

Deception and psychological harm

Psychology



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Experiments are a way of life for psychologists, especially social psychologists. Testing how people react in various situations is the only way to understand how their reactions. Also, a crucial part of experiments in general is that they should be blind – people should not know that they are being experimented on (in medical trials, no one is sure who has the drug and who has the placebo). But is this attitude really relevant in social psychology, when deception can cause undue stress? Yes. With certain limitations, deception is necessary in social psychology experiments.

As Kelman states in his article, “ Human Use of Human Subjects, The problem of Deception in Social Psychological Experiments,” the use of deception is not a cut-and-dried issue. There are too many scenarios in which deception has produced amazing results that could not have been had in other ways. However, the experiments, in some cases, have produced profound psychological harm to the subjects, or at least had the possibility of doing so. Certain experiments cannot be carried out without deception. One famous example is the role of obedience in adult subjects.

Participants were told they were accomplices, and that they were to shock the ‘ participant’ if s/he did not answer correctly. The shocks administered increased until they could cause severe injury or death, and the ‘ participant’ (who was really an accomplice) began to complain, then shriek and scream, and finally, to be absolutely silent. Many people, with the experimenter’s coaching, administered shocks that were considered lethal. While this experiment is cruel, because it leads the subject to believe he or she is torturing another person, it is a critical piece of information about obedience vs. ‘ doing the right thing.’

People were much more likely to be obedient to the person in charge than they were to call the experiment off and prevent the ‘subject’ from being hurt further. The experiment tested obedience under extreme circumstances. Had an extreme case not been used, or had the subject known he was being deceived, he would have been much more likely to go along with the premise. For example, if someone was ordered to pick up a rabbit, carry it across the room, and set it down in another cage, he would very likely obey – even if he didn’t particularly like rabbits, because there was nothing extraordinary or even very interesting about the request.

It is not hard to obey someone who has not asked you something difficult. However, there are other situations in which deception is not necessarily appropriate. Another experiment Kelman mentions, in which subjects were led to believe they had homosexual tendencies, seems unnecessary, especially given the ages of the participants. What does it matter, who does or doesn’t have homosexual tendencies or where they came from? It would be better to conduct this experiment with people who self-reported confusion or homosexual thoughts, and keep it to an interview situation.

As Kelman points out, it seems that sometimes deception is seen as a matter of course, rather than a last resort. In deciding on whether deception should be allowed, one must really take several factors into consideration. First, is there a way to do the experiment without deception? If so, then every effort should be made to do the experiment that way. Second, is the necessary deception going to cause psychological harm to the participants? If so, another method of gaining the necessary information – perhaps through case studies or interviews – should be gained.

Third, will the deception destroy trust between the experimenter and subject? And fourth, is this experiment absolutely crucial information that cannot be gained any other way? Going through this process will allow the social psychologist to evaluate the scenario before unnecessarily inflicting any form of deception on the participants. Social psychologists need to consider their subjects as human beings, rather than simply looking to them as participants from which to garner information.

While, as in the first example above, there are certain times that deception and even psychological harm are necessary and can produce fascinating results, these situations are the exception, not the rule. Deception is a fascinating topic, and one that is key in social psychology. Students would do well to think very carefully about it as they are planning all of their studies and experiments, so that they can use it to the best advantages, without the disadvantages outweighing those advantages. Only then will social psychology be both a human subject and one that has a rich breadth of information.