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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# **Do the Ends Justify the Means? The Ethics of Deception in Social Science Research**

## **Year**

1997

## **Description**

This case raises issues of the question of ethical justification for intentionally deceiving subjects, experimentation on human subjects and voluntary consent.

## **Body**

[Case 1](#)

[Case 2](#)

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## **Case 1**

Ann Smith is a social psychologist who wants to study attitude change. She submits a proposal to her institution outlining details of a study that will examine the attitude change of participants following a workshop on environmental issues. Smith plans to identify attitude change by administering a pretest and a posttest. She is worried, however, that the participants will recognize that she is looking for changes

in their attitudes and that this knowledge will influence their answers on the posttest. To address this problem, she plans to disguise the issues she is most interested in; when she administers the tests, she will give a very broad explanation that does not fully disclose the nature of the study. Her proposal includes these procedures and an explanation of why she believes they are necessary; she also includes a plan to "debrief" the subjects (tell them the real purpose of the study) after they finish taking the second test.

## Discussion Questions

1. What might be the benefits of this research, if any? What risks to subjects, if any, do you identify?
2. What issues should members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB)([1](#)) raise regarding Smith's proposal?
3. If you were a member of the IRB, how would you weigh the benefits of the research with the risks to subjects in this case?
4. Based on your assessment of the benefits and risks, would you approve Smith's proposal as submitted? If not, what changes would you suggest?

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## Case 2

For a study on conformity to group norms, Ann Smith constructs a survey designed to measure attitudes toward a controversial topic. The research proposal she submits describes her study procedures: She will use as subjects students in a large introductory psychology course she teaches. She includes the following paragraph in her syllabus? "One of the requirements of this course is your participation in a psychology experiment, through which you will be introduced to the methods of psychological research. If you prefer not to participate in the experiment, you may instead complete a 50-page research paper on a psychology topic of your choosing." She will bring two groups into the laboratory, ostensibly simply to obtain their attitudes on the survey. One group will be encouraged to discuss responses to the survey freely amongst themselves; the members of the other group, acting as controls, will take the survey independently. In the first (experimental) group, Smith

will "plant" several confederates instructed to advocate loudly one side of the issue in question. Based on the results of similar studies, Smith believes that the majority of responses given by subjects in this experimental group will conform to the position advocated by the confederates, indicating the powerful influence of the group norm. Following the experiment, all subjects will be debriefed as to the true purpose of the experiment.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What are likely to be the benefits of this research, if any? What risks to subjects do you identify?
2. What issues should members of the IRB raise regarding this proposal?
3. If you were a member of the IRB, how would you weigh the benefits of the research with the risks to subjects in this case?
4. Based on your assessment of the benefits and risks, would you approve Smith's proposal as submitted? If not, what changes would you suggest?
5. For the subjects involved, are there consequences of participation in the experiment that did not exist for Case 1? Are these consequences negative or positive? How do the effects of debriefing in this case differ from its effects in Case 1?

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## **Case 3**

In a research proposal modeling a familiar experimental manipulation to study people's altruistic, or "helping," behavior, Ann Smith plans to place one subject in a room with several experimental confederates. She will assign the group a task, supposedly the purpose of the experiment, then arrange for an "emergency" to occur in the vicinity of the laboratory -- the group will hear a loud thud from an adjacent room and then a piercing cry for help. She will instruct confederates to look up upon hearing the cry, then return to their task. In a pilot test of this procedure, the single subject looked around uncomfortably, then returned to the assigned task, as the confederates did. Following the experiment, the subjects will be debriefed about the true purpose of the research.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What might be the benefits of this research, if any? What risks to subjects do you identify, if any?
2. What issues should members of the IRB raise regarding this proposal?
3. If you were a member of the IRB, how would you weigh the benefits of the research with the risks to subjects in this case
4. Based on your assessment of the benefits and risks, would you approve Smith's proposal as submitted? If not, what changes would you suggest?
5. For the subjects involved, how do the consequences of participation in the experiment differ from those in Cases 1 and 2? the consequences of debriefing?
6. Suppose subjects were told before they agreed to participate that "This experiment could result in negative psychological effects for subjects," and the subjects still agreed to participate. Is Smith absolved of any further responsibility?

## **Discussion Questions for All Three Cases**

1. Is deception of subjects ever justifiable? If so, under what conditions?
2. Can such questions as these be answered without deceiving subjects? Do potential benefits of such experiments outweigh psychological risks to

subjects? At what point, if ever, do benefits of such experiments outweigh costs?

3. If the consequences for subjects are positive (in Case 3, for example, if subjects who helped feel good about themselves, and subjects who did not help resolve to do so in the future), can the researcher conclude that the deception was justified?
  4. How might conducting experiments that involve deception of subjects affect the researcher? Is there any way in which such experiments could reflect upon science itself? If so, how?
- [\(1\)](#)An Institutional Review Board (IRB) is an institutional committee established to review research proposals to ensure that the rights of human subjects are fully protected.

## Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 1, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 1997.

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