

Introduction to Deception Debate

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The debate that follows is part of an ongoing discussion about the meaning and importance of deception in research. While the authors emphasize experimental research, deception is an issue in all social-science methodologies. Such debates are important signals that our field considers how changing technology, research questions, and relationships reflect on and potentially modify our understanding of what is critical for both research and ethics. From the sociology of science, we know that such debates must be encouraged as they are critical for preventing flawed reasoning and stalled analysis.

Definitions of deception stress the intentional misrepresentation of the study to the participants. Obviously researchers rarely fully explain the purpose and hypotheses of the study; incomplete explanations are not deceptions. But deception can take different forms in different methods. In fieldwork, the actual identity and purpose of the researcher may be “hidden” and result in deception (for discussions, see Allen 1997; Ellis 1995; Mitchell 1990). In experiments, false information may be presented as true. Consequently, one way to think about deception is related to violation of informed consent. If the study is not fully represented to the participant, he or she is prevented from providing a consent that is truly informed.

The lack of informed consent helps clarify both the *ethical* and the *research importance* issues. In many ways, the social contract between the educator, clinician, or researcher and the participant is a trust relationship, and it can be argued that this relationship is violated by deception if the costs outweigh the benefits. When Institutional Review Boards

(IRBs) consider this issue, both short-term and long-term costs and benefits are considered, although the emphasis is usually on immediate calculation about participation in a study. (Hegtvedt 2007 offers a thorough discussion of IRB concerns.) In such initial calculations, the costs most often involve time, privacy, or potential psychic or physical harm. The benefits are also heavily weighted on immediate benefits; these could be monetary, or potential physical or psychic well-being. Future experience and outcome are also considered in the cost/benefit analysis. This consideration provides the basis for two quite different views represented in this debate. For both views, another aspect of the social contract, the research field itself, becomes important.

One view, expressed by Hertwig and Ormann and most experimental economists (for example, Holt 2007), posits that if subjects have been deceived, it is reasonable for them to expect to be deceived in other studies. If participants expect to be deceived and consequently do not believe the manipulations, then the very strength of the experiment, control, is destroyed. Thus, it can be argued that deception in one experiment can contaminate the participant pool for future experiments. If this is the case, then there should be a prohibition of most deception. Such a prohibition is not based principally on the ethical relationship to the participant but on the ethical relationship to the research field. (It should be noted that one purely practical solution might be to screen for those who have been in such studies)

Another view, favoring at least limited use of deception, addresses the ethical and research importance issues from a different perspective. The ethical issue in deception relates to how the participants are treated after the study is completed and relates to the obligation for careful, respectful, and thorough

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debriefing. The argument is that such debriefing can educate participants in an especially effective way, as they have just experienced the conditions being investigated.

But, perhaps the strongest argument for the maintenance of deception presented by Yamagishi and Cook is that some research questions cannot be addressed without deception. This argument also relates to the research field rather than a particular participant. Excellent examples come from research that is fundamental to social psychology, such as the effects of labeling, in particular the effects of false labels. One of the most important insights in social psychology relates to the effects of expectations of others on an actor or actors. From the critical insight that expectations are transmitted in multiple ways, we know the importance of controlling for researcher effects (a great methodological contribution) and we know the importance of labeling and stereotyping. Without deception, such knowledge is unobtainable.

So, while Hertwig and Ortmann emphasize problems of deception and offer vital criticisms about the unquestioning acceptance of

its use, Yamagishi and Cook emphasize the importance of deception for certain kinds of questions. These different emphases have impact upon the norms and tolerance in different fields. It seems unconscionable to reject a study only on the basis that deception was used; it seems unconscionable to use deception only on the basis that it is convenient or has been used before.

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