
Yale University Institutional Review Boards Guidance

200 GD.1

Deception in Human Research

Overview

Deception in the context of human research refers to both providing false information as well as to withholding some pertinent aspect of the research that concerns the real purpose or nature of the research. The use of either form of deception is inconsistent with fully informed consent and hence must be scientifically and ethically justified. If the deception/incomplete disclosure impacts the consent process, the deceptive aspects of the study must meet the requirements for waiver or alteration of consent. Any proposal to involve deception or incomplete disclosure must be justified and necessary to carry out the research and must not adversely affect the subjects' rights and welfare.

Instances when deception may be allowable

The use of deception and/or incomplete disclosure in research may be allowable when:

- There are no undisclosed risks to subjects that are more than minimal.
- The study intends to measure behaviors or responses that are likely to be different if the participants were fully informed

Examples of studies that may necessitate the use of deception/incomplete disclosure include:

- Psychology studies examining spontaneous behaviors which would be inhibited by informing the participant of the trait being observed
- Psychology studies involving confederate(s) who are used to elicit comments/responses as if to a peer of the participant

Instances when deception is not be allowable

The use of deception and/or incomplete disclosure is **not** allowable when

- The deception regards significant aspects of the study that would affect the participants' willingness to participate in the research.
- The deception/incomplete disclosure itself could cause harm to the participants
- The deceptive techniques are intended solely to entice or lure an individual to participate in a research study.
- False information is incorporated into the consent materials or process.

Debriefing

Participants in a study involving the use of deception or incomplete disclosure should be debriefed about the nature of the deception and/or incomplete disclosure after completion of the study unless debriefing is not possible or would cause unacceptable risk to the subjects.

Investigators should include a description of the debriefing process, including any written materials, as a part of the protocol submitted to the IRB. The debriefing process should include a clear description of what information was withheld or false as well as an explanation for why it was necessary to deceive the participant. During the debriefing, subjects must have the opportunity to ask questions about the new information and be given the opportunity to withdraw from the study or have their data removed.

Debriefing may not be advisable in certain limited situations, for example, if the research reveals information about the participant that s/he might find disturbing (such as a personality disorder, aggressive behavior tendencies, etc.). If an investigator believes that debriefing will be inappropriate, the investigator should explain the basis for this belief in the protocol submitted to the IRB. The IRB will determine whether debriefing is appropriate.

Considerations for Consenting Participants in Studies Involving Deception

Consent forms should not include false or misleading information to further the deception. Investigators may, however, be vague as to the purposes of the study or omit information in the consent process in order to maintain the deception or incomplete disclosure necessary for the study.

Investigators should include a statement in the consent form advising potential participants that the information provided in the consent form is not complete and that participants will be debriefed after the research procedures are completed whenever feasible. For example:

“Research designs sometimes require that the full intent of the study not be explained prior to participation. Although we have described the general nature of the tasks that you will be asked to perform, the full intent of the study will not be explained to you until after the completion of the study. At that time, we will provide you with a full debriefing which will include an explanation of the purpose of the study and other relevant background information pertaining to the study. You will also be given an opportunity to ask any questions you might have about the study and the procedures used in the study. You may decide to withdraw from the study or have your data removed as well.”