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LETTERS

Of Subjects and Participants

To the Editor:

Re: "The Subject Is ... Subjects" (June 15): The word "subject" in no way implies that people "are having things done to them," as the American Psychological Association asserts. Such people would be called objects, not subjects.

It takes many people to carry out an experiment. There is the experimenter, who conducts the investigation, and the subject, who provides the empirical data. But technicians, research assistants and confederates often take part as well.

All these people "participate." To call subjects "participants" not only denies recognition of their unique contribution to research, but also denies proper recognition to the other participants as well.

DR. JOHN F. KIHLMSTROM
Berkeley, Calif.

The writer is a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley.

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The Subject Is ... Subjects

By **BENEDICT CAREY**

For more than a century, researchers have used the word "subjects" to describe the college undergraduates and other brave souls who volunteer for psychology experiments.

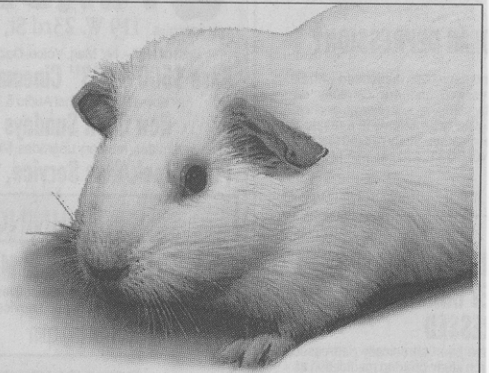
Now the American Psychological Association wants to retire the term. It is, the group says, too impersonal, stripping people of their individuality, their humanity. "Participants" is a better word, the association's publication manual advises. It implies consent. Unless, of course, the subjects — er, participants — are infants or Alzheimer's patients, in which case they have not technically consented and are better referred to, the manual suggests, as "individuals."

The 18-page language guidelines have

so confused the usage "that someone like me has not a clue what word to use in many cases," said Dr. Henry L. Roediger III, chairman of the psychology department at Washington University in St. Louis. In a recent editorial in a professional journal, Dr. Roediger styled himself a member and founder of "Sufferers of Participant Phobia (SPP)." "Use of the word participants in our journals has caused me mental anguish, has produced undue stress," he wrote.

A dozen colleagues shot off letters in solidarity. "Soon, I imagine, we'll be calling them 'Their Excellencies,'" one read.

Dr. Gary R. VandenBos, executive director of publications and communications at the psychological association, was not amused. Dr. VandenBos said that he was not in the room when the



Nigel Cattlin/Photo Researchers Inc.

Has he signed the consent form?

"whole subject-participant" decision was made but that he agreed with it. "'Subjects' implies that these are people who are having things done to them, whereas 'participants' implies that they gave consent," he said.

No word yet from groups that represent lab rats or guinea pigs.