Amazon Mechanical Turk
IRB Considerations

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“The Mechanical Turk” chess playing automaton
Amazon Mechanical Turk

**HITs**
Human Intelligence Tasks

**Workers**
People who complete HITs

**Requesters**
Post HITs for workers to complete
• Workers are paid small sums of money for each task they complete

• Typical pay ranges from a few cents to a few dollars

• Depends on task complexity and length
Amazon Mechanical Turk

• mTurk was designed as a crowdsourcing platform for business – not a research platform

• This makes mTurk unique among online survey platforms

• Leads to unique challenges
Academic researchers have widely adopted mTurk as a research platform.

Easy, cheap way to recruit large numbers of subjects quickly.
Who are mTurk workers?

N=3,370

51% Male, 49% Female

88% under the age of 50, 41% under 30

77% white, non-Hispanic

51% have a college degree
How often do Turkers work on mTurk?

- Every Day, 63%
- More than once a week, 32%
- Once a week or less, 5%

Source: Pew Research report “Research in the Crowdsourcing Age”
Ethical and regulatory concerns with mTurk as a research platform
mTurk Ethical Concerns

• Low pay is the norm

• Asking workers for identifiable information violates Participation Agreement

• Steep learning curve for new requesters
Turkers’ Hourly Pay

- Less than $5, 52%
- $5 to $7.99, 39%
- $8 or more, 8%
- Refused, 1%

Source: Pew Research report “Research in the Crowdsourcing Age”
mTurk Worker IDs

- All mTurk workers have a “Worker ID” that is supposed to be anonymous.
- In reality, worker IDs are not anonymous.
- A worker’s Amazon.com profile can be accessed via:

  www.amazon.com/gp/profile/[worker ID]
Steep Learning Curve

• It’s difficult to fully understand mTurk worker culture
  • Dynamo worker collective can help
• Easy to underestimate how serious workers are
  • Due in part to low pay
Workers are VERY serious about mTurk
mTurk Regulatory Concerns

- Requiring workers to complete all tasks in order to get paid
- Impossible to know if a subject is under 18 years old
- Waiver of Documentation is required
Common complaints to the IRB from mTurk workers
• Our IRB receives more complaints from mTurk workers than from any other research population
  • Complaints tend to be very detailed
  • Workers are very persistent
Common Complaints to the IRB

• Most common complaint type is a HIT rejection
  • Workers do not get paid if a requester rejects their HIT
  • Rejection lowers the worker’s HIT acceptance rate
Sample Complaint #1

• HIT rejection
• Task was a 50-minute survey that paid $5
• HIT rejected due to not checking a box on consent form
• Three similar complaints about this study
• I advised researcher to accept all HITs, pay the subjects
Sample Complaint #2

- HIT rejection
- Photo/text matching task
- Researcher believed subject wrote a computer script to complete the task quickly many times
- Subject began harassing researcher and the IRB
- I advised researcher to:
  - Accept the HITs
  - Pay the subject
  - Throw out their data
Helpful links

- Amazon Mechanical Turk: [www.mturk.com](http://www.mturk.com)
- Dynamo worker collective: [www.wearedynamo.org](http://www.wearedynamo.org)
- Dynamo Guidelines: [www.wearedynamo.org/guidelines](http://www.wearedynamo.org/guidelines)
- Turkopticon: [https://turkopticon.ucsd.edu](https://turkopticon.ucsd.edu)