

Ethics in communication research



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I. Introduction

Researches are practically the basis of development for modern knowledge and development. In our modern research papers and articles, it is compulsory for new studies to elaborate on already existing researches or at least to mention where the new study position itself toward existing studies in the same field. This is obvious since research will lead to decision making that require exact information (Holmes Institute, 2007).

Therefore, students, professors and researchers in general often quote or use previous researches as foundation of their newly found theory or application of existing theories. In other words, they should comply with ethical actions, which refer to right things to do and write them in the company's ethics codes (Kidder, 2002; BSR Staff, 2004).

Ironically, while doing so, most of these researchers are generally insensitive to the validity of existing researches. Despite the absence of any statements regarding the fulfillment of research ethics within the process of conducting the research in any part of the paper or article, readers generally assume that research ethics are fulfilled nevertheless. In this paper however, I would like to briefly discuss research ethics and how they are applied in present communication researches and provide several suggestions on how they should proceed from this point.

II. Relationship with Research Participants

There are actually various aspects of research activities which require ethical concerns, for example: ethics in relationship with research participants,

ethics in the process of collecting data, ethics in analysis of data, ethics of social impact, etc. This paper will particularly address ethics within relationship with research participants.

II. 1. Deception in Communication Researches

Oxford Advanced Learner' Dictionary (1989) defines ethics as a system of moral principles and rule of conduct. It means that moral might apply not only for human being but also for organizations and their entire members. As implied earlier, there are few studies that are actually focusing on ethical issues in communication researches. These few studies however, delivered revealing results when focus on the role of 'deception' in communication research. Deception implied in this chapter is intended to address the activity of delivering misleading information to research participants or deliberately withholding vital information from research participants (Reese & Fremouw, 1984).

The research on communication research ethics revealed that the use of deception in most communication researches are generally vital, nevertheless, we tend to take them for granted. Moreover, most of the researchers generally avoid the talk regarding the use of deception in extracting relevant data for research. Ironically, a small survey indicated that almost 70% respondents believed that communication researches 'require' the use of deception to generate original behavior from research subjects. 55% of the respondents however, believed that we are not overusing deception as a research tool, only 14 % do (Gordon, 1983).

Discussions regarding the ethical justification of misinforming research subjects however, still exist in the academic realm. Some of these discussions address the lack of focus regarding researchers' ethical considerations as the effect of poor ethical education in universities (Gordon, 1983). Few if any researchers of communication researches have had extensive training in ethical issues. Even if they have had training on ethical issues, detecting ethical issues in the process of a research is hardly a popular activity.

II. 2. Perspective of Ethics in Communication Researches

If we are to divide the research society into different groups depending on perspectives toward ethics in communication researches, we would find that there are two large groups, which are: people who believe that scientific knowledge is good and thus using various means of achieving it would be justifiable; and people who believe that there are still boundaries of right and wrong within efforts of discovering scientific knowledge. The first group is called the utilitarian group, while the second is called the deontologist group.

Taking a look back in our history, it is revealed that the presence of scientific knowledge within modern society was welcomed with such a celebration that in some efforts to achieving it, any cross the boundaries of ethics. Even more, some might say that ethics in scientific research was not considered a vital issue until the late 80's. Thus, it is safe to say that the scientific society was originated from the utilitarian view of ethics in research activities. In the modern days however, along with increasing demands of social

responsibility, the deontologist perspective is becoming increasingly dominant.

Others might argue however, that even with the utilitarian view within our scientific society, where we value knowledge over all, it would be odd to ignore the knowledge about the manner in which we gather information or perform research practices in the ethical perspective. Some might say that this strain of thought is what drives us more and more into the deontologist perspective. Questions about how ethics is considered in performing scientific researches become popular, such as: to what extent is 'deception' used in our researches, considering all the senses regarding the word itself?; How many of our researches have been previously evaluated by a review board? Have we used methods that generate psychological harm to research participants?, etc.

II. 3. Previous Usages of Deception in Communication Researches

The questions mentioned in previous chapter revealed concerns regarding the limitations of using deception as a research tool. These concerns automatically turn to discussions regarding how to prevent unwanted effects from being resulted by the use of deception within communication researches. One way that has been formulated to prevent any physiological or psychological harm from ever resulted by the use of deception in communication researches is by using informed consent procedures and debriefing research participants. Surveys of more than 1, 000 researches that use deception in the process however, revealed that less than 5 % of the researches surveyed used informed consent procedures and perform any

effort of debriefing research participants. In this chapter I would like to present examples of how deception is used in communication research and what is the short and long term effect from the use of deception within the researches (McNamara & Woods, 1977).

A study regarding the effects of previous participation in a bystander experiment and subsequent helping behavior was clearly using deception as a research tool, as they withhold important information from research participants regarding what is about to take place before them. Within the research, participants were made to watch a violent attack on a male subject on TV under the knowledge that they are participating in an extrasensory perception-related research. Afterwards, participants were made to encounter a male acting as though he was hurt, directly in the participant's path. One of the important findings is that only 64% was willing to initiate contact with the 'victim' (Schwartz and Gottlieb, 1980)

What was interesting regarding the research is that none of the participants were directly debriefed after the research was completed. The reason of delaying the debriefing activity is because the researchers feared that participants would feel like they are caught up in a web of experimental deception for most of their lives, a feeling that could cause a false assumption about reality and slight behavior abnormality. Despite the justified reason, the researchers regretted the decision because it was now considered unethical to leave research participants without the knowledge that they were under a controlled environment. Due to the difficulty in finding all the participants, 80% of the participants were never debriefed.

The second example is a study regarding the degree of success or failure in a communication situation and its effect on communicator anxiety level. This level has been approved by the Department of Health and Human Services and in compliance with regulations regarding voluntary participation. Within the study, participants had their middle finger clipped for six minutes while waiting for an upcoming debate with a partner that will supposedly join them shortly. The debate partner mentioned was of course never existed and the participants were debriefed as soon as the experiment was over. The study delivered influential results regarding how success/failure expectation affected anxiety level (Greene & Sparks, 1984).

While these two examples represent the use of misinformation in communication researches, there is another type of deception utilized by researchers in order to obtain original response, which is 'withholding information'. In the usage of this type of deception, more researches are accounted for (Greene & Sparks, 1984).

From the examples above, we can easily conclude that the use of deception is necessary to avoid bias and to ensure validity of the research conclusions. Nevertheless, as revealed by the second example, there are more ethical ways of using deception as a research tool, some of which is by using informed consent procedure and immediate debriefing.

III. Communicating to Research Participants

In addition to the increasing recommendation of using informed consent procedure and immediate debriefing, researchers have also started to consider other methods of getting valid results from their researches. One of

<https://assignbuster.com/ethics-in-communication-research/>

those methods is by communicating more extensively to research participants before or after the research activity. This is a rather unorthodox practice since researchers all over the globe are always taught that ‘meanings are in people and not in words’. This would explain the tendency of researchers not to tell their participants much until the research is over. Some researchers do not even tell participants anything because they believe that the result of the experiment will speak better than the words of participants themselves (Clark, 1979).

These practices are now challenged by a new perspective of research procedure which put forth participants’ opinion along with the results of the experiments. Questions like how participants perceived the situation, how participants perceived researchers and their intentions, etc are now gaining more attention. Some believe that the use of two-way communication generated by those questions will produce more accurate and insightful data regarding participant’s condition (Clark, 1979).

Nevertheless, despite the valid point of the argument, most researcher still lack appreciation of participant’s opinion compare to what they themselves concluded from their researches. In a sense, the current practices of communication researches actually violate communication theory in order to build their own communication theory. In the end, several researchers that have similar concern regarding this tendency believed that the present researches contain deficiencies, particularly in exposing personal feelings of research participants that would otherwise contribute to the accuracy of the research as a whole.

Writers believed that the future of communication research will lead away from such a single-minded methodology. The use of a more extensive communication toward research participants (one that involves answering the questions revealed earlier about the feelings and perspectives of participants) is expected to enhance the research system from which present goal is only to gather data to really understand the meaning of the data, meanings that can only be extracted by accessing participant's perspectives.