
The Issue Of Deception The Experiment Participant

Deception is a highly debated ethical issue in psychology. There have been studies that display deception in experiments as objectionable. As well as studies that display it as a necessity for a desired set of results. However, despite opinions deception is still very popular in psychological research. Even though, the practice has frequently been criticised (Baumrind, 1985, cited in Epley & Huff, 1998), and the concerns regarding its impact on how psychology is viewed by the public (Kelman, 1967, cited in Epley & Huff, 1998). Two types of deception occur in psychological research. Researchers who withhold certain aspects regarding the true meaning behind a study, but do not completely mislead a participant, are deceiving participants by omission. When participants are deceived knowingly by the researcher alongside, the researcher imposing improper knowledge about the study and going against ethical guidelines. These participants are being deceived by commission (Kemmelmeier et al., 2003). Psychologists are asked by The Code of Human Research Ethics to gain as much information as possible from participants that take part in any of their research. However, not all psychologists undertake this requirement. This is usually due to the attempt to prevent participants from acting unnatural, further resulting in a researcher's study being inaccurate. Individuals outside of the psychology profession, alongside some individuals within, see the deception of participants within research as inappropriate. Deception is especially inappropriate, if the reaction from the participants after deception has been revealed, results in exasperation or objection (The BPS, 2014).

In 1920 an experiment was conducted on an 11-month-old male on the subject of emotional response against different conditions (Watson & Rayner 1920). It was referred to as the "Little Albert" experiment. Dr. John B. Watson and his graduate assistant Rosalie Rayner demonstrated that classical conditioning principles could be applied to fear a previously neutral stimulus (Beck et al., 2009).

However, Watson and Rayner detrimentally deceived the child by commission. Alongside unaware of participation (Hertwig & Ortmann, 2008). The participant was a baby, he was unable to personally give consent for his participation in the study. It was not reported that the child had parents therefore, it is suggested parental consent was not obtained. Furthermore, he was too young to understand the true meaning behind the study as well as being unable to withdraw himself. Watson and Rayner did not de-condition the participant, this did not protect him from psychological harm as he was exposed to state fear (Cornwell & Hobbs, 1976). The American Psychological Association (APA) encourages all psychologists to avoid harm, Watson and Rayner did not avoid this as they put the participant in danger. However, this code of ethics was not recognised until 1953 (APA, 1953). Furthermore, when this study was conducted no papers expressed any ethical concerns regarding it. Although the study would be considered unethical today, it is unreasonable to infer that this study was unethical in 1920 (Digdon, Powell, & Harris, 2014).

A second study conducted in 1939 consisted of 22 orphan children who were selected for an unethical, unpublished study regarding repetitional speech, the study was later referred to as the "Monster Study" (Bloodstein, 1987, cited in Silverman, 1988). The children were separated into groups, 10 stutterers and 12 normal speakers. The study was designed by Professor

Wendell Johnson alongside Mary Tudor under his supervision (Ambrose & Yairi, 2002), in the hope to objectify if removing the label “stutterer” from an individual, will it affect their speech? (Tudor, 1939, cited in Ambrose & Yairi, 2002). A report was released contending that the study was designed to install stuttering into a normally spoken child (Dryer, 2001, cited in Ambrose & Yairi, 2002).

The children involved in this study were deceived by omission, the children were unaware of their participation in the study. The orphanage staff was deceived as they were told that one group of children were not stutterers and that no attention should be paid to these individuals regarding their speech. The staff was also told that a second group were stutterers and their speech should be observed however, both pieces of information were falsified. Mary Tudor later revealed that the orphanage staff did not take part in the study’s deception due to the children’s self-esteem (Tudor, 1939, cited in Ambrose & Yairi, 2002). Furthermore, 2 of the groups were deceived by being told incorrect information regarding their speech. Alongside, 6 out of the 22 students who spoke normally, were exposed to negative labelling along with another 5 children, resulting in normal speakers being induced to stutter. The study had psychological effects on the children as the report suggested that the induced stuttering was irreversible, this included the children who were previously not stutterers (Dryer, 2001, cited in Ambrose & Yairi, 2002). The study as previously mentioned, was set in an orphanage, this would mean that parental consent was impossible to obtain. Although the orphanage staff was aware of the activities, they did not attempt to withdraw the children neither divulge the true objectives of the study (Ambrose & Yairi, 2002). Although this study was unethical and the participants were deceived, the findings obtained from the study supported Johnson’s theory enabling further contribution to stuttering treatment and research (Silverman, 1988).

In conclusion, “Should participants ever be deceived concerning the true nature of a psychological experiment in which they are taking part?”. It has been suggested that deception can sometimes be seen by participants as a more enjoyable and interesting experience (Uz & Kemmelmeier). However, this is not the case with all participants. Although studies have suggested deception can sometimes have zero effect on a participant (Boynton et al., 2013) it can still result in detrimental psychological effects, even if the participant has been de-briefed correctly. On the other hand, if all individuals involved in a research study knew all the information regarding it, the research behind it would be futile. As mentioned previously, issues such as participants acting unnatural and participants no longer wanting to take part are plausible. Although deception in psychological research can result in participants distrusting the activities and attitudes of psychologists, and can potentially result in distress and harm. There are rarely any psychological processes today, that deceive participants of their awareness that they are being studied. Focused research regarding the collection of data would make many psychological researches impossible (The BPS 2014). Deception is essential to generating results, results that will make an endeavour meaningful. However, it should only be used as a last resort (Kimmel, 2011).