

Debriefing Procedure

A process debriefing procedure achieves several goals:

- (1) ensures that participants are informed of all deceptive elements of the study,
- (2) ensures that participants understand the occasional need for deception in some research, and
- (3) ensures that participants leave the study with a better understanding of social psychological research and a positive regard for research participation.

The outline that follows reflects the three major purposes of the post-experimental debriefing session. Process debriefing is designed to

- (1) gently probe for the precise nature of any participant suspicions,
- (2) explain the nature and purpose of any deception employed, and to do so in a gradual and considerate manner, and
- (3) to explain the true purpose of the study, and the relationship between procedures and the hypotheses being tested.

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- I. Ask if the participant has any questions. If not, ascertain whether the entire research procedure was perfectly clear to the participant, and whether he or she harbored any suspicions.
 - A. Tell the participant that different people respond to things in different ways, and that it would be useful to the researcher to hear about the participant's feelings about and reactions to the study.
 - B. Ask specifically if the participant found any aspect of the procedure odd, disturbing, or confusing.

(This discussion may take considerable time, but it is necessary to determine whether the participants interpreted the events in the laboratory as the researcher intended, and whether participants understood all the instructions and procedures. In addition, it provides for the voicing of any general suspicions or misgivings on the part of the participants).

- II. If no suspicions have been voiced, the researcher asks: "Do you think that there may have been more to this study than meets the eye?"

(This discussion affords participants the opportunity to voice specific suspicions should they not already have done so. Just as important, the discussion allows even previously nonsuspicious participants to indicate to the researcher that they are not entirely gullible or naïve people—it affords them the opportunity to see themselves as less gullible than they otherwise might.)

- III. The researcher, depending on the participant's responses, says something like this: "Yes, you were on the right track. We were interested in studying some things that we couldn't really discuss with you in advance. I'd like to take a few minutes to tell you in more detail about what we're studying..." Most participants readily understand that were they to know the true purpose of the study in advance, they would likely try their best to "help the

researcher out” by behaving in ways that fit the researcher’s expectations. They also understand how this kind of “cooperation” could seriously jeopardize the research results.

- A. Quickly summarize for the participant past research on the topic. Explain how it has been conducted and what it has found.
- B. Explain the methods and hypothesis of the current study.
- C. Ask if the participant has any questions about the “mechanics” of the experiment, or about the concepts discussed.

(This discussion serves as the “educational” segment of the debriefing session, wherein the participants learn about the work and thought that goes into the planning and execution of a laboratory study. It also allows participants to ask questions related to real-world phenomena, and the translation of psychological constructs into concrete research procedures.)

IV. The researcher addresses deception as a necessary component of many social psychological studies.

- A. Explain the irony of being less than honest in order to get at “the truth.”
- B. Explain that deception is used only when necessary—to test hypotheses in a valid manner—rather than being arbitrarily employed to embarrass participants.
- C. Explain the times when deception is necessary:
 - 1. Sometimes what people believe or say they would do is not what they would really do when they find themselves in the middle of a situation. Reality is often different than “hypothetical” situations.
 - 2. If participants know specifically what researchers are trying to test or examine, their behaviors may be affected.
 - a. They may set out to help the researcher “prove” his or her hypothesis.
 - b. They may assert their independence and set out to “disprove” the hypothesis.
 - c. They may work to “look normal” or “look good” and thus engage in “artificial” behaviors.

Deception—deliberately withholding some information or misleading participants—is frequently the only valid way to prevent the problems described above.

- D. Explain specific deception used in the study, and explain that the assurances of confidentiality, as described on the consent form, are TRUE.
- E. Explain that to the extent that the participant believed what he or she was told, it does not reflect his or her level of sophistication or intelligence. Most participants interpret the events as the researcher intended. This is because hours and hours of planning and pilot-testing go into every study, to ensure that most if not all participants interpret events as the researcher intends.

- F. Entertain comments, concerns, or questions from the participant regarding deception in general, and the specifics of deception in this study.

(This is typically the most time-consuming segment of the debriefing process. It is imperative that participants understand the necessity of deception in general in social-psychological research, and in this specific study. Equally important, it is essential that participants understand that there is absolutely nothing “wrong” with them to the extent that they believed the “cover story.” This segment of the debriefing also acknowledges the rights of participants as collaborators (albeit initially unwitting) to voice any objections or concerns that they may have regarding deception in research.)

- V. Carefully assess the “state of mind” of the participant before he or she departs.
 - A. Have all questions been answered?
 - B. Does the participant feel at least as “okay” before leaving the laboratory as he or she did upon entering? (If not, talk to participants, and, if necessary, refer them to the counseling center.)
 - C. Has the participant come to see him or herself as the provider of valuable scientific information?
 - D. Ask the participant, now that he or she has participated in the study and knows all about it, to make any suggestions for improvements of the study. Can he or she think of any ways the study could have been carried out that would not have involved deception?
- VI. Ask the participant not to reveal anything about his or her experiences to anyone else. Explain that all would be lost if later participants were privy to information about the purposes, procedures, and so on, of the study.
- VII. Ascertain whether the current participant has heard anything about the study. Explain that credit for participation will not be affected, even if the participant’s responses are invalid.
- VIII. Thank the participant for participating, provide a copy of the consent form with a phone number so that the participant may call the researcher if he or she has any further questions or concerns about the study; provide a list of references should the participant wish to learn more about the relevant topics, and provide a mailing list should the participant wish to receive a copy of the results of the research.