

Ethical issues of deception in psychological research:

Ethical issues are a major area for concern in psychological studies, and that in some way or another ethical guidelines are compromised.

Deception is one of the most controversial aspects in psychological research. The definition of the word deception is not always clear and is defined differentially by different people. An example of this is **Hey (1998)** who pointed out that 'there is a world of difference between not telling participants' things and telling them the wrong things'. On the other hand **Adair, Dushenko and Lindsay (1985)** define deception in psychological research as: the provision of information that actively misleads participants regarding some aspect of the study. **Christensen (1977)** defines deception in psychological research as an explicit misstatement of fact.

For the purpose of this essay I am going to use the definition of deception cited in the Oxford English Dictionary. Here it defines deception as untruthful, misleading and dishonesty.

The first reference to the ethics of deception to have appeared in psychological research is credited to **W.E. Vinacke** in his **1954** American psychologist article entitled 'Deceiving Experimental Subjects'. In that article he raised the question of the 'proper balance between the interests of science and the thoughtful treatment of research subjects' (**Korn, 1997**).

Despite Vinacke's attempt to stimulate discussion in the field of such ethical issues, the message was largely ignored. This was until nine years later when the controversy surrounding **Stanley Milgram's** obedience experiments (1963) came to light. As a result of these experiments, **Diane Baumrind (1985)** began a vigorous campaign against the use of deception in psychological research.

The controversy regarding the use of deception arises because it may have an effect on participants' willingness to take part in psychological research. Indeed this controversy has resulted in much research on this. However, the findings have been contradictory.

Some research has shown that the use of deception negatively affects participant's perception of researchers and psychology consequently the likelihood that they will take part in psychological research again, and whether they will complete the study they are participating in. For example **Oliansky (1991)** reported that participants who had been deceived in psychological research reported strong negative feelings in that they said that they were unlikely to take part again. Therefore this shows that the use of deception does affect participant's willingness to take part in psychological studies.

On the other hand there is evidence that people actually enjoy being deceived and therefore deception has a positive effect, in that participants report that the likelihood that they would take part in another psychological study had increased. For example a study carried out by **Smith and Richardson (1983)** found that participants who were involved in experiments involving deception reported that they enjoyed, and benefited from the experience, more than what they did in experiments without deception. They reported that they would be very likely to take part in such studies in the future.

However, some research into the of deception in psychological research has shown that participants do not appear to react negatively to being deceived, and the likelihood of them taking part in future studies is not affected. For example **Bonetti's (1998)** findings led him to conclude that 'deception has no effect on participants' willingness to take part in future studies in psychology studies, in that

it neither reduces nor increases participants willingness to take part in future studies whether they involve deception or not.

Consequently, these contradictory findings regarding the use of deception implies that people have different interpretations of what deception actually means. All of these studies into the effects of deception have asked participant's after they have been deceived whether or not they objected. Therefore further research is needed to investigate the possible effects that the use of deception in a prospective psychological study to see whether it has any impact on 'potential participants' decision to take part in research. This could easily be done by informing some participants that they may be deceived at some point during a proposed psychological study and not informing a control group to establish whether the information about deception has any significant influence on whether or not they decide to take part.