

**Deception in Marketing Research:
Ethical, Methodological, and Disciplinary Implications**

Allan J. Kimmel
ESCP-EAP, Graduate School of Management

N. Craig Smith
London Business School

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Allan J. Kimmel
79, avenue de la Republic
ESCP-EAP, Graduate School of Management
Marketing Department
75543 Paris Cedex 11 - FRANCE
Tel: 01.49.23.22.47
Fax: 01.49.23.22.48
E-mail: kimmel@escp-eap.net

N. Craig Smith
London Business School
Regent's Park
London NW1 4SA
Tel: 020-77262-5050
Fax: 020-7724-1145
E-mail: ncsmith@london.edu

London Business School, Regent's Park, London NW1 4SA, U.K.
Tel: +44 (0)20 7262-5050 Fax: +44 (0)20 7724-1145
<http://www.london.edu/Marketing>

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Abstract

Although marketing researchers often find it necessary to deceive their research participants, little attention has been given within marketing to the ethical issues underlying the use of deception or to the potential consequences of deceptive research practices. This paper provides a conceptual starting point for developing a more complete understanding of deception in marketing research, including an ethical analysis from the viewpoint of consequentialist and deontological theories of moral reasoning. A research agenda is outlined that draws on the extensive behavioral science literature on this topic and includes empirical questions relevant to the ethical, methodological, and disciplinary implications of using deceptive practices in marketing research.

Deception in Marketing Research:

Ethical, Methodological, and Disciplinary Implications

Despite a growing focus on the ethical issues inherent in the investigation of human participants, academic researchers in marketing have given relatively scant attention to the uses of ethically questionable research practices, such as deception, the invasion of privacy, and breaches of confidentiality. This inattention to the rightness and potential impact of research practices stands in stark contrast to the situation in related disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, where systematic attempts to assess the implications of both ethical procedures (such as informed consent, debriefing, and protection of anonymity) and ethically sensitive practices (such as misrepresentation of the research purpose and the use of confederates) have been extensive.

In psychology, particular attention has been directed to the frequency, intensity, and impact of deceptions employed by psychologists over time, as tangible indications of the extent to which research methods have been altered by ethical requirements (Adair, Dushenko, & Lindsay, 1985; Nicks, Korn, & Mainieri, 1997; Vitelli, 1988). It is not surprising that much interest has been focused on the use of deception by psychologists, as some of the most ethically controversial studies in the discipline (e.g., the Milgram obedience studies) relied heavily on deceptive procedures and were originally responsible for generating concern about ethical research practices in the behavioral sciences (Baumrind, 1964; Kelman, 1967).

Frequently researched topics in psychology, such as conformity, prejudice, aggression, helping behavior, sexuality, and maladaptive behavior require naïve research participants in order to assess their unbiased, natural responses. Deception may be

considered necessary in some behavioral research because if researchers were to reveal the exact substance of the study, they would run the risk of distorting participants' reactions and ultimately limiting the applicability of their research findings. The employment of deception can be seen as a possible solution to the problem of subject reactivity; in certain situations, deception has the capacity to improve the validity of an investigation by diminishing the likelihood that subjects' behaviors have been influenced by certain thoughts or motivations associated with participation in the study. Deception, it is sometimes argued, provides additional methodological advantages for the researcher. Depending upon the focus of the investigation, it can elicit more spontaneous behavior from participants than otherwise might be the case in a laboratory setting and it can increase the researcher's degree of methodological control over the experimental situation. Deceptive procedures allow researchers to manipulate and control the variables of interest with much greater facility by contriving the precise conditions under which their participants respond.

Marketing researchers are not immune from such methodological considerations and often find it necessary to deceive research participants about various aspects of their investigations, including the study's purpose, research materials, interview length, and the like. The consequences of such deceptive research practices are of growing concern in light of evidence indicating that marketing researchers frequently deceive their research participants and that the employment of these practices actually has risen over recent decades (Kimmel, in press; Misra, 1992; Toy, Olson, & Wright, 1989). By contrast, recent trends in social psychological research are marked by a decline in both laboratory experimentation and the use of active deception procedures (Kimmel, in press; Nicks et al., 1997; Vitelli, 1988).

The systematic evaluation of deceptive research procedures is essential to a discipline characterized by the increasing use of these practices. As such, the purpose of this paper is to serve as a conceptual starting point for addressing the implications of a continued reliance on ethically sensitive research practices in marketing research, with special attention given to deception. We begin by describing the potential consequences inherent in the utilization of deception, including its methodological and disciplinary implications. We then provide an ethical analysis of deception within the framework of consequentialist and deontological theories of moral philosophy. To conclude, we offer recommendations for improved research practice and suggest a research agenda.

Identifying the Extent of Deception in Marketing Research and its Potential Effects

Prior to an ethical evaluation of deception and the formulation of a research agenda for assessing its implications for marketing research, it is first useful to examine evidence as to the extent to which deceptive procedures are used in the discipline and to consider their potential short- and long-term effects.

Evidence of the Use of Deception

While some observers (e.g., Akaah & Riordan, 1990; Laroche, McGown, & Rainville, 1986) have reported that marketing research practitioners admitted to utilizing deception in their research, including such practices as concealment of the study purpose and deception of study sponsor or study length, there are few indications as to its actual frequency or kind. This is particularly true of academic marketing research. In one limited examination of the research literature, Toy et al. (1989) found that more than 350 experimental studies published in three key marketing journals (Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Research) from 1976 through 1986

involved some form of deception. In a more recent analysis, Kimmel (in press) surveyed the methodological and ethical practices reported in empirical studies appearing in the Journal of Marketing Research and the Journal of Consumer Research across three time periods, 1975-76, 1989-90, and 1996-97. The results revealed an increase in deceptive procedures over time reported in human participant studies, from 43% in 1975-76 to 56% in 1996-97, largely due to an overall rise in the use of active deception procedures (4.8% to 16%). The most common forms of active deception (i.e., deception involving the provision of information that actively misleads participants regarding some aspect of the study) consisted of misrepresentation of the research purpose and incorrect information about research procedures, equipment, and measuring instruments. For example, in one study of advertising recall, participants were falsely informed that the intent of the research was to pretest advertisements that were to be used in another investigation. The percentage of studies employing passive deceptions (i.e., deceptions involving the omission or withholding of information regarding some critical aspect of the study) actually declined across time (from 32.5% in 1975-76 to 26.7% in 1996-97), suggesting that marketing researchers have progressively come to rely more on active procedures than passive procedures in order to mislead research participants.

The modest rise in the overall proportion of deception studies noted in Kimmel's analysis corresponded to an observed increase in experimental and laboratory research over the same time span. This is hardly surprising given that in the controlled environment of a laboratory, variables of interest to researchers typically can be more carefully manipulated than in natural settings, and this increase in control facilitates the creation of fictional environments through active deceptions.

Kimmel similarly coded all of the issues of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP) for the years 1989 and 1996 in order to update Adair, Dushenko, & Lindsay's (1985) assessment of the same journal for 1979 and 1983. In contrast to the trends noted in marketing research, the JPSP findings revealed an overall drop in the frequency of active deception over the same time period, consistent with other recent analyses (Nicks et al., 1997; Vitelli, 1988). This decline in the frequency of deception in psychological research was accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the prevalence of studies conducted in laboratory settings and research involving experimental manipulations. Together, these findings provide evidence of two related disciplines apparently moving in opposite directions in terms of ethical and methodological research practices, which in part may be explained by varying levels of self-evaluation relative to ethical issues and shifting emphases in theory (Kimmel, in press; Vitelli, 1988). Nonetheless, analyses of the marketing and psychology research literature consistently reveal very little reporting on a number of matters relating to deception and ethics, such as the use of debriefing, the protection of respondent anonymity, and the provision that participants are free to withdraw from the research. This tendency may convey the message to researchers that ethical practices are relatively unimportant.

Potential Effects of Deception

Although there is an ample body of psychological research on the consequences of deceiving research participants, it must be emphasized that while many of the issues are similar across disciplines, the effects may not be. This is primarily because there are differences in both the number and kind of deceptive procedures employed in psychological and marketing research. For example, marketing researchers are less apt than psychologists to use deceptions that are relevant to the fundamental beliefs and values of research

participants, but rather deceptions that pertain to peripheral factors such as the research sponsor or study purpose (Toy et al., 1989; Misra, 1992). Additionally, there is evidence that marketing researchers employ deceptive practices with less frequency overall than do psychologists (Kimmel, 1999). Thus, while one can draw from the psychological literature as a means of identifying useful research directions and potential effects of research practices, one must be cautious in generalizing the reported findings without conducting the necessary studies in the context of marketing research.

When considering the potential effects of deception in marketing research it is important to recognize that they may be positive (i.e., beneficial to recipients) or negative (i.e., harmful to recipients); moreover, the effects may be short- or long-term and immediate or delayed. For example, a research participant may be initially unaffected by the awareness that she was duped into believing that a fictitious company had sponsored a research study, but may experience a short-term loss of self-esteem when later reading a magazine article about how easily consumers are deceived by marketing researchers. In this case, the deception effects are negative, delayed, and short-term. Another consideration with regard to the potential effects of deception is that research deception can have direct or indirect consequences on a wide range of targets, including research participants who are deceived (or expect to be deceived), researchers, the marketing profession or the research enterprise in general, and society at large. Additionally, there are potential costs to all parties involved that stem from the decision not to employ deception for research purposes, including the greater difficulty in determining the validity of a theory or possible loss of knowledge that results (Haywood, 1976; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984). For many studies, individual participants incur the costs while marketers or society in general stand to reap the benefits. Some of the possible consequences of deception for each of the parties involved

are summarized in Table 1 (see Kimmel, 1996, for further discussion). Finally, although deception is most readily thought of as a practice that is employed during the data collection stage, in fact it may be employed at each of the stages of the research process (See Figure 1 at the end of the document).

(See Table 1 at the end of the document)

Although the effects of deception can be positive, negative effects have prompted criticisms of the use of deception in human subject research. In one form or another, arguments against deception suggest that because it involves lying and deceit, its employment in research is morally reprehensible and may have potentially harmful effects on each of the parties involved in the research or implicated by it. In short, critics of deception have decried its use on three primary fronts: (1) moral grounds; (2) methodological grounds; and (3) general disciplinary grounds.

(See Figure 1 at the end of the document)

Ethical Drawbacks to the Use of Deception. The crux of the typical moral argument against deception in human subject research is the contention that regardless of the anticipated research ends, it is always wrong to mislead research participants because deception represents a clear violation of the subject's basic right to informed consent and it shatters the trust inherent in the implicit contractual relationship between the researcher and participant.

This argument attacks at the very heart of the utilitarian justification for using deception in research contexts, which holds that beneficial scientific ends sometimes justify the use of means that would necessarily infringe upon individual participants' rights or general welfare. In the generally-espoused utilitarian view (cf. Atwell, 1981; Steininger, Newell, & Garcia, 1984), deception is acceptable if the information or knowledge being

sought outweighs the costs to participants of being deceived, presuming that some alternative procedure cannot be found and that researchers protect the well-being of their subjects through careful debriefing and other mechanisms. This is the position that has been adopted within a majority of existing research codes of ethics (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1992; National Commission, 1979; see also, Sales & Folkman, 2000).

Nonetheless, critics of this approach maintain that participants' rights to autonomy, dignity, and privacy are necessarily violated by deceptive research practices and that these rights should take precedence, regardless of any anticipated benefits (Baumrind, 1975; 1985).

The merits of the moral argument, along with some of its limitations, are considered in greater detail below in the context of a more detailed analysis of the ethics of deception from consequentialist and deontological perspectives.

Methodological Drawbacks to the Use of Deception. The methodological argument against deceptive research essentially contends that deception increases the suspiciousness of future research subjects, thereby exhausting the pool of naïve participants (e.g., Ortmann & Hertwig, 1997). This view reflects the concern that as the incidence of deception continues to rise, participants' growing sophistication about deceptive practices may cause them to behave unnaturally in behavioral science investigations. By extension, if the prevalence of deception over the years has decreased naiveté among prospective participants, this would diminish the methodological value of using deception in the first place. Further, even honest investigators might not be trusted by participants who view apparent "openness" with suspicion (Resnick & Schwartz, 1973). Such participant expectations could have a counter-productive effect on research results, motivating individuals to behave in ways that do not reflect their natural behaviors or compelling them to behave in uncooperative ways in active attempts to undermine the research.

These methodological effects are likely to be exacerbated as researchers continue to tap the same population of potential research participants, such as university subject pools or frequently sampled consumer groups. Already there are some indications that more consumers are refusing to participate in research, thereby increasing costs and the likelihood of non-response bias. Estimates of refusal rates for commercial marketing research have increased 20% since 1990 (Bowers, 1997), with survey refusal rates put as high as 60% (PR News, 1995). Although the increase in consumer unwillingness to take part in marketing research can be attributed to a variety of factors (e.g., inconvenience, telemarketing, growing wariness of strangers), deceptive research practices (e.g., misrepresenting the length of an interview or participation incentive) have also been implicated (Bearden, Madden, & Usategui, 1998; Rothenberg, 1990; Schlossberg, 1992).

Disciplinary Drawbacks to the Use of Deception. The third front on which deception has been criticized focuses on broader disciplinary concerns; specifically, that deceptive techniques reduce the public's trust in social scientists and give the research professions a poor reputation. In this view, it is not only the case that research participants are likely to perceive researchers as less trustworthy following deception research, but that this lack of trust accrues to the profession and to the larger society as well. In light of research showing that consumers evaluate some deceptive practices (such as misrepresentation of interview length or study purpose) as inappropriate, it is feared that they not only will be less likely to participate in future research, but that their research experience will negatively influence their image of the study sponsor, at least in commercial market research contexts (Tessar, 1994).

It is further argued that the very practice of deceiving participants and of justifying such procedures can weaken researchers' respect for their participants and undermine their

own integrity and commitment to the truth. At the same time, the public's confidence in the scientific enterprise and in the credibility of those who engage in it is likely to be weakened, thereby jeopardizing community support for the research enterprise and public trust in expert authorities.

Given these various criticisms, it is apparent that evaluations of the effects of employing deception for research purposes can be directed at the ethical, methodological, or disciplinary level. With these considerations in mind, in the next section we provide an in-depth analysis of the ethics of deception from the perspective of some key theories of moral philosophy.

The Ethics of Deception in Research

Professional codes of ethics in the field of marketing and related disciplines typically place the onus of ethical decision making in the research context directly on the investigator(s) responsible for carrying out a study. Thus, whether a researcher is contemplating the use of active or passive deception, it is essential that he or she first establish that the deception is morally justifiable. In essence, deceit is the intentional effort to mislead people. It is a way of making people act against their will and the most common reason for distrust. According to Bok (1992), determining whether deception is justifiable is a question of "crucial importance."

Various theories of moral philosophy might be applied in an attempt to evaluate the ethics of deceptive research practices. The theories that form the basis of our subsequent discussion, consequentialism and deontology, are implicitly used in codes of conduct governing research and represent the approaches to ethical analysis that have received the greatest attention within the marketing discipline, having been introduced by Hunt and

Vitell (1986) and subsequently explored empirically in a program of research examining factors that affect ethical decision making (cf. Hunt & Vitell, 1993; Sparks & Hunt, 1998). Hunt and Vitell's (1986) "general theory of marketing ethics" is an attempt to explain the decision-making process for situations involving an ethical problem. In their view, nearly all normative ethical theories can be classified as either deontological or teleological in nature.

Whereas deontological theories focus on the inherent rightness of a behavior, teleological theories emphasize the amount of goodness or badness inherent in the consequences of actions. Given this distinction, ethical judgments are considered by Hunt and Vitell (1986) to be a function of a person's deontological evaluation, which involves the application of norms to each behavioral alternative, and a person's teleological evaluation, involving the assessment of the overall goodness or badness likely to be produced by each alternative action. While there are theories of moral philosophy that are neither consequentialist nor deontological (e.g., theories of virtue), it is reasonable to claim that most theories fall within one of these two major categories. Also, they are more accurately seen as terms denoting types of theories, rather than each being a singular and distinct theory of moral philosophy.

Consequentialism

Consequentialist theories of moral philosophy take many forms. However, at their core is the premise that an action is morally right, relative to some other action (or not acting at all), if it produces the greatest good consequences and the least bad consequences. Hence, the moral evaluation of an act reflects an assessment of the balance of good consequences over bad and thus (in most formulations) the amount of value in the world as a result of the act (McNaughton, 2000). Sometimes these theories are referred to as "teleological" (from the Greek word telos for goal or aim), although some philosophers

claim a broader scope for teleology (including ethical egoism, a normative theory that claims individuals ought to act so as to pursue their own self-interest).

Utilitarianism is the most dominant and the best known of the various consequentialist theories of moral philosophy. As generally conceived, utilitarianism is “a moral theory that regards welfare, or the good of individuals, as the ultimate value, and evaluates other things, such as acts, solely by their promotion of that value” (Lyons, 1992, p. 640). Accordingly, an act is morally right (and generally obligatory) that produces the greatest net welfare or utility for those affected. (Non-utilitarian branches of consequentialism do not treat the welfare of individuals as the sole basis for assessing goodness or badness; the good may take different forms and include other values, such as fairness.) As distinct from ethical egoism, utilitarianism is impartial with respect to who is affected by an individual’s act and, thus, effects on another’s welfare may carry equal weight with effects on the individual agent’s own welfare.

It is important to differentiate between act-utilitarianism and indirect forms of utilitarianism, particularly rule-utilitarianism (and, more broadly, act-consequentialism and rule-consequentialism). Act-utilitarianism applies the utility or welfare criterion to specific acts by a particular individual; rule-utilitarianism, by contrast, holds that the rightness of an act is determined by whether it is consistent with conduct permitted by social rules that maximize human welfare (Lyons, 1992).

While dating back to the late seventeenth century, act-utilitarianism remains an important theory within contemporary moral philosophy. With its reliance on the overarching ideal of maximizing human welfare, act-utilitarianism offers a consistent approach for the moral evaluation of all human conduct. Nonetheless, it is rarely advanced today as a decision procedure for day-to-day moral thinking. Rule-utilitarianism is generally

preferred, particularly in light of some of the shortcomings of act-utilitarianism, such as the lack of information about probable consequences of our actions and the lack of time to collect this information (Frey, 2000). Complying with a limited set of simple rules is likely to be more conducive to welfare promotion overall, particularly under conceptions of rule-utilitarianism that envisage internalization of these rules (Hooker, 2000; Lyons, 1992).

Rule-utilitarianism's direct reference to moral rules is seen as more consistent with the logic of moral reasoning and the common understanding of morality as a social code, where individuals have convictions about moral obligations and minimum moral standards. Thus, it is seen as more intuitively plausible and less likely to be at odds with nonconsequentialist reasoning than act-utilitarianism. As Hooker (2000) observed, consequentialism endorses acts based on non-consequentialist considerations if there will be greater overall good as a result. Thus, rule-utilitarianism can take the form of a decision procedure that promotes adherence to tried and true rules, such as 'do no harm to others' or 'keep your promises.'

Rule-utilitarianism also is less demanding than act-utilitarianism. Whereas act-utilitarianism generally determines that an act is permissible and obligatory, rule-utilitarianism is less exacting, claiming only that an act is permissible. Rule-utilitarianism allows for supererogatory acts (i.e., acts that are praiseworthy to perform but not blameworthy to omit, such as certain acts of heroism). Moreover, act-utilitarianism might require huge sacrifices of an individual that only result in slight increases in aggregate good (e.g., giving almost all of one's income to help the poor). Rule-utilitarianism calls for a more reasonable amount of sacrifice and allows the individual some measure of partiality toward the self (due to the prohibitive costs of getting greater impartiality internalized). Also, under act-utilitarianism certain acts are right even when they violate common

prohibitions (e.g., killing an innocent person, violating a promise) and with only a marginal gain in net good. These counter-intuitive determinations are avoided under rule-utilitarian analysis, which is generally more consistent with our beliefs about when one can or cannot engage in normally prohibited acts for the sake of the overall good. Under rule-utilitarianism, internalization of the prohibition would generally result in more overall good. Nonetheless, rule-utilitarianism would permit a normally prohibited act to prevent a disaster, in contrast with some forms of deontological reasoning.

Critics of rule-utilitarianism have focused on its basis for rightness and whether it can correctly identify what makes right acts right. Some suggest that it is inconsistent to argue that rules should be evaluated by their consequences, but not acts, and others have maintained that rule-utilitarianism ultimately collapses into act-utilitarianism. Hooker (2000) has rejected these points by differentiating between a compliance formulation of rule-utilitarianism and an acceptance formulation (under which rules are internalized). Under the former, rule-utilitarianism would favor one simple rule that one must always do what will maximize the good—hence, collapsing into act-utilitarianism. However, the good may not be maximized under these conditions, for reasons previously discussed. According to Hooker, because of the broad costs and benefits of rule internalization, only a small set of rules would be internalized and thus provide the basis for moral concern and action.

Deontology

In contrast to consequentialist theories, deontological theories generally treat the morality of conduct as being independent of consequences. This is not to say that consequences are unimportant; rather, the nonconsequentialist position is that consequences are not the sole determinant of rightness. More specifically, deontology (which comes from the Greek word deontos and refers to “that which is binding”) is a type of moral philosophy theory based in duty. Duty-based theories focus upon the obligations of moral agents and are therefore agent-relative, in contrast to most formulations of consequentialism which are generally agent-neutral. Hence, the rightness or wrongness of an act stems from a person’s duties (e.g., to do no harm); that is, what that person is morally obligated to do or not do in a given situation.

In many formulations of deontological theory, an act is right or wrong in and of itself, although this does not necessarily amount to moral absolutism, where an act is right or wrong whatever the consequences. (For example, killing innocent people is often advanced as an act that should be ruled absolutely immoral). However, some duty-based theories do allow for consequences to be a consideration in determining what duties a person has or the priority of different duties, particularly where duties conflict.

It is important to differentiate between different types of duties. Duties may require a moral agent to commit some act (e.g., to help somebody in distress) or omit some act (e.g., to not lie). More specifically, duties may be obligatory (permissible to do and forbidden to omit), forbidden (impermissible to do, obligatory to omit), and permissible (neither obligatory nor forbidden). The distinction between permissible and obligatory is captured in everyday parlance when we refer, respectively, to what may be “all right” or alternatively to “the right thing to do” (O’Neill, 1992). Further, some duties are treated as

absolute or primary, while other duties are relative or secondary and capable of being overridden. This is an important consideration when duties conflict. Also, duties may be to the self or to others. Duties to others may be universal or special duties that are owed by virtue of the agent's position (e.g., as a parent) or profession (e.g., as a physician or academic researcher). Finally, while there are different positions on the relationship between duties and rights, it is generally accepted that all human rights have corresponding duties. These obligations are known as perfect duties. Imperfect duties arise where there is an obligation (e.g., to be generous), but not necessarily a corresponding right.

Because consequentialist theories such as rule-utilitarianism may include moral duties, it has been suggested that the distinction between consequentialist and deontological theories may be "dubious" (Crisp, 1995). However, it is generally agreed that in consequentialist theories the duties are derivative and subordinate. By contrast, in deontological theories, duties are primary.

A deontological theory must offer an account of where a person's duties come from and what they are. Perhaps the three best-known examples are Divine Command Theory, where duties come from God; W. D. Ross's (1877-1971) prima facie duty ethic, a form of intuitionism under which duties are self-evident; and Kantian ethics, where duties are derived through Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) categorical imperative (Wike, 1997). Kant's theory is often considered to be the paradigmatic deontological theory, with a highly developed account of duty that allows no role for consequences (O'Neill, 1992; Wike, 1997).

Kant's objective was to identify the supreme principle of morality. His starting point was the concept of duty and, more specifically, the basis for acting in accordance with a moral duty overriding all other considerations. Kant's basic moral principle, the Categorical

Imperative, is established through the use of reason. As Hill (2000, p. 229) explains, Kant attempted to articulate “an abstract, basic and comprehensive principle that can be shown to be a deep presupposition in ordinary moral thinking” and establish that this principle is rational to accept and to follow.

Kant differentiated between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. The hypothetical imperative recognizes that as a valid principle of rationality human beings ought to do what is necessary to achieve their goals. By contrast, categorical imperatives are duties that bind unconditionally and provide sufficient, overriding reason to fulfill our moral duties, regardless of whether this will promote our own happiness or serve our individual ends (Hill, 2000). It follows that the supreme principle of morality must be a categorical imperative, which provides a test (or “thought experiment”) against which all other moral principles may be assessed.

Kant argued that universality must be the basis of the Categorical Imperative (Formula of Universal Law), which states that one should “act only on a maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law.” If his reasoning about human autonomy and moral duties is correct, then it follows that humans have dignity and this must hold for all moral agents, who thus are ends in themselves. As such, Kant’s derivative Formula of Humanity holds that one should “act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.”

Kant’s Categorical Imperative is strictly formal and is a principle without substantive content. Indeed, Kant did not identify a comprehensive set of duties and only in some interpretations did he endorse absolute duties, such as never to kill an innocent human being (Marshall, 1997). However, he was famously controversial in his writings on deception. For Kant, lying is a violation of a duty to oneself as well as to others and is never permitted.

Kant went so far as to claim that one should not lie even to protect a friend who has come to hide in one's house to escape a murderer. Clearly, to lie when it is convenient to do so is not a maxim for action that could be universally adopted. Many philosophers have questioned Kant's insistence that lying is never permissible; however, others have recommended a more narrow interpretation (Hill, 2000).

Moral Reasoning Applied to Deception in Research

Both consequentialist and deontological theories of moral reasoning are evident in most codes of conduct governing academic researchers in marketing. Generally, there is an acknowledgement of potential good and bad consequences of research endeavors and some attempt to specify moral duties to research subjects and other affected parties. For example, Section 11.02 of the Code of Ethics of the American Sociological Association (1997) identifies limits to its confidentiality obligation by recognizing that sociologists may confront unanticipated circumstances where they become aware of information that is clearly health- or life-threatening to research participants, students, employees, clients, or others. Sociologists thus are instructed to balance a duty of confidentiality with other principles in the code and elsewhere.

Similarly, the ethics code of the American Psychological Association includes both consequentialist and deontological reasoning throughout, from addressing the issue of whether a particular study should be undertaken to specific research practices under consideration. For example, the code acknowledges that the obligation to advance knowledge about human behavior will at times impinge upon well-recognized human rights and that researchers must first assess whether the importance of the research warrants the potential negative effects on participants (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Applying consequentialist and deontological theories of moral philosophy to deception in research reveals how arguments may be advanced that might justify deception or claim that it is morally wrong under many circumstances. Of course, the exact circumstances of the use of deception in a given research study must be known if an adequate ethical assessment is to be made, including the intensity of the deception, its potential impact on the subject, the use of remedial measures such as forewarning and debriefing, and so on. Certainly, such details would be crucial to making anything close to a definitive judgment of whether the deception is morally justifiable, unless an absolutist position (that any form of deception is always wrong) is adopted. As such, in the following section we can only examine how consequentialist and deontological reasoning might in general be applied in arguments for and against the use of deception.

Consequentialist and Deontological Analysis of Deception Studies

A deontological analysis of deception in research generally would be likely to conclude that it is impermissible, particularly where the consequences of its use are not treated as a relevant consideration. Under a consequentialist analysis, it is clearly appropriate to consider the potential benefits of the research findings. As suggested, an act-utilitarian analysis may be more adequately grounded as a basis for claiming the rightness of a given act than a rule-utilitarian analysis, although it is less adequate as a decision procedure in specific cases. As such, in evaluating the ethics of research deception in the abstract, one might more readily rely on the act-utilitarian account of these two consequentialist theories.

Under act-utilitarianism, the use of deception in research would not only be permissible, but also obligatory, should its use maximize human welfare. In other words, the researcher would be morally obligated to conduct the study using deception. The

determination made would include all increases or decreases in utility for all affected parties as a result of conducting the research study using deception. A net gain in overall utility as a result of using deception (relative to using a non-deceptive method or not conducting the study) would require its use. Gains in utility might result, for example, from important research findings and increases in the reputation of the researcher. However, losses in utility might include the research subject experiencing reduced confidence in his or her judgment and less trust in others (see Table 1).

The distribution of utilities and disutilities is irrelevant under most conceptions of act-utilitarianism. Hence, it is quite possible that serious psychological harm to subjects could result from a study and yet this could be weighed against the likelihood of important research findings and thus not rule out the study as impermissible. While not offering a moral judgment on the controversial studies by Milgram (1963), it is certainly possible to claim that research studies with potentially important insights into human willingness to obey authority—particularly in light of war crimes—may be acceptable under act-utilitarianism, notwithstanding the potentially harmful deception of subjects. This conclusion may well be contrary to common sense morality (i.e., our everyday sense of right and wrong), particularly in terms of beliefs we might hold about a duty to not knowingly do harm. However, beliefs about duties, including those based in the researcher’s professional role, are generally not relevant to an act-utilitarian analysis.

There are more pragmatic problems with act-utilitarianism as well. Even if it is assumed that there are satisfactory metrics for interpersonal comparisons of utility, an individual researcher evaluating a prospective study might well be tempted to underestimate potential disutilities for research participants and overestimate possible benefits for research beneficiaries because of his or her vested interest in conducting the investigation. Further,

the researcher's ability to accurately forecast these utilities is likely to be limited (even with pilot testing, role playing, or other procedures intended to assess the impact of deceptive practices on respondents). While act-utilitarianism might provide some degree of support for deception studies in the abstract, it is difficult to see how it might meaningfully be applied to specific research projects.

Rule-utilitarian analysis avoids some of the problems of act-utilitarianism. Its basis for rightness may be less compelling, but it is less likely to lead to ethical evaluations that are inconsistent with common sense morality and has fewer pragmatic problems in application to specific cases. Under rule-utilitarianism, we might envisage the analysis of deception in research, either in general or in specific cases, being assessed in relation to higher-level rules governing the acceptability of deception. These are the social rules that, if adopted, would maximize human welfare. For example, that one should never knowingly deceive another without an overriding reason might be claimed to be such a rule. (Of course, the basis for such a claim is one of rule-utilitarianism's weaknesses with regard to its claim to rightness.) In this regard, deception becomes permissible only where the researcher has an overriding reason for employing it, which might be that he or she can reliably anticipate important research findings that can only be obtained by using deceptive methods.

Other social rules can be envisaged as a secondary screen that must be passed if a deception study is to be considered permissible; for example, never to knowingly do harm except under certain limited and extreme circumstances (such as military combat in times of war). This social rule would appear to make impermissible the hypothetical obedience study discussed above. If this tentative attempt to offer rules that might be included in a rule-utilitarian analysis has merit, then one might conclude that rule-utilitarianism is generally less likely to support deception studies than act-utilitarianism. Rule-utilitarianism

applied to specific cases may face similar problems as act-utilitarianism—albeit to a lesser extent—such as knowing whether there is harm from deceptive research procedures or estimating the likelihood of important research findings. Also, rule-utilitarianism generally would not take account of unfair distributions of the benefits and burdens of research. More fundamentally, it is unclear which social rules would maximize human welfare, how that welfare should be conceived, and whether there are not other values beyond welfare that constitute the good (e.g., human dignity).

In many respects, deontology holds out the possibility of a more clear-cut determination of the ethics of research deception, although it is likely to be least supportive of its use, relative to either act-utilitarianism or rule-utilitarianism. However, a duty-based analysis of deception studies is not solely restricted to the researcher's duties to research participants and, in some formulations, can take account of consequences in assessing the relative weight of different duties.

Researchers' duties include duties to themselves and to their profession. There may be special duties that academic researchers have as professionals that include their duties to science and, in their additional role as teachers, a duty to students who are often also their research participants. An important obligation that is a key component of these duties, simply put, is to do good work. While this might point to a requirement for skill and creativity in identifying non-deceptive research procedures, it is also indicative of the potential for conflicts of duties where researchers find that, despite their best efforts, a research project cannot be conducted without the use of deception (e.g., to ensure naïve participants).

The key to resolving such conflicts lies in whether the identified duties are primary or secondary. It certainly is reasonable to claim that a duty to do no harm to research

subjects is primary, with other duties such as a duty to science as secondary in comparison. (Aside from an appeal to common sense morality, one could readily ground this claim in the inviolability of individual autonomy). However, it is not as clear that a duty not to deceive research subjects, absent any foreseeable harm, would take precedence over a duty to science, particularly where non-deceptive alternatives are unavailable and where the deception is mild. Duty-based theorists who allow a role for consequences might well argue that the relative priority of these duties could be determined by an assessment of consequences.

Some might adopt the position that deception in research is never permissible. This absolutist position is consistent with some interpretations of Kant's moral philosophy. Kant allows no role for consequences and claims that moral duties as categorical imperatives cannot conflict, as any apparent conflict is logically inconsistent. Deception studies are certainly morally problematic and arguably impermissible under Kantian ethics. Kant's

categorical imperative expressed as the "Formula of Universal Law" can be used to establish a clear duty to tell the truth, for we cannot will lying when it is convenient to do so as a maxim for action that could be universally adopted. Further, Kant's "Formula of Humanity" rules out deception because it is treating people as a means only.

However, while it is obligatory to act in accordance with a categorical imperative, such duties might be highly specified and appropriately qualified (Hill, 2000). Thus, on a judicious interpretation of Kant, one might argue that deception in research is generally forbidden, but would be permissible under a limited set of circumstances. Consistent with Kant, these exceptions would not be looking to the consequences of the deception (though a duty to not knowingly harm subjects would forbid potentially harmful deceptions). Instead, an argument justifying exceptions to the general duty not to deceive might be

grounded in the expectations of research participants, such that there is a tacit understanding that they will not be fully informed about a research study and may be asked to believe a fictitious account offered to mask the researcher's true purposes. Of course, additional caveats are needed, including an absence of coercion, the use of mild deceptions only, and a requirement for forewarning and debriefing.

If this broadly construed Kantian perspective has merit as a moral assessment of when deception is permissible, it carries with it some major implications for research practice. No longer will we be imagining completely naïve subjects. Either implicitly or (preferably) explicitly we are admitting that deception is a likely component of the participant's research experience. This could be made part of an informed consent procedure at the outset of the study. Perhaps, however, this is no more than an acknowledgement of the long-standing assumption that research participants do attempt to guess what research studies are really about (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997). Nonetheless, this does pose some important research questions that are included within our research agenda, discussed below.

In sum, the ethical analysis offered here suggests that deception may not be impermissible in research. Indeed, from an act-utilitarian perspective, it may be obligatory, though this argument would be difficult to advance in relation to any specific research study. A rule-utilitarian analysis also may suggest that deception is permissible, but again there are problems, both in general as well as in considering specific cases, particularly given uncertainty about the applicable social rules. By contrast, Kantian ethics (at least as represented by Kant's categorical imperative), more clearly rejects deception, though it has been argued here that this need not make all forms of deception in research absolutely forbidden. On the basis of our interpretation of Kant, it can be argued that some deception

studies may be permissible given research participants' understanding and acquiescence to a fiction created by the researcher.

A Research Agenda for Deception

The foregoing ethical analysis suggests that there are no simple guidelines for determining whether the employment of deception is morally justified in a particular research investigation. Nonetheless, it does highlight a role for moral theory to inform researcher judgments and points to two general recommendations relative to decisions about the use of deceptive procedures for research purposes. First, the establishment of a more collaborative researcher/participant relationship—one requiring more candor and consideration on the part of the researcher than is currently the norm—should enable researchers to offset some of the potential problems inherent in the use of deception and better educate participants about the scientific process. Second, researchers need to be encouraged to consider the variety and breadth of existing research alternatives to deception, particularly in light of ethical guidelines requiring that deception be used only as a last resort. Most research hypotheses can be tested in more than one way, such that deception need not be employed merely as a matter of course. It should be noted that strong arguments have been made in the past for implementing both of these recommendations for improved practice (Adair, 1973; Jourard, 1967; Kelman, 1972; Kimmel, 1996; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991), although they have not received much attention in the marketing field.

Our ethical analysis of deception also makes clear that the usefulness of theories of moral reasoning in decisions about research deception is limited by a number of practical concerns, many of which are associated with methodological and disciplinary considerations. Given the paucity of research on the ethical, methodological, and

disciplinary dimensions within the context of marketing, we offer a research agenda for further advancing our understanding of how deception operates in marketing and the nature of its effects both within and outside the field. A set of empirical questions is presented for each category of potential effects. In cases in which the investigation of these questions would require the manipulation of deception, researchers might consider using one of more of the currently available meta-analytic procedures as an alternative approach (cf.

Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

In assessing the effects of deception at the ethical level, a useful starting point lies in a determination of the values of marketing investigators, particularly as they relate to deceptive research practices. One goal of this evaluation is to assess researchers' attitudes towards the use of deception and to better understand the ways in which researchers resolve ethical dilemmas relative to its use in research contexts. As we have noted, deception often lies at the core of moral dilemmas for human subject researchers, who often must weigh the scientific requirements of validity (i.e., in obtaining an objective and valid measure of behavior) against the ethical imperative of informed consent. The decision to opt for deception in an attempt to maximize the validity of a study runs counter to researchers' obligation to be forthcoming with their research participants.

Studies of the ethical ideologies and decision making of researchers have been carried out in both the psychology and marketing fields. Research on the ethical decision making of psychologists has revealed predictable variability in the resolution of vignettes posing ethical dilemmas (Forsyth, 1980; Hamsher & Reznikoff, 1967; Kimmel, 1991; Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977), in the evaluation of research proposals (Eaton, 1983), and in the outcomes of institutional review board decisions (Goldman & Katz, 1982; Grodin,

Zaharoff, & Kaminow, 1986; Ceci, Peters, & Plotkin, 1985). Together, this body of research indicates that ethical issues in psychological research are closely tied to the more general moral positions held by psychologists. While there also have been attempts to identify the ethical ideologies of marketing researchers and understand the influence of moral positions on the resolution of marketing research dilemmas (e.g., Mayo & Marks, 1990; Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1991), to date these studies primarily have been aimed at dilemmas that are likely to be encountered by marketing practitioners, rather than to the employment of specific research practices by marketing academics.

Other investigations into ethical issues in marketing research have largely focused on what researchers perceive to be their primary ethical obligations and how practitioners, students, and consumers feel about the main ethical issues (e.g., Akaah & Riordan, 1989; Crawford 1970; Hunt, Chonko, & Wilcox, 1984; Schneider & Holm, 1982; Syverstad & Vrålstad, 1998). For example, surveys of American research directors and marketing executives have revealed high levels of approval when respondents are presented with scenarios describing various unethical practices affecting research participants (Akaah & Riordan, 1989; Crawford, 1970). More than 80% believed that it was acceptable to fake long distance calls in telephone interviews and to use a fake research firm to disguise the identity of the study sponsor. Similarly, a cross-national comparison of marketing professionals in the U.S., Australia, Canada, and Great Britain found relatively high levels of approval for some deceptive research practices (Akaah, 1990). Such investigations of attitudes and perceptions within the marketing profession are informative, but they offer little insight into the actual decision making of academic researchers who are faced with ethical dilemmas involving deception in their own research programs. In sum, further research needs to be conducted on the following questions:

1. How do marketing researchers identify and resolve ethical dilemmas involving deception?
2. How does this ethical decision-making process inform decisions about the frequency, type, and intensity of deceptions used?
3. To what extent is it possible to predict the costs and benefits resulting from the employment of deception in marketing investigations?
4. Are marketing research studies subject to the same ethical scrutiny by institutional review boards, ethics committees, and journal editors as behavioral science proposals?
5. Will stricter ethical regulation and review affect researchers' decisions to employ deceptive procedures in their studies?

Methodological Considerations

While there is a long line of research into the methodological consequences of deception in the behavioral sciences, marketing researchers have only recently begun to turn their attention to such concerns. In psychology, methodological issues relating to the use of deception emerged along with the gradual increase in studies employing deceptive procedures over the years. Deception has been evaluated by psychologists in terms of the degree of participant naiveté concerning its use (Orne & Holland, 1968; MacCoun & Kerr, 1987; Stricker, Messick, & Jackson, 1967), the consequences of suspicion on experimental results and validity (Allen, 1966; Epstein, Suedfeld, & Silverstein, 1973; Gallo, Smith, & Mumford, 1973; Glinksi, Glinski, & Slatin, 1970), and the effects of deception on subsequent experimental performance (Brock & Becker, 1966; Fillenbaum, 1966; Silverman, Shulman, & Wiesenthal, 1970). Some critics of deception in the behavioral sciences have argued that the scientific costs stemming from its use are considerable, not

the least of which involves the potential depletion of the pool of naive participants for future research (Baumrind, 1985; Ortmann & Hertwig, 1997).

To date, marketing researchers primarily have focused their attention on two methodological issues associated with the employment of deception: the effects of debriefing deceived participants (Misra, 1992; Toy et al., 1989) and the extent to which declines in participation in commercial marketing research are attributed to deceptive (and other ethically questionable) procedures (Bearden, Madden, & Usategui, 1998; Humbaugh, 1998; Petersen, 1994). To better gauge the methodological consequences of an increasing use of deception in the field of marketing and to assess the generalizability of the behavioral science program of research on methodological issues, the following questions need to be investigated:

1. How effective is the use of deceptive procedures in marketing studies?
2. To what extent do marketing researchers carry out suspiciousness checks?
3. Does deception increase participant suspiciousness in subsequent studies?
4. What are the effects of suspiciousness on research results?
5. Does deception operate differentially across conditions of a study?
6. Does deception result in declining rates of subject participation in marketing research?
7. To what extent do the results of deceptive studies replicate the results of studies testing the same hypotheses that are conducted without the use of deception?
8. Are there research alternatives to the use of deception that are both methodologically and ethically sound?

Disciplinary Considerations

The behavioral sciences may serve as a useful model for the development of

a program of research to assess the impact of deception at the disciplinary level for marketing. Several evaluations of research participants' reactions to deception experiments in psychology have been reported (e.g., Christensen, 1988; Pihl, Zacchia, & Zeichner, 1981; Smith, 1981; Smith & Richardson, 1983), and the results overall tend to suggest that individuals who have participated in deception experiments versus non-deception experiments report that they did not mind being deceived, enjoyed the experience more, and received more educational benefit from it. Moreover, surveys intended to gauge reactions to deception consistently have shown that most individuals in the general population apparently do not have serious objections to its use for psychological research purposes (Collins, Kuhn, & King, 1979; Rugg, 1975; Sullivan & Deiker, 1973) and that attitudes toward psychological research in general have not been negatively affected by the continued use of deception over several decades (Sharpe, Adair, & Roese, 1992).

Marketing researchers have given some attention to similar considerations in relation to commercial marketing research, although the early findings are more mixed than in the field of psychology (Schlossberg, 1992; Schneider & Holm, 1982). Several studies of consumer responses to deceptive practices have revealed that some practices employed by commercial marketing researchers are considered inappropriate by consumer respondents (Humbaugh, 1998; Payne & Partners, 1998; Tassar, 1994), thus implying that deceptive marketing research practices ultimately will tarnish the image of the marketing field, assuming that this has not already occurred. More studies need to be conducted along these lines, consistent with the following empirical questions:

1. Do subjects perceive researchers as less trustworthy following participation in deception research?
2. Does deception have an impact on consumers' perceptions about marketing or

attitudes about science in general?

3. Does the employment of deception weaken researchers' respect for their subjects and undermine their own integrity and commitment to the truth?

4. Do mass-mediated accounts of deceptive marketing research practices influence attitudes and perceptions of marketing in the general public?

5. Do deceptive marketing research practices ultimately jeopardize community support for the research enterprise and public trust in expert authorities?

Conclusion

Deception has emerged as a reality of contemporary marketing research in recent years and its use is no longer the exception to the rule. While there are often clear benefits for the researcher in the employment of deception, it remains a morally problematic research procedure. Our ethical analysis suggests that the use of deceptive practices is not necessarily precluded; nonetheless, deception should be minimized in the research context and subject to certain constraints and conditions. A decision to carry out a deceptive investigation requires a considered judgment formulated on the basis of ethical, methodological, and disciplinary considerations. Further research is necessary relative to these three dimensions before we can expect researchers at the individual and (review) committee levels to apply deception in a consistent, reasoned, and morally justifiable manner.

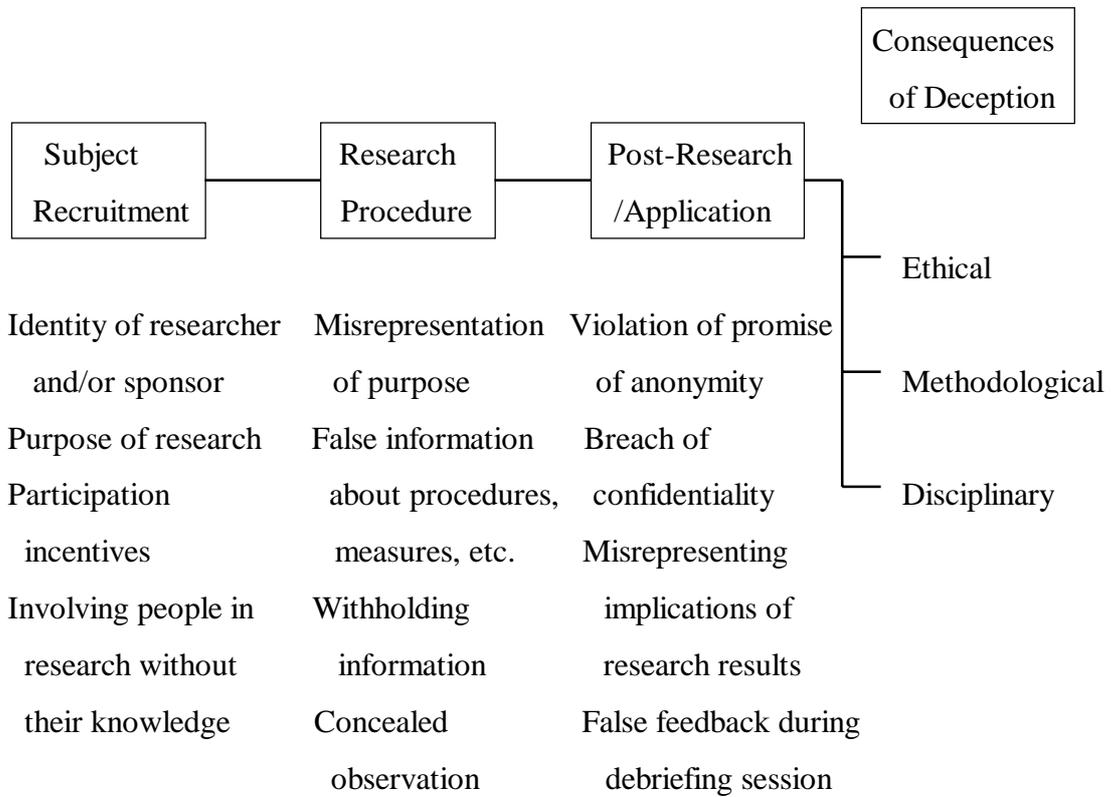
Table 1

Potential Costs and Benefits of Deception Studies

Recipient	Benefits	Costs
Participant	Increased understanding of science and the research process Feeling of having contributed to science Self-insight (from personal content revealed by deceptive probes)	Inflicted insight Embarrassment Image of science lowered Mistrust of others
Researcher	Capacity to elicit spontaneous behavior from participants Increased degree of methodological control Enhanced reputation from successful research endeavors	Legal sanctions (e.g., if confidentiality breached) Undermines integrity and commitment to the truth Tarnished image
Profession	Facilitates attempts to determine validity of theories, previous research, and assessment instruments	Exhausts pool of naïve participants Jeopardizes community/industry support for the research enterprise
Society	Scientific advancement and progress Increased understanding of behavior Insight into applications toward the betterment of humanity	Undermines trust in expert authorities and science Increased suspiciousness (e.g., self-consciousness in public)

Figure 1

Use of Deception at Various Stages of the Marketing Research Process



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Profession	Facilitates attempts to determine validity of theories, previous research, and assessment instruments	Exhausts pool of naïve participants Jeopardizes community/industry support for the research enterprise
Society	Scientific advancement and progress Increased understanding of behavior Insight into applications toward the betterment of humanity	Undermines trust in expert authorities and science Increased suspiciousness (e.g., self-consciousness in public)

Figure 1

Use of Deception at Various Stages of the Marketing Research Process

