

Deception in Research

Deception is when a researcher gives false information to subjects or intentionally misleads them about some key aspect of the research. Examples include:

- Subjects complete a quiz, and are falsely told that they did very poorly, regardless of their actual performance.
- In order to induce stress, **study** personnel tell subjects that they will give a speech that evaluators will observe on video, when the subjects' speeches will not actually be recorded or observed.
- The study includes a researcher's "confederate" (an individual who poses as a subject) but whose behavior in the study is actually part of the researcher's experimental design.

Incomplete disclosure involves withholding information about the study purpose and/or reason for procedures, in order to prevent biasing the results. Examples include:

- Subjects are asked to take a quiz for research but they are not told that the research question involves how background noise affects their ability to concentrate.
- To further understanding of how representations of same sex couples depicted in commercials influence consumer behavior, subjects are exposed to advertisements featuring gay couples and straight couples while their heart rate, facial muscle movement, and sweat responses are recorded. Subjects are informed that their reactions to the commercials are being studied, but not that the researchers are examining if the sexual orientation of characters in commercials influences them.

Points for Consideration

Protocols that include the use of deception should demonstrate that the investigators are aware of, seeking to minimize, and have a plan to address the possible negative impacts on participants, such as:

- Potential of deception to facilitate unwanted and inappropriate invasion of privacy
- Potential coercion of participants into acting against their own will
- Potential for participants to change their mind about the use of their data after the deception is revealed
- Damage to a participant's self-esteem through feeling ashamed, guilty, stressed, embarrassed, feeling manipulated, or lacking control over their own experience
- The subject is given insight into his or her flows through participation, causing unexpected or emotional pain (sometimes called *inflicted insight*)
- Creation of suspicion and/or distrust in the investigator and/or a generalized distrust of the broader research enterprise.

Protocols that include the use of deception should justify the use of this method and demonstrate that risks to subjects will be minimized by using procedures that are consistent with sound research design including:

- The study must not involve more than minimal risk to the subjects
- The use of deceptive methods must be justified by the study's significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value
- The protocol must clearly address why deception or incomplete disclosure are necessary to ensure the research is scientifically valid and feasible and that an alternative, non-deceptive methodology could not be used
- Subjects should not be deceived about any aspect of the study that would affect their willingness to participate

Informed consent

Deception and incomplete disclosure may interfere with the ability of the research subject to make a fully informed decision about whether or not to participate in the research. In general, deception is not acceptable if, in the judgment of the IRB, the participant may have declined to participate had they been informed of the true purpose of the research. Research using deceptive methods involves omitting one or more of the required elements of consent; usually all or part of the true study purpose and the risk of the deception itself. The IRB may approve a consent procedure that does not include, or which alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent, or waive the requirements to obtain informed consent provided the IRB finds that:

- The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects;
- The waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects;
- The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration; and
- Whenever possible, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation (a complete debriefing).

When appropriate, researchers are encouraged to consider the use of a prospective consent process that informs participants that a study will not be described accurately or that some procedures will be deceptive and provides them an opportunity to decide whether or not to participate on these terms. Below is sample language for consent forms:

For scientific reasons, this consent form does not include all of the information about the research question being tested. The researchers will give you more information when your participation in the study is over.

Debriefing and Dehoaxing

Debriefing is a process that can be undertaken at the conclusion of any research activities, regardless of whether deception is part of the research design. The content and extent of a debriefing should align with the details and risks of the study.

Dehoaxing is the process of convincing subjects who have been deceived as part of a research study that they have in fact been deceived. The purpose of dehoaxing is to prevent possible future harm to the subject.

Goals of Dehoaxing

- To repair the breach of informed consent created by the deception
- To remove any confusion or defuse any tensions that might have been generated by the deception
- To repair any breach of trust that has occurred not only between investigator and subject, and preserve the public's trust in research endeavors
- Dehoax with dignity and an unconditional positive regard for the range of emotions subjects may experience in response to the deception.
- To convince the subject the behavior was due to situational determinants within the experiment rather than to dispositional determinants within the subject.

Delayed Debriefing

If a study requiring debriefing will run over several days or weeks, subjects who have completed the study might tell others about it. If they have been debriefed and thus know the real purpose of the study activities, they might share that information with prospective subjects, thus compromising the scientific validity of the study. Under these circumstances, the IRB may consider a delayed debriefing based upon the level of risk to subjects and the justification for delay.

Exceptions

There are certain circumstances under which the IRB may waive the requirement for debriefing when a study involves deception, such as when the debriefing regarding deception may cause more harm than the deception itself.

Review Level

Research involving deception could fall into any of the three review levels (exempt, expedited, or full board) depending on the specifics of the study. Please note that studies involving deception will not be considered for exempt category 1 (research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings) because deception is not a "normal educational practice." However, these studies may be considered for exempt categories 2 or 3 if they do not involve risk, active tasks that participants will complete, or a plan to enroll children.