## Guidelines for protocols involving deception

Full disclosure of information is necessary in order for participants to exercise free and informed consent. However, the need for research occasionally justifies the deception of participants. In general, deception in research involving human participants takes one of two forms:

**Limited disclosure**: when the researcher conceals the full or true purpose of the research from participants;

**Misrepresentation:** when the researcher actively misleads the participant with regard to the true purpose of the research.

In both cases, deception is used because full and/or true disclosure would likely influence participant responses significantly, compromising the validity of research.

Researchers must expressly justify the use of deception in research protocols. In particular, protocols that involve the use of deception must demonstrate the following:

- The deception is necessary to the effectiveness of the project;
- The deception only extends to the elements of research in which it is necessary; and
- All alternative investigative methods are significantly less satisfactory than the use of deception.

## Furthermore:

- The deception must not invalidate any aspects of informed consent that influence a participant's willingness to take part (e.g., length of the study);
- The deception must not underplay any risks to participants or, in itself, create substantial risk to the participant's self-esteem and dignity.

To reduce the risk of deception and ensure that participants' right to full disclosure is fulfilled, researchers must provide a debriefing as soon as possible after the deception. The debriefing should seek to remove any misconceptions that the participants might have and to reestablish any trust that might have been lost, assuring participants that the research procedures were neither arbitrary nor capricious, but necessary for scientifically valid findings. The debriefing should be proportionate to the sensitivity of the issue and provide the following elements:

- Candid disclosure of the deception
- An explanation of the true purpose and hypotheses of the study
- A full explanation of the need for deception
- o Details about the importance of the research
- An expression of concern about the participants' well-being.
- An opportunity for participants to re-consent to the use of their data, if feasible (see below)

Immediate and full debriefing of all participants may not feasible. In studies in which data collection occurs over an extended period, debriefing may have to be deferred to the end of the project. In some cases, (e.g., research involving children), it may be more appropriate to debrief parents rather participants themselves. In other cases it may be more appropriate to debrief the entire family or community. In addition, it may be advisable to modify the debriefing to be sensitive to individual participant's needs and feelings.

In studies in which limited disclosure and/or misrepresentation are employed, it is generally advisable for participants to exercise re-consent at the conclusion of the study, following debriefing. If a participant expresses concerns about a study, the researcher should give the participant the option of removing his or her data from the project. This approach should be used only when the elimination of the participant's data will not compromise the validity of the research design and/or diminish the ethical value of the participation of others. Researchers who do not wish to employ a re-consent procedure need to justify their request in their protocol.

Deceptive techniques should be used with discretion and may be employed only with clearance from the REB. If a research participant expresses significant concerns about the use of deception in a research project, the researcher should report those concerns to the REB.

Please refer to Section 2 – Free and Informed Consent in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement:* Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (link to web site) for additional information or speak to the Research Ethics Officer of REB Chair.

The REB would like to thank Dr. Carolyn Hafer, Professor in the Department of Psychology at Brock University for her contribution to these guidelines.

## Reference:

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.* 1998 (with 2000, 2002 and 2005 amendments).

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