Introduction:

As researchers, most of us have benefited from the recruitment of participants from undergraduate classes. This has been facilitated through the introduction of student participation pools in our faculties. While we are well aware of the benefits that this system has offered to the advancement of research, we often forget that research participant pools are also intended to enhance the educational experience of students. The fulfillment of this second purpose of implementing subject pools should be seen not only as a benefit to students, but more importantly as an essential criterion for continuing to use this method of recruitment. Given that participation in research should be completely voluntary, Sharpe (2009) recognizes that “…the main justification for participation as a course requirement is that students will better their understanding and appreciation for research if they themselves experience the science at work.” Brody (2000) identifies the debriefing session as the primary means for ensuring that students gain valuable learning experiences and therefore for ethically justifying the use of undergraduate participant pools.

Participants who experience a thorough and informative debriefing tend to have more positive impressions of research. They generally are more aware of the relevance of the research, have more appreciation for the value of the experiment, and feel better about their participation. In addition, participants who have positive debriefing experiences tend to have more positive impressions of the field in which research was conducted and the general research community.

This document was created as a tool for researchers recruiting participants from student subject pools i) to help them improve their debriefing methodology, and ii) to raise awareness about the importance of debriefing as well as the benefits associated with good debriefing practices.

**Section 1: The Benefits of Debriefing**

1.1 Benefits for Student Participants:
1) Debriefing enhances the educational experience of student participants
   a. Participants learn about the significance of the research.
   b. Participants gain a better understanding of research methodology.
   c. Participants learn about how they have contributed to the field of research as individuals.
   d. Debriefing connects what students have learned in the classroom to what they should gain from the experience of research participation.

2) Debriefing gives participants an opportunity to interact with the researcher(s) beyond the scope of the experiment itself.
   a. Participants are able to ask questions about the research, and about their involvement in the research.
   b. Gives participants a chance to comment about the research and express their opinion about how it was conducted, what could be improved, etc.
   c. The debriefing session is the perfect time to correct participants’ misconceptions about the field or the research, allowing them to leave with more confidence about their knowledge in the field.
   d. Through this interaction, participants can feel that they are more than just ‘guinea pigs’ of science, but that their involvement and time commitment is valued by the researcher.

1.2 Benefits for Researchers:

1) Debriefing is an opportunity for researchers to get valuable feedback about their experiment
   a. Participants can inform researchers about what parts of the experiment were clear, what parts were unclear, and whether they fully understood the task. This helps researchers improve their research methodology for future studies
   b. Researchers can get an idea of whether participants were aware of certain aspects of the research design (e.g. the variables being tested, researcher expectations for certain results, etc.)

2) Debriefing is a way for researchers to show respect to participants
   a. It gives the researcher an opportunity to thank their participants for their time
   b. Debriefing helps researchers establish a trust-based relationship between participants and the research community

Section 2: Practical Suggestions to Help Improve Debriefing

2.1 Enhancing the educational experience of student participants

1) Give a clear and concise statement of research goals and methods used to answer the research question
   • Explain specific research questions you had for your study
   • Talk about the variables used and how they were operationalized
• Present your hypothesis
• If possible, present some current findings of your research
• Do not simply repeat the information presented in the informed consent

2) State the purpose and significance of the research
   • Give a brief overview of similar research conducted in the past and their findings
   • Explain why the research you are conducting is important to the field
   • State the implications of your study for future research
   • Explain how your participants may benefit from the study
   • Explain how society may benefit from the study

3) Correct misconceptions the participant may have about the field or study or the research itself
   • Identify areas where the participant may have a skewed understanding
   • Address them by providing the correct information and explaining why it might be a better way to think about a particular issue

4) Relate your research to the relevant material students have learned in their course(s)
   • Ask participants what methodologies were familiar to them in the experiment, whether they had learned about relevant phenomena in their courses
   • Explain the use of certain research strategies, equipment, or software that may have been discussed in the course
   • Explain how your research contributes to the understanding of the relevant phenomenon

2.2 Getting Feedback from Participants

1) Get feedback about the experimental design
   • Ask participants about what aspects of the experiment was clear or unclear to them
   • Ask participants whether they understood the task they were asked to complete
   • Ask participants what they think the purpose of the experiment was

2) Get feedback about participant expectations for the experiment
   • Ask participants what they think the results might look like
   • Ask participants whether they believed they were to behave or perform in a certain way
   • Ask participants what they think the researcher expectations were (of them and of the results)

2.3 Improving Researcher-Participant Rapport

1) Give participants an opportunity to ask questions and comment about the study they have just taken part in. The debriefing session should be a bi-directional exchange!
   • Allot time for question and answer period between the researcher and the participant
   • Create a comfortable environment for participants to be open with their opinions
     i. When possible, conduct debriefing one-on-one, especially if sensitive information may be brought up.
     ii. Make sure participants do not feel intimidated, pressured, or judged
• Be sure that participants are informed about researcher contact information so that, should they have questions or concerns after leaving the study, they are able to communicate with the researcher.

2) Help participants understand their contribution to your research and to the field
   • When possible, give participants immediate feedback about their responses or performance in your study
   • Explain how their results might affect the outcome of your study
   • Relate their results to previous research in the field
   • Discuss implications the results might have for future research

3) Maintain a positive attitude during debriefing
   • Conduct debriefing with a positive and engaged attitude to show your participants that you are invested in your research and in them
   • If debriefing is conducted with an apathetic attitude, participants may get the impression that:
     i. You do no value their participation
     ii. That the research they participated in is unimportant
     iii. That debriefing is not an important component of good research practices

2.4 The Use of Deception in Research

1) Reveal the deception
   • Inform the participants that deception was used and the nature of the deception
   • Justify the use of this deception in your research, why it was necessary to answer your research questions
   • Participants must be given the opportunity to withdraw consent after being informed of any deception (see here: http://www.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-epbtc2/chapter3-chapitre3/#toc03-1b )

2) Give participants an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the debriefing
   • Allow participants to perform the same task or a similar task after you have revealed the deception, this time without falling for misleading cues.
   • This will help to eliminate potentially lingering feelings of shame, incompetency, or gullibility
For further information on best practices in debriefing, see:


