

Dynamic exchanges, designated roles: A multi-stage qualitative analysis of midcentury psychologists' shifting assessments of multifaceted subjects

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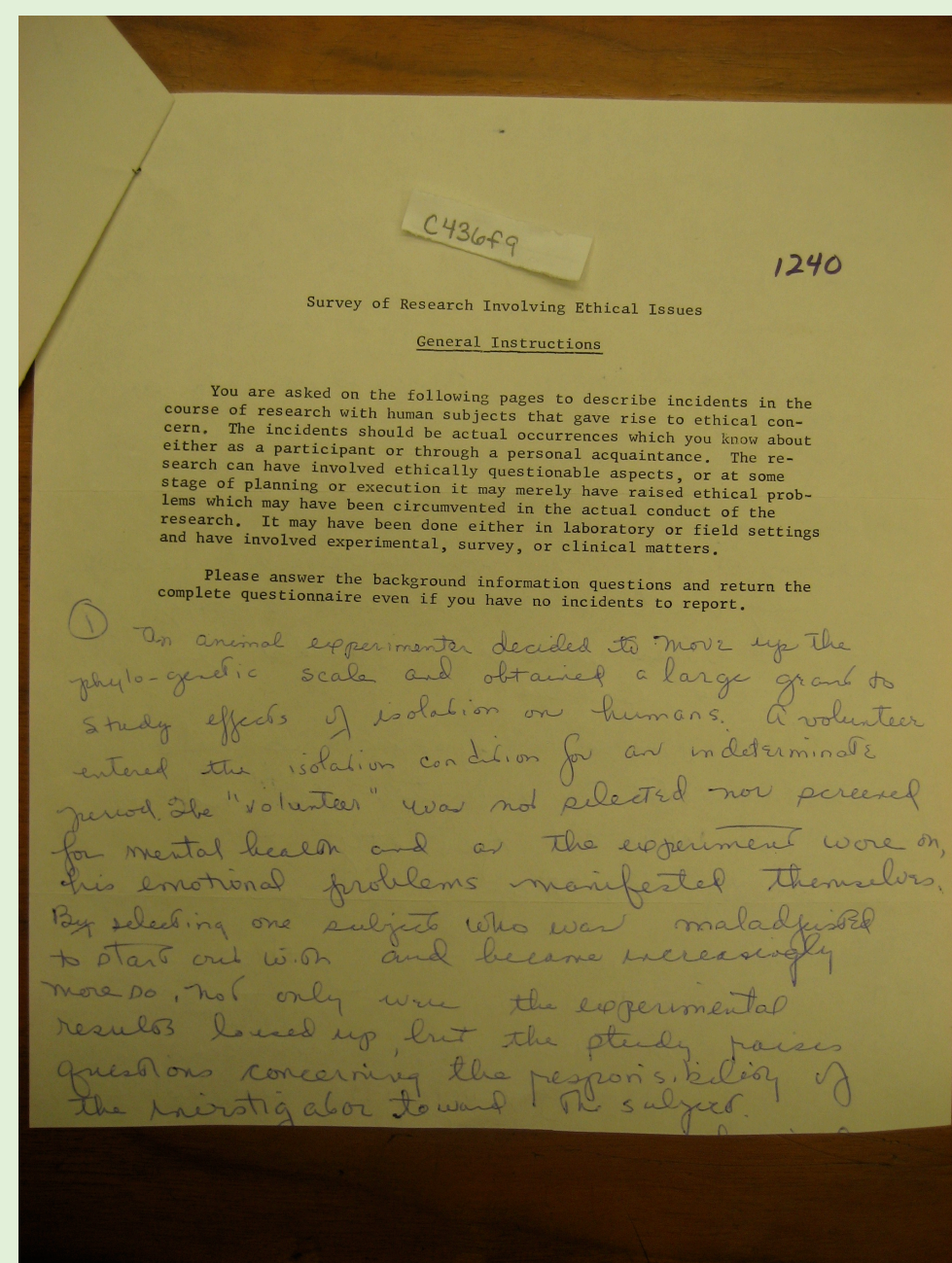
Introduction

Psychology has aimed to align itself with natural sciences through an ethos of an objective, controlled laboratory. However, it differs from natural sciences in that its subject, humans, are responsive, reactive agents. Thus, those producing the data (“subjects” or “participants”) and those studying them (“observers” or “experimenters”) inevitably form complex relationships, sometimes rife with dynamic expectations and exchanges. Concerns surrounding psychologist-subject relations became salient in the post-World War II decades as psychology grew in ambition and subjects grew in their awareness of experimentation.

This thesis contributes to scholarship on subject-researcher relationships by using a unique data set of psychologists' firsthand accounts of research experiences: responses to a survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) of its members between 1968 and 1971. The open-ended, anonymous surveys enabled reports of relations routinely excluded from scientific publications (Bazerman, 1983; Danziger, 1988; Devereux, 1967) and sheds light on psychologists' regard for subjects beyond experimental matters.

Materials

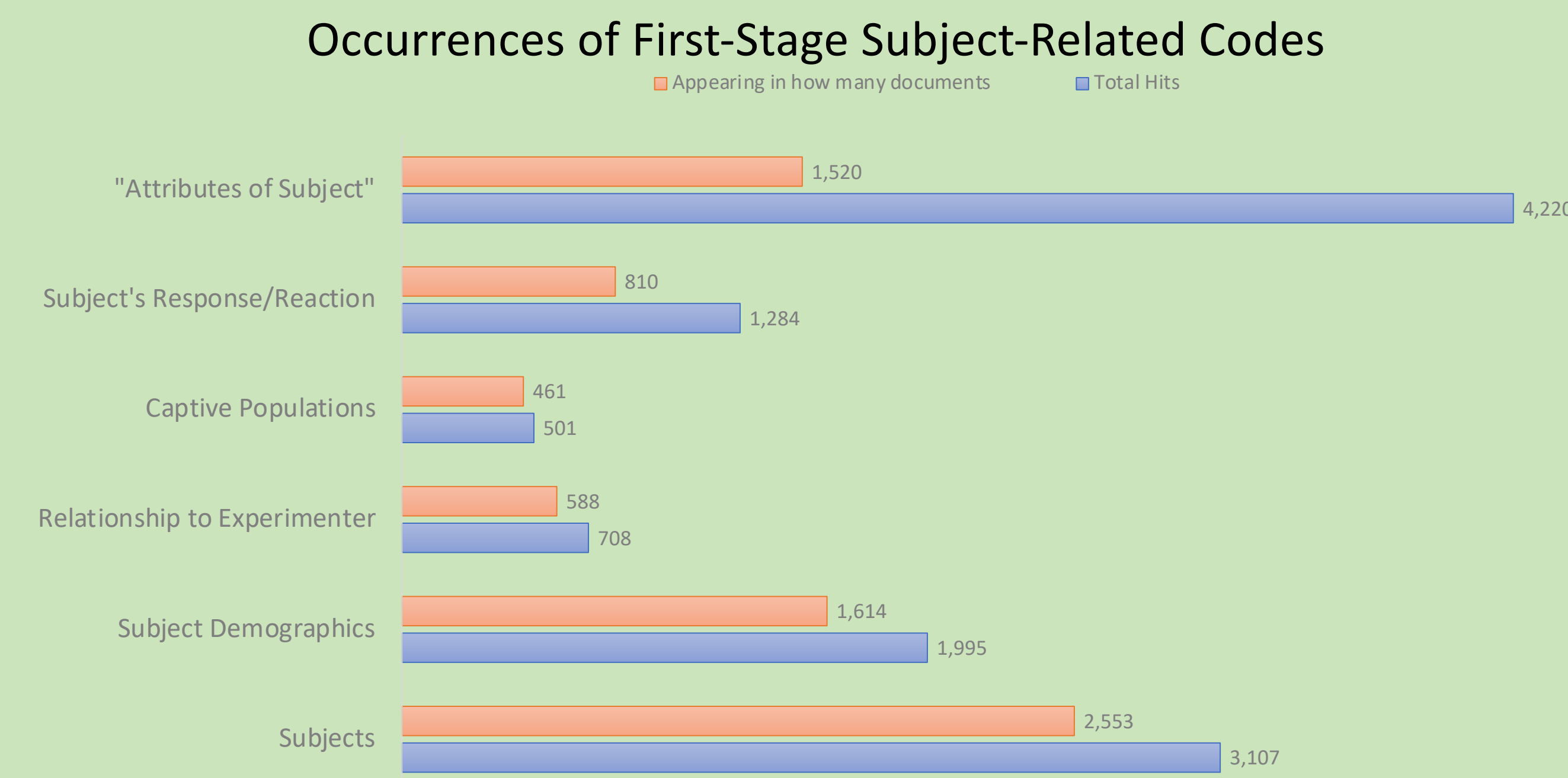
The surveys, part of the APA's efforts to empirically create ethics guidelines for research, were conducted between 1968 and 1971. Each survey collected background information and posed an open-ended question asking respondents to “describe incidents in the course of research with human subjects that gave rise to ethical concern.” There are approximately 2,500 known surviving responses housed in the Library of Congress; these were digitally copied and transcribed by Jill Morawski and Laura Stark.



Literature Cited

Archives of the American Psychological Association (Boxes 423-445), Manuscript Division, U.S. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Bazerman, C. (1983). Scientific writing as a social act: A review of the literature of the sociology of science. In P. Anderson, J. Brockman, & C. Miller (Eds.), *New Essays in Technical and Scientific Communication: Research, Theory, Practice* (pp. 156-184). Routledge.
Danziger, K. (1988). A question of identity: Who participated in psychological experiments? In J. G. Morawski (ed.), *The Rise of Experimentation in American Psychology* (pp. 35-52). Yale University.

First-Stage Coding Findings



Co-Occurrences of "Subject Attributes" and other first-stage codes

- “S. Atts” and “S. Response/Reaction” overlap in 794 coded segments in 594 documents
- “S. Atts” and “S. Demographics” overlap in 538 segments found in 498 documents
- “S. Atts” and “Captive population” overlap in 151 segments, across 142 documents.
- “S. Atts” and “relationship to E” overlap in 225 segments in 202 documents

Secondary “Attributes of Subject” Findings

- Attributions of **“emotion and affect”** were frequently **“anticipatory-methodological”** or **“in situ”** since feeling states are fluid. Respondents frequently wrote of how subjects may feel or did feel as a result of a research protocol
 - **In Situ:** “The inability of the Ss to do well on the task was obviously upsetting to some of them. They would become quiet, depressed, withdrawn, etc and one could sense their ego was a little bruised” (4302c441sIVfE).
- **“Knowledge and awareness”** attributes included **“a priori”** statements about subjects' cognitive states; **“anticipatory-methodological”** and **“in situ”** statements about what subjects knew or understood about a specific protocol
 - **Anticipatory-Methodological:** “knowledge of the recording would contaminate the results” (4259c438sIVfD2).
 - **Anticipatory-Methodological:** “It was known that most patients would not recognize the chemical name of LSD, and it is possible that some subjects would have refused to participate in the research project had they known that they might be administered LSD” (501c435sIVfB3).
- Attributes of **“resistors and resistance”** described subject qualities that make them likely to resist (*a priori*); hypothetical or observed (*anticipatory-methodological* and *in situ*) impacts on subjects as a result of refusing to participate
 - **In Situ:** “The results, beyond occasional flat refusals, were 1) evasive pseudo-compliance with consequent bad data, some of which has ended up in published material, and 2) a relatively high level of hostility to psychological testing on the part of the groups tested. This polutes [SIC] the environment in which psychologists work.” (699c434sIVfA1)
- **“Pathology, diagnosis, and other psyc. characteristics”** attributes: respondents used psychological labels to determine their subject sample (*a priori*), used past diagnoses to explain S behavior and conferred new diagnoses onto their subjects as a result of research contact (*in situ*), and considered how diagnoses may influence a subject going forward or how a research protocol may impact someone based on their existing diagnosis (*anticipatory-methodological*)
 - **A Priori:** “mentally retarded patients” (4188c441s5fB1b), “‘backward’ chronic schizophrenic and psychotic patients” (2283c437sVIfD), “emotionally disturbed children” (1310c436sIVfG)
 - **A Priori/In Situ** “‘Normal’ people probably would not be harmed by such procedure, but there are many very neurotic individuals who would be, and many such are serving as subjects in ‘college sophomore’ research” (1488c436sIVfA1a).
 - **In Situ:** “One child’s performance gave strong evidence of organicity [SIC.] plus strong signals of psychoses and possible suicidal tendencies” (1140c434sIVfF3).
- **“Political and cultural”** attributions grouped people by political characteristic (*a priori*), sometimes using these **“a priori”** groupings to hypothesize the political implications of the research (*anticipatory-methodological*) or observing power dynamics in the laboratory and in the use of psychology in society (*in situ*)
 - **A Priori:** “pro-abortion subjects” (4469c441sVIfC), “instigators” (4456c441sVIfB), and “people of different political viewpoints” (4395-2c442sVIfF).
- **“Agency”** attributions addressed subjects' level of choice in participation in ways **“a priori”** **“anticipatory-methodological”** and **“in situ.”**
 - **Anticipatory-Methodological:** “The poor population (a captive audience) was used as [IND] a middle class one because permission was more easily obtained.” (4581c441sVfA3)

Overarching user themes:

The thematic analysis revealed two refrains running through “attributes of subjects:” respondents reflected on intimate exchanges with subjects, replete with emotion and interpersonal regard, and recognized power structures involved in psychological knowledge production, both the politics inside the lab and governing the use of psychology research.

Methods

- MaxQDA mixed-methods data analysis software used across all stages of qualitative coding.
- The analysis was conducted on all 2,553 surveys in the database.
- 6 first-stage codes: *Subject*, and its subcodes *subject demographics*, *captive population*, and *relationship to experimenter*; *subject response/reaction*, and *attributes of subject*.
- Reliability: consensus checking with 2 independent coders
- Secondary thematic analysis of “attributes of subject” code conducted along two dimensions, depicted in the matrix below
 - thematic content of the statement
 - temporal junction at which it was made.
- Co-occurrences examined between the “Subject attributes” and the first-stage codes “subject demographics,” “relationship to experimenter,” “captive population” and “subject response/reaction.”

Content	Temporal Setting		
	A Priori	Anticipatory-Methodological	In Situ
Emotion and Affect			
Knowledge and Awareness			
Resistors and Resistance			
Pathology, Diagnosis, and other Psychological Characteristics			
Political and Cultural Agency			

Discussion and Future

This project reveals the numerous ways midcentury psychologists regarded their subjects when free from canonical standards of reporting. Future research could analyze these discussions of subjects in relation to other features discussed in the APA data set, using codes (such as those in the original 17-code project) to find areas of overlap between “attributes of subject” with “ethical problem stated” and “scientific problem stated” or with “ethical problem resolution/justification (uncertainty).” An alternative direction for future research could include conducting the same survey with a sample of contemporary psychologists.

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