

What Do We Mean by "Deception" in Educational Research?

Initially I compare the incidence of deception in research for 1978 and 1992 in two major education journals. In one journal the percentage of studies using deception is as high in the 1990s as it was in the 1970s, although in the other, use of deception has virtually ceased. The survey raised the question: "What do we mean by 'deception'", for I found it hard to decide whether some procedures were deceptive or not. Furthermore, in the debate about deception in research, researchers' conceptions of deception differ. Many researchers say, for example, that withholding of any information from participants prior to consent is deceptive. Other researchers think that withholding prior to consent need not be deceptive. Some researchers, too, report uncertainty about whether a certain procedure they used was deceptive. From what bases, then, might researchers answer an ethics committee question: "Does your proposed study involve deception?" Do ethics committees, in turn, differ on what they understand by deception? Two different views of deception in research are described that align with two major conceptions of deception as discussed by philosophers. These two views hold widely different implications for restriction of research on the grounds that it involves deception.

Although deception in social science research has been controversial for over thirty years, it is still used as much in the 1990s as it was in the 1970s. In the prominent *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, deception was used in 46.7% of studies in 1992--a percentage virtually identical to the 1978 rate of 46.8% (Sieber, Iannuzo, & Rodriguez, 1995). Conducting a parallel survey in two major education journals, I found a similar pattern in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*--13% of studies used deception in 1978 and the figure was even slightly higher at 14.9% in 1992. Similarity between 1970s and 1990s percentages is not, however, uniform across the two education journals. In the *American Educational Research Journal* deception was used in 15.1% of studies in 1978, but in 1992, no deception was apparent.

In surveying these two journals I ran into difficulties classifying a substantial minority of the studies as either deceptive or nondeceptive. Oddly, however, other researchers who, since the 1960s have surveyed journals to monitor the use of deception, have never reported difficulty in determining the deceptive status of studies (e.g., Adair, Dushenko, & Lindsay, 1985; Menges, 1973; Sieber et al., 1995). There are, however, signs in the literature, that researchers' understandings of deception vary markedly. Adair, et al. (1985) noted that surveyors differ in their definitions of deception; and the literature on deception in research reflects a marked discrepancy between researchers who deem withholding any information from

participants prior to consent deceptive (e. g., Cupples & Gochnauer; 1985; Sieber, 1982; Sieber et al., 1995), and researchers who maintain that withholding some information prior to consent is not necessarily deceptive (e.g., Baumrind 1985). However, virtually no attention has been given in the deception debate to the meaning of deception; the literature on deception offers only brief definitions--sometimes arranged in taxonomies of types of deceptive research procedures.

My recent difficulty in classifying studies as deceptive or nondeceptive was not a new experience for me. Some years ago I began a Ph.D. in motivational research--an area in which deception has been a standard procedure. I designed a study that I thought was

nondeceptive. When I began testing the children, however, I gradually realised intuitively that the procedure was profoundly deceptive, but I could not work out just what made it deceptive. Shortly after, I turned my attention to the issue of deception in research and began by surveying the percentage of studies using deception in one issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. I gave up on that task because I found myself at loss as to how to classify some of the studies. I did not know whether they were deceptive or nondeceptive, and furthermore felt that I did not have a philosophical basis for even considering their classification. I began to wonder "what is deception" in earnest at that stage. Seeking answers in the writings of ethicists, I repeatedly came across two views of deception which I call informational and relational. The literature on these two views helped clarify why my research had been deceptive and helped me to understand the dilemmas I had faced when trying to classify reported studies as deceptive or nondeceptive. I cannot give a full account of the informational and relational views in this brief paper, but can convey some sense of their meanings.¹

In the informational view, discrepancy between information in the minds of participants and information in the mind of the researcher about the research, which is created or used by the researcher, is regarded as deceptive. So giving misinformation (e.g., Phillips, 1993); and withholding any information at the time of consent, are both seen as deceptive (e.g., Sieber, 1982; Sieber et al., 1995). In everyday life, surprise parties and harmless jokes are seen as deceptions from this view because they involve discrepancies in the respective information in the minds of actors and recipients. Indeed, researchers who take an informational view of deception use the analogy of the surprise party to show that deceptions can be utterly harmless and delightful, and thus to defend deception in research (e.g., Milgram, 1977).

In the relational view the respective information in the minds of those involved, although important, is not a deciding criterion for deeming a communication deceptive. There has to be a betrayal of trust for a

communication to be called deceptive, and the relational view also entails the notion of right to the truth: withholding the truth is not deceptive unless it is withheld from someone who has a right to that truth. In research, giving misinformation to participants is generally, though not invariably, seen as deceptive from a relational view, and withholding of information from participants until after a study is not necessarily seen as deceptive. In everyday life, surprise parties and harmless practical jokes are not classed as deceptions from a relational view, partly because they do not involve a betrayal of trust.

Some philosophers who discuss truthfulness and deception use the World War 2 example of householders who concealed Jews in their homes and who responded with false statements when the Gestapo asked the whereabouts of the Jews. In an informational view, these false statements are classed as deceptions (specifically lies). In a relational view, however, giving false statements to Nazis to protect hidden Jews can no more be called "lying" than killing in self-defence can be called "murder" (Thielicke, 1979). There is no expectation of trust between the Gestapo and the householders, so the householders false statements do not betray existing trust, and the Gestapo have forfeited a right to the truth by questioning the householders for the wrongful purpose of annihilating Jews.

Philosophers who argue for the relational view maintain that if, as in the informational view, the term "lie" is applied to every statement in which there is discrepancy between thought and speech, and necessary

false statements to the enemy in war are called lies, then the lie acquires a moral sanction that conflicts in every possible way with the meaning of the term. Furthermore, calling harmless jokes and surprise parties deceptions takes from deception its seriousness and malice, and also deprives the joke of its characteristic features of harmlessness, playfulness, and freedom (Bonhoeffer, 1955).

For the remainder of this paper we can consider several research procedures from the perspective of these two views of deception, to observe the different judgements that can be made about their deceptiveness. The first two examples are standard procedures listed in taxonomies of research deceptions. The second two examples are studies which researchers have been hesitant to classify as deceptive or nondeceptive.

Informed consent to participate in one of several conditions. Sieber (1982; Sieber et al., 1995) includes this procedure in her taxonomy of different types of deception in research. The researcher tells participants what will happen in each of several experimental conditions, but also tells them that they will not be told, until after the study, the conditions to which they have been assigned.

Participants consent to that arrangement. Sieber's classification of this procedure as deceptive reflects the informational view that withholding any information at the time of consent is deceptive. From a relational view, however, this procedure is not deceptive, for participants consent to the temporary withholding of information about the condition to which they are assigned--they choose to give up their right to that truth until the end of the study. Furthermore, the procedure does not involve a betrayal of participants' trust by the researcher--the participants know the full range of purposes and procedures to which they may be exposed.

Waiver of right to be informed. In this procedure participants waive the right to some information about the study prior to participation. Sieber (1982; Sieber et al., 1995) also includes this procedure in her taxonomy of different types of research deceptions, again reflecting the informational view that any withholding at the time of consent amounts to deception. In a relational view, however, this strategy need not be deceptive, for participants have waived their right to all the truth about the study prior to participation. The procedure could nevertheless be deceptive from a relational view if the participants' trust is betrayed--if participants find the procedure offensive or risky to the extent that they would not have consented had they been privy to the withheld information from the outset. From the relational view, then, strategies may be needed to ensure as far as possible that participants' trust will not be betrayed when information is temporarily withheld at the outset. Discussion of such strategies is beyond the scope of this paper. Generally, however, they would involve the researcher in giving a general statement of purpose prior to the participant's consent with the indication that full details will be given at the conclusion of the study. When it is uncertain whether the participants would consider the purpose or procedure risky or offensive, a preliminary sample from the target population could be told about the research to see whether they object, and if so, what proportion objects (e.g., C. Lawson, 1995; Veatch, 1987).

In the next two examples, researchers have expressed uncertainty about the deceptive status of the study described.

HIV/AIDS research. Phillips (1994) wanted to survey adolescents' attitudes and behaviours related to HIV/AIDS prevention. Most of the adolescents had taken health education classes involving AIDS

education, and Phillips thought that if she told them that her research was "AIDS research" they might give answers that they "should" give rather than genuine answers. So she told them that the questionnaire would be sexually explicit and called it a "personal health survey", but did not specifically say that she was hoping to apply the findings to HIV/AIDS prevention education until after the study. In discussion of this study she began by calling it deceptive, but then expressed

uncertainty as to whether it really was. Again, her study is more likely to be called deceptive from an informational view than from a relational view. Provided that, at the time of consent, researchers told participants that the statement of purpose was general, and that specific details would follow the study, the procedure would not readily be deemed deceptive from a relational perspective. It is even doubtful that preliminary sampling from the target population was required to ensure that participants' trust was not be betrayed by withholding the specific purpose, for in her initial statement Phillips told participants that there would be sexually explicit questions. She thus informed them in advance of all the ingredients of the research, and simply withheld the emphasis that she would place upon the different ingredients.

Cookies and kindness. This study is discussed by (Sieber, 1983). The researcher coopted a confederate to hand out cookies to subjects while they were studying in the library, to see if this would increase their subsequent willingness to engage in helpful behaviour. In commentary, Sieber maintained that this deception is "so minimal that it is difficult to agree on whether it should be called ... deception at all" (1983, p. 5). From a relational perspective, however, the study is likely to be classed as deceptive for it betrays and trammels with social trust. Participants reported that they initially thought the confederate was just some kind person giving out cookies as gifts. When the ulterior motive came to light, participants could have gone away feeling more suspicious or cynical about the motives behind kind actions of others in the community. Contrary to the previous examples, therefore, this study is more likely to be seen as deceptive from a relational view than from the view held by Sieber.

It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the pros and cons of the two views of deception. As consideration of the above examples has suggested, however, the informational and relational views would place different restrictions upon research on the grounds that it is deceptive. This is an important consideration when some ethical guidelines, including the Code of Ethics of the Australian Association for Research in Education (1995) have been moving close to advising that deception should never be used. In that eventuality, the relational view of deception would be less restrictive of research than the informational view. Furthermore, the activities of researchers have ripple effects in the wider society beyond the dissemination of research findings. For this reason too, the relational view may hold an advantage for it upholds the notion that deception is morally serious. In the informational view, deception is intrinsically morally neutral, though it may be the vehicle for introducing moral difficulties depending upon the level of harm it enables. Promulgation of a view that deception is intrinsically morally neutral may foster the spread of deception in society more than promulgation of a view that deception is morally serious.

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1 I more fully explore the meaning of these two views of deception and their implications for research in Lawson (1996).

E. Lawson: AARE, 1996