



DECEPTION & DEBRIEFING

Description

Deception is the intentional misleading of participants or the withholding of full information about the nature of a research experiment or procedure. Misleading or omitted information might include the purpose of the research, the role of the researcher, or what procedures in the study are experimental.

Deception increases ethical concerns because it affects the ability of the participant to give informed consent. However, deception is arguably necessary for certain types of behavioral research. Because humans act differently depending on circumstances, full knowledge by the participant might bias research results.

The use of deception in research may be permitted if the research satisfies the regulatory criteria for approval and a waiver or alteration of consent is acceptable. An investigator must provide scientific and ethical justification for deceptive procedures for the IRB review and approval. The missing information should not increase the risks of the study, and participants must be fully debriefed. Participants must have the opportunity to ask questions about the new information and be given the opportunity to withdraw from the study and have their data removed. Deception may not be utilized to obtain enrollments.

The American Psychological Association (APA) allows deception in research only if it has significant scientific value and other non-deceptive procedures are not possible. Participants must be fully informed at the conclusion of the activities and be offered an opportunity to withdraw their data if they are bothered by the concealment or deception. See Appendix A for excerpts from the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct.

In cases where deception is used in research, the University of Utah IRB requires that the following guidelines be applied:

1. In the application, the proposed methods must be justified by providing a scientific rationale and verifying that there are no comparable alternatives to the design to achieve the goals. See Points to Consider below.
2. All researchers conducting studies involving deception are required to apply for approval of an **Alteration of Consent**, which allows the investigator to alter or remove one or more of the elements (e.g., purpose of research) of informed consent.
3. The participant is fully informed about the requirements of their participation before they participate in the study. This is documented by using a consent form. When appropriate, participants should be informed prospectively of the use of deception and consent to its use.

Sample Consent Language: In some research studies, the investigators cannot tell you exactly what the study is about before you participate in the study. We will describe the tasks in the study in a general way, but we can't explain the real purpose of the study until after you complete these tasks. When you are done, we will explain why we are doing this study, what we are looking at, and any other information you should know about this study. You will be able to ask any questions you might have about the study's purpose and the tasks you did. Though we may not be able to explain the real purpose of the study until after you complete the tasks, there are no additional risks to those that have been described in this consent form.

4. As soon as possible after the deception, the participant is fully informed about the deception, the exact nature of the deception, and the reason for the deception using an IRB-approved debriefing document. At that time, the participant is given the opportunity to refuse to allow their data to be used in the research. For example, after full disclosure, the participant could be provided with a debriefing document with checkboxes indicating their permission to use their data or requesting to remove their data from the study. See the Debriefing Document Template on the IRB website.

Please contact the IRB Office at (801) 581-3655 or irb@hsc.utah.edu for additional guidance.



Points to Address

New Study Application:

1. **Study Information page, question 5:** Select both “Informed Consent Process” and “Waiver or Alteration of Informed Consent”. ERICA will automatically prompt you to complete the **Alteration of Consent page** as you continue through the application.
2. **Study Information page, Question 6:** When describing the study procedures, clearly state deception will be used and state why deception is necessary to conduct the study.
3. **Request for Waiver or Alteration of Consent:** Click “add” on the Request for Waiver or Alteration of Consent page. State the purpose of the waiver and request an “Alteration of Informed Consent” and answer the rest of the questions. For question 9, when asked whether deception will be used, select “yes” and provide the justification for the use of deception and describe the debriefing procedures.
4. **Risks and Benefits page:** Please explain why participants will be exposed to no more than minimal risk due to the use of deception. Please also state whether the withheld information may affect the participant’s decision to participate in the research.
5. **Documents and Attachments page:** Please attach a debriefing document for review. The debriefing document should be in addition to the consent document.

References & Links

*APA Ethical Principles of
Psychologists and Code of
Conduct*

http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html#8_07

*Debriefing Document
Template*

<https://irb.utah.edu/informed-consent/forms-templates-cpt/>

Appendix A: Excerpts from APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct

8.07 Deception in Research

- a) Psychologists do not conduct a study involving deception unless they have determined that the use of deceptive techniques is justified by the study's significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and that effective non-deceptive alternative procedures are not feasible.
- b) Psychologists do not deceive prospective participants about research that is reasonably expected to cause physical pain or severe emotional distress.
- c) Psychologists explain any deception that is an integral feature of the design and conduct of an experiment to participants as early as is feasible, preferably at the conclusion of their participation, but no later than at the conclusion of the data collection, and permit participants to withdraw their data.

8.08 Debriefing

- a) Psychologists provide a prompt opportunity for participants to obtain appropriate information about the nature, results, and conclusions of the research, and they take reasonable steps to correct any misconceptions that participants may have of which the psychologists are aware.
- b) If scientific or humane values justify delaying or withholding this information, psychologists take reasonable measures to reduce the risk of harm.
- c) When psychologists become aware that research procedures have harmed a participant, they take reasonable steps to minimize the harm.

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