

Can deception be desirable?

Irem Uz

TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara, Turkey

Markus Kimmelmeier

University of Nevada, Reno

Corresponding author:

Irem Uz, Department of Psychology, TOBB University of Economics and Technology,

Sogutozu cad. No: 43, Ankara, Turkey 06560.

Email: iremuz@gmail.com

Citation of published paper:

Uz, I., & Kimmelmeier, M. (2017). Can deception be desirable? *Social Science Information*, 56, 98–106.

Abstract

Critics of deception in research allege harm to society, the discipline of psychology, the researchers and participants. However neither empirical findings nor a 'reasonable-person' test seem to support those allegations. By and large, researchers who use deception consider its costs and benefits, and the kind and degree of deceit that is typically used in psychology is of a benevolent type. Moreover participants prefer to participate in deception research rather its non-deceptive alternatives. In the light of these premises, we argue that deception can be desirable, especially when considering cost and benefits to research participants.

Keywords

deception, harm and benefits, psychology experiments, research ethics, research participants

Can deception be desirable?

In the 1960s and 1970s, in response to a number of highly controversial studies (e.g. Humphreys, 1975; Milgram, 1963), a flurry of publications challenged the use of deception in psychological research (e.g. Baumrind, 1985; Bok, 1995). This was also the beginning of legal regulation of human research participation, which started in the US with the ‘Belmont Report’, but other countries soon created institutional review boards (IRB) or their equivalents, too. Nowadays there seems to be a consensus that deception can be acceptable within existing regulatory framework, with proper safeguards and debriefing (e.g. Sommers & Miller, 2013). Provided that the participants are debriefed, deception is regarded as acceptable, especially when there are no alternatives and when the participants do not face risks beyond those routinely encountered in everyday life (e.g. Kimmel, 2011). However in the present paper, we argue that the previous debate on deception has been somewhat one sided and almost exclusively focused on deception as a source of harm and danger. This perspective relegates deception to a means of last resort (e.g. Kimmel, 2012), with its harm being exaggerated and its benefits, especially to individual research participants, being neglected. Secondly it appears that many institutional review boards often rely on conjecture rather than actual evidence in assessing the deception’s harmful consequences. Whereas we agree that deception can have harmful effects, we argue that the available evidence suggests that these concerns are often exaggerated. Indeed when the actual consequences of deception are examined, it appears that the use of deception in research can be desirable.

In the present paper, we define deception as ‘concealing or camouflaging the real purpose of an experiment’ (Bröder, 1998). Without a doubt, there have been extreme instances of deception in research that most psychologists can agree on being ethically most problematic (e.g. Tearoom Study of Humphreys, 1975; Syphilis Study at Tuskegee of U.S. public health service). However such gross transgressions against the basic rights of research participants should not be mistaken for the everyday type of deception that goes on in psychology experiments. Based on a few instances of malevolent deceit, those who argue that deception should be abolished once and

for all are creating a negative stereotype encompassing each and every piece of research that involves deception. Here we have posited that most researchers who use deception are very circumspect concerning its costs and benefits to society, the discipline of psychology, the researchers and the participants. The type of deceit we are referring to is the one representative of psychology rather than the extreme instances of it. Setting this as the background, we argue that the utility of deception has been incorrectly assessed. Specifically, from the perspective of participants, research involving deception can be more desirable compared to the non-deceptive alternatives.

Harms and benefits

To society

It has been argued that the use of deception by scientists provides a model for society in general, which may cause deception to become a ‘mass product’ (e.g. Thieliicke, 1966). Along the same lines, then, some movies and all illusionist shows should be banned too because they also provide a model for society as a whole for engaging in deception. Such an argument seems to be an exaggeration at best. After all, adults in a free society are deceived all the time. Deception is not a problem in itself as long as it is not malicious, as long as people have a reasonable expectation that it might occur and the opportunity to avoid it if they choose.

Regarding benefits, some of the important phenomena (e.g. conformity, implicit learning, etc.) could have never been studied without deception (Cook & Yamagishi, 2008). Even the study of unethical behavior necessarily involves deception because studying unethical behavior is not really possible when participants know that they are being observed when engaging in unethical behavior (e.g. Gino et al., 2009). Thus to the extent that deception helps in generation of knowledge that was otherwise unavailable, it advances society.

To the discipline of psychology

The arguments about harm to the discipline center on the idea that, when the public becomes

aware of the use of deception in psychology, the status of the discipline declines in their eyes (e.g. Baumrind, 1985). Whether this occurs or not, one wonders about its relevance. Historically deception was primarily a concern for biological sciences but ‘social scientists found themselves swept along, not because of anything they had done, but because regulators preferred to control whole universities rather than make careful distinctions among disciplines’ (Schrag, 2010: 142). More importantly the responsibility of a scientist is not to promote the status of a discipline but to generate new insights and investigate the truth, even where new insight and the status of one’s own discipline may be at odds with each other. In terms of empirical findings, it appears that the public finds deception research more interesting and is not offended by the use of noninvasive techniques (Wilson & Donnerstein, 1976). In the only series of experiments that has thus far investigated, the direct effects of deception on trust observed neither decreased trust in science or nor decreased trust in social science (Barrera & Simpson, 2012). In fact one might argue that it is primarily psychologists who hold unfavorable attitudes toward deception (Harcum & Friedman, 1991; Korn, 1987; Sullivan & Deiker, 1973) because they have distaste for a ‘fun-and-games’ approach to psychology (Ring, 1967). However whether an experiment is fun or not is irrelevant to the status of psychology as a science. The scientific status of psychology is instead related to the knowledge it generates. In this regard, we should recall Feyerabend’s (1993) argument that an enterprise is more capable of generating knowledge the less constraints it has on the methods it can employ. Outlawing deceptive techniques or relegating them to a last resort (e.g. Kimmel, 1998, 2011) is too restrictive.

To individual researchers

Some opponents of the use of deception in research have argued that such studies are harmful to the researchers who conduct them (e.g. Bok, 1995; Murray, 1980) in the sense that researchers become immoral when they deceive. Such a stance might seem principled, but it ignores the multitude of relevant moral concerns. Deception as defined here, that is, the concealing or camouflaging of the true purpose of a study, is not same as lying. Deception is employed to

advance scientific knowledge without harming the participants while at least promoting the general good of society, if not that of the participants themselves (see the section ‘The participants’, below). Thus it is hard to argue, at least from any perspective that considers the consequences of researchers’ actions, that it is unethical to conduct research involving deception, and that researchers damage their own moral character if they conduct such research. Further, though it is clear that people sometimes make poor choices, and third parties do know better, it is also important to respect individual autonomy. From this point of view, whether their own research may harm them morally or in some other way is arguably something that should be left up to individual researchers. A third party might know better about any harm or benefit coming to them or others, since researchers have a vested interest in their own research; however whether a particular research endeavor harms or benefits the individual researcher is best judged by this individual himself or herself according to his or her own standards. When morality is at stake, moral plurality precludes enforcement of the deontological stance since what is moral is a value judgment, after all. Again, at least as far as the interests of the researcher are concerned, limiting deception would be an unnecessary constraint on both research methods and the topics of study (see also, Cook & Yamagishi, 2008). Indeed restrictions and pressure might produce a decrease in creativity (Amabile, 1979; Amabile et al., 2002). Too much formalization of rules certainly reduces creativity (Andrews & Smith, 1996). Since science is inherently a creative enterprise, restrictions on one’s methods may adversely affect a researcher’s productivity and academic career, especially when such restrictions are imposed by external authorities.

To participants

The central argument against research involving deception alleges harm to participants; arguably this was the central impetus behind the establishment of IRBs and the emergence of government regulation of human research participation. This includes actual threat to the dignity, privacy and self-determination of participants, but may also include potential bodily or economic harm (e.g. Ortmann & Hertwig, 1997). Research involving deception can certainly have such adverse

consequences; yet, humiliation or invasion of privacy can occur in any type of human research, deceptive or not. Regarding dignity, for example, individuals may feel no less humiliated when they learn that their true IQ score is much lower than they thought than when they were given such false feedback by the researchers and were subsequently debriefed. This is illustrated in research by Epley and Huff (1998) in which participants received false feedback on their IQ. Participants did not mind false feedback *per se*; they responded negatively only when false feedback challenged favorable self-views (see also Bickman & Zarantonello, 1978). Moreover Boynton, Portnoy and Johnson (2013) found that such false-feedback effects only lasted until debriefing.

Likewise asking people about intimate details of their sex life does not constitute a lesser form of invasion of privacy when researchers reveal the true purpose of the study compared to when they ask the same question in a study that conceals from participants that the study focuses on sex. In both cases participants may wish to decline answering the questions.

The issue critical to the deception research concerns informed consent because, by definition, participants cannot consent to something that they do not know. However deception, and not knowing about every detail of the research procedure, is not a problem when research participants can make the reasonable assumption that their well-being will not be jeopardized by the researcher. When such basic trust exists, a warning appears to be entirely sufficient. Pre-warning participants about the possibility of deception in an experiment provides a sufficient basis for participants to give --- or withhold --- consent. That is, if prospective participants know that deception can occur, their decision to participate is not much different than other choices they make in their daily lives, e.g. to drive a car, smoke or ski (all activities which bear risks that are much more serious than participation in deception research) (Benham, 2008). However not knowing the purpose of the study until debriefing establishes a partial transfer of rights to self-determination from participants to the experimenters, since they cannot decide for themselves whether they would like to contribute to a study of that specific purpose. Still such a temporary and unbinding transfer can be considered as part of the contract they made with the experimenter

when they voluntarily decided to participate in a study might involve deception (Lawson, 1995; Smith et al., 2009). Moreover because participants are always told that they can terminate their participation or that they can skip questions without penalty, one might argue that it is extremely easy for participants to gain control over the situation again, i.e. to take back some of the rights that they transferred whenever they wish to do so,

Can a situation in which a person willingly forgoes a fraction of his/her right to self-determination be considered ethically acceptable, even if it is of a temporary nature? If the answer to this question is 'No', then surprise parties may be ethically unacceptable, too, since the innocent person is deceived in order to hide the true purpose of the driven activity. Ethical standards for research activities should not be different from those for non-research activities (e.g. Hansson, 2011; John, 2010; but see Wilson & Hunter; 2010). If a surprise party is morally acceptable, then the proper answer to the above question becomes at least an 'it depends'. Once it is agreed upon that it depends whether a condition where a person willingly forgoes a fraction of his/her right to self-determination can be considered ethically acceptable, what remains to be established is what it depends on. The perspective of law can be helpful in this regard. Anglo-American common law suggests that, in vague cases, the reasonable-person test should be applied, that is 'whether a reasonable man [sic] would be inconvenienced or annoyed by the event' (Silverman, 1975). In addition to the researchers who design the study, IRBs, which have much higher standards of reasonableness than the general public, serve as an ascetic jury in the reasonable-man test. Therefore to make deception a lesser form of threat to self-determination, all that seems required is to tell participants in advance that the procedures they will be asked to carry out during the experiment may involve deception. Drawing such a general outline would help maintain interpersonal trust between the participants and the researchers without compromising the validity of the findings (Finney, 1987).

The second type of opposition to research involving deception rests on the presupposition that participants have negative attitudes toward deception and that their self-image may be adversely affected. Rather than relying on some researchers' intuitive allegations, it might be

more fruitful to look at the empirical findings. Some studies have found that deception is distasteful to participants (e.g. Epstein et al., 1973; Walster et al., 1967). Yet many others have found that participants have quite favorable attitudes (e.g. Aguinis & Henle, 2001; Korn, 1987; Ring et al., 1970). Compared to non-deceptive alternatives, participants find being a part of deception research more interesting and valuable (e.g. Holmes, 1967; Schwartz & Gottlieb, 1981; Smith et al., 1980), and indeed more enjoyable (e.g. Boynton et al., 2013; Christensen, 1988; Finney, 1987; Milgram, 1964). To illustrate, we selected those studies in the literature which included both a deception condition and a control condition, and which had obtained participants' ratings of enjoyment (Aitkenhead & Dordoy, 1985; Finney, 1987; Sharpe et al., 1992; Smith & Richardson, 1983). A meta-analysis of relevant effect sizes in those studies showed that participants enjoyed the experiments more when there was deception, $d = 0.28$. Thus there may be benefits of deception as well as harm. From the perspective of participants, in addition to the educational benefits (e.g. Epley & Huff, 1998; Hilton, 2001), research involving deception appears to be entertaining and often provocative (Boynton et al., 2013). Indeed participants may regret that they were not deceived (Boynton et al., 2013). If researchers are to pay critical attention to the cost and benefits their participants derive from participating in their study (APA, 2010), they need to consider the fact that participants themselves say they derive more utility from deception experiments. It is easy then to imagine that there may be more benefit than harm for the participants in the deception research. One might even argue that it is the responsibility of psychologists to use deception when deception produces greater utility for research participants, but only when the benefits and harm to society, to science and to the individual researcher are comparable.

Discussion

We have examined the alleged harm and benefits to society, the discipline and the individual researcher and research participants of research involving deception. Our brief review concluded that, whereas harm can occur without a doubt as a function of such research, evidence that

deception of the kind practiced in psychology inherently causes damage is largely absent. Instead using deception in behavioral research might be desirable. It has long been argued that certain topics cannot be investigated without the use of deception (see also Cook & Yamagishi, 2008). Moreover there is reason to believe that an unconstrained science might be more creative and useful than a constrained one, which is arguably in the best interests of society. However most importantly, research documents very well that, to individual research participants, being deceived in a research study is not only not a problem but it is even preferable to not being deceived (Boynton et al., 2013; Christensen, 1988). That is, if basic safeguards of participants' well-being are in place, deception in social and behavioral research should be employed more, not less, if the perspective of individual research participants is to be taken seriously. That is, deception should not be regarded as a means of last resort but as a tool that might make research participation more interesting and more enjoyable --- and arguably more of a learning experience. Still, informed consent is critical (e.g. Follette et al., 2003, Kimmelmeier et al., 2003). At the time of consent, participants must be informed that the research procedures they are about to experience may include deception. This, combined with standard exhortations that research participants can always skip tasks or terminate their participation without adverse consequences, seems sufficient to safeguard both the well-being and the self-determination of research participants. In conclusion, rather than a type of research reserved for exceptional cases, there should be no prejudice against the use of deception in social and behavioral research.

References

- Aguinis H, Henle CA (2001) Empirical assessment of the ethics of the bogus pipeline. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31: 352--375.
- Aitkenhead M, Dordoy J (1985) What the subjects have to say. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 24: 293--305.
- Amabile TM (1979) Effects of external evaluation on artistic creativity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37: 221--233.
- Amabile T, Hadley C, Kramer S (2002) Creativity under the gun. *Harvard Business Review* 80: 52--61.
- American Psychological Association (APA) (2010) Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. Available at: <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/principles.pdf>.
- Andrews J, Smith DC (1996) In search of the marketing imagination: Factors affecting the creativity of marketing programs for mature products. *Journal of Marketing Research* 33: 174--187.
- Barrera D, Simpson B (2012) Much ado about deception: Consequences of deceiving research participants in the social sciences. *Sociological Methods & Research* 41: 383--413.
- Baumrind D (1985) Research using intentional deception: Ethical issues revisited. *American Psychologist* 40: 165--174.
- Benham B (2008) The ubiquity of deception and the ethics of deceptive research. *Bioethics* 22: 147--156.
- Bickman L, Zarantonello M (1978) The effects of deception and level of obedience on subjects' ratings of the ethics of the Milgram study. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 4: 81--85.
- Bok S (1995) Shading the truth in seeking informed consent for research purposes. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 3: 1--17.
- Boynton MH, Portnoy DB, Johnson BT (2013) Exploring the ethics and psychological impact of deception in psychological research. *IRB: Ethics & human research* 35: 7--13.
- Bröder A (1998) Deception can be acceptable. *American Psychologist* 53: 805--806.
- Christensen L (1988) Deception in psychological research: When is its use justified? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 14: 664--675.
- Cook KS, Yamagishi T (2008) A defense of deception on scientific grounds. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71: 215--221.
- Epley N, Huff C (1998) Suspicion, affective response, and educational benefit as a result of

- deception in psychology research. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24: 759--768.
- Epstein YM, Suedfeld P, Silverstein SJ (1973) The experimental contract: Subjects' expectations of and reactions to some behaviors of experimenters. *American Psychologist* 28: 212--221.
- Feyerabend PK (1993) *Against Method*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Finney PD (1987) When consent information refers to risk and deception: Implications for social research. *Journal of Personality and Social Behavior* 2: 37--48.
- Follette WC, Davis D, Kimmelmeier M (2003) Ideals and realities in the development and practice of informed consent. In: O'Donohue W, Ferguson KE (eds) *Handbook of Professional Ethics for Psychologists*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 195--226.
- Gino F, Ayal S, Ariely D (2009) Contagion and differentiation in unethical behavior. *Psychological Science* 20: 393--398.
- Hansson SO (2011) Do we need a special ethics for research? *Science and Engineering Ethics* 17: 21--29.
- Harcum ER, Friedman H (1991) Students' ethics ratings of demonstrations in introductory psychology. *Teaching of Psychology* 18: 215--218.
- Hilton DJ (2001) Is the challenge for psychologists to return to behaviorism? *Behavior and Brain Sciences* 24: 415.
- Holmes DS (1967) Amount of experience in experiments as a determinant of performance in later experiments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 7: 403--407.
- Humphreys L (1975) *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal sex in public places*. New York, NY: Aldine.
- John S (2010) Three worries about three arguments for research exceptionalism. *American Journal of Bioethics* 10: 67--69.
- Kimmelmeier M, Davis D, Follette WC (2003) Seven 'sins' of misdirection? Ethical controversies surrounding the use of deception in research. In: O'Donohue W, Ferguson KE (eds) *Handbook of Professional Ethics for Psychologists*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 227--256.
- Kimmel AJ (1998) In defense of deception. *American Psychologist* 53: 803--804.
- Kimmel AJ (2011) Deception in psychological research --- A necessary evil. *The Psychologist* 24: 580--585.
- Kimmel AJ (2012) Deception in research. In: Knapp SJ (ed.) *APA Handbook of Ethics in Psychology*. Washington, DC: APA, 401--421.

- Korn JH (1987) Judgments of acceptability of deception in psychological research. *Journal of General Psychology* 114: 205--216.
- Lawson C (1995) Research participation as a contract. *Ethics & Behavior* 5: 205--215.
- Milgram S (1963) Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67: 371--378.
- Milgram S (1964) Issues in the study of obedience: A reply to Baumrind. *American Psychologist* 19: 848--852.
- Murray TH (1980) Learning to deceive. *The Hastings Center Report* 10: 11--14.
- Ortmann A, Hertwig R (1997) Is deception acceptable? *American Psychologist* 52: 746--747.
- Ring K (1967) Experimental social psychology: Some sober questions about some frivolous values. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 3: 113--123.
- Ring K, Wallston KA, Corey M (1970) Mode of debriefing as a factor affecting subjective reaction to a Milgram-type obedience experiment: An ethical inquiry. *Representative Research in Social Psychology* 1970:67--88.
- Schrag ZM (2010) *Ethical Imperialism: Institutional review boards and the social sciences, 1965--2009*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Schwartz SH, Gottlieb A (1981) Participants' postexperimental reactions and the ethics of bystander research. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 17: 396--407.
- Sharpe D, Adair JG, Roese NJ (1992) Twenty years of deception research: A decline in subjects' trust? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 18: 585--590.
- Silverman I (1975) Nonreactive methods and the law. *American Psychologist* 30: 764--769.
- Smith CP, Berard S, Malinowski C (1980) Ethical issues in research: How harmful is deception? *Resources in Education* 15: 42.
- Smith NC, Kimmel AJ, Klein JG (2009) Social contract theory and the ethics of deception in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 19: 486--496.
- Smith SS, Richardson D (1983) Amelioration of deception and harm in psychological research: The important role of debriefing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44: 1075--1082.
- Sommers R, Miller FG (2013) Forgoing debriefing in deceptive research: Is it ever ethical? *Ethics & Behavior* 23: 98--116.
- Sullivan DS, Deiker TE (1973) Subject--experimenter perceptions of ethical issues in human research. *American Psychologist* 28: 587--591.

- Thielicke H (1966) *Theological Ethics*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress. (1st ed. 1958--1959)
- US Public Health Service (1932--1972). The Tuskegee timeline. Available at:
<http://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>.
- Walster E, Berscheid E, Abrahams D, et al. (1967) Effectiveness of debriefing following deception experiments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 6: 371--380.
- Wilson DW, Donnerstein E (1976) Legal and ethical aspects of nonreactive social psychological research. *American Psychologist* 31: 765--773.
- Wilson J, Hunter D (2010) Research exceptionalism. *American Journal of Bioethics* 10: 45--54.