Volunteering For Psychological Research

As a student enrolled in Psychology 110, 115, 209, or 210, you are expected to learn a little bit about how research is conducted in Psychology. To this end, these courses provide several options having to do with research that allow you to earn bonus credit. One of those options is to volunteer to be a subject in some of the experiments being performed in the Psychology Department. This handout provides information about that option. If you choose not to use that option, please be aware that your instructor should provide you with other options to earn bonus credit. Among these, for example, may be writing brief reports on articles in such journals as the Annual Editions in Psychology series (or other journals in the Psychology Library), or projects or lectures to be assigned by your instructor.

PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

The participation requirements include being willing to participate in up to three hours worth of experiments. For most people, this will probably mean being called for three 50-minute experiments over the course of the semester, rather than a single 150-minute session. In any case, we schedule you for times at which YOU are free. However, we do require that people who volunteer for participation in experiments put down at least 5 hours during the week, between 8 am and 5 pm, when they will be available to be scheduled. We will normally notify you at least one or two class sessions before the experiment, so you will have time to make other arrangements, or reschedule the experiment for a more convenient time, if you need to.

Basically, your free times go into a computer. Experimenters tell the computer when they want to run their experiments and it picks people at random from anyone available at those times. Because it tries to match up your times against the experimenter’s times, we DO have to have definite times from you: We can’t just call a week beforehand to see if you might be free. On the other hand, we WILL TRY to give you at least two class periods notice for an experiment so that you can make plans or reschedule, if necessary.

BONUS CREDIT

Your instructor will tell you how much bonus credit each hour of experiments is worth. Normally, however, the additional points can add 30% of a grade level to your final grade. So, for example, if at the end of the semester you are at 77 and a B is 80 to 89, then 30% of a grade level (10 points in this example) would add an additional 3 points to your final grade, bringing it up to a B at 80. Note, however, that you may not be called for a full three hours: How many experiments you are scheduled for depends on how many experiments are conducted and when, how many volunteers there are, etc. Generally, the more available hours you put down, the greater your odds of being called.

Also, many experiments have a need for people with special characteristics. For example, people with contacts may not be able to use the apparatus in some experiments. Other experiments may wish to compare the performance of bilingual and monolingual subjects. Yet other experiments may require right-handed subjects, or people who are between 45 and 55 years of age. So, whether you get considered for a certain experiment will also depend on what population characteristics the experimenter has specified.

If you are NOT called for your full three hours, your instructor should have additional opportunities available to bring your bonus credit up to the full amount. However, please note the following limitations:

1. Bonus points may NOT be used to change an F to a D. (However, if you DO repeat Psychology 110, your previously-earned bonus points are still good, although you cannot be a volunteer the second time around.)

2. You will be called for no further experiments if you have an unexcused absence from an experiment. In this case, you can earn no more bonus points for participating in psychological research. (But if the unexcused absence was due to an honest mistake, we can reinstate you, on request.)

3. Bonus points generally will NOT be given for demonstrations/surveys done while you are in class: These are considered normal classroom activity.

THE EXPERIMENTER’S RESPONSIBILITIES

The experimenter has several responsibilities towards you. In order to have you participate, the experimenter has obtained approval for his or her experiment form the Psychology Department’s Use Of Human Subjects Committee, or in some cases, from the University’s Institutional Review Board. Such approval generally requires that you give INFORMED CONSENT to participating in the experiment. That is, before you start, the experimenter should give you a reasonable idea of what the experiment is about. If, at that point, you choose not to participate, you may do so without any penalties: You will not get credit for that experiment, of course, but you will be returned to the Pool where you may be scheduled for yet other experiments.

Also, prior to the experiment itself, the experimenter should inform you of your rights not to participate. If you do agree
to go on, the experimenter will then ask you to sign a form indicating that you have been told something of the experiment and have been informed of your rights.

Before, during, and after the experiment, the experimenter should treat you with all due courtesy. One of American Psychological Association’s ethical requirements for research using human subjects is that the experimenter be concerned with and take responsibility for your well-being. Also, unless you and the experimenter come to an explicit agreement otherwise, please be assured that all responses you give will be confidential: Your responses will be kept anonymous.

Finally, this should be an educational experience for you. Therefore, at the end of each experiment, the experimenter should tell you a bit about what the purpose of the experiment is, what the results might look like, what other people have found, etc. You should be given a handout that presents this information. (On occasion, it may be possible than handouts will be delayed until the end of the semester.)

If at any point you feel that you have not been treated appropriately (for example, if an experimenter fails to show up for an experiment), please let the Subject Pool Coordinator (Dr. Čech: cech@louisiana.edu) know, so that we may investigate and try to find out what the problem was, and how to make it right.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

Your first responsibility, of course, is to show up, if at all possible. Note that experiments are run in many different rooms and in several different buildings, so it is important to know where you are supposed to be. Very often, a number of people will participate at the same time. If you are late, it may not be possible to start the experiment over again. Thus, it would be wise to show up several minutes early for an experiment.

If for some reason you CANNOT make the experiment, please let the experimenter know WELL IN ADVANCE! Calling five or ten minutes beforehand will generally not suffice: By that time, most experimenters are already in the lab. Try to call a day or two before. If you CANNOT reach the experimenter by phone or email, try to leave a note in his/her mailbox. Note that some experimenters have mailboxes in Girard and run their experiments there, and others have mailboxes and laboratories in Rougeou. Finally, as a last resort, you can write a note to the experimenter and place it in the big yellow (manila) envelope on the second floor of Girard Hall on the bulletin board in the hallway. The envelope is labeled Excuses for Subject Pool. But if you do this, you need to be precise about which experiment your note is for, and when you were scheduled, since experimenters will only look at the notes addressed to them about their own experiments.

Finally, please take your participation as a subject seriously. You may find yourself in an experiment that you consider quite exciting, or one that you consider quite boring. Regardless of which it is, give it your best: The people who do this research are trying to find out something about how we operate, and specific experiments, despite how bizarre or strange they might seem to you, are often designed to answer very specific questions the experimenter has about human behavior. (Don’t be afraid to ask afterwards why the experimenter did what he/she did!) And for similar reasons, please don’t discuss the specifics of an experiment with others: If people go into an experiment already knowing what its purpose is, the data the experimenter obtains are likely to be useless. In other words, both you and the experimenter are temporary partners in the scientific process. We regard that as important; we hope you do, too!

IN CASE OF QUESTIONS...

If you have any questions about the Subject Pool, you can leave a message in the Subject Pool Mailbox located near the Psychology Office or you can talk to your professor’s teaching assistant. Or, you can arrange an appointment with Dr. Čech (cech@louisiana.edu) in Psychology, who is in charge of administering the Subject Pool.

Also, all experiments will be listed on the bulletin board on the second floor of Girard Hall. So, if you lose or forget your notice, that bulletin board is the first place to check for your name, so you can see what day, what time, and what room you are supposed to go to.

SIGNING UP

Signing up normally is done via computer, and your Instructor will let you know what that process involves. Some time early in the semester, we will hold a signup period (although you can arrange to sign up later, or to modify your available hours, if needed, by contacting one of the Subject Pool Coordinators or Dr. Čech).