The Office of Human Research Ethics

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Research Involving Deception or Withholding of Information

Some studies may require researchers to deceive participants or withhold information from them to avoid biasing the results. The power of suggestion can influence participants to act or think in a particular way, so researchers may not want to disclose the true purpose of their study. For example, a study about workers using or not using back braces while performing manual labor. Knowing that back braces are the subject of the study could incline participants to respond that the braces made their job much easier and their backs hurt less.

Are these valid responses or are they biased by the power of suggestion?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this video, IRB members will be able to…

- understand what deception and withholding information mean
- understand the regulatory framework regarding deception and disclosure
- decide when these methods can be used, and
- explain the deception to participants afterward.

Deception

Deception involves researchers intentionally giving misleading or false information to participants, such as:

- Telling participants that they failed a quiz even if they didn't.
- Telling participants to expect moderate pain during a procedure when no pain is actually involved.

Incomplete Disclosure

Incomplete disclosure involves withholding information about the true purpose or nature of the research, for instance:

- Telling participants that they are completing a questionnaire to evaluate statements about their childhood memories while withholding that the questionnaire items will vary based on each participant's demographics and are intended to induce an emotional response, which will be tracked.
- Asking participants to play a game without telling them the game is rigged to study the participants' reactions to losing.

- Asking participants to take a quiz without telling them the real point of the study is to test how background noise affects focus.

Federal Regulations

But…how do researchers respect a participants' rights while actively deceiving them? How can a participant give informed consent when they don't have all the information?

1. Federal regulations permit deception and incomplete disclosure for research activities that involve no more than minimal risk to participants.
2. Researchers may deceive or withhold information about a minimal risk activity within a study that has an overall risk level of greater than minimal.
3. The IRB cannot approve research in which participants are deceived about a part of the study that poses more than minimal risk or would likely otherwise affect their decision to participate.

Responsibilities of Researchers:

When using deception or incomplete disclosure as a research tool, researchers should follow the professional ethics of their discipline. And when completing the IRB application, researchers must:

- Justify why deception or withholding information is necessary.
- Explain why alternatives are not feasible.
- Describe how the potential benefits justify the deception.
- Address any potential psychological discomfort associated with deception or incomplete disclosure for participants and how that discomfort will be minimized during and after the experiment. The researcher must show that the study team has the skill and resources to minimize participants' potential distress or anger.
- Outline the debriefing process, including when, how, and by whom participants will be informed, and include a copy of the debriefing script.

Informed Consent

Researchers should consider telling participants that the study involves withholding information or deception. For instance, the informed consent form could provide:

- A statement of the purpose that omits or alters the true purpose of the study, and
- A statement that informs participants that some study details will be withheld and explained later.

Preferably, "later" is immediately after participants complete their part in the study; however, there may be justifiable reasons to withhold the information until all participants have completed the study. Acceptable methods for informing participants later include:

- Sending information by mail, email, or phone,
- Providing a URL with debriefing details, or
- Having participants self-address an envelope to receive information after the study.

In the application, researchers should request a waiver or alteration of some elements of Informed consent. One note, FDA-regulated research does not allow waiver or alteration of consent elements for deception or incomplete disclosure.

Responsibilities of the Board Members

When reviewing the research application, the IRB must confirm that the waiver request is justified. This involves considerations of…

- The minimal risk of the research activity and of the deception or incomplete disclosure.
- Whether the deception or incomplete disclosure significantly reduces the scientific value and validity of the research.
- Whether there are reasonable alternative approaches other than deception or incomplete disclose to protect against participant bias.
- The likelihood that deception would influence a participant's willingness to participate.
- The possibility of harm induced by the experiment and whether proposed debriefing procedures remove such harm.

The IRB must also review and confirm that the proposed Consent Process, Consent Form, and the Debriefing Script are adequate.

- Consider whether to require the researcher to give participants the option of withdrawing their data from the study after learning the true nature of the research, especially if the study collects sensitive information.
- Consider whether debriefing could introduce new risk of harm itself, in which case there may be justification not to debrief. For example, if a participant is chosen based on physical traits like weight or perceived attractiveness, it might not be appropriate to mention this in the debriefing.
- Consider the potential of deception to facilitate unwanted and inappropriate invasions of privacy.
- Recommend revisions as deemed necessary.

Conclusion

In summary, deception and incomplete disclosure are ethically acceptable under certain circumstances. The IRB must evaluate the risks and benefits deception or incomplete disclosure may cause and consider the impact of deception or incomplete disclosure on research integrity and participant autonomy.

Lastly, board members should know they can always recommend revisions to the deception plan whenever they see it's necessary to protect participants.

For more information, visit OHRE's website for guidance on Research Involving Deception or Withholding of Information.