

Using Participant-Generated Codes as Unique Identifiers

If the evaluation plan calls for a pre-post design, and especially if scores must be matched at the participant level, it can be important to devise a way to preserve anonymity yet still be able to identify which participant completed each pre-test and post-test. This makes it possible to compute change in scores for each participant. Sometimes, asking participants to put their name on a measure (for example, an attitude or satisfaction survey) can seem like a violation of privacy. Also, there may be a concern that this will unduly influence or constrain responses.

In this situation, use a *participant-generated, unique identifier*. This is a simple code made up of letters and/or numbers only the participant knows that are easy for the participant to remember consistently. Ask the participant to write this code on the top of the pre-test and later, on the top of the post-test, to allow their two sets of responses to be matched for analysis. There are many ways to construct such an identifier. Take care not to use codes that could be too easily re-constructed to individually identify participants. Below are two examples:

Example #1: (courtesy of Marilyn Ray, Finger Lakes Law and Social Policy Center)

Use a four (4) letter/digit code. Provide four blanks or boxes to fill in. Instruct participants:

- A. *In the first box, write the second letter of your first name;*
- B. *In the second and third boxes, write the day of the month on which you were born (e.g. if born on the 2nd day of some month, then 02 is the answer);*
- C. *In the last box, write the first letter of your mother's last name prior to marriage.*

Example #2: (courtesy of Kelly Vachta, Wayne State University)

Use a five (5) part code. Provide five blanks or boxes to fill in. Instruct participants as follows:

- A. *In the first box write the number of kids who are older than you, but under age of 18, living in your house.*
- B. *In the second box, write the number of pets living inside your house. Only include pets who live inside your house. Also, don't count any pets your parents don't know about.*
- C. *In the third box, write the last 2 numbers of your street address (if you lived at "20249 Main Street", you would enter 49; if your address only has one number, like "4 North Street", just write 4)*
- D. *In the last 2 boxes, write the first and last letters of your middle name (e.g. if your middle name is "Paul", enter PL.) If you have more than 1 middle name, use the one that comes right after your first name.*

Pilot Test It!

Here's a real-life example of what happened in an initial attempt to get participants to create a unique self-identifying code that would serve to match pre- and post- surveys. The initial instructions for creating the code are below (this was used with middle school youth), and the resulting test answers from piloting the survey are in the table below. The point is that mistakes are easy to make, and surprising things can go wrong, even when you think you are being clear!

Example of "code" instructions at the beginning of the draft survey:

Please enter the last letter of your first name, your birth month, and your fifth grade teacher's last name.

Example: name = Patti, Birth month = July, 5th grade teacher = Mrs. Zuels.

Code = i7Zuels.

Actual results obtained in pilot-test of survey:

- n,july,joly
- llocchi
- Kevin Decmenber Mckenzie
- A 2 Snow
- a,december,mrs.welhelm
- Aosavelson

Thanks to careful pilot-testing, the evaluators had an opportunity to revise the instructions before the real survey was sent out. Be sure to write clear instructions and pilot test your unique identifier procedures.