The Ethics of Deception in Consumer Research

N. Craig Smith, Jill Gabrielle Klein & Allan J. Kimmel*

Centre for Marketing Working Paper
No. 02-702
June 2002

N. Craig Smith is a Professor of Marketing and Ethics at London Business School
Jill Gabrielle Klein is a Professor of Marketing at INSEAD
Allan J. Kimmel is a Professor of Marketing ESCP-EAP

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

Copyright © London Business School 2002

*N. Craig Smith is Associate Professor of Marketing and Ethics at London Business School, Regent’s Park, London NW1 4SA, United Kingdom; e-mail:ncsmith@london.edu. Jill Gabrielle Klein is Associate Professor of Marketing at INSEAD, Department of Marketing, Boulevard de Constance, 77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France; e-mail:Jill.Klein@insead.edu. Allan J. Kimmel is Associate Professor of Marketing at ESCP-EAP, European School of Management, Marketing Department, 79, avenue de la République, 75543 Paris Cedex 11, France; e-mail:kimmel@escp-eap.net. The authors wish to thank George Brenkert, Kent Grayson, Gita Johar, John Lynch, Ralph Rosnow, Nader Tavassoli, and the Behavioral Reading Group at London Business School for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. We also thank the ethnographic researchers who shared deception issues with us. The assistance of Michael Brown, Andrea Scott and Brian Rutherford in data collection and data entry is gratefully acknowledged.
While deception is arguably the most pervasive ethical issue in consumer research, researchers have little guidance on its acceptability, notwithstanding the codes of root disciplines and the important methodological and disciplinary implications of deception. This article introduces normative theories of ethics from moral philosophy to analyze the ethics of deceptive research practices. Using social contract theory, it identifies the conditions under which deception may be morally permissible. Principles guiding research practice are formulated and their implications for consumer researchers and others are identified, together with practical recommendations for decision making on deception studies.
Morality is a key element of human behavior, yet social scientists often appear to give it little attention, not least in relation to how they conduct their own research activities (Cassell and Jacobs 2000; Sabini and Silver 1982; Schuler 1982). In consumer research, Holbrook (1994, p. 568) has decried the lack of “a scholarly tradition of work” on ethics and there have been various other calls for more attention to ethics (e.g., Andreasen 1992; Lynch 1997; Sojka and Spangenberg 1994). Indeed, remarkably little attention has been given to ethically sensitive research practices, including the deception of research participants, arguably the most pervasive ethical issue in consumer research. There are various possible explanations, including defensiveness relative to the possibility of ethical regulations serving as impediments to research. We accept that ethics may constrain human behavior, but argue that this should be no less true of researchers. Decisions about research topics and methods are inextricably bound to important ethical considerations that should not be left to chance. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that many consumer researchers would appreciate greater guidance on the deception of research participants. Hence, in this paper we examine the ethics of deception in consumer research and offer practical recommendations as to its use.

Deceit is the intentional effort to mislead people. Whether it is morally justifiable is a question of crucial importance because it can be a way of making people act against their will and is the most common reason for distrust (Bok 1992). Lying, which involves falsehoods that are intended to deceive, is considered morally problematic by virtually all major philosophical traditions and religions. Because consumer researchers often deem it necessary to disguise their investigations in order to minimize demand characteristics and hypothesis guessing (Shimp, Hyatt and Snyder 1993), they may find themselves in the position of having to decide whether to lie to their participants as a necessary condition of fulfilling their research objectives. Researchers also may engage in intentional deception by omission, whereby information is withheld about certain
aspects of a study that misleads participants about its purpose or other characteristics. While some consumer researchers use deception almost as a matter of course, it can be argued that deception in research—whether by omission or commission—is never morally justifiable.

We argue that deception in research may be morally permissible if consistent with certain principles. In some respects, our position is analogous to how lying is treated in everyday life. Although lying is generally considered to be wrong, most people prefer to live in a world where some lying is permissible, such as white lies, lies to certain kinds of people (children, the dying), and lies to avoid greater harms. In these situations, it is important for the persons telling the lies to be able to justify their actions, if only to themselves. There is at least as great a need for researchers to reflect on their potential use of deception and to be able to justify it if it is used, whether these are mild deceptions (e.g., misrepresenting study purpose) or potentially more severe (e.g., undisclosed mood manipulations that leave participants depressed; covert ethnography in consumer chat rooms).

We start by examining the use of deception in consumer research, establishing its prevalence and the relevance of our inquiry to most consumer researchers. Having noted the paucity of attention to the topic within consumer research, we examine how deception has been addressed in its root disciplines. Given the weaknesses of the relevant ethical codes, we conclude that a more fundamental examination of the ethics of deception is required. Moral philosophy provides the best-justified standards for evaluating the ethics of human conduct. Accordingly, we introduce theories of moral philosophy and conclude that ethical analysis of deception in research is best grounded in social contract theory. On the basis of this analysis, we identify the conditions under which deception in research may be morally justifiable, including specific principles governing its use. Finally, we discuss the implications of these principles for consumer researchers, including practical recommendations on the development of studies that might call for deception.
DECEPTION IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

Evidence suggests that deception is used extensively in consumer research and that its frequency of use is rising (Kimmel 2001; Toy, Olson & Wright 1989). Kimmel (2001) examined empirical articles appearing in the Journal of Consumer Research and the Journal of Marketing Research during three time periods, 1975-76, 1989-90, and 1996-97. His findings revealed a rise in deceptive procedures in human participant studies over time, from 43% between 1975 and 1976 to 56% between 1996 and 1997, an increase attributed to the greater use of active deception (i.e., deception by commission), most commonly misrepresentation of the research purpose and incorrect information about research procedures, equipment, and measuring instruments.

To further examine the use of deception we conducted a survey of consumer researchers (N = 112) at the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) annual conference (see Table 1). Use of at least some form of deception was reported by 86% of respondents; 59% always use deception or use it frequently (in more than half of their studies).\(^1\) The most prevalent types of deception involve misrepresentation of the study purpose and making false statements (unrelated to the subject’s character or identity), but all types of deception queried were used at least occasionally by at least 15% of the sample. Use of remedial measures to mitigate deception is not universal; few use forewarning and only 42% always use a debriefing in deception studies. However, of those who always or frequently use deception, only 1 respondent reported never using any remedial measures. The data support Toy et al.’s (1989) hypothesis that behavioral researchers in marketing may avoid debriefing, though its use appears higher than the 21% found in published studies (Kimmel 2001).

(Table 1 About Here)

---

\(^1\) There were no differences on any of the key measures reported based on academic rank, gender, or number of years in the profession, with the exception that Ph.D. students were found to use deception less than non-students (72% vs. 92%).
While most respondents have had some training in the use of deception, beliefs in training adequacy were neutral on average and 44% of the sample indicated less than 4 on a 7-point scale, suggesting that many see training as less than adequate. There was low familiarity with the American Psychological Association (APA) ethics code, the primary code of conduct for the most common research methods in the field (50% indicating less than 4 on a 7-point scale) and only 14% of those not familiar with the APA code were familiar with at least one other research code. Further, only 47% of the respondents at schools with Institutional Review Boards (85% of the sample) indicated that researchers in their department always submit studies involving human subjects to the IRB. In sum, the data are consistent with content analyses of published studies and suggest the use of deception is extensive in consumer research and often without remedial measures or IRB review. There may well be a need for more training on the use of deception.

**Implications of the Use of Deception**

The readiness with which deception apparently is used may be morally problematic on a number of counts. Various moral duties may be violated by deception in research and even the most mild deceptions would be morally impermissible under a conventional interpretation of Kant, for example (Kimmel and Smith 2001). Most critics, however, focus on the adverse consequences of deception. It is through deception that some of the greatest risks of harm to behavioral science research participants have been posed, notwithstanding the use of remedial measures to mitigate the deception, such as debriefing (e.g., studies where participants believed they were going to die; see Adair, Dushenko and Lindsay 1985). Such studies have prompted extensive debate about the use of deception in psychology, sociology and anthropology (Adair et al. 1985; Allen 1997; Kimmel 1996; Reynolds 1982; Schuler 1982; Sieber 1992).
While mild deceptions are the norm in most consumer research, they can have negative consequences, not least where studies are cavalierly or carelessly conducted. For example, in a study of vendor response to consumer complaints, a Columbia Business School professor sent letters on Columbia letterhead stationery to 240 New York City restaurants falsely claiming he had suffered food poisoning after dining at the restaurant in celebration of his wedding anniversary (Kifner 2001). An editorial in *The New York Times* (“Spoiling the Broth,” September 11th, 2001) claimed that the resulting review of hygiene procedures “caused a reign of terror in the city’s top restaurants.” Reactions to the study resulted in a formal apology from the School’s Dean and the researcher and prompted the introduction of new procedures governing researchers at Columbia.

Moreover, not all use of deception in consumer research is unquestionably mild. For example, in studies of emotion where sadness has been manipulated, it is not uncommon for participants to cry, and participants have vomited in studies where disgust has been induced. Further, developments in the field point to a greater likelihood of more severe deceptions or at least the potential for inadvertent harm. These developments include attention to new substantive domains, such as research on vulnerable populations, on health-related consumption and on the ‘dark side’ of consumer behavior, as well as a new emphasis on theoretical domains, such as emotion. Greater use of qualitative methodologies such as ethnography has also brought researchers closer to their participants, in terms of physical proximity and intimacy, increasing the salience and immediacy of various ethical considerations, including deception (Sojka and Spangenberg 1994).

Deception has methodological as well as ethical implications for consumer research. Criticisms have been directed to the very core of the methodological assumptions upon which the use of deception procedures depend, including: (a) that the level of naiveté among research participants is high; (b) that the procedure does not produce cues that suggest to participants that
deception is taking place; and (c) that participant suspiciousness of deception does not alter the experimental effect (Kimmel 1996). Further, the reliance many researchers place upon debriefing and forewarning as remedies to deception may well be misplaced (Toy, Wright & Olsen 2001).

Table 2 provides an overview of studies that have examined the foregoing concerns. In sum, they show that within certain research circumstances the continued employment of deception has the capacity to reduce the pool of naive research participants (as apparent from research indicating high leakage rates) and that experimental findings can be significantly altered by subject suspiciousness and prior participation in deception research. With respect to forewarning there is evidence that experimental performance is more likely to be altered to the extent that participants receive explicit details about the deceptive nature of the investigation than when they are merely informed that the study might involve deception. Finally, the research is mixed as to the effectiveness of debriefing in eliminating negative consequences caused by deception, particularly when a conventional debriefing is used (i.e., debriefing involving only a cursory explanation of the deception). On the other hand, explicit debriefings (i.e., those that describe the perseverance effect or clearly provide participants with justification for their experimental behavior) have been shown to substantially reduce false beliefs or negative feelings linked to the use of deception in the study.

Again, looking at the possible consequences of deception, its use is less ethically justifiable to the extent that it does not provide the methodological gains that are claimed and that it is less easy to ‘undo’ through debriefing. Deceptive research practices also have implications for the field, as they may reduce trust within the academic community and diminish public trust in research (Kimmel and Smith 2001). Bok (1978, p. 196) suggested that “each deceptive study comes to contribute to a breakdown in trust.” However, concern about these possible disciplinary
consequences might be overstated, not least given the absence of studies showing strongly negative reactions of participants (e.g., Christensen 1988; Smith and Richardson 1983) and of the general population to deception studies (see Table 2; Singer 1984 is an exception). Nonetheless, IRBs might become more stringent in their reviews of consumer research that involves deception, in line with current trends (Lawson 2001; Shea 2000). These outcomes are more likely to the extent that deceptive studies become the focus of mass media reports of unethical research practices.

The lower likelihood of consumer researchers employing severe deceptions relative to investigators in related fields (such as social psychology) perhaps explains why deception has been neglected as a central issue in consumer research. Among the small number of articles on ethics in academic consumer research, only a handful have focused on deception (Kimmel and Smith 2001; Misra 1992; Singer 1984; Toy et al. 1989, 2001). However, consumer research is an interdisciplinary field and deception in research has been addressed in its root disciplines. ACR members are explicitly directed to seek guidance on ethical research conduct from the professional associations of the various fields from which they draw (www.acrweb.org). We look next at the adequacy of the guidance on deception in research provided in their codes.

**Treatment of Deception in Ethics Codes**

Ethical regulation of research in various behavioral science fields tends to have been stimulated in the wake of disclosures of ethical misconduct and the reporting of studies involving mistreatment of research participants. Often cited are controversial studies from the 1960s like Project Camelot in political science, Laud Humphrey’s “tearoom trade” research in sociology, and Stanley Milgram’s obedience research in psychology (Kimmel 1996; Reynolds 1982).

---

2 As well as the associations referred to below, ACR directs its members to the American Marketing Association and the American Political Science Association. However, their codes offer no specific guidance on deception in research.
American Psychological Association Code of Conduct. The APA ethics code has served as a model for professional associations around the world (Kimmel 1996). The current code (APA 2002) is the result of a 50-year history of development and revision, including substantial strengthening of its research guidelines in the wake of debate about the use of deception in Milgram’s obedience research. It emphasizes voluntary participation and informed consent as fundamental prerequisites for research with human participants. These two ethical principles date back to the 1947 Nuremberg Code, a general set of standards formulated in order to prevent atrocities like those perpetrated by Nazi researchers during World War II and the forerunner to all subsequent guidelines governing experimentation with human participants (Schuler 1982). The standard pertaining to deception in the APA (2002) code dictates that deception should be used only if a study’s results are likely to be sufficiently important (because of “the study’s significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value”), an alternative nondeceptive procedure is not feasible, the research is not likely to cause physical pain or severe emotional distress, and the deception is to be explained to participants as early as possible as part of a debriefing.

While some critics have argued against any use of deception in psychology (e.g., Baumrind 1985), others favor a more restricted use and express concern that the ethical standards for deception are to be applied within a cost-benefit framework that permits the researcher to consider whether the benefits of the research outweigh possible harm to participants. Indeed, this criterion has fueled extensive debate regarding interpretation of the principles and their implementation (Kimmel 1996; Schuler 1982) and, despite attempts to obtain feedback from researchers prior to the adoption of new versions of the code, there has never been a consensus among APA members as to the specific wording of the standards for research or how to apply them. However, the code acknowledges that psychologists may be required to obtain institutional approval prior to conducting research and this
constraint partially addresses the cost-benefit problem. Nonetheless, it remains a fundamental weakness of the APA code, as we further illustrate below.

*American Sociological Association (ASA) Code of Conduct.* The criteria for the use of deception in research in the current code of the ASA (1997) are almost identical to those of the APA (2002). The ASA has the same cost-benefit approach, though it does allow a broader interpretation of harm and requires IRB (or equivalent) approval. Because sociologists commonly use non-experimental methodologies, the code acknowledges that informed consent may not always be possible or appropriate and suggests that it should not be an absolute requirement for all sociological research. Reynolds (1982) cites research on subway altruism, archival data and ‘garbageology’ as examples of covert research. The code notes that on rare occasions “sociologists may need to conceal their identity in order to undertake research that could not practicably be carried out were they to be known as researchers.” The code clarifies that under such circumstances, the researcher can proceed if the deception poses no more than minimal risk for participants and if they have obtained approval to conduct the research from an IRB (or an equivalent body).

*American Anthropological Association (AAA) Code of Conduct.* The AAA has a set of general statements on ethics and a detailed code (AAA 1998). While the APA and ASA describe their standards as enforceable, the AAA no longer adjudicates on claims of unethical behavior. The AAA ethical statements acknowledge that conflicts between the various responsibilities of anthropologists are inevitable and that choices between conflicting values will have to be made. Toward assisting researchers in resolving these conflicts, it is recommended that priority should be placed on the well-being of research participants and the integrity of the discipline, and that when these conditions cannot be followed, it is best that the research not be carried out (at least as

---

3 Host institutions and organizations increasingly now require committee review prior to allowing any research—whatever the nature—to be carried out with human participants. This is required of institutions in the U.S. that receive Federal research funds. The IRB requirement can even extend to fields such as history, for example (Shea 2000).
originally proposed). On deception, the AAA position in its ethics statements is rather blunt in its assertion that “constraint, deception, and secrecy have no place in science.”

While the AAA (1998) code itself does not directly refer to deception, it adopts a fundamentally different approach to the cost-benefits trade-off found in the APA and ASA codes. Consistent with the AAA statements on ethics, it states specifically that:

Anthropological researchers have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work. These obligations can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge, and can lead to decisions not to undertake or to discontinue a research project when the primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities... These ethical obligations include: To avoid harm or wrong, understanding that the development of knowledge can lead to change which may be positive or negative for the people or animals worked with or studied.

In sum, research codes in the root disciplines of consumer research recognize the moral significance of deception. However, while considerable attention has been given to the use of deception in psychology, in particular, much of the discussion centers on the methodological and disciplinary implications, with the ethical issues often insufficiently articulated. Little attempt has been made to explicitly apply theories of normative ethics to the issue of deception in research (there are notable exceptions, such as Atwell 1981, Baumrind 1985 and Reynolds 1982). Perhaps as a result, the extant codes, despite offering guidance, ultimately remain ambivalent about the use of deception and inconsistent with each other. We believe that there is a need for greater attention to moral argument and, if deception is to be used, the development of a normative justification. Accordingly, we turn to moral philosophy for a better understanding of the ethics of deception and the circumstances under which deception may be morally permissible in consumer research.

**ETHICAL THEORIES AND DECEPTION**

Like those working in other areas of professional endeavor, many consumer researchers may give little thought to the morality of their conduct; recognition of an ethical issue requires ‘ethical
sensitivity’ (Sparks and Hunt 1998). Assuming this recognition takes place, we would expect the researcher’s deliberations about the use of deception to be informed by his or her moral standards. These standards or principles can stem from multiple possible sources, including one’s early upbringing, the behavior of others, social and cultural norms, religion, and professional codes of conduct. However, the major theories of normative ethics from moral philosophy provide the best-justified standards for evaluating the ethics of human conduct (Beauchamp 1982; Shaw 1999).

To be defensible, the researcher’s moral judgment about the use of deception must be supportable by sound moral principles, the validity of which depends on the reasons advanced in their support. These reasons are generally evaluated within moral philosophy by criteria such as impartiality and whether they are logical and consistent with other principles and our considered beliefs (or commonsense morality). Because of the methodological reasons for researchers to favor the use of deception, moral principles also must be sufficiently compelling to counter possible self-interested arguments to act contrary to principle. This provides all the more reason for researchers to reflect on the merits and limitations of the principles that inform their use of deception.

Over its long history, moral philosophy has produced many ethical theories from which we might derive principles to guide consumer researchers. The two predominant classes of normative theory are consequentialism and deontology. Under consequentialist theories, the morally right research study would be the one that produces at least as good a ratio of good to bad consequences (e.g., in terms of welfare or utility) as any other course of action, including not conducting the study at all. Under deontological theories, the ethical evaluation of a research study would reflect an assessment of its consistency with binding moral rules or duties and consequences are not of primary importance. Clearly, one such duty might be to tell the truth, in general and in the conduct of research. The consequentialist analysis is closely akin to the familiar idea of the cost-benefit
assessment found in the APA and ASA codes, while the obligations identified in the AAA’s (1998) ‘prime directive’ (quoted above) are more consistent with deontological reasoning. Indeed, many of the provisions in these ethical codes are in keeping with consequentialist or deontological reasoning. However, in general, these codes are not directly informed by moral philosophy and their guidelines on the use of deception in research often seem inconsistent or, at least, uncertain from the perspective of normative ethics.

Kimmel and Smith (2001) examined how utilitarianism, the leading consequentialist theory and Kantian ethics, the leading deontological theory, might inform ethical evaluations of deceptive research procedures. Their outline normative analysis suggested that deception in research is not necessarily precluded altogether, although it is more likely to be judged permissible from a utilitarian perspective and less likely to be permissible from a deontological perspective. The APA (2002) and ASA (1997) approaches to deception, as described in the previous section, are largely in line with utilitarian reasoning. Toy et al. (2001) also advanced a utilitarian approach to deception in research. However, as Kimmel and Smith (2001) observed, a utilitarian perspective is problematic in application to specific research studies because of the difficulties for the researcher in identifying all the possible consequences of a study using deception, as required by the theory. At the very least, making such a determination would be highly demanding of a researcher’s time and we might well question whether researchers would realistically be willing or able to make such an investment. We go further and reject utilitarianism on both theoretical and practical grounds, though we acknowledge that it does illuminate how ethical codes and some researchers might view deception.

There are considerable theoretical objections to utilitarianism, particularly given its aggregative, maximizing, and impartial characteristics. Determination of the rightness of an act is made on the basis of whether it would provide the greatest total welfare and without regard to how
utilities or disutilities are distributed. Thus, a research study that could harm some participants might be justified from a utilitarian perspective because of perceived potential benefits to a larger group within society. Indeed, the APA (1990, p. 395) has stated: “Research procedures likely to cause serious or lasting harm to a participant are not used… unless the research has great potential benefit and fully informed and voluntary consent is obtained from each participant.” Although consistent with some forms of utilitarian reasoning, this provision is contrary to commonsense morality (and is not included in the latest APA code). Utilitarianism’s impartiality is said to ignore any existing relationships where we might ordinarily believe special obligations should be upheld. Hence, a researcher’s perceived obligations to student research participants would not be relevant except insofar as they inform calculations of the utility gained or lost as a result of the study. Further, under some formulations of utilitarianism, the researcher would be obligated to conduct studies potentially harmful to participants, if this maximized total welfare.

Problematic from a practical standpoint are the difficulties inherent in interpersonal comparisons of utility. Can different kinds of utility be meaningfully compared for any one individual, let alone across different individuals? For example, research participants might place different values on the utility gained from learning about consumer behavior through research participation. Most problematic is that the theory would appear to require not only major assumptions about the researcher’s capacity to forecast accurately the outcomes of the study, but also to minimize human shortcomings that might otherwise bias judgment. It seems highly likely that researchers would overestimate the potential benefits of the intended research and underestimate disutilities to research participants. Frey (2000) has observed that the apparent simplicity and ease of application of (act) utilitarianism gives it substantial appeal. However, he
concludes that it cannot reasonably be applied and, more importantly, should not be applied on a case-by-case basis.

Some of these problems are diminished through rule utilitarianism (Hooker 2000; Kimmel and Smith 2001), a form of utilitarianism that holds that the welfare maximization criterion should not be applied to individual actions but to moral codes as a whole (thus, the test is whether the rules, if generally adopted, would maximize welfare). However, there are theoretical and pragmatic objections to rule utilitarianism, including the problem that it is ultimately unclear which social rules would maximize human welfare. Baumrind (1985) applied a rule-utilitarian approach to deception in psychological research. She concluded that intentional deception in research is morally wrong. However, a rule utilitarian faces the problem of identifying which rules to apply and their basis for rightness and her analysis is readily challenged on these grounds.

Kimmel and Smith (2001) concluded that deontological analysis offers the possibility of a more clear-cut determination of the ethics of deception in consumer research and provided an illustrative analysis based on a broadly construed Kantian perspective. While a traditional interpretation of Kantian ethics would likely reject deception studies as impermissible, they advanced the argument that deception in research might be permissible under a limited set of circumstances (notably, the participant’s understanding and acquiescence to a fiction created by the researcher). We depart from Kimmel and Smith (2001) by turning to social contract theory (a specific type of deontological theory) and suggest it is superior in at least two key respects. It presents a more plausible basis for examining the moral justification for deception in research and provides scope for identifying specific principles to guide researchers in its use.
A SOCIAL CONTRACT APPROACH TO DECEPTION

Social contract theory is based on the idea that the authority of moral principles can come from the agreement of those affected, with the assumption that there is an obligation to maintain agreements. Thus, as a normative theory of ethics, contractarianism claims that binding moral obligations may be identified through the agreement (hypothetical or actual) and consent of moral agents. Extending this idea to deceptive research practices suggests that normative justification for deception could rest on an agreement between researchers, research participants, and other affected parties, within an appropriately crafted social contract. Some have alluded to social contracts in research (Lawson 1995, Rosnow 1997), but only Schuler (1982) appears to have developed the idea in any depth. Ultimately, his purpose was descriptive rather than normative. However, his account provides a good basis for introducing the idea of a social contract and an appropriate starting point for showing how it might guide deception in consumer research.

Schuler’s Social Contract for Research

Schuler (1982) suggests there is a social contract within which the partners exchange elements of cost (e.g., the participant’s time, psychological stress, and the researcher’s investment of effort) and benefit (e.g., the participant’s increased understanding of science, self-insight, and the researcher’s satisfaction of scientific interest and scientific success). He notes, however, that the contract is inevitably unbalanced; while the researcher only conducts the study if the predicted benefits exceed the costs, both benefits and costs for the participant are uncertain. Moreover, a second contract between the researcher and the scientific community and organization supporting the research also must be balanced. In Schuler’s view, the conflicting obligations of the two contracts often are resolved by burdening the weaker partner (the participant) with the costs, as evidenced by studies exposing participants to excessive risk or lacking informed consent because of
pressures on the researcher (e.g., ‘publish or perish’). Consistent with our assessment of the APA and ASA codes, Schuler rejects arguments justifying the imposition of these costs on participants because of the study’s presumed contribution to science. He claims this argument can only be plausible where the two contracts overlap and participants identify with the research goals.

Schuler (1982) describes what he perceives as an actual social contract between researcher and participant. He acknowledges the potential for the contract imposing very different costs on participants, depending upon four key characteristics of the study: (1) familiarity and danger (familiarity with the specific research procedures or situation determines the degree of objective danger and hence costs for the participant); (2) stimulus control (extent to which the experimenter controls the stimuli for the participant); (3) reaction control (behavioral possibilities for the participant); and, (4) power differential (between the researcher and participant).

Applied to consumer research, imagine a study in which self-esteem is manipulated to examine effects on receptiveness to advertising. Let us assume that subjects are given an ‘intelligence test’ and then receive bogus feedback that they either performed well or poorly on the test. In this case, there is likely to be high perceived familiarity with testing procedures, but low familiarity with failure (particularly for student subjects at top universities) and some therefore will feel their sense of self endangered (the purpose of the manipulation). Stimulus control is high because the experimenter controls the testing situation and the feedback. If subjects are informed at the start of the experiment that they can stop at any time, then they stand a better chance of maintaining control over their reactions. Once they have been given negative feedback, however, ceasing participation will not help repair their self-esteem and thus their control over their reactions to the feedback is limited. Finally, many consumer research studies are run by research assistants, creating a low power differential. However, subjects may perceive a high power differential if the
investigator controls their grades or other outcomes. Schuler suggests that these four factors influence researcher responsibility to redress the ratio of costs to benefits, especially where costs are not transparent to participants. (At the end of this paper we offer specific measures that can reduce the costs to participants.)

Schuler’s (1982) purpose in identifying a social contract is primarily *descriptive*: “to help us understand the experimental situation in such a way that we can develop criteria for evaluating the behavior of social scientists” (1982, p. 64). It is an account of what is or could be rather than what should be. His largely implicit (utilitarian) criterion for evaluating the ethics of a study appears to be whether there is a balanced exchange of costs and benefits by researchers and participants. In contrast, we use a contractarian approach to advance a *normative* social contract for consumer research that identifies the conditions under which deception might be permissible. First, however, we explain the contractarian approach and show how it addresses some of the major problems of other deontological approaches and consequentialism.

**Social Contract Theory**

Social contract theory developed in response to a need to provide a justification for the legitimacy of government at the time of the social upheavals in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe (Dunfee, Smith and Ross 1999; Sayre-McCord 2000). The classic contractarian approach is to specify a suboptimal set of circumstances (or pre-agreement condition) that provides the impetus for an actual or hypothetical agreement among the people affected and their consent to a contract that creates a more optimal situation (Becker 1992, Donaldson 1982, Sayre-McCord 2000). The normative authority of this contract rests on the assumption of consent by rational persons to its terms (Becker 1992, Donaldson & Dunfee 1999). Before developing in this way a social contract for
consumer researchers, it is important to highlight the merits of social contract theory and note its major limitations.

As dissatisfaction within philosophy has grown with utilitarianism and other competing theories, moral contractarianism has seen a revival (Sayre-McCord 2000). This is reflected by the attention that has been given recently to social contract theory in business ethics (Donaldson and Dunfee 1999; Dunfee et al. 1999). Kantian contractarianism reflects Kant’s insistence that acting from moral duty is at the core of the human condition, with the social contract approach used to identify what such a morality might consist of. Its prime exponent is John Rawls (1971). A key feature of Rawls’ pre-agreement condition (which he calls the ‘original position’) is the ‘veil of ignorance,’ according to which, he asks what principles governing behavior we might agree on were we to be ignorant of our individual circumstances and how we might benefit or suffer as a result of the principles specified. The impartiality required by this approach gives the agreed principles moral legitimacy and arguably more so than principles identified under rule utilitarianism and without the demanding absolutism of traditional Kantian ethics. Also, unlike act or rule utilitarianism, this approach does not require difficult interpersonal comparisons of utility or, indeed, the forecasting of utilities with all the effort and potential for bias that this might entail.

The mutual agreement of the contractarian approach means that morality’s demands can claim the allegiance of all and, again consistent with Kant, by governing oneself through principles others could endorse, there is equal concern and respect for the self and others. As a result, there is less likelihood of unfair distributions of utilities, a disregard of special obligations, or moral judgments inconsistent with commonsense morality. Arguably, contractarianism is even more

---

4 Sayre-McCord (2000) identified two main approaches to contractarianism today: what may broadly be characterized as Kantian contractarianism and Hobbesian contractarianism. The Hobbesian approach uses a contractarian framework to show that there are non-moral (self-interested) reasons to justify human concern for morality’s content and demands. In many respects, the two approaches are complimentary and will be treated as such in our use of contractarianism to identify moral principles guiding the use of deception in research.
intuitively plausible than rule utilitarianism because it specifies that the rules come from mutual agreement. In sum, Kantian contractarianism addresses many of the perceived failings of other major normative theories of ethics.

There are two fundamental criticisms of social contract theory. The first pertains to the problem of absence of actual consent. In contemporary moral contractarianism, reliance generally is placed on hypothetical consent—what people might rationally be assumed to consent to under given circumstances. This changes the basis for claiming normative authority of obligations established via social contracts. Normative authority rests on the reasons advanced for giving consent, rather than consent per se—though arguably this is preferable to the possible bad reasons or coercion that might exist with actual consent (Rawls 1971). Thus, Sayre-McCord (2000) suggests that Kantian contractarianism needs to show that any hypothetical agreement is sensitive to the variety of people ostensibly participating or who are to be governed by what is chosen. Consistent with Integrative Social Contracts Theory (Dunfee et al. 1999), we suggest placing some reliance on actual norms of research communities.

The second fundamental criticism is that social contract theory in the end falls back on other normative theories and does little real work in and of itself. The contributions of Rawls (1971) are important in showing how social contract theory can contribute to ethical decision-making in non-trivial ways. However, a key question of Kantian contractarianism is whether it provides sufficient reason to act consistent with its demands, including the potential sacrifices this might entail. One response is that the moral obligation in itself provides sufficient motivation to act, and this may well be a sufficient answer from a Kantian perspective. Another response is found in Hobbesian contractarianism, which suggests that we have non-moral reasons to act consistent with mutually advantageous principles, assuming others will do likewise. This is problematic in a number of
respects, but less so if it can be allied with Kantian contractarianism (Sayre-McCord 2000). With the essential reasoning behind contractarianism laid out, including an explanation of why it is superior in some important respects to other normative theory, it can now be applied to specific ethical problems of consumer research.

**Developing a Hypothetical Social Contract for Deception in Consumer Research**

Although Schuler (1982) referred to a norm of social obligation in relation to the social contract between researchers and their participants, he chose not to look to this contract as a primary source of moral principles to guide researchers. It is tempting to envisage a contractarian approach whereby individual researchers and their research participants develop an agreement governing their interaction and the research procedures and methods used (Lawson 1995) that goes well beyond the ‘quasi’ agreement outlined in research consent forms solely developed by researchers. On the face of it, this is an appealing solution in its reliance on the actual consent of those affected. However, we reject this as unworkable on a number of counts, not least because of the differences in familiarity with research and of power that generally exist between researcher and participant. Within the context of psychological experiments, participants have let things happen to themselves or engaged in acts that are generally considered degrading if not harmful to themselves or others (e.g., eating caterpillars, administering electric shocks). It does not seem unreasonable to assume that this willingness to do as the experimenter asks or appears to expect is likely to exist prior to any experiment, which is when a contract might be agreed upon. This power differential problem is all the more salient where research participants are students drawn from university subject pools. Further, there still is the problem of participants consenting to costs they are uncertain of or willing to accept in order to obtain an attractive incentive, let alone the difficulty of adopting such an
approach within many ethnographic research situations. For these and other reasons, a plausible contractarian solution appears to require hypothetical agreement and consent.

Thus our task, in following a contractarian approach to deception, is to specify a pre-agreement condition that would hypothetically provide sufficient reason for consumer researchers and their participants to agree on how research might be conducted. The terms of this agreement or ‘contract’ then must be shown as likely to be acceptable to all affected parties. This at the core of contractarianism for it is on this basis that we might presume consent and thus normative authority of the moral principles identified (Sayre-McCord 2000).

In keeping with the classical approach to contractarianism, our starting point is to identify an undesirable state in the same way that Hobbes’ 

Leviathan

(1651) used a ‘state of nature’ (Sayre-McCord 2000) and Donaldson (1982), in developing a social contract for business, postulated a state of individual production, a world without the benefits of large organizations. A plausible pre-agreement condition that would serve here is a situation where no deception in consumer research is permitted. In this (as yet) hypothetical world, much current consumer research would not be permissible and while many research topics might be examined using non-deceptive procedures, some research topics likely would be inadequately investigated or not addressed at all (e.g., memory, automaticity). This pre-agreement condition is not as outlandish as it might appear (though whether this could actually happen is not essential to developing the social contract). IRBs are becoming increasingly restrictive, fully informed consent cannot readily coexist with deception and this problem is inadequately compensated for through forewarning and debriefing (Toy et al. 2001).

This situation clearly would provide an incentive to consumer researchers to seek an agreement where some use of deception is permissible. Arguably, given the potential benefits of the knowledge emanating from consumer research and the more direct possible benefits of research
participation (Schuler 1982), there would be an incentive for participants also to seek agreement. Further, studies have shown that participants are accepting of some forms of deception (e.g., Christensen 1988; Smith and Richardson 1983). Moreover, we incorporate in this pre-agreement condition a Rawlsian original position, where researchers and participants are unaware of their respective roles in research. Thus, not knowing whether they are to be researchers or research participants, we ask, what principles governing deception in research would the parties (our ‘contractors’) agree to under these circumstances?

**PRINCIPLES TO GOVERN THE USE OF DECEPTION IN CONSUMER RESEARCH**

Although descriptive in purpose, Schuler’s social contract has normative implications relevant to this analysis. There are adverse consequences that research participants would surely prefer to avoid. These are the potential costs Schuler (1982) identifies, including: psychological stress, physical stress, anxiety, embarrassment, loss of trust, disappointment, and impaired self-esteem. Further, there are the more deontological concerns associated with the deception of participants, including participants being treated as means rather than ends and the possibility that some participants may not wish to be deceived. Accordingly, the first principle of our social contract governing deception in research is as follows:

1. **Deception is a last resort. It is only used where alternative and equally valid research procedures are unavailable and where remedial measures are employed.**

   We might expect our rational contractors to be, at the very least, consistent with the ethical guidelines developed by researchers within the root disciplines of consumer research (especially the APA code, as it is based in part on research with APA members). However, asserting that deception is a *last resort* does go beyond the APA and ASA guidelines. This is consistent with the view that deception is problematic as a social practice and should be minimized. Doing research with deception as a last resort has major implications that we examine in the next section.
2. Researchers always conduct research with respect for the dignity of their participants and harmful deceptions are never permissible.

   We would reasonably anticipate our contractors to agree that researchers should not knowingly expose participants to significant risks of harm via deception and should respect the dignity of respondents as individuals. They also should make sufficient effort to determine the likelihood of possible harms or threats to participant dignity. In some areas of research, such as our earlier temporary loss of self-esteem example, the risk of a low level of harm can be quite great. It is quite possible that our putative participants would agree to these studies taking place subject to adequate disclosure (as well as the other principles identified here). However, they are also likely to require no lasting harm, even where this could be fully disclosed in advance. Thus we differentiate between risks of permanent harm, which would be impermissible, and risks of temporary, low levels of harm that participants might agree to and would be permissible if disclosed in advance (and thus participants could choose to opt out). Our contractors would likely define risks of low levels of harm as being comparable to what might be experienced in everyday life (e.g., embarrassment, shocking event in news reports).

   We might argue that rational contractors would not permit ‘kamikaze’ participants willing to permit lasting harm to themselves in the name of science or in order to receive promised incentives (such as money or free products that might compromise the voluntary nature of participation). Alternatively, we might appeal to the AAA (1998) ‘prime directive’ or invoke an overriding ‘do no harm’ prohibition or ‘hypernorm’ (Donaldson & Dunfee 1999) that, strictly speaking, goes outside the social contract.

3. Researchers provide for informed consent by explaining research and the voluntary nature of participation. This should be done in two ways. Before participating in any research, participants must be given (or have) a general understanding of the research process, with explicit forewarning that deception is often used. Prior to any given study,
the researcher discloses the actual research procedures to be used, especially those that might affect a decision to participate, though not necessarily identifying any deception.

Acting rationally and with knowledge of how research has been conducted in the past and valuing human autonomy, our contractors are likely to reach agreement whereby research is conducted with informed consent to the fullest possible extent. Participants should know what to expect from participation in research studies in general (e.g., for subject pools this could take the form of an introduction to research at the start of the semester) and, for any given study, they should know of specific research procedures, particularly those that might influence their decision to participate, to the extent that this does not unduly compromise research validity. This should be done without overburdening participants (e.g., participants need not be informed that the laboratory is at room temperature, but would need to know if it is maintained just above freezing). Thus, participants are more familiar with research, consistent with Schuler (1982).

Although a truly informed consent is elusive in the context of deceptive research studies, it is possible to notify participants of the likely use of deception and to explain its methodological rationale. Conceivably, researchers might refer to the use of ‘misinformation’ (Schuler 1982) where mild deceptions are employed. This principle goes beyond conventional forewarning procedures by making the acknowledgement of the use of deception explicit. Arguably, participants are no longer ‘lied to’ if they are told that misinformation is a ‘rule of the game’ and the particular nature of the social interaction in a research study is explained (Kimmel and Smith 2001). In many studies, however, as not all can be told for deception to be effective, the participant still must give over responsibility to the researcher to decide on the acceptability of some research procedures. This responsibility is primarily constrained by the following principle:

4. Researchers never expose participants to risks they themselves would be unwilling to accept if similarly situated and allowing for possible vulnerabilities of participants.
This is a Rawlsian constraint that is fundamental to the social contract. (It is also consistent with Kantian ethics and, in large measure, the Golden Rule, as well as some codes of medical ethics.) Because we envisage our researcher and participant contractors in a Rawlsian original position, they are unaware of their respective roles in research. Thus, as a minimum condition, researchers would not be willing to impose procedures on participants that they themselves would be unwilling to accept. This is a necessary but not sufficient principle. People vary in their willingness to assume risks (Atwell 1981) and researchers specifically, given their vested interests, might be more willing to accept risks, even qua participants (though Principle 2 precludes harmful deceptions). Researchers also should consider the possible vulnerabilities of their research participants and the limitations these vulnerabilities might impose on understanding deception or its consequences. This is relatively straightforward with children (and codes often acknowledge special obligations of researchers towards children). It is more difficult with vulnerable adults (e.g., disadvantaged consumers, the mentally ill) or participants from unfamiliar cultures.

5. **Participants are reminded that their participation is voluntary and told that they may and should withdraw from a study at any time if they have concerns about procedures used.**

In line with the above principles, researchers always have the obligation to identify and eliminate research procedures that might have caused a participant not to participate, were he or she to have known in advance of the procedure. This might require the use of role-playing and quasi-control techniques (see Greenberg 1967; Rosenthal and Rosnow 1991). However, because researchers can never fully anticipate individual participant responses to research situations, participants should be told at the outset of any research study that they can withdraw at any time with full promised compensation (including course credit in student subject pools) and be told that they *should* do so if they have concerns about the research procedures used.
The Justificatory Rationale Revisited

Why should consumer researchers give the above principles consideration? The answer to this question, at least initially, rests on the normative authority of the principles identified. The contractarian approach derives normative authority primarily from the assumption that the agreement and consent of moral agents creates binding moral obligations. With hypothetical agreement and consent, as offered here, the legitimacy of the contract rests on the reasoning advanced to show why moral agents, acting rationally, would agree to the terms proposed. More specifically, on what basis would our researchers and research participants rationally choose to be constrained by these principles governing the use of deception in research?

At the core of our rationale is a Rawlsian original position. In the formulation advanced here, researchers and research participants when developing their contract are unaware of their respective roles. This is in contrast to how the APA develops its code, including surveys of its members with little if any inclusion of the views of research participants. The outcome of this process is an often-equivocal code that to its critics, at least, appears self-serving.

The weaknesses of the codes from the root disciplines notwithstanding, they still partially serve our justificatory rationale for the first two principles proposed. We have made the assumption that our contractors, again unaware of whether they are researchers or research participants, would be in favor of research (at least its socially beneficial outcomes) and be persuaded by arguments about the methodological requirement for deception in some consumer research studies. The constraints that researchers have in actuality agreed would seem to provide the minimal requirements that our contractors would agree on; including voluntary participation and the use of informed consent to the extent possible with deception. However, we also specify further deontological constraints consistent with criticisms of the extant codes.
What of the generic criticism of social contract theory, that it does no real work in itself? It is acknowledged that some recourse is made here to other normative theories. Our assumption about the contractors valuing research outcomes and being willing to accept the use of deception where there is prospective scientific benefit is essentially utilitarian. However, real work is being done by the contractarian formulation of the principles. We could not go straight to utilitarianism or Kantian ethics, given weaknesses in these theories already discussed. Hence, this is primarily but not solely contractarian. The social contract approach provides the legitimating framework while utilizing the strengths and avoiding many of the weaknesses of other normative theories.

**IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

What are the implications for consumer researchers of our ethical analysis and the principles proposed? Foremost, greater consideration needs to be given to the use of deception. Applying the major theories of normative ethics to deception in research clearly highlights its morally problematic nature, in contrast to the apparent readiness with which it appears to be used within consumer research. While secondary to the purposes of this paper, we believe that more attention to deception is also warranted by its methodological implications. Below, we apply our principles to recommend steps that can be taken by consumer researchers in designing research with human participants. The discussion is structured around a decision tree (see Figure 1) that can inform choices about the possible use of deception.

(Figure 1 About Here)

1. *Does the research involve deception, either by commission or omission?* Our analysis suggests that deception should be a last resort and thus our starting point is that every use of deception needs to be identified as such and decided upon. Deception by commission includes, among others, providing a false purpose or cover story for a study (e.g., telling participants that the
Deception by omission is often harder to identify. The principles do not require that research participants be informed of hypotheses being tested. On the other hand, overly general descriptions of the research purpose provided during recruitment could leave out information important to participants or that might affect their willingness to participate. Even the administration of a relatively straightforward survey could involve deception by omission. As an example, the second author of this paper conducted a survey in Hiroshima to examine the effects of anger toward the United States due to the atomic bombing. To avoid a selection bias whereby those who were angry would be over-represented in the sample, respondents were told that the study was an investigation of consumer choices and product preferences. In fact, most of the survey contained questions about judgments of the quality of U.S. products and attitudes toward buying them. The last section of the survey, however, measured anger towards the U.S. related to World War II and the bombing of Hiroshima. In many surveys, respondents receive only general descriptions of the research to avoid various potential biases (e.g., selection bias, demand artifacts, social desirability effects) that could be created by giving a detailed description of the research (Shimp et al. 1993). As our example shows, this can amount to deception by omission and could be problematic, not least because respondents are denied informed consent (see Principle 3).

Remedial measures can be used to mitigate this type of deception. For example, in the Hiroshima study, respondents were told that they could skip any questions or discontinue filling out...
the questionnaire at any point (and still receive the promised compensation) and they received a written debriefing. This is good practice. However, respondents rarely terminate their involvement in a study prematurely once they have agreed to participate (though they might provide false information as a result of the deception, highlighting a further methodological drawback to deception). Principle 5 specifies that participants have an obligation to withdraw should they become concerned about procedures used. This implies that instructions to participants must communicate more strongly that withdrawal is expected. In the Hiroshima study, a pilot study had been conducted with a small group of respondents during which interviewers were asked to look for any stress or concerns expressed by respondents (there were none). It is recommended that pretests explicitly consider the effects of any potential deception in a study and some pretests might be undertaken specifically for this purpose.

Ethnographic researchers face similar issues, but perhaps with greater ambiguity because they often begin a study without specific hypotheses. Thus, a general description of the topic is complete and truthful and, at least at the outset, cannot be deception by omission. As the research develops, however, the ethnographer may arrive at specific research objectives and the participants may not have had an opportunity to consent to research on those specific topics. For example, an ethnographic study might begin with a general objective of observing consumption patterns of a group of consumers, but ultimately focus on consumption that is not socially desirable. It can be very difficult to address these issues when participants are recruited because the ultimate direction of the research is still unknown.

Ethnographers generally identify themselves to respondents as researchers, answer any questions about the research that respondents may ask, and return to informants, where possible, with the finished product of their research for final approval. This is good practice and provides for
informed consent in large measure consistent with Principle 3. However, given the grounded approach of much ethnography, there may be an obligation under Principle 3 for researchers to more fully convey the nature of ethnographic research to participants (perhaps providing examples of prior studies) and to regularly seek or confirm their consent during the study. Returning to informants for their approval provides a type of after-the-fact consent that can be essential (methodologically, this is also an important validation technique). Ethnographic studies have provoked controversy when, for example, communities have been described in unflattering ways by a researcher that participants had come to see as one of their own (e.g., Allen 1997). In these cases, there may have been insufficient respect for the dignity of participants (see Principle 2).

2. **Are there equally effective non-deception alternatives?** If deception is identified, then the researcher should consider non-deception alternatives (such as quasi-controls, simulations and role playing; see Kimmel 1996), consistent with Principle 1. Researchers often avoid non-deceptive alternatives because of the concern that they might lead to biased results, but these concerns might be inflated. Shimp et al. (1993) suggest that demand artifacts (a potential outcome of not deceiving participants; Toy et al. 2001) do not necessarily represent a source of systematic (confounding) error. Further, it is widely recognized that respondents generally try to guess the purpose of a study regardless of the use of deception. (Whether this leads to systematic or random variance will depend on the homogeneity of subjects’ guesses and the correlation between the guess and the hypotheses being tested.) Even when subjects are likely to guess the true purpose of a study, a consistent bias does not necessarily develop (Kruglanski 1975). The effects of deception on research validity and the alternatives to deception need further study (Toy et al. 2001). But the alternatives appear to warrant more widespread use, at least by researchers using experiments and surveys. In
ethnographic research, participants’ suspicions or biases that result from being told the truth about a study generally are considered part of the research and discussed when it is reported.

Undue concern about the potential biases from being truthful to respondents may mean that researchers use deception when it is not required methodologically. As an alternative, a trade-off might be made in favor of avoiding deception with research validity only modestly (perhaps insignificantly) compromised as a result of potential bias. If ethical concerns about deception are to be addressed, this might require a shift in the perspective and priorities of journal editors and reviewers as well as changes in researcher practices. Researchers could be asked to more adequately justify their use of deception or, alternatively, encouraged to provide evidence that deception is not necessary. For example, returning to the Hiroshima study, a pilot study could have been conducted in which some respondents were given a general statement of research purpose, while others were given more specific details (that questions would ask about anger toward the U.S. due to the atomic bombing). Given no differences between the two groups, evidence could be provided to reviewers that the use of detailed disclosure did not lead to biased results. Given that most surveys require pilot testing, this type of evidence would be straightforward to obtain (with the exercise of due care for participants in the treatment condition). If results indicated that bias was generated by detailed descriptions, the researcher could then be more confident that deception by omission is necessary for research validity. Further, through actually testing whether deception is necessary, consumer research as a field could develop knowledge about when disclosure does lead to bias.

3. Is the deception potentially harmful, even if participants are forewarned, debriefed and/or desensitized? Principle 2 states that harmful deceptions are never permissible. The difficulty then lies in determining if a planned procedure is potentially harmful. Even the seemingly mild deceptions of some consumer research studies might be precluded because of the potential risk of
more than a temporary and low level of harm. For example, negative affect created through a mood manipulation in an experiment on emotions might persist long after the participant has left the lab (even if the manipulation is explained during debriefing). Potential harm can be difficult to assess in ethnographic research, as well (e.g., studying the plans of elderly informants concerning the passing on of their possessions may precipitate sadness or family conflict).

Self-esteem manipulations are illustrative of some of the more difficult dilemmas consumer researchers face when considering potential harmful effects of deception. One approach to manipulating self-esteem is through false feedback on a test, as described in our earlier example. An alternative is to have participants either write a paragraph about a time they felt proud or not at all proud of themselves. Both approaches are successful at manipulating self-esteem (e.g., Fein and Spencer 1997). The latter technique arguably involves less deception; there is no false information given about the participant’s ability (though there is deception by omission because the purpose of writing the paragraph and its effects are not disclosed). However, the false feedback approach may be less harmful overall. It is easier to undo the effects of the manipulation if false feedback was provided, particularly if the test, in fact, contained questions that were impossible to answer and this is pointed out to the respondent. The low self-esteem induced by writing the negative paragraph may be longer lasting, even if a positive paragraph is written at the end of the study in remediation. However, to some extent this is conjecture and empirical work is required to test the longevity of the manipulation. In general, it is recognized that debriefings often fail to eliminate false beliefs in part because of perseverence effects (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard 1975; Toy et al. 2001).

Principle 4 may be helpful in assessing harm (in addition to Principle 2). It requires that participants be treated as the researcher would wish to be treated. Thus, at minimum, the researcher should use this standard as a measure of the risk of harm. However, when it comes to the study,
researchers are not participants and they may need to test their perceptions of the risks of harm. One approach is to provide a scenario of the study procedure to respondents representative of those who would participate in the study. After reading the scenario, respondents can rate how they would feel about participating in such a study and researchers can probe with questions, such as, “If something were to upset you about this study, what would it be?” Researchers could therefore identify possible harmful aspects of the research and modify procedures accordingly (or drop the study).

3a. Is the deception harmful because respondents are from a vulnerable population? Again, under Principle 4, the diagnosis of potential harm is particularly relevant when research participants are members of a vulnerable population. They may be particularly susceptible to the potential harms of deception. Further, any population sampled in research can include vulnerable members. For example, a study on the marketing of health prevention that induces anxiety about cancer may not be harmful to most participants, but might pose risks to already anxious individuals or someone who has recently lost a family member due to cancer.

We recommend that researchers consider the potential effects of deception on the most vulnerable members of the participant population. This can be done through the exercise of imagining the reactions of vulnerable participants (the shyest student, the least secure friend, etc.) or conducting the scenario research described above (assuming vulnerable members of the target population are sampled in the scenario study). Further, participants who say they would not feel harmed by the research process could be asked to describe the type of person they think might be harmed. This information can be used to alter procedures or identify potential participants who should be excluded from the study (step 3b in Figure 1). In the latter event, we acknowledge the potential issue of compromised sample representativeness. In many cases, we believe this would be insignificant. If not, we again invoke the ethics-validity trade-off earlier discussed, and would ask:
To what degree is validity compromised? And, conversely, to what extent is there a risk of potential harm to participants whom we might prefer to exclude absent representativeness concerns?

4. Does the deception threaten participants’ dignity. Beyond ensuring that participants are not harmed, researchers must also ensure that participants are treated with dignity and are viewed as important stakeholders in the research process. One approach is to compensate the participant either monetarily or otherwise. For unpaid participants, an effort can be made to create a learning experience from research participation. Students can learn about theories relevant to the study and to their coursework. Monetary compensation also can be used: some ethnographic researchers send money to impoverished informants, in part because to do otherwise could be exploitative as only the researcher would benefit from the research process.

One can argue that deception itself undermines the dignity of research participants: to be lied to is, in a sense, to be told that one is unworthy of the truth. Indeed, research suggests that researchers may denigrate their participants as a result of deceiving them (Toy et al. 2001). Forewarning that deception will be used, consistent with Principle 3, helps to preserve dignity, because forewarning allows the participant to chose to “opt-in” to the deceptive situation. For example, the University of Michigan allows students in introductory psychology courses to choose between participating in non-deception studies only, participating in either deception or non-deception studies, or completing an alternative assignment (which takes less time and effort than participating in research). Through this procedure respondents retain the freedom to choose to participate in a deceptive study.

Moving to the bottom of the decision tree, if the foregoing steps have been followed conscientiously and, despite the researcher’s best efforts, the deception is unavoidable, the deception study may be undertaken. However, this recourse is taken with the following caveats: (1)
participants are aware of procedures (including the potential use of deception); (2) they understand the right and obligation to withdraw; (3) remedial measures, such as forewarning, debriefing and, if required, desensitizing (Toy et al. 1989; 2001) are employed; and, (4) participants are compensated, in some form, for their participation.

CONCLUSION

There appears to be widespread use of deception in consumer research and often without remedial measures or IRB approval. This use of deception poses a dilemma for many consumer researchers. On the one hand, deception may be deemed necessary for research validity and essential to investigate certain topics. On the other hand, it is morally questionable, even with debriefing. This paper has offered a solution to this problem. We rejected the position that any use of deception is morally impermissible, as might be argued from a traditional interpretation of Kant or for other reasons (e.g., Baumrind 1985; Bok 1978). We also rejected the consequentialist position espoused in codes of conduct, which is suspect for many reasons, not least because the researcher determines the consequences and thus the acceptability of the deception. Using social contract theory, we identified principles for the use of deception that should be acceptable to researchers and participants alike.

Having stressed that deception should be a last resort, our proposed principles were used to provide the basis for practical recommendations on decisions about studies that might call for deception. Thus we offered consumer researchers a solution to the dilemma of deception and a basis for justifying its use to themselves and others, such as IRBs. Potentially, this also may lessen the prospect of the field having to deal with its own ‘obedience study’ or ‘tearoom trade study’. Finally, we hope our principles and recommendations may be useful to other relevant parties in the research process, including reviewers, journal editors and IRBs, as well as to researchers in other fields.
REFERENCES


Table 1: Survey on Perceptions and Use of Deception in Consumer Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Sample (%)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline of Ph.D.</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Research&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Ph.D. Student</td>
<td>Assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perceptions of Deception

| Estimated % of consumer research studies involving human subjects that include deception | 51.56 | 29.05 |
| Perceived adequacy of training in the use of deception in consumer research studies<sup>c</sup> | 3.98 | 1.56 |
| Familiarity with the APA code of conduct<sup>d</sup> | 3.53 | 2.06 |
| Find the use of any deception in academic consumer research unacceptable or acceptable<sup>e</sup> | 5.26 | 1.72 |

Use of Practices (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misrepresent purpose</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give untrue statements about subject’s character of identity</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give untrue statements not related to subject’s character of identity</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not provide details that might affect willingness to participate</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use confederates</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mislead about length of study</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not inform people in field settings that they are being observed for research</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use of Remedial Measures (%)

| Use forewarning in research that involves deception | 74.0 | 14.1 | 6.5 | 5.4 |
| Use debriefing in research that involves deception | 8.7 | 25.0 | 23.9 | 42.4 |
| Use desensitizing in research that involves deception | 72.8 | 12.0 | 7.6 | 7.6 |

<sup>a</sup> Of the 163 delegates approached at the October 2002 ACR conference, 112 agreed to participate (a response rate of 69%).

<sup>b</sup> Most respondents checked more than one type of research.

<sup>c</sup> On a 1 (“training is not adequate”) to 7 (“training is adequate”) scale.

<sup>d</sup> On a 1 (“not at all familiar”) to 7 (“very familiar”) scale.

<sup>e</sup> On a 1 (“unacceptable”) to 7 (“acceptable”) scale.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues Linked to Deception</th>
<th>Degree of Effects(^a)</th>
<th>Research Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodological</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Participant suspiciousness</td>
<td>Medium to high</td>
<td>Stricker et al. (1967); Gallo et al. (1973); Glinski et al. (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(use of deception leads to an increase in suspiciousness among research subject pools)</td>
<td>(&gt;25%) levels of suspicions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Effects of subject suspicions</td>
<td>Significant effects</td>
<td>Golding &amp; Lichtenstein (1970); Newberry (1973); Silverman et al. (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(suspicions linked to the use of deception influence current or future research performance)</td>
<td>(between naive and aware participants)</td>
<td>Brock &amp; Becker (1966); Fillenbaum (1966)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Leakage (participants divulge crucial information into the subject pool)</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>Glinski et al. (1970); Lichtenstein (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Forewarning (participants’ pre-knowledge of deception alters experimental performance)</td>
<td>Little effect on performance</td>
<td>Allen (1983); Gallo et al. (1973); Wiener &amp; Erker (1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(between forewarned Ss and uninformed controls)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Effectiveness of debriefing on the mitigation of negative deception effects (false beliefs, negative affect, inflicted insight)</td>
<td>Effective (conventional debrief)</td>
<td>Holmes (1973); Holmes &amp; Bennett (1974)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ineffective (conventional debrief)</td>
<td>Ross et al. (1975); Valins (1974); Walster et al. (1967); Wegner et al. (1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effective (explicit debrief)</td>
<td>Misra (1992); Ring et al. (1970); Toy et al. (1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disciplinary</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Effects of deception on perceptions of the discipline (deception reflects poorly)</td>
<td>Mixed effects</td>
<td>Sharpe et al. (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. General population reactions to deception (objections to the use of deception for research purposes among the general public)</td>
<td>No objections</td>
<td>Collins et al. (1979); Epstein et al. (1973); Rugg (1975); Sullivan &amp; Deiker (1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Objections</td>
<td>Singer (1984)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) This column represents the extent to which the anticipated adverse consequences of deception noted in the first column were apparent. For the issues linked to debriefing, this column reflects the extent of debriefing in reducing adverse deception effects or leading to favorable evaluations of the debriefing procedure.

\(^b\) While estimates of the extent of suspiciousness may be low (e.g., Adair et al. 1985; Kimmel 2001), these results may be somewhat suspect given that participants cannot be counted on to be totally forthcoming in revealing their suspicions or knowledge about research procedures and hypotheses.
Figure 1: Decision Making on Deception Studies in Consumer Research

1. Does research involve deception, either by commission or omission?
   - No: Deception issues not relevant
   - Yes: Are there equally effective non-deceptive alternatives?
     - Yes: Choose non-deception alternative
     - No: 2. Are there equally effective non-deceptive alternatives?
       - Yes: 3. Is the deception potentially harmful (even with debriefing)?
         - Yes: 3a. Is the deception harmful because some/all respondents are from a vulnerable population?
           - Yes: Undertake study subject to:
             1. Participant’s awareness of research process and possible use of deception.
             2. Participant’s knowledge of the right and obligation to withdraw.
             3. Use of remedial measures (forewarning, debriefing, desensitising).
             4. Compensation for participation (e.g., education, money)
           - No: Don’t do present study: consider alternative methods or topics.
         - No: 3b. Is it possible to screen out vulnerable participants?
           - Yes: Don’t do present study: consider alternative populations.
           - No: Don’t do present study: consider alternative methods or topics.
       - No: 4. Does deception threaten participant’s dignity?
         - Yes: Undertake study subject to:
           - No: Deception issues not relevant

Undertake study subject to:
1. Participant’s awareness of research process and possible use of deception.
2. Participant’s knowledge of the right and obligation to withdraw.
3. Use of remedial measures (forewarning, debriefing, desensitising).
4. Compensation for participation (e.g., education, money)