

Subject to Participation

December 28, 2011



Douglas L. Medin

The following events took place a bit more than a decade ago. Norbert Ross, who was a postdoctoral fellow at the time, and I were appearing before the Menominee Language and Culture Commission in Keshena, Wisconsin, to ask for permission to conduct studies on children's understandings of biology. We had previously received approval from the Menominee Tribal Legislature for studies with hunters and fishermen, and we expected things to go smoothly. Norbert and I explained that our research assistants would be Native Americans (mainly Menominee), and that we would make a donation to the schools for each child who participated in a study.

After our presentation, one elder said, "The Menominee have been studied too much." She did not go into any detail, but several other commission members nodded in agreement. Norbert and I described the potential benefits to the tribe (for example, we suggested that our studies might eventually help improve science education). After we finished, a vote was taken, and the commission members were evenly split: four in favor and four opposed. The chair of the committee broke the tie in our favor.

Have the Menominee been studied too much? What did this elder mean? She had an important point to make, though but for me, it was not obvious from the onset what the point was. Later on, I visited her several times (initially bringing coffee as a sign of respect and, after I learned that oatmeal raisin was her favorite kind of cookie, I would bring those as well), and as we talked, gradually I was able to grasp what she was getting at.

There is a long history of research in Native American communities that, to say the least, has often not been in their best interest. Some studies have portrayed tribes through a deficit lens, focusing on problems rather than sources of resiliency and, in effect, blaming the victims. It is not an exaggeration to

say that “research” almost has the status of a dirty word in many Native communities.

At the heart of the issue — in my opinion — are power relations and unequal benefits. When I began doing research with Menominee participants, it seemed perfectly fine for a graduate student to complete his or her dissertation by paying participants generously, seeking appropriate tribal approvals, and employing Menominee research assistants whenever possible. Now it doesn’t seem so fine. For one thing, in a broader context, the money seems less generous: Spending a thousand dollars on participants seems a pretty modest cost relative to the value of a PhD. More importantly, there is the issue of ownership and control over the research.

My thinking about what is owed to participants has changed dramatically since I started doing cross-cultural research and studies in Native American communities. The Menominee have been studied too much by outside researchers who benefit asymmetrically from the exchange. At the same time, tribes and intertribal communities, such as the American Indian Center of Chicago, have a great need for indigenous scholars who can apply for grants, build research infrastructure, and bring relevant expertise to bear on policy issues.

Power sharing is needed to develop meaningful research partnerships. Thanks to good fortune and a very substantial amount of leadership from Native scholars like Megan Bang and Karen Washinawatok, we have been able to establish research partnerships with Native American institutions for the work conducted over the past decade on the Menominee reservation in Wisconsin and in Chicago. For example, our grants have involved collaborative submissions by Northwestern University, the American Indian Center of Chicago, and a tribal college as well as other institutions on the Menominee reservation. It is to the credit of the National Science Foundation that these partnerships do not involve subcontracts from Northwestern University to tribal institutions but rather parallel budgets with a Principal Investigator at each site.[\[1\]](#) , [\[2\]](#)

The Menominee Language and Culture Commission still reviews our work, but now we are seen not so much as outsiders but rather as part of a team. And the exchange is much more symmetrical in benefits.

Now let’s shift contexts. When you read the first paragraph, you may also have had the thought that undergraduates at major research universities have been studied too much (and certainly much more than members of the Menominee Nation of Wisconsin). For current purposes, I’d like to suggest that we think about whether this research exchange also has any possibility of being asymmetrical. [\[3\]](#)

Do we owe our campus research participants anything beyond a sincere thanks and a short debriefing? I have in mind undergraduates taking Introduction to Psychology and serving some number of hours in a participant pool in exchange for partial course credit. At my school, we require 11 hours. (They receive an hour credit for participating in mass testing, so the main obligation is 10 hours.) We give students an hour credit for showing up to all their studies on time, so the total can be as little as 9 hours, which can turn into 18 half hours. Furthermore, we argue — correctly, in my opinion — that 9 hours is more defensible than say 3 hours. Why? Because we think it is important for undergraduates taking a psychology course to learn about research, and 9 hours (usually 18 half hours) will provide much more diversity of experience than 3 hours. Students may “opt out” of the participant pool by writing a 10- to 15-page paper on any psychology topic of their choice based on reading (at least) four journal articles. [\[4\]](#)

However, our department may be guilty of a serious inconsistency. The readings and lecture materials show up on tests and determine grades, but (at Northwestern University anyway) we don't test or grade students on what they learned by being in the participant pool. We also don't have any formal procedures for trying to assess the educational value of our debriefings (and truth be told, some of them are deliberately vague, so that word doesn't spread about what the study is trying to get at and create an experiment-demand effect) or other benefits from participating in research. (One person who read a draft of this column suggested that the current situation is much more akin to mutual exploitation than mutual benefits.)

You may be sensing just a tinge of cynicism and might be wondering if I think we don't assess learning or other forms of benefits from research-pool service because these benefits do not, in fact, exist. On the contrary, one of my close friends is a cognitive psychologist, and he once told me that the primary reason he went into psychology was because when he took Introduction to Psychology, he was more or less required to be in the research pool. This experience allowed him to see that you could learn something about how the mind works by doing experiments. Being in the participant pool energized his interest in psychology. Nonetheless, the benefits from subject-pool participation appear to be essentially unassessed.

Don't you think it's odd that we pay so little attention to the benefits of research participation when our subject pool is such a lifeline for so many of us? I do. And I think we owe it to the students. It would require effort on our part, maybe a lot of effort. I think two reasons we don't do it (if you do it at your school, please let me know) are (1) inertia and (2) the near certainty that we could be doing a better job at it.

Let's consider another nearby source of participants: infants, toddlers, and children. Typically, we rely on mothers (this is a fact, not gender bias) to bring their infants and toddlers into our college and university labs, sometimes for modest monetary compensation, but mainly because of their sheer willingness to help researchers discover how bright these children are (and they are bright — one of these days Renee Baillargeon or Liz Spelke or someone else is going to show that 6-month-old children can do differential equations). There's no need to offer course credit for participation, but the onus is on the experimenter to develop an attention-grabbing study, or the participants will either fall asleep or start crying. For developmental research, it's the parents who are being debriefed, so we have the opportunity to make them feel good about their important contributions to research. I'm guessing we do that, but does anyone know of studies that have looked either at that or other forms of benefits?

When we graduate to children, a new player comes into the picture — schools. Taking a child out of a classroom for a (short) study means taking him or her away from instruction time, including preparation time for high-stakes testing like that associated with the No Child Left Behind Act. In the past, schools often have been cooperative in principle, but it's not so easy to see what's in it for the school except for lost time and potential complaints from parents. When Sandra Waxman, Megan Bang, Karen Washinawatok, and I do studies in schools, we couple the abstract promise that our research might some day be useful in an educational context with monetary payments to schools and a promise of one hour of our research assistants volunteering as teachers' aides for every hour they are running studies. Those measures seem like a move in the right direction, but it's hard to escape the feeling that we're getting more than we are giving.

Maybe we should pay a bit more attention to research benefits from the perspective of those being studied. And, maybe the Menominees are not the only research “subjects” who have been studied too much.

[1] I don't know how easy this sounds, but it isn't so easy in reality. Most major research universities have at least half a century's experience administering grants, negotiating indirect costs agreements, and the like. In contrast, tribal institutions typically have much less experience in these areas. One area in which I am proud of Northwestern University is its willingness to provide advice and training in the service of fostering tribal sovereignty in research administration.

[2] There may be many ways of combating an inherently unequal exchange. Scott Atran has headed a team of scholars conducting research in Guatemala for the past two decades, where the indigenous Itza' Maya do not have institutions that could support collaborative research. Nonetheless, Scott has helped the Itza' set up a language school and also helped to develop a forest preserve (the Bio-Itza'). He also supported their efforts to establish sovereignty.

[3] I hasten to add that the power-relation differences and potential for exploitation are minor compared with the case of Native American communities, though they may be real.

[4] Our current excellent subject-pool coordinator, Katie Meyer, says “I would say that roughly 2% [of students] choose to do the paper alternative. This includes the students who are under 18 and are required to do the paper since they cannot legally give consent for studies.”