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**EDITORIAL POSTLUDE**

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**Convenient Abusive Research**

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Comedian and filmmaker Woody Allen is often credited with having said that “Life is 90 percent showing up.” In the introductory psychology class I took as a 1960s undergraduate, it was 5 percent. As is still a common practice at many research universities, students enrolled in the class were required to show up for a few hours of participation in a psychology research experiment. At least such participation makes sense in the context of those classes. As undergraduate students study how organisms respond to stimuli, rewards, and punishments, they also get to experience life as a lab rat. But over the years, the practice has grown in size and expanded to many other departments, making it a classroom constant way beyond a few course points in basic psychology.

There exist a number of controls and government regulations for protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects of research, an administrative activity of usually unquestioned validity that some scholars claim is pushed to levels of overkill in an effort to make certain the people studied are not abused (Church 2002). Some universities, colleges, or academic departments have rules on who can access classes for research purposes. Yet even with these controls, the use of student subjects has grown by leaps and bounds in every discipline that studies consumers.

Sometimes the research itself is part of the course learning experience. Sometimes a questionnaire has logical ties to the lecture materials. But students are increasingly subjects for other experiments in which the only “lesson” is that they learn to be frequent guinea pigs for the research whims of their teachers.

The problem is not new. Years ago, I did it, too. As new doctoral students, we were each teaching a small section of the basic introductory advertising class. For the lectures on the generation of advertising ideas, my officemate provided a test of creative ability that the students answered and we then used as a springboard to discuss how advertising is written. The students’ answers were used for our research, too, when we took the completed forms, compared the data with other information, and eventually, produced a journal article. But a week after we did the in-class exercise,

one of the faculty members asked if we'd have the students fill out a questionnaire for his study. A day later, I got another request, then another. I say "request," but they were faculty and we were students, so our compliance was presumed. As a new teacher, a part of me felt relief in that it was a few minutes of lecture I didn't have to write. Yet by the third "request" I rebelled. I appealed to the department head, who stepped in to write a policy limiting such faculty research access to classes and students.

However, the desire was to limit pressures on the graduate teaching assistants, not to limit the potential exploitation of students in the course. And in the decades since then, the practice has grown.

When I taught my first large-section introductory course in over a decade, I was amazed at how many requests came in from faculty and graduate students all over campus to use "just a few minutes at the start of class" to have students fill out surveys or respond to sample advertising messages. (All such requests were refused.) I heard from one teacher who, as he was making arrangements to leave town for a conference and have his class time covered, someone else in his college asked if he could step in to use this maybe-open period for an experiment with the hundreds of captive student subjects. It is not uncommon at any school for some faculty to ask to teach large section classes whenever they need a group of subjects to complete research questionnaires during the upcoming term. In extreme cases, students in danger of failing a course eagerly sign on for supposedly non-coercive extra credit research "experiences" to turn the F grade into a C.

For the academic researcher, the modern large-sized classes make it convenient to gather more student subjects in a single sitting. A thousand-subject four-cell lab experiment can be run within the meeting times of just four class sections at many universities. With greater convenience comes greater use; so increasing amounts of class time are spent with students filling out questionnaires.

More than twenty-five years ago, the late Robert Ferber decried the increasing use of availability samples in consumer research (1977). As editor of *Journal of Consumer Research*, he was writing not about student samples per se, but about how the increasing use of convenience samples not relevant to the topic or representative of the population was supplanting articles dealing with more appropriate probability samples. For many years my personal referee comments to authors cited this editorial as I asked for some explanation for the sample selection beyond a few throw-away lines noting it as a "limitation" or a "topic for future research." Now I cite it in rejection letters.

The usual convenience sample collections of undergraduate students are not valid surrogates for the population at large (James and Sonner 2001). College students are “young,” but they are older than the primary targets for most anti-smoking advertising campaigns that aim to get under-18 children to not use cigarettes. The traditional college students are adults, but they are children compared to the population at large.

I haven’t imposed an editorial edict against student samples as has been done at some other journals, but the *JCA* manuscript referees are frequently asking that the relevant and appropriate nature of the convenience sample be established. As Ferber noted with an example of a study on bicycle preferences, while the study would be relevant to students who use bicycles, “The fact remains, however, that many students do not use bicycles and, with regard to bicycle preferences, could not care less. Until the necessary distinction is established, the relevance of the sample remains in doubt” (p. 57).

In some ways, I am even more concerned about those times when inappropriate research methods are selected to fit the available sample. For example, when the research topic deals with consumer affairs issues such as reactions to consumer education efforts or public service advertising, the appropriate research theory is usually phrased in terms of long-term effects among members of the population. Yet many papers are submitted that dutifully restate these theories while testing hypotheses based on single-exposure laboratory experiments that usually, and not unexpectedly, find little effect. Obviously, the sample was available, so the method was chosen to fit what could be done with it, turning all basic guidelines for research decision-making on its head. We increasingly have “convenience methods” to go with the convenience samples.

As we went through the recent political season and the daily news reports on shifting public opinion polls, NPR commentator Daniel Schorr repeatedly called each poll a “snapshot” of opinions at that time. But he’s wrong. Like the studies in the academic journals, each poll is more like an impressionistic painting, carrying various qualitative biases that can’t be escaped. As news organizations spend increasing amounts of money to accurately call each election winner at greater speed, they still make mistakes and call things wrong well beyond their noted sample errors (Plissner 1999). Even the best-funded academic consumer research can’t match the funding of major business or media organizations, but our “paintings” should at least be conceptually sound.

But beyond the quality of published research, I pose a more basic question for people who submit papers to *JCA*. Scholars of the human impact

of education, government, and business activities should be more sensitive than most other people when someone wants to turn the classroom into a captive setting for numerous research projects. I doubt that any class has based 90 percent of the student's grade on his or her showing up for experiments. But the published consumer research based on subjects who happen to show up has probably passed that proportion.

## REFERENCES

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