RESEARCH INVOLVING THE DECEPTION OF ADULT PARTICIPANTS

1. INTRODUCTION

While it is good practice to obtain participants' informed consent to take part in research, there may sometimes be situations where withholding information from, or even deceiving, participants, can be justified in order to obtain unbiased research data. Deception involves giving false information or deliberately misleading participants. Incomplete disclosure is a type of deception that involves withholding some information about the research aims or process. As stated in the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics:

Deception or covert collection of data should only take place:

- *where the research objective has strong scientific merit;*
- *where it is essential to achieve the research results required and*
- *where there is an appropriate risk management and harm alleviation strategy.*

Within their ethics application, researchers must: explain and justify any deception or withholding of information from participants to the extent that they are unable to make an informed decision about participation. Researchers should explain why the objectives of the research cannot be met through other methods and show that other reasonable options have been explored. Researchers must also explain the measures put in place to manage the associated risks and reduce potential harm or distress to everyone involved, the research participants in particular.

2. DECEPTION PROCEDURES

Research involving deception should be designed in such a way that it protects the dignity and autonomy of the research participants. In line with the guidance of the BPS, the University's research ethics committees consider that deception raises particular ethical concerns if the research involves any of the following:

i. The deliberate misleading by the researcher, of the participant, leads to effects of participation in the research that are potentially adverse for participants (e.g. by virtue of being upsetting, demeaning, embarrassing or objectionable). For example, participants being falsely told their performance on a cognitive task was poor, as an experimental manipulation or reactions being observed covertly while a false emergency situation is staged.

ii. Participation in the research project may produce negative effects beyond the research programme itself, for example that impact on people other than those participating in the research, or that may persist after the research has concluded.

iii. Potential adverse effects to the researcher(s) could arise from the research (eg. if the research involves the investigation or observation of illegal activities).

iv. A full debriefing statement of the aims of the research is **not** provided to participants at the conclusion of their participation in the study, or at the end of the session in which

they are deceived (for longitudinal studies). This should be provided as soon as possible, any delays in doing so must be explained in the ethics application.

Where applicants propose a research project that includes the deception of adult participants, but none of the points listed in i. - iv. above applies, an application for ethics approval can be made using the CUREC 1 form (for MS IDREC) or CUREC 1A (for SSH IDREC). Any negative impact on the equality of the participants or others (having particular regard to the protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010) must be acknowledged and addressed in the ethics application. A CUREC 2 form will be needed if the study raises further complex issues (e.g. if it involves vulnerable participants or could lead to harm, discomfort, anger or objection), or is being combined with another CUREC Approved Procedure. If any of the points listed in i.- iv above apply to the proposed research, or the research is not fully covered by this Approved Procedure, an application for ethics approval must be made using a CUREC 2 form. Applicants to the MS IDREC should, however, work through the online application decision tool before completing any application form.

3. INFORMED CONSENT AND DEBRIEF

Participants should be provided with as much information as possible to make an informed decision about participating beforehand, and the deception kept to a minimum. Guidance on producing a participant information sheet and consent form is available on the Research Support website. Note that explicit consent must be obtained for audio/ video recordings and photography of participants.

Participants must be debriefed following any form of deception, including the withholding of information from participants that they might need in order to make an informed decision about participating. The debrief document must explain why the deception occurred, address any concerns and give participants the opportunity to withdraw their consent.

The debrief document should be written in lay language and well-structured. This should include:

- University logo, departmental and researchers' contact details;
- A statement thanking participants for their time and contributions;
- A brief reminder of initially-stated project aims, along with study title;
- A description of the deception and why this was necessary;
- Sufficient information for the participants to make an informed decision as to whether they would like their data to be used for the research or would prefer to withdraw their data. This information should include:
    - a lay summary of the full research aims;
    - clarification of the intended use of the data;
    - how the research will be published;
    - an explanation of how identifiable participants could be from any publications or other research outputs (e.g. conference presentations, commissioned reports);
    - (If applicable) a statement of any new or altered risks to participation;
- The opportunity to withdraw consent for use of data in the research;
- A contact for concerns or complaints (standard wording is available on the template information sheet);
- (If applicable) information on relevant sources of support, such as counselling services, websites or helplines.

If debriefing is not possible, the application for ethics approval must be made using the CUREC 2 form and the application should address why debriefing is not appropriate for the research.

3.1 (Online) surveys or other tasks

Online study designs offer many benefits for researchers, but they are not without their disadvantages regarding debriefing. Participants are not in the same physical location, so determining the extent to which they may be experiencing negative emotions becomes more difficult. By exiting out of the study window, participants are also able to leave the study at any time, meaning that they may leave the study without receiving any debriefing information.

If information is being withheld from participants during a questionnaire or survey, it would be good practice to provide respondents with a debrief page once they have participated, e.g. at the end of the survey or if they choose to withdraw early, e.g. by closing the browser window. Participants should also be given contact information for the researcher at the University of Oxford should they have any questions. The template information sheet for online research shows the information to provide to ensure participants are able to make an informed decision. If participants are unable to withdraw once their survey has been submitted, it is essential that they are provided with the debrief before submitting their completed survey.

Despite the options available for providing debriefing information online, researchers cannot guarantee that people will read the information, resulting in the potential for continued harm. Phone calls or face-to-face meetings would alleviate concerns about missing the debriefing information at the potential cost of the participants' anonymity, this may be appropriate for certain types of research. The arrangements for debriefing participants should be proportionate to the risks associated with the deception and participation in the research. For example, more detail should be provided for research where participants could be upset by the content of a survey or object to the intended use of the research findings than for a survey with minimal ethical issues where participants are unlikely to be offended or upset.

Further guidance is available within CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 06 on Internet-mediated research.

3.2 Deception in observational research

In line with the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics, "*unless those observed give their consent to being observed, observational research is only acceptable in public situations where those observed would expect to be observed by strangers. Additionally, particular account should be taken of local cultural values and of the possibility of intruding upon the privacy of individuals who, even while in a normally public space, may believe they are unobserved*". Further guidance on obtaining participants informed consent for qualitative research is available within CUREC's Best Practice Guidance (02) - Ethnographic and other types of qualitative research.

4. TRAINING OF RESEARCH STAFF

All researchers must be trained:

- to use appropriate research methods;
- to provide accessible debriefing information and to be able to answer questions relating to the deception;
- to recognise and respond to any difficulty experienced by the participant following the deception including emotional reactions.

5. COMPENSATION

Consideration should be given to how and when participants are told about any recompense. Participant information sheets and recruitment materials should state that recompense will be made so that potential participants are not discouraged from participating by the associated

costs. As a general rule, recruitment material should not state the value. However, if this is necessary (e.g. it is a requirement of a third-party recruiter), advertisements must not emphasise the value of the payment (for example, through the use of formatting). Further guidance is available within CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 05 on Payments and incentives in research.

6. REDUCING RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS, RESEARCHERS AND OTHERS

The scope of this Approved Procedure is confined to research which carries minimal risk to participating adults or to the researchers. However, participants may feel distressed or angry due to being deceived about the real aim of the study. Negative feelings experienced by participants may have been an intentional part of the research design (e.g., receiving negative feedback on a task or being prompted to think of sad situations) or an unintended part of the study process (e.g., participation triggering distressing memories). Whether the negative feelings were expected or not, efforts should be made to alleviate any intense emotional responses and to minimise any harm or burden to participants or others. Participants must be made aware at this point that they can still withdraw from the study if they so choose.

The researcher could discuss with the participants their experience of the research in order to monitor any unforeseen negative effects or misconceptions, and explain how the reaction is natural and expected given the study circumstances. All researchers involved in the research should be prepared to respond to any questions or emotional reactions following the study and an appropriate level of support provided in order for them to do this (i.e. supervision of junior researchers, guidance or information on sources of emotional support). The research should be conducted in accordance with CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 08 on Psychological Distress.

7. MONITORING AND REPORTING ADVERSE OR UNFORESEEN EVENTS

It is a condition of any ethical approval that all research projects that involve deception must report to the relevant ethics committee any incident where any adverse consequences for participants, third parties or researchers occurred either during or after the research.

8. COMMUNICATION OF RESULTS

Wherever possible, researchers should offer to provide feedback to participants about the results from the study as a whole.

9. DATA MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION

The research must be conducted in accordance with the University's Policy on the Management of Data Supporting Research Outputs, CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 09 on Data collection, protection and management and Research Data Oxford's guidance on data backup, storage and security.

There is no time limit on retention of anonymised data. If identifiable data is to be retained, participants' informed consent must be obtained for this. A participant's personal data **must not** be shared with others without the participant's consent. If researchers do intend to share identifiable data with anyone outside the research team, this must be made clear to participants, for example by explaining within the information sheet how the data will be shared and how identifiable they will be.

10. FURTHER INFORMATION

- Allen, M. (2017). *The sage encyclopaedia of communication research methods* (Vols. 1-4). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc doi: 10.4135/9781483381411
- American Sociological Association Code of Ethics and Policies and Procedures of the ASA Committee on Professional Ethics
- British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2nd edition, 2014)
- Social Research Association Research Ethics Guidance (2021)
- Spriggs M, Gillam L. Deception of children in research. Journal of Medical Ethics 2015; 41:179-182
- Tai, Michael Cheng-Tek. Deception and informed consent in social, behavioral, and educational research (SBER), Tzu Chi Medical Journal, Volume 24, Issue 4, 2012, Pages 218-222, ISSN 1016-3190, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tcmj.2012.05.003.

11. CHANGE HISTORY

Version No.	Significant Changes	Previous Version No.
2.0	Retitled `Approved Procedure' (previously `Protocol'). Approved by CUREC, 19 November 2015	N/A
3.0	Extensively reviewed and expanded, with input from members of both MS and SSH IDRECs. Inclusion of procedures for the SSH IDREC. Reformatted.	2.0
3.1	Minor text change to section two to clarify use of points 1-4	3.0
3.2	Updated hyperlinks for new CUREC website	3.1
3.3	Removed reference to sections of the old CUREC 1 checklist	3.2
3.4	Updated broken hyperlinks	3.3
4.0	Revised throughout and restructured, including clarifying CUREC's expectations around the use of deception, referencing current best practice guidance and adding guidance on deception involving online tasks and in observational research.	3.4