



## **Examining Responses to Sexism Using a High-Impact, High-Psychological Realism Lab Study**

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## Abstract

High-impact lab experiments that are high in psychological realism are relatively rare in the age of quick online data collection. However, there are many benefits to conducting clever in-person experiments. This “methods in action” case focuses on the experimental techniques required to create a study that mimics the real-world pressures women may face when responding to sexism. The study preparation and data collection protocol are described in detail. Needed resources, time commitment, logistical challenges, best practices, and benefits associated with this methodology are discussed throughout.

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## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Describe the methodological challenges of conducting high-impact lab studies
  - Describe the benefits of creating high-psychological realism in research studies
  - Employ strategies for training research assistants on study protocol
  - Identify the resources, time, and space required for conducting high-impact research
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## Project Context

Confronting prejudice can decrease future prejudicial behavior (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006; Mallett & Wagner, 2011). When asked to imagine the experience of sexism women often report that they *would* confront (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001)—a desire that may be driven by the motivation to be respected. Yet women rarely confront sexism when they actually experience it (Swim & Hyers, 1999). This may occur in part because women do not anticipate the need to belong will constrain their behavior. That is, the fear of rejection or backlash for speaking up and the emergent threat to the need to belong may keep women from confronting sexism in the moment. Therefore, we hypothesized that a belonging affirmation would increase actual confrontation of sexism by allowing the need to be respected to drive behavior. We tested our hypothesis via a high-impact, high psychological realism laboratory experiment.

Our question was one of causation—we wanted to know if changing one variable would cause a change in an outcome variable. We hypothesized that satisfying liking goals (i.e., the desire to be liked by another person) would allow respect goals (i.e., the desire to be treated fairly) to come to the forefront, *causing* an increase in assertive responses to sexism like confrontation. To satisfy liking goals, we had some participants complete a belonging affirmation that required them to write about a time they had been accepted by other people. To test for a causal process, we needed to conduct an experiment where we manipulated variables (i.e., the

presence of sexism, belonging affirmation) and assessed subsequent changes in outcome variables (e.g., women's responses). True experiments allow researchers to carefully manipulate their variables and are often high in internal validity—the confidence that a change in one variable caused a change in another variable.

We knew that women's predicted responses to sexism often do not match their actual responses (e.g., Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Thus, we wanted to create a situation that induced the same psychological response to sexism that women were likely to feel in the “real world.” We used mild deception to obscure the true goal of the experiment, reduce participant reactance, and heighten psychological realism. Drawing from past research and personal experience, we carefully crafted our cover story, procedure, and materials to make the experimental situation feel psychologically realistic to our female participants.

We discuss the research published in Mallett and Melchiori (2014) in this article. The two studies in the published article are similar in their methodology. We focus on Study 2 because it has an additional variable and thus offers a richer example of high-impact experimental lab research.

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### Research Practicalities

The studies published in Mallett and Melchiori (2014) were inspired by Melchiori's master's thesis. We began developing the ideas in late 2009. The studies were approved by our Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the Spring of 2010. We began to train research assistants in the Fall of 2010; new research assistants were trained as they joined our research lab each semester. In general, because this type of study requires greater commitment and skill, we only select research assistants who have done a good job for at least one semester in the lab. We conducted studies in this line of research over the course of several semesters from September 2010 through December 2012.

A team of five to six undergraduate research assistants collected data each semester. Some research assistants remained the same over the course of several semesters, but there was always at least one new research assistant every semester. We recruited female participants from Loyola University Chicago's Psychology 101 participant pool. All students enrolled in Psychology 101 at the university were required to register with Sona, a study participant management system. Students could log into the site and review a list of research study summaries. If they were eligible for participation, they could reserve an hour-long appointment to come into the research lab and complete the experiment.

The study was conducted in two small adjoining rooms that were part of Mallett's private (i.e.,

not shared with other faculty) research space. These rooms were specially designed for this type of social interaction study when the psychology department was relocated to a new building. One research assistant conducted each experimental session and participants completed the study one at a time. After she was greeted by the experimenter, the participant was seated at a computer station in one room, and the research assistant was seated at a computer station in the other room. Informed consent forms and debriefing forms were printed using the Psychology department copier. All other study materials were presented via Inquisit 4.0, a survey and reaction-time software package. Following data collection, we analyzed all quantitative and coded qualitative data with IBM SPSS Software.

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### Research Design

In Study 2 of Mallett and Melchiori (2014), we used a 2(sense of belonging: enhanced, reduced) × 2(type of questions: sexist, inappropriate) between-participants factorial design. In factorial designs, there are more than one independent variables and at least two conditions or “levels” for each independent variable. In our study, we had two independent variables each with two levels. We used a “fully crossed” factorial design in that we assessed all possible combinations of the levels across both factors. Our study was between-participants because each participant experienced only one level of each independent variable. In other words, each participant only completed one belonging condition (enhanced or reduced) and only saw one set of questions (sexist or inappropriate).

We deceived participants in our research study. Participants were told a cover story that did not reveal the true conditions or purpose of the experiment. We told participants that the belonging manipulation was a pilot test of a new “cognitive task” and that the main purpose of the study was to evaluate the use of online job interviews for telecommuters. We believe (and our IRB agreed) that the use of deception in our study is justified for three reasons. First, there was a real risk that demand characteristics would influence the results of our study. Demand characteristics are features of a study that lead the participant to try to guess the study hypothesis and/or act to try to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis. Telling participants that we wanted to see if a liking goal influenced assertive responses to sexism or that the male expert was not really conducting the interview would likely prevent us from being able to draw reasonable conclusions from our study. Second, the potential benefit of the knowledge gained from our study outweighed the risk. The deception was not different from that which participants might encounter in everyday life, but the knowledge gained from the deception could influence future research and social policy (e.g., workplace sexual harassment policies). Third, we informed participants about the deception immediately after they completed the study via a debriefing interview. The research assistant revealed all deception used in the study,

noted any participant concerns, and gave the participants the contact information of the principal investigators should they have questions about the deception or any other facet of the experiment. A debriefing session is an ethical approach to ensuring that participant risk is minimized and participant benefits are maximized for studies that use deception.

### Manipulating a Sense of Belonging

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two belonging manipulations adapted from Knowles and Gardner (2008). The belonging manipulations were writing prompts designed to induce psychological states. In the enhanced belonging condition, participants were asked to write about a time they were socially accepted. Participants in this condition spent 3-5 min recalling and writing about a time they were included, accepted, or praised, thereby leading them to adopt a feeling of enhanced belonging that would impact their responses later in the study. In the reduced belonging condition, participants were asked to write about a time they were socially rejected. Participants in this condition recalled times they were rejected, left out, or ridiculed by others, thereby leading them to adopt a feeling of reduced belonging that would impact their responses later in the study. The full instructions appear below; the bracketed information contains the manipulated language for the enhanced and reduced conditions, respectively:

Please write about a time in which you felt intensely [accepted/rejected] in some way, a time that you felt as if you [belonged/did not belong]. This [acceptance/rejection] can be interpersonal in nature (e.g., a time in which someone [wished to date you or wanted to be your friend/broke up with you or no longer wanted to be your friend]) or can be a [acceptance/rejection] from a group (e.g., a time in which you were [chosen for a team or included in a clique/chosen last for a team or excluded from a clique]).

After spending several minutes typing their responses, participants answered a manipulation check item ("I felt social accepted during this event," 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*very much*]). Participants also answered a goal preference item ("If you had to choose between being liked and being respected by the interviewer, which do you regard as more important?," 1 [*most important to be liked*], 4 [*equally important*], 7 [*most important to be respected*]).

### Type of Questions

Participants completed a mock job interview using a computerized instant message platform. Our cover story was that we were interested in the best strategies to use in online job interviews. We told participants that a 32-year-old man with an MBA and online interviewing experience from the "University student resource center" would conduct the mock interview for

a research assistant position. In reality, the research assistant conducted the chat from another room. The door between the participant and research rooms was closed, and we used a sound minimizing keyboard to disguise the sound of typing.

All participants received three control questions (“What is your year in school?”, “What is your major or intended major?”, “Why are you interested in this research position?”) and were given time to respond in the chat. After receiving their response, we randomly assigned participants either the sexist (“Do you have a boyfriend?” “Do people find you desirable?” “Do you think it is important for women to wear bras to work?”) or inappropriate (“Do you have a best friend?” “Do people find you morbid?” “Do you think it is important for people to believe in God?”) question set. These questions were taken directly from Woodzicka and LaFrance’s (2001) study. Participants were given time to respond in the chat. After sending their responses, the research assistant entered the room and announced the interview portion of the study was over due to an issue with the Internet connection.

We then assessed the assertiveness of participant responses via self-report and coding. For self-reported assertiveness, participants rated how much they used six assertive response strategies based on Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) (e.g., “Asked why the question was asked”, “Told the interviewer it was none of his business”; 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*very much*]) in response to each question. For coded assertiveness, two independent coders were trained by the researchers to identify each of the assertive response strategies as well as whether the question was simply answered with a yes or no response.

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### Method in Action

The study procedure, belonging manipulation, and dependent variables were all pilot tested with the 12 undergraduate and 3 graduate students who were in our research lab. We brought drafts of the materials to a weekly lab meeting. Research assistants, who were unaware of our study predictions, completed the measures and read through the proposed study procedure script. We edited the materials based upon their feedback and then returned with the updated materials at a subsequent meeting. For example, during a lab meeting a research assistant pointed out that because our procedure involved the research assistant leaving the participant alone in the room, the participant may be tempted to browse the Internet or check email while conducting the chat. In consultation with our research assistants, we decided to have the research assistant open the chat on the participant computer and place the cursor in the chat box. Then, the research assistant took the wireless mouse with her to the other room, ostensibly for “control purposes.” Thus, the participant could only use the keyboard for navigation and responding, and would be unlikely to navigate away from the chat screen during

the study.

We spent approximately 2 weeks training research assistants on the study protocol after we had a working draft of the study procedure and Inquisit programs. We first met with the six research assistants who were assigned to the study within the study space to walk through the script and procedure. Then, we had the research assistants memorize the script and run one another through the study in the study space, alternating the research assistant and participant roles. Finally, before running a real participant for the first time we asked our research assistants to bring a friend into the lab and run them through the study. This procedure allowed our research assistants to get comfortable with the script and study space before we began data collection. It also allowed us to get additional feedback from the research assistants on the protocol and the research materials as they played out in the study environment. For example, during her study run-through with a friend, a research assistant pointed out that the Google Chat feature we used for the online mock interview tells the person on the other end of the chat when someone is typing. Therefore, we could not simply copy and paste the scripted questions into the chat. We adjusted to protocol to have the research assistant type and then delete some text in the chat screen so that the “typing” indicator was displayed to the participant for an appropriate amount of time. These small additions to the procedure were crucial for heightening the psychological realism in the study and lessening participant suspicion. We also encouraged the research assistants to report any anomalies during the course of data collection to ensure that the protocol was followed consistently across all research assistants. We emphasized that although it may not be very exciting to implement the exact procedure 50 times in the same semester, the research assistants were responsible for collecting data that may one day contribute to our scientific understanding of human nature. So although they may be tempted to vary an aspect of the procedure, it was essential to check with the team leaders before making any such changes.

To conduct each session, research assistants relied on a seven-page study procedure script that was refined during the training process describe above. Research assistants were instructed to arrive to the lab rooms 5 min before the session was scheduled to begin. The research assistant logged onto the study computers and opened the first Inquisit study file. The Sona page instructed participants to wait in a small lounge until the research assistant came to get them. After checking the Sona page, the research assistant retrieved the participant from the lounge and brought her to the study room. The research assistant wrote the participant's name on a log that randomly assigned type of questions condition (1 = sexist questions, 2 = surprising questions) next to each name slot. The research assistant instructed the participant to read and sign the informed consent form if she agreed to participate.

After obtaining informed consent, the research assistant helped the participant begin the belonging manipulation task with the following cover story:

Thank you for signing up for our study. We are using part of your study hour to pilot test a new cognitive task for use in future research. This task is very straightforward and should not take long to complete. [The research assistant opened the “Cognitive Task” Inquisit file on the computer.] I am working on some homework in the other room, so just knock on the door after you complete this program. I’ll hear you in the other room and come start you on the other study.

The research assistant then left the room and waited in the adjoining room. We programmed Inquisit to randomly present either the enhanced belonging manipulation or the reduced belonging manipulation. The manipulation checks and goal question appeared after the participants finished the writing task. After the participant finished the survey and knocked on the door, the research assistant reentered the study room and delivered the following script:

You are about to take part in a study of online job interviews for telecommuters. With the current economy and the changing workforce, more people are choosing to telecommute to work. That is, they choose to work from home for an office that is in another location. Often the interviews for telecommuter positions are conducted over the internet, either through Skype or simply through a formalized chat. Little research has investigated the effectiveness of these interviews or what types of strategies work well for such interviews. The present research investigates those questions.

You will take part in an online chat with a 32 year old male who works in the University’s student resource center. He has agreed to conduct and evaluate the interviews. This experience can provide you with valuable information for this type of job interview. You will answer a series of interview questions via an instant messaging program. The interview will be practice for a research-oriented position that could open doors for many types of jobs in the future. After you answer the interview questions, you will answer some questions about the interview experience.

I’m going to go in the other room and start the chat process with the interviewer. I’ll connect with him and make sure your chat is set up. Are you familiar with how to do an online chat? I have brought up the chat box and you simply type your answers to the questions. I will be taking the mouse with me for control purposes. We’re playing around with the format, so the questions may come one at a time, or a few at a time. When you hit enter, he will see your response. Do you have any questions?



After answering any questions, the research assistant maximized the Google Chat screen on the participant's computer and went into the adjoining room with the participant's wireless mouse. The research assistant waited a few moments to avoid making the participant suspicious and then logged into the chat dialogue.

We created two Google accounts for the study. One Google account was used by the research assistant ("StudentResourcesLUC") to pose as a 32-year-old male university employee on the Google Chat dialogue within Gmail. The other Google account was used by the participant ("LUCinterview") for the Chat within Gmail. Creating our own accounts rather than asking participants to create an account or use their personal account had three benefits: it protected participant confidentiality, kept the chat names standard across participants, and allowed us to easily create a log the text of the chats from either account. During research assistant training, we learned that the text of the last chat with a user automatically appeared when starting a new chat with the same user. We fixed this issue by sending several spaces via the chat to remove the text from appearing on the screen. Participants were not able to use a mouse during the chat and were therefore unlikely to scroll up in the chat dialogue. Any participants who scrolled up using the keyboard and reported doing so during the funneled debriefing interview were excluded from analyses.

The first message from the interviewer/research assistant was introductory in nature:

Hi, I'm Michael. I'll be conducting the interview today. I have a MBA from Northwestern's school of business and have extensive experience conducting online interviews. We're playing around with the interview format, so in this interview I'll be sending a few questions at a time. Each question will be numbered. Please use the corresponding number for your response. So, if I send "1. What is your name?" you will reply "1. (your name)." Let's get started.

We allowed participants to respond to this first message. Most participants replied with their first name or a greeting (e.g., "hi, nice to meet you"). After a few moments, the interviewer/research assistant sent a set of neutral questions, being sure to type and then delete text in the box so that the "typing" message appeared for an appropriate amount of time in the participant's chat box:

- 1.What is your year in school?
- 2.What is your major or intended major?
- 3.Why are you interested in this research position?

After receiving a response to these questions, the research assistant checked the session log

they wrote the participant's name on when she first entered the study room. If there was a "1" by her name, the interviewer/research assistant sent the sexist questions next. If there was a "2" by her name, the interviewer/research assistant sent the surprising questions next:

4. Do you have a boyfriend?
5. Do people find you desirable?
6. Do you think it is important for women to wear bras to work?

[OR]

4. Do you have a best friend?
5. Do people find you morbid?
6. Do you think it is important for people to believe in God?

The research assistant then waited for the participant to respond to the second set of questions. After receiving the participant's response to the second set of questions, the research assistant used a feature in Google Chat to set the interviewer's status to "Invisible." Once this setting was enabled, it appeared as if the other user logged off. The research assistant then entered the study room and said,

I'm sorry to say that we're having some technical difficulties, so it looks like that's it for the interview portion of the study. Now we'd like you to tell us your thoughts about the interview experience.

The researcher then brought up an Inquisit program that included questions about the interview experience as well as potential covariates that were not discussed in Mallett and Melchiori (2014) and demographic questions (e.g., race, gender, age). We developed a self-report scale based on a similar study (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001) to assess self-reported response assertiveness. Participants answered the same scale items for each of the three sexist or surprising questions:

To what extent did you respond in the following ways after the interviewer asked you this question? Items answered on a scale of 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*very much*]

1. Simply answered the question
2. Stated a clarification of the question before you answered
3. Asked why the question was asked and then answered the question
4. Asked why the question was asked and then refused to answer the question
5. Told the interviewer that the question was irrelevant
6. Told off the interviewer

7. Told the interviewer it was none of his business
8. Left the interview after this question
9. Reported the interviewer to the research assistant
10. Simply refused to answer the question

We also coded the responses the participants gave during the live chat. The inclusion of both open-ended responses and self-reported responses was a great strength in our study. The open-ended responses that the participants typed during the chat allowed us to capture their rich, in-the-moment responses. An open-ended format mirrors how women would likely respond to discrimination in a real-world context, thus heightening the external validity of the research conclusions. We then developed a qualitative coding scheme based on past research and emerging themes to translate their words to numbers and test for our predicted effects.

By also including the self-report ratings of assertive responses, we could directly compare the results of our study to past research. We had a lot of control with the development of the self-reported measure and were able to ensure that we assessed the constructs that emerged in previous confronting research (e.g., Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Thus, with the self-reported data, we were able to demonstrate that we conceptually replicated the findings from past research. Furthermore, the fact that our analyses led us to similar conclusions about the open-ended and self-reported data gave us confidence that other studies that only include self-reported data are likely internally valid.

The final step of our research protocol was a funnel debriefing interview (Dulany, 1962). We wanted to carefully probe for participant suspicion as well as ensure that participants understood the deception used in the study. The questions that appeared on the debriefing interview script asked increasingly leading questions (i.e., “funnel”) designed to tap into potential participant reaction bias and suspicion. We spent some time with research assistants training them how to create a sense of trust with the participant to encourage truthful disclosure. After conducting the interview, the research assistant gradually revealed the deception used in the study, described the purpose of the study, requested that the participant not talk about the study with other students in the participant pool, and offered the participant the opportunity to ask questions. At the conclusion of the interview, the participant was given a debriefing form with the experimenter’s contact information to take home with them. The research assistant then used a 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*very much*] rating scale to report “Level of suspicion” and “Involvement in study” for each participant. The full funnel debriefing interview script appears below:

We’re almost finished, but first I need to ask you a few questions. This will help us

understand your experience in the study. I'll also give you some information about the research process and our topic of interest. It's very important that you share your true thoughts with me because it will really help our research to know about your experience.

First, what was your overall impression of the study?

Do you have any concerns about the study (circle one)? YES NO

A lot of people in psychology experiments are suspicious that we're hiding something from them or that we are looking at something other than what we said we were looking at. Were you suspicious at all? *[If yes, determine at what point and how bad it was]* *[If she says it started with the SECOND SET OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, say "Was there any point before that?"]*

What did you think of the interviewer? Just tell me your first impression.

If you had to guess, what would you say this study was trying to figure out? What was our hypothesis?

Have any of your friends have been in this study?

Have you ever taken part in a study similar to this one before? If so, when (last fall, last spring).

Okay, now I'd like to tell you a bit more about this study. I ask that you not share this information with any friends you have who might also participate in the study. Doing so could keep them from acting as they would if they had not heard the information. If they ask, just say we were looking at how people interview via the computer, okay? *[Make eye contact and get a head nod or verbal acknowledgement]*

The present study is part of a program of research that explores how women respond to sexism. Specifically, we are interested in the conditions that increase or decrease the likelihood that women will assertively respond to sexism. By the time they are teenagers, most American girls have experienced some form of sexism. This can range from being objectified to being sexually harassed at work. Most women imagine that they would say something to perpetrators of discrimination, yet research shows that most women hesitate to confront sexism. This poses a problem because people believe that if women do not respond to or report discrimination, they are consenting to the treatment.

We are looking at why women often imagine that they will assertively respond to discrimination (e.g., point out that a remark was prejudicial to the perpetrator) but usually either do not respond, or respond in non-assertive ways (e.g., nervously laugh after a prejudicial remark). Women may choose not to assertively respond to discrimination for several reasons. For example, people tend to dislike those who confront discrimination and concern about being disliked can make women question their decision to confront.

In this study, we were testing how you would respond to questions in the interview. Half of the participants just imagine they did the interview and half actually take part in a mock interview. In reality, there was no interviewer. Even when people thought they were doing a mock interview, they were talking with me and I had a scripted set of questions to ask. We apologize for the deception and hope that you understand why it was necessary.

Half of the participants were randomly assigned to receive surprising questions that were not sexist like, “do you have a best friend?” the other half of participants were randomly assigned to receive sexist questions like, “do you have a boyfriend?” We will code the written answers that you provided for the assertiveness of your response.

Do you have any questions about the study that you would like me to answer?

Thanks for helping with the study. I'll update your credit later today.

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### Conclusions and Practical Lessons Learned

High-impact, high psychological-realism lab experiments require substantial preparation, a committed research assistant team, regular oversight and check-ins during data collection, and significant research support from the department in the form of space, equipment, and sometimes participant compensation. It is important to have a senior member of the research team who has successfully conducted this type of study in the past to consult when creating and modifying the procedure and managing the study. However, using this methodology provides a powerful test of socially relevant research questions.

The methodology detailed in this case requires substantial time and patience. It took months to develop the study materials and procedure and gain IRB approval. We could only run one participant at a time through our study. The research assistant training process took one to two weeks each semester, and we met with our research assistants weekly to check-in on study protocol and arising issues. For example, during the early weeks of the study, a research

assistant noted that some participants were finishing the last survey portion of the study very quickly. We then realized that some research assistants were opening the incorrect file on the computer. Had we not checked in with our research assistants regularly, we could have potential lost data from dozens of participants. Because we wanted high psychological-realism, the substantial time we put into the study was essential to ensure we had a realistic flow to our cover story and procedure, well-trained research assistants who maintained consistency in their adherence to the study protocol, and a study setting that was free from the distraction of other participants. This study ran fairly smoothly because the second author (R.K.M.) had conducted nearly a dozen similar studies in the past. If you decide to use this method for the first time, you should attempt to consult with someone who has expertise in the area and expect a few bumps along the way. Listen carefully to your research team and learn from them as you develop and pilot test your materials.

Using a high-impact lab study also creates a rich experiential learning exercise for undergraduate research assistants. We were able to closely work with several research assistants, many from underrepresented groups, over the course of the project. Research assistants gained a greater appreciation for study creation, the experimental method, and the patience it takes to run more than a hundred people through the exact same procedure over the course of a year. Two research assistants received university fellowships to assist with the project. They were involved in creating and presenting posters at local and regional conferences. We also benefited from their unique insight into what it is like to be an undergraduate participant in this type of study. Their knowledge of instant message chatting, for example, was invaluable in refining our procedure.

The two studies in Mallett and Melchiori (2014) took hundreds of hours of preparation, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. Those hours translated in a finely tuned experimental design and procedure and produced results that allowed us to make confident causal conclusions: addressing liking concerns allows women to pursue respect goals and assertively respond to sexism.

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### Exercises and Discussion Questions

- 1.What is one benefit of conducting a high-impact lab experiment?
- 2.What resources are necessary for completing lab research?
- 3.What are the benefits of pilot testing materials and extended training of research assistants?
- 4.Why is it important to enhance psychological realism when studying topics like responses to sexism?

5. What are the benefits of including both open-ended and self-reported outcomes in a study?

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#### Further Reading

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#### Web Resources

Inquisit survey software: <http://www.millisecond.com>

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