

2. PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS AS PARTICIPANTS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

- 2.1. Students as Participants
- 2.2. Coerced Participants
- 2.3. References

2.1. STUDENTS AS PARTICIPANTS

Students generally have been the main source of participants for psychological research over many years. Valentine (1982) believed it was over three-quarters of research. While Kimmel (1996) estimated that 70% of studies in personality and social psychology, and 90% of cognitive psychology studies used students as participants. Their abundant use has led to the tag of "human fruit flies" (Rubenstein 1982).

Students are a minority group and make up less than 5% of the population. Thus the use of students in such situations produces sampling and participant bias into the research.

Sears (1986) notes how students vary from the general population:

- Their self concept may not be fully formed;
- Their social and political attitudes may be less crystallised;
- They may be more egocentric;
- They may have a stronger need for peer approval;
- They may have unstable peer relationships.

Also their intelligence is higher than the average.

When I looked at articles published in the "British Journal of Social Psychology", in 1991 73% of all participants were students (Brewer 2001a) and 60% in 1998 (Brewer 2001b).

2.2. COERCED PARTICIPANTS

It is not only that psychological research uses students, but that often the students (particularly psychology ones) did not have a choice (ie: coerced to participate). Menges (1973) calculated that 40% of participants in studies published in 1971 were psychology

students as part of their "course requirements".

Sieber and Saks (1989) reported that only about 40 of 366 US psychology departments used wholly voluntary student participants. The remainder were not forced to participate, but the choice to not participate was framed in negative terms:

The bottom line is that students learn very quickly that their departments want them and expect them to participate in research. This expectation, whether communicated implicitly or explicitly, may lead them to fear that their course tutors will downgrade them or penalise them in some way for not accepting the department's preferred option and research culture (Foot and Sanford 2004 p257).

If psychology students do agree to participate in departmental research, do they have the right to withdraw in a real sense?

Exercising the right to withdraw is difficult for students who probably still have to face and interact with the staff involved in the research, however, "relaxed" those staff members may appear to be about the withdrawal (Foot and Sanford 2004 p258).

Coerced participants may be more likely to sabotage the research, particularly by seeking to disrupt what they think are the expected findings (the "screw you" effect; Masling 1966). The opposite to "demand characteristics".

Table 2.1 outlines the advantages and disadvantages of using psychology students in psychological research.

ADVANTAGES

1. Convenient for university-based researchers.
2. Large numbers of students easily available.
3. Expensive and time-consuming finding non-student participants.
4. Students often more willing to participate in research than the general population because they are used to research taking place.
5. Psychology students experience research from both sides (as a participant here and as a student researcher later).

DISADVANTAGES

1. Students are not typical of the general population in terms of age, intelligence or social class, for example. This challenges the generalisability of findings from students to the general population.
2. Many students have to take part in research as a course requirement (especially in the USA).
3. Often students are recruited for research through opportunity sampling which risks being even more unrepresentative of the general population as well as the student population.
4. Students coerced to participate in research may be difficult (eg: the "screw you" effect).
5. Even with students volunteering for research, those who volunteer may not be typical of the general population (Brewer 2005).

Table 2.1 - Advantages and disadvantages of using psychology students as participants in psychological research.

2.3. REFERENCES

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