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Deception and Research

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Synonyms

Disguised purpose and research; Ethically regulated deception and research

Introduction

Deception is used as a methodological instrument for various purposes. For example, in experimental research, if participants were fully informed about the aim of the study their behavior could be altered and unspontaneous. Similarly, in ethnographic research, sometimes full disclosure of the researcher's identity and goals is not feasible, because the behavior of research participants can be disturbed if they are aware that they are being observed. Formal norms and institutions that regulate the use of deception in research are inspired by ethical concern for the health and well-being of research participants and developed primarily with a focus on biomedical research. While various forms of deception are commonly used in behavioral research, the ethics codes of most professional associations explicitly regulate use of deception. As a result, the use and status of deception varies considerably across scientific disciplines.

What Is Deception?

There is no consensus about what constitutes deception in empirical research. However, a minimal definition of deception can be based on commonalities across different fields. These definitions converge on considering deception as the *explicit* and *intentional* provision of false or misleading information about facts or people involved in a study. Deception of research participants can thus occur mainly in two ways: actively lying, or concealing essential information through omission or partial disclosure. The extent of lying can vary greatly in intensity, and lying is common especially in experimental research, though not restricted to it. In nonexperimental research, researchers sometimes lie about their own identity, for example, in studies employing covert participant observation. At one extreme, lying about the true purpose of an experimental study is a mild form of deception that is very common. At the opposite extreme, sometimes research participants have been placed in situations in which almost nothing is what it is purported to be. Milgram's controversial experiments on

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obedience to authority provide a notorious example. In these studies, participants were told they were taking part in a study on the effects of physical punishment on learning and they were lead to administer electric shocks to other persons, when they failed the learning tests. In reality, the electric shocks were simulated and the person apparently receiving the shocks was an accomplice of the experimenter, instructed to act as if he was enduring severe pain. In between these extremes, in many experiments involving interactions, participants engage with research confederates, or with a computer program simulating the behavior of the other person, while they are told the other person is a real participant like themselves. Asch's conformity studies provide a classical example of this form of deception. In these studies, Asch employed several confederates at once, instructed to give the same wrong answer to a very simple visual test, in order to create a normative pressure towards conformity. Nowadays, extreme forms of deception, such as Milgram's, are no longer permitted. However, using confederates or simulated partners is still very common. For example, in social psychological studies on cooperation within groups, the interactions are usually computer mediated and research participants are often told they are interacting with real partners, while in fact all other group members are simulated. This form of deception is used to enhance control and experimental validity by ensuring that the experimental stimulus is truly identical for all participants in the same experimental condition.

Partial disclosure or concealment is a subtler form of deception tolerated in most areas of behavioral research, with some caveats or limitations. In experimental research, concealing the true purpose of a study is customary. However, it is hard to draw a line separating relatively innocuous and legitimate economy with the truth from provision of incomplete information leading participants to form false beliefs about the nature of the situations in which they are involved. In other areas of research, concealment may concern the way researchers obtain and store the data. For example, an interviewer could use audio- or video-recording equipment, without informing research participants. Each form of deception raises various ethical concerns, and the ways in which they are addressed differs between disciplines and countries.

While mild forms of concealment are used in various research areas, explicit deception is typically associated with experimental social psychology. The experimental method became paramount in psychology in the first 30 years of the twentieth century, contributing to the establishment of psychology as a science. Subsequently, social psychologists began to use deception to exert control over the experimental stimulus, which in their field typically consisted of other people's behavior. Historically, deception was very uncommon before 1930 and limited to less than 10% of the articles published by the major social psychology journals between 1930 and 1945. However, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a sharp increase in the frequency of deception, eventually leveling off in the 1970s, when about 50% of the articles published by the most prominent journal in the field – the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology – used deception (Korn 1997). The rapid increase in the frequency of deception starting in the 1950s was accompanied by a change in the quality of the deception used in psychological research. Due to the influential work of Kurt Lewin and Leon Festinger, experiments became increasingly complex and typically made used of elaborate deceptions involving confederates, complicated scripts, and cover stories.

Regulation of Deception

In the USA, the institutionalization of ethics rules concerning research involving human subjects was accelerated by a few infamous cases of severe ethical misconduct in biomedical research that became public in the early 1970s. In the same period, the publication of Milgram's studies on obedience to authority opened the debate about the protection of research participants in experimental social psychology. In 1981, the United States Department of Health and Human Services issued a set of rules for conducting research involving human subjects – known as the "common rule," drafted primarily for human

experimentation in biomedical research. Strict interpretation of the principles regulating informed consent would make the use of deception impossible in experimental research; however, the National Science Foundation provided guidelines that allow Institutional Review Boards some flexibility, especially with respect to informed consent in behavioral research involving deception. In other countries, national codes of ethical conduct in human research explicitly regulate exceptions to the requirement of informed consent for those studies that would be impossible to conduct without partial disclosure or explicit deception. For example, the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement permits alterations of the consent requirements if (1) the study involves no more than minimal risk for the participants, (2) the proposed research cannot be conducted if informed consent is required, and (3) at the end of the experiment participants are allowed to withdraw their data, if they wish to do so. Similar clauses regulate exceptions to the consent requirements in the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. Furthermore, The Australian National Statement requires that the potential benefits of the proposed research involving partial disclosure or deception arguably outweigh the risk to the community's trust in research and researchers.

In addition to the national codes of conduct, several professional associations have published ethics codes that provide rules for use of deception. For example, the Code of Ethics of the American Sociological Association (s 12.05) and the Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (s 8.07) both allow deception when it is (1) justified by the prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and when alternative procedure to conduct the same study without using deception are not available and (2) reasonably expected that it will not cause physical harm or severe emotional distress to the research participants. In each case, when deception is used, researchers must inform their subjects as early as possible of all features concerning the study in which they participated. In addition, psychologists developed a specific procedure, debriefing (see APA 8.08), to ensure participants are adequately informed about the study and offered the possibility to withdraw their data. The sociologists' code also specifies that researchers may need to conceal their identity under specific circumstances, provided the study does not involve any risk for the participants. Finally, both codes stipulate that use of any deception is subject to ethics approval by an Institutional Review Board.

Research on Consequences of Deception

Since the early days of experimental economics, economists have argued against the use of deception on two grounds. First, when a participant is deceived in one study (and knows that deception has occurred), the participant could lose trust in experimenters and experiments. As a result, the participant's behavior would be biased in subsequent experiments. Second, as it becomes common knowledge that scholars of other disciplines (e.g., social psychologists and experimental sociologists) deceive their participants – for example, because introductory textbooks or university lectures describe experiments that use deception – even participants who have never been deceived by researchers will tend to suspect deception. Thus, their behavior could be altered as a result (Hertwig and Ortmann 2001). The major journals that publish experimental research in economics do not accept the legitimacy of deception. However, partial disclosure is permitted, as long as the information concealed to participants does not lead them to form false beliefs about the situation in which the interaction that is being studied takes place. By contrast, experimental researchers from disciplines like social psychology that regularly employ deception in experiments have argued that the use of deception is crucial to ensure control of the variables that are manipulated in the experiment and eliminate possible confounds (Cook and Yamagishi 2008).

Empirical studies of deception have addressed two basic issues: whether deceived participants are subsequently more likely to harbor negative feelings or attitudes toward experimental research, and whether suspicion resulting from

the actual experience of deception or from warnings that deception may be used affects the behaviors of participants during the course of a single experiment. Possible effects on the participants' feelings seem to depend on the nature and the severity of the deception employed. However, when negative feelings are reported, they generally do not alter the participants' behavior nor their trust in scientific research. Behavioral effects of suspicion have been found in research on conformity. For example, subjects who suspect that the other participants are confederates instructed to behave in a certain way are less likely to bend to social pressure. However, suspicion tends to produce a conservative bias in the results, i.e., increase the probability that the research hypothesis is rejected. When suspicion is deliberately stimulated – for example, informing participants, before the experiment, that some form of deception will be, or could be used – the behavioral effects of suspicion increase when the information on deception is more concrete and salient. Few studies have investigated the effects of experiencing deception in one study on the behavior of subjects in subsequent experiments. Firsthand experience of deception has been found to affect the participants' beliefs about the frequency of deception, but there is no evidence that experiencing deception systematically alters the behavior of participants. However, evidence about the impact of deception on suspicion and experimental results is inconclusive and may depend on a number of factors, including the severity of deception and which dependent variables are employed.

Cross-References

- ▶ Autonomy and Informed Consent
- ▶ Covert Research
- ▶ Research Integrity and Research Misconduct

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