

Varieties of Deception

If one makes use of elaborate arrangements or even creates situations with strong forces, as theoretical requirements also demand shall be the case, then only a very small percentage of experimental subjects will act as though they feel themselves to be experimental subjects. Others very soon get involved in the situation and accordingly become free and natural. (Kurt Lewin, 1929, quoted by MacKinnon & Dukes, 1962)

[T]he goal is to fully convince the subject that you are in a terrible jam and feeling deeply uncomfortable about it. You sweat, you cringe, you wring your hands; you convey to the subject that you are in real trouble here—that the next participant is waiting and the God-damn stooge hasn't shown up yet. You then appeal to her to do you a favor: to play the role of the stooge and mislead the next participant. (Eliot Aronson, 1991)

Psychological science, like other sciences, finds its facts and tests its theories in the laboratory and in the real world. Throughout its history psychology has emulated other sciences in valuing objective, empirical observation under carefully controlled conditions followed by sophisticated quantitative analysis of the results. Although rigorous as research, this rigor often leads to tedious reports that make dull reading. Research in social psychology, however, contains many exciting exceptions because of the use of methods and research situations that often are creative and dramatic. Some of these studies have been like theater performances with directors, actors, and rehearsal.

Social psychologists always have shared the value placed on experimental control by their parent discipline, but as this field developed in the middle of the twentieth century, certain people and events moved much of the research toward realistic staged experiments. The key feature in this research was the use of deception to mislead research participants so they were unaware of the true purpose of an experiment, or that they even were

part of an experiment. From 1965 to 1985, about half of all social psychology articles published in the United States used some form of deception. Some of this research involved moderate to extreme physical or psychological stress or invasions of privacy, and the methods used led to serious ethical questions.

This book presents the story of how the practice of deception grew in social psychology and describes the historical and cultural factors that supported this practice. There will be some discussion of the ethical controversy concerning deception, but the focus will be on how the research of social psychologists was influenced by the times and places in which they worked.

Deception in Strange Places

There are varieties of deception. There is the outright lie, but we may also mislead, delude, and beguile. All of these forms of deception have been used in psychological research. Before presenting a definition of deception, it may be helpful to consider three examples of deceptive research to illustrate the kinds of situations that make this a fascinating topic.

How Would You Like a Shot in the Arm?

Imagine yourself as one of many thousands of American college students taking your first psychology course. One day at the beginning of your class your professor introduces a graduate student who wants your help with his research. The research is described as follows:

This is an experiment on memory. It concerns the effects of various drugs on a person's short-term memory. Your drug will be given by injection under the skin of your upper right arm. You may experience these symptoms: dryness of the throat, slight headache, and coolness in the toes and fingers.

Would you agree to volunteer for this experiment in which you would be injected with this drug? Very few people want to be injected with anything, even for good medical reasons, and most people would be concerned about the effects of the drug (Korn & Hogan, 1992).

This example is based on a study that was done at Stanford University by Gary Marshall and Philip Zimbardo (1979). Students were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in a study "being conducted by a member of the ophthalmology department concerning the influences of an injection of a vitamin supplement on visual acuity." This was a lie. The experiment was being conducted by psychologists and concerned the physiological basis of emotion.

When students came to the laboratory they were again told that this was a study of vision being done by the ophthalmology department. They also were told that a physician would administer the vitamin injection, which was described as having no major side effects, but that there would be some minor effects: dryness of the throat, slight headache, coolness in toes and fingers. This also was a lie. In fact students were injected with epinephrine (adrenalin), which produces other symptoms including increased heart rate and sweating.

Next these students were told to wait in a room with another student who was taking part in the experiment. This other student was really a confederate of the experimenter (an assistant) who was playing a role—another lie. The confederate was trained to act silly and the real purpose of the experiment was to see if the students would describe themselves as feeling euphoric or happy. The theory is that we use the cues in the situation to interpret physiological symptoms. Given the symptoms produced by adrenalin we may experience happiness or anger or some other emotion, depending on the situation.

May I Watch You Urinate?

One of the strangest examples of psychological research is the study of “personal space invasions in the lavatory” (Middlemist, Knowles, & Matter, 1976). The hypothesis was that crowding increases physiological arousal as measured by the latency and duration of urination in a men’s lavatory. The prediction was that it would take a man longer to start to urinate and he would finish faster if someone were standing in the urinal next to him rather than in one that was two places away. Men were observed, while they urinated, by a person using a periscope to peek under a toilet stall that was adjacent to the urinal. The observer used two stopwatches to measure the beginning and length of time that each man urinated. The hypothesis was confirmed.

The major ethical issue here is invasion of privacy (Koocher, 1977), but deception also was involved. To force subjects to use the urinal adjacent to the toilet stall, a sign was placed on one of the urinals not occupied by the confederate. The sign said, “Don’t use. Washing urinal.” The other use of deception was based on the subjects’ assumption that the confederate was a stranger who was in the lavatory for an obvious purpose. In most psychological research participants are debriefed, that is they are told about the purpose of the experiment and the reasons for using deception. However, in this study subjects were not informed that they had been in an experiment.

Would You Help a Bloody Stranger?

This study was done outside the research laboratory in a natural setting, a subway train in Philadelphia (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972). One member of

the research team pretended to have a seizure; sometimes he had a capsule in his mouth that he could bite to make it appear that he was bleeding. Another researcher seated on the train recorded whether and how quickly other riders came to the aid of the pretend victim. The method used in this study is a good example of the elaborate staging used in much of the research in social psychology during the 1960s and 1970s.

Each [research] team consisted of a victim, a 'programmed bystander,' and two observers. Two variables were manipulated: presence or absence of apparent blood coming from the mouth of the victim as he fell and presence or absence of an authoritative bystander. . . . This bystander was dressed either as an intern in a white coat, as a priest, or in ordinary street clothes. (p. 355)

The team took their assigned places on the train and the play began.

As the train started, the victim, who had entered last at the center door, began to walk, using a cane, toward the end of the car in which the bystander was sitting. In the 'no blood' condition, he collapsed quietly directly in front of the programmed bystander. In the 'blood' condition, he did exactly the same, but in addition he released a trickle of thick red fluid from the corner of his mouth as he fell. . . . If no one had come to the aid of the victim on that trial, the bystander assisted the victim off the train. All team members got off at the stop and transferred to a train going in the other direction for the next trial. (p. 356)

Defining Deception

The dictionary says that to deceive means to cause to accept as true what is false or to give a false impression. This happened in each of the examples that I presented in the previous section. Deception is the larger category. Its forms are beguile, mislead, delude, and lie. To beguile involves the use of charm and persuasion in deceiving, and is used by all researchers seeking to convince people to participate in their laboratory studies. To mislead refers to a leading astray that may or may not be intentional. A false eye examination led participants astray intentionally in the first example presented. To delude is to deceive so thoroughly as to obscure the truth, and to lie is to make an explicit misstatement of fact. Bok (1979) defined a lie as "any intentionally deceptive message which is *stated*" (p. 14, italics in original).

In the context of psychological research, deception is a complex concept, which Joan Sieber (1982, 1983) has described in great detail. She developed a

taxonomy in which the major categories were: the means of deceiving (including seven kinds of deception), the nature of the research (e.g., naturally occurring or induced behavior), and the upset caused by the deception (Sieber, 1983). Deception research was defined as

research in which subjects are purposely allowed to or caused to have false beliefs or assumptions or to accept as false that which is true, and in which the researcher studies their reactions; the reactions and the study of those reactions are made possible by the incorrect beliefs or assumptions of the subject. (p. 2)

At various places in this book I will refer to some examples of deception as mild and others as extreme. As these adjectives suggest, there are degrees of deception. It is easy to differentiate the extent of the deception in the examples previously described from milder forms used in some other studies; for example, an experimenter may falsely identify the author of an essay as either Thomas Jefferson or Adolf Hitler. This distinction between degrees of deception is important because, over the past fifty years, there have been changes in both the quantity and the quality of misinformation given to research participants.

Sieber's (1983) taxonomy shows, however, that it is difficult to measure the intensity of deception in research because of the many dimensions of this practice. One category of her taxonomy includes weak and strong forms of deception by a researcher. In weak forms, participants may consent to being deceived. In strong forms informed consent is not obtained. Sieber notes,

however, that even the very strongest form of deception, and the form that violates the largest number of ordinary moral obligations to persons, can be used in utterly harmless and delightful ways as well as in potentially dangerous and objectionable ways, depending on the means of deception and the nature of the research. (p. 4)

As an example of a "delightful" use of strong deception, Sieber (1982, p. 4) refers to a study in which students who had received cookies were more willing to help other people who dropped some books.

The category that is most clearly related to judgments of the intensity of deception concerns discomfort or harm caused by the deception. Sieber (1983, p. 4) discusses sources that may upset both participants and researchers. Many research treatments can upset participants: for example, pressure to deliver allegedly harmful electric shocks, receiving an injection, and falsifying test scores to lower self-esteem have all been used in psychological research.

Deceptive research may also upset those involved in perpetrating the deception.

The confederate role, in particular, which must be reenacted perhaps hundreds of times, can be extremely upsetting. Often the confederates are graduate students being socialized for a research career. One may question the appropriateness of training that is either repellent or deadening to moral sensitivities. (Sieber, 1983, p. 4; also see Oliansky, 1991)

All forms of deception will be considered in this book using this general definition of deception: to cause to accept as true that which is false. Although deception is a normal and necessary part of daily life (Nyberg, 1993), it is not a morally neutral word so its use must be justified. At several places in the following chapters, particularly in chapter 10, I will summarize the reasons that psychologists give for using deception. One social psychologist has argued that we should not use that word at all because it biases the issue. Stanley Milgram, whose studies of obedience may be the best known research in all of psychology, preferred to use a neutral term like *technical illusions* (Milgram, 1977/1992, p. 181). The title of this book is a reference to this idea.

The Significance of Deception in Research

When I was developing my plan for this book, someone told me that deception in research is not an important issue anymore because deception is less frequent, it is not as extreme now as it used to be, and the ethical issues have been resolved. In fact a large proportion of the studies in social psychology continue to involve the use of deception, dramatic methods still are used occasionally, and there is continuing discussion of the ethics of deception. Nevertheless, the general question of the importance of this topic should be considered. These are six reasons that studying the use of deception in psychological research is important:

1. It is interesting.
2. Much of the research concerns questions that are socially significant.
3. It is a topic that has been overlooked in the history of psychology.
4. Important ethical questions are involved.
5. The public image of psychology may be affected by the use of deception.
6. Deception is a general problem in our culture.

Intrinsic Interest

I do not mean to be pejorative when I refer to this area of research as psychology's theater. A theater is a place where productions are staged that

concern issues of social significance as well as those of everyday life. When the productions are successful it is because of the creativity of the authors, directors, and actors. In the following chapters I will present many examples of creative research, and the analogy with stage productions will be clear. Reading excerpts from these research reports is often like reading scenes from a play.

Social Significance of the Research

Most of the research that I will discuss also is important, and interesting, because it deals with questions of obvious social significance: When do people help others who are in trouble? What makes people aggressive? What forces make us obedient to authority, and what are those that help us become independent? A concern with important social issues is closely tied to the growth of the use of deception in research. The key person at the beginning of this story is Kurt Lewin, a German-Jewish psychologist who came to the United States in 1933 after the Nazis had taken over his homeland. Not only did he inspire new approaches to laboratory research, but he also was a force in the founding of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, an organization that has been called the conscience of psychology. Lewin's legacy is the use of realistic experiments to contribute to our understanding of significant human problems.

Some of the research that I will describe, however, is not of great social significance, but concerns simple events in everyday life such as why we like some people more than others. These are not unimportant issues, but psychologists have been criticized for studying what seem to be trivial matters. In the 1970s William Proxmire, a U. S. Senator from Wisconsin, sought publicity by presenting "Golden Fleece Awards" to government-funded projects that he thought were wasteful. It seemed silly to spend thousands of dollars to find out why people fall in love. The fact is that finding a romantic partner is a difficult problem for many people, and they might find this research to be of value, whether deception is used or not. Senator Proxmire himself apparently was somewhat concerned about the importance of physical attractiveness because he underwent hair implants to eliminate his baldness.

An Overlooked Topic in History

The history of psychology has become a lively area of research, which has gone beyond traditional histories that described the march through time of great people and their ideas. Newer histories are concerned with the cultural context in which psychologists work to create their theories and

methods. Elizabeth Scarborough and Laurel Furumoto (1987), for example, presented accounts of the first generation of women psychologists in America, a group of scholars who had been overlooked in previous histories. It was important to draw attention to the contributions of these women, but more significantly, Scarborough and Furumoto discovered five historical themes that explained the oversight. My purpose here is similar to theirs. Historians of psychology have not examined the origins of the use of deception in research, or the growth of that practice. I hope to provide both a description, and an explanation in terms of culture and history.

Ethical Questions

Although the use of deception in psychological research began during the 1920s, it was more than twenty-five years before psychologists began to consider the ethical issues related to this practice, and not until the 1970s that the ethics of deception became a frequent topic in the literature of psychology. In chapter 10 I will discuss the reasons for this delay. At this point it is important to recognize the ethical principles that must be considered when evaluating deceptive research. These include freedom to choose (autonomy), possible harm to individuals, and abuse of power by researchers (justice).

In addition to demonstrating the creativity of psychologists, the studies that I will describe sometimes are upsetting because the potential for harm is clear. The best-known example is Stanley Milgram's (1963) study of obedience, in which he vividly describes the emotional break down of one of his subjects. This study set off a debate about research ethics that continues to be presented in undergraduate textbooks. Research review boards now prohibit psychologists from using many of the deceptive methods that were used in the past, but an examination of how psychologists began to use deception should enlighten the ethical debate.

The Image of Psychology

However extreme or mild deception might now be or has been in the past, it has had effects beyond the discipline of psychology that makes it worthy of study. These are effects on public trust, especially on research participants themselves. Herbert Kelman (1967) concluded that "there is something disturbing about the idea of relying on massive deception as the basis for developing a field of inquiry" (p. 7). Among the effects of deception that Kelman saw was that it "establishes the reputation of psychologists as people who cannot be believed" (p. 7). He thought that this made it difficult to find naive subjects in the college student population that provides most research participants.

Consider this example of the impact of deceptive research on the university community. MacCoun and Kerr (1987) reported that they were conducting a study in which six male students were acting as a mock jury and deliberating a case. Apparently no deception was involved in this study. Suddenly, one of the students had a grand mal epileptic seizure and fell to the floor. The other students came to his aid and called paramedics for help. The experimental session was ended and the victim recovered.

While discussing this event, the experimenters wondered if any of the students thought that the seizure was faked as part of the experiment. When those students were interviewed, three of the five “spontaneously reported that they had questioned the authenticity of the attack” (MacCoun & Kerr, 1987, p. 199). Furthermore,

Several of the bystanders also reported that the first reaction of their friends upon hearing about the seizure were expressions of suspicion. There were indications that prior knowledge of psychological research—derived primarily from coursework—was related to suspicion. For example, the most suspicious subject (who was still suspicious even after the paramedics arrived) had begun to study psychology in high school. (p. 199)

Two other bystanders said that they even looked for hidden cameras *after* the paramedics arrived.

Deception Is a Characteristic of American Culture

While I was working on this book, an article appeared in my daily newspaper with the headline, “Coach Quits after Faking Shooting at Team Rally” (“Coach Quits,” 1993). “During a pep talk to players, [the coach] interceded in a fake fight he had orchestrated between two youths. Shots rang out, and [the coach] fell to the ground as phony blood spread across his shirt” (p. D1). Even the coach’s son thought his father had been shot. Here was an example of life imitating psychological art.

Deception is everywhere in American culture and has a long history. In some areas, such as political advertising, everyone assumes that information will be distorted and this has led to public distrust of the groups who control these forms of communication. In this context, social psychologists do not see their deception as serious, but as comparable to the typical experiences of everyday life, which are what they seek to understand. The little lies told by psychologists are part of the same culture that includes big lies told by presidents.

Thousands of college students have taken part in studies that use deception. For any one student that deception is only one among the many

encountered every day. This sometimes is used as a justification for the use of deception; it is no worse than anything that often happens to any of us. Yet that is precisely why it is an important issue. Deception in research adds to the deception that permeates our culture, but it takes place in an institution, the university, which is dedicated to the search for truth.

Deception in Other Social Sciences

Although deception is a characteristic of many areas of society, no other social science uses deception to the extent and in the way that it is used in social psychology. This is because other social sciences are not experimental; that is, they do not make extensive use of laboratory methods in research. Economists and political scientists rely heavily on data in public records (e.g., tax receipts, voting records). Anthropologists and sociologists generally use field research methods in which they observe people in natural situations.

If, however, one uses a definition of deception that includes studies in which participants are not aware that they are being studied, then some research in sociology would involve deception. Most sociologists believe that it is better to let people know they are part of a study, but admit that this may not be possible if the group does not want to be studied. Two sociologists whom I interviewed were hard pressed to think of any studies in their field that use explicit lies.¹ There are two important exceptions. The first was a famous study of homosexual men by Laud Humphreys (1970), who lied about who he was and about the purpose of his study when he interviewed men in their homes. When this study was published it resulted in a storm of controversy in the field of sociology, including fist fights in Humphreys's own department.

The other exception to the use of explicit deception by sociologists involves research techniques that would not typically appear in published research reports. Some sociologists advocate the use of deceptive tactics to gain access to groups that do not want to be observed. In the early to middle 1970s the principal advocate of this approach was Jack Douglas, who presented a number of "ploys" that researchers could use to gain acceptance (Douglas, 1976). These included the "boob ploy" of pretending to be submissive and spineless, the "hair-brained academic ploy" whereby one's research is made to seem highly abstract and of little interest to nonacademics, and the tactic of "revealing guilty facts about oneself, even when not true" (p. 173). Douglas believes that "it takes years to learn to be dishonest effectively" (p. 185). Most sociologists, however, reject this approach.

With these exceptions, it is social psychologists who have used deception in research, and have raised these techniques to an art form. In no other area of psychology is deception used so extensively, and when it is used in

other areas it almost always is a form of social psychology. For example, in developmental psychology there are studies of the conditions under which children help others, but that is really social psychology using children as subjects. My primary concern then is with the field of social psychology. This is not a narrow specialty, but involves a large number of psychologists who have published hundreds of research articles. For many years, a large proportion of these articles reported the use of deception.

A Sense of History

This sense refers both to our ability to take the perspective of other people at another time, and to our awareness of continuity with past generations. At some point we feel the excitement of Kurt Lewin's research seminar where he and his students developed creative situations to test new ideas. We see this group of working class, white, young men (very few women at this time) being inspired by a Jewish refugee during a time of severe economic depression and threat of war.

One of the students working with Lewin was Leon Festinger, who we come to know as a master of experimental design, a demanding academic mentor, and the creator of the most dominant social psychology theory of the 1950s and 1960s. We join him as he and his colleagues infiltrate a religious cult that awaits the end of the world. We also take the place of a subject in one of Festinger's dissonance experiments, in which a boring experience is made to seem exciting.

Festinger influenced hundreds of social psychologists who accepted his views on well controlled experimental research that also was realistic for the participants. They took these values into the turbulent 1960s and applied them to the social issues that seemed to explode in this country. In the 1970s, after the Watergate burglary led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon, social psychologists even were able to create an experimental study in which subjects had a chance to become felons.

The specific topic of this book is how social psychologists came to use deception in their research, and how deception came to be used frequently and often creatively. More generally, it is about the research endeavor, the excitement that experimenters feel as they become involved in creative design, the impact that their productions have on the participants, and how these things are affected by their time in history and the values of our culture. The next chapter will describe the pattern of the development and growth of the use of deception.