



## Voluntary vs. Involuntary Participation in Research

**Research Question:**  
*What research has been published regarding the differences in responses and results from voluntary participants to involuntary participants?*

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We often are asked the question: Should we require participation in our surveys/assessments? Here we offer a research-based answer and our practical applications and experience.

As a benchmark, in a confidential study in 2003, of participating IT companies surveyed, 100% (12/12) stated that their organizational employee survey is voluntary, and these were large, high-profile companies. Our experience is similar, that most employee engagement surveys or assessments (with few exceptions for example manager responses in a 360), collect confidential voluntary responses.

Ethically, the American Psychological Association (2002) (to which our Consultants belong) requires that researchers give participants the option to withdraw from research at any time. This is called the “freedom to withdraw.” While we strongly support this, there are at times business reasons where strongly suggested participation may be necessary, such as the developmental aspect of a 360-degree feedback survey wherein the very nature of the assessment is to receive ratings from multiple groups. In the case where a manager does not respond, usually the target (recipient) requests another report after the manager responds, so our experience has been to strongly suggest manager participation before releasing a report without their feedback. This exception notwithstanding, general best practice is to ensure voluntary participation in surveys

and assessments.

## RESEARCH SAYS

As “Investigators” in the research of our clients, we feel that all employees are entitled to make their own decisions, and that participation in research, surveys, or assessments falls into this arena. Indeed, Elmes, Kantowitz, and Roediger (1995) stated: “The investigator respects the individual’s freedom to decline to participate in or to withdraw from the research at any time. The obligation to protect this freedom requires



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careful thought and consideration when the investigator is in a position of authority or influence over the participant. Such positions of authority include, but are not limited to, situations in which the research participation is required as part of employment or in which the participant is a student, client, or employee of the investigator.” In those cases, the definition for “willing volunteer participant” has been questioned. Elmes, Kantowitz, and Roediger (1995) do not expand

on how required participation/participants are different, only that this may occur in cases such as in intro to psych classes- as part of the grade, in which case an alternative should be provided, such as writing a paper instead. They do bring up captive audiences as another example, such as students, prisoners, military recruits, and employees of the experimenter. However, details are not provided as to these types of situations.

Given that we are generally working with voluntarily employed adults, we also understand that the psychological contract an employee has with his/her employer is influenced by the extra activities he/she is asked to undertake, and when employees are offered the opportunity to participate in giving feedback vs. being required to give feedback, the very nature of their responses and perception of the employment situation is different. However, it is worth exploring further rather than relying on experience alone.

In researching different types of participants in research, Pedhazur and Schmelkin (1991) referred to different types of participants: the ‘good’ subject, the ‘faithful’ subject, the ‘negativistic’ subject, and the ‘apprehensive’ subject. Of these types of subjects, they are not compared to subjects who do NOT participate. They found that:

- Good subjects comply with participation for several reasons- for the “good” of science, or the good of research in general.
- Faithful subjects try NOT to let the hypothesis influence their behavior, but sometimes it does anyway.
- Negativistic subjects may be uncooperative, hostile, and “actively engaged in undermining the research.”
- Apprehensive subjects are concerned about what the experimenter thinks of him/her as a person.

Similarly, Rosnow and Rosenthal (1997) wrote a chapter about participants, titled, “The Person Behind the Look.” In it, they also describe different types of subjects/participants. These different types of subjects

are responding differently to the demand characteristics of the situation. These situational characteristics can be interpreted differently by respondents to yield different types of subjects, such as the Good subject, and the Obedient subject. Rosnow and Rosenthal (1997) also state that there are several mediating factors which can contribute to the subject's responses—such as evaluation apprehension, cues of the situation/demand characteristics, motivation to comply, and capability to comply. If the participant is receptive to participating, is motivated in a positive way to participate, and is capable, he/she will be more likely to respond honestly than someone who is motivated negatively, coerced into responding, or unable to respond. These people may be noncompliant, or intentionally respond in dishonest ways or in ways which would distort the results, making them less reliable. Rosenthal and Rosnow (1997) recommend ensuring confidentiality at least, if not anonymity, and a non-threatening, non-coercive environment to ensure honest participation.

Kraut (1996) stated: “While requiring survey participation may seem high-handed, it is not unethical as long as respondents remain anonymous.” (p. 394). Although, he also points out that respondents can fake responding or respond in ways which corrupt the data, and that it is extremely difficult to guarantee anonymity with an organizational survey. Additionally, coercive acts and strong encouragement from management should be avoided, which ties into the voluntary nature of organizational surveys. Ideally, responses need to be honest and then in return used in a constructive manner to improve the organization, reinforcing the cycle of feedback trust. However, if employees are coerced into participating, the survey is not voluntary anymore. In order for true and honest responses to be gathered and synthesized for further use, the respondents themselves must be willing to respond to the survey of their own accord.

Anecdotal evidence from previous participants in academic research have commented that if they feel

forced to complete research projects or surveys they are more apt to respond in ways which will corrupt the data—such as providing random responses, not reading the questions, or responding intentionally in negative ways to “mess up” the research. These academic participants are likely to become members of an organization. Their attitudes and behavior toward forced participation is likely to continue if forced to complete an organizational survey.

#### **BOTTOM LINE**

Voluntary participation is at the core of many organizational feedback processes, and is central to creating trust in the system. There is a time and place for mandatory or involuntary participation (e.g., performance appraisals, documenting HR issues, manager feedback in selection for hiring assessments, etc.), however it is not recommended in an employee survey or developmental assessment feedback program.



## Consultant's Corner

These studies can be applied to organizational situations easily. The Negativistic subject (employee) may intentionally undermine a survey or assessment if required to participate, as a way to de-rail or purposefully and (most often) negatively impact the survey results. When morale is low, or positive organizational citizenship behaviors are not the norm, negative or corruptive behaviors can result if participation in a feedback process is mandatory. However, when employees see that their feedback is genuinely wanted and used in a constructive way, they will be more apt to participate, and to do so honestly, trusting the feedback process.

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