Forewarning & Debriefing as Remedies to Deception in Consumer Research:

An Empirical Study

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Centre for Marketing Working Paper
No. 02-705
November 2002

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Abstract

This research examines the effectiveness of forewarning and debriefing as measures to mitigate the use of deception in consumer research. Findings from an exploratory study suggest that these remedial measures may not only improve practice, but also lower respondent concern and increase the likelihood of research participation. Implications for researchers are discussed.
Introduction

Unethical practices have been blamed for reduced consumer willingness to participate in research (e.g., Bearden, Madden and Usctegui 1998). While some of these practices are clearly avoidable, other practices are arguably unavoidable, particularly some deceptive practices. Forewarning and debriefing have been proposed as remedial measures to mitigate the use of deception, but doubts have been raised about the extent and adequacy of their use by consumer researchers (Toy, Wright and Olson 2001) and respondent reactions to these measures are largely unexplored. In this paper, we examine the effectiveness of forewarning and debriefing as measures to mitigate the use of deception. First, we look at how deception is addressed in psychology as a basis for proposing appropriate remedial measures. We then report an exploratory study where respondents evaluated four common deceptive practices in a market research context that researchers might consider justifiable (primarily to eliminate demand characteristics).

Remedial Measures to Mitigate Deception

Ethical principles governing psychological research originated with the Nuremberg trials of 1947 and the Nuremberg Code can be seen as the basis of all subsequent guidelines governing experimentation with human participants (Schuler 1982). Voluntary participation and informed consent are fundamental prerequisites. The first American Psychological Association (APA) code was approved in 1953 and made substantially more stringent in the 1973 and subsequent revisions, particularly in light of controversy over the Milgram obedience experiments (Baumrind 1964). The guiding principles are perceived to be exacting, though they are to be applied within a cost-benefit framework, resulting in debates about the code’s interpretation and implementation (Kimmel 1996).

The distinction we have made between avoidable and apparently unavoidable but problematic practices in consumer research is consistent with the APA approach to deception. The current version of the code (APA 1992; under revision for 2002) requires that deception not be used
if it is avoidable. If an alternative procedure is not feasible, the use of deceptive techniques must be justified by the study’s prospective scientific, educational, or applied value. A weakness of this approach is that psychologists might be too quick to anticipate significant scientific output, though Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) provide a partial check.

The APA code also states that participants must not be deceived about a significant aspect of the study that would affect their willingness to participate, perhaps because of physical risks, discomfort, or unpleasant emotional experiences. It is important to consider the form and effects of the deception. Commercial and academic consumer research generally uses only “mild deceptions”—deceptions that are not targeted at respondents’ fundamental, self-related beliefs or values and unlikely to affect their willingness to participate—instead, respondents are deceived about “peripheral factors such as the research sponsor, why a procedure or measure is used, or the purpose of the study” (Toy, Olson and Wright 1989, p. 72). However, while the risk of harm to the individual by or as a result of the deception might be less or negligible, even mild deceptions are morally problematic (Kimmel and Smith 2001).

Deception is widely used in psychology, notwithstanding the provisions of the APA code and critics who charge that any use of deception is an unacceptable violation of the individual’s right to voluntarily choose to participate in research (Adair, Dushenko and Lindsay 1985). Proponents of allowing deception argue that it is essential in many studies. Broder (1998), for example, cites memory research and studies of incidental learning and of cognitive illusions that could not have been conducted without deception. Under these circumstances, it is argued, the decision to be made is not whether to use deception, but whether the research is necessary (Kimmel 1996).

The APA code stipulates that deception must be explained promptly to participants within a debriefing to correct any misconceptions. However, it may not be sufficient simply to tell
respondents that they were deceived and to provide correct information; effective debriefing may require “dehoaxing” and “desensitizing” (Toy, et al. 1989). Providing an educational benefit is often viewed as an important part of debriefing, particularly if the participants are students (Schuler 1982). This does not lessen the possible harm from deception, but it may partially compensate and be included in the researcher’s assessment of the benefits and costs of research participation.

Forewarning is a more uncertain remedy to deception. Under informed consent provisions of the APA code (1992), researchers are obligated to brief participants beforehand about the study and explain that, should they choose to participate, they might withdraw at any time. However, the participant’s decision relies upon the information provided by the researcher. Clearly, if fully informed about the study, there can be no deception. Under forewarning, subjects in a deception experiment may be “informed in advance that some information may have to be withheld and that full disclosure of the purpose and procedures will be made at the end of the experiment” (Adair, et al., p. 60). However, if deceit is used to obtain consent, by definition it cannot be informed (Baumrind 1985). Further, reliance is placed on the researcher’s estimate of the risk to the respondent (Schuler 1982). One solution to these problems is to pretest the experiment to establish whether subjects would give consent, absent the deception (Kimmel 1996). A similar approach is adopted in the study reported below.

A case can be made that intentional deception is never permissible (Bok 1978). However, a more balanced view would argue that some deception in consumer research is morally justifiable (Kimmel and Smith 2001). In keeping with the treatment of deception in psychological research, we propose treating deception in consumer research as permissible under conditions where the researcher has no alternative procedure available, the deception is mild, and appropriate remedial measures are used. We recognize that this position is not uncontroversial and note that our focus is
The appropriateness of remedial measures can be subject to empirical inquiry. The purpose of the study reported below was to illustrate in an exploratory study how possible remedial measures for deception in consumer research might be investigated and to demonstrate their effectiveness. Drawing on psychology, as discussed, the remedial measures examined are forewarning, debriefing, and the use of monetary and other forms of compensation. In addition, we explored the implications of a non-deceptive approach, i.e., telling the truth. Remedial measures were examined within a market research context, drawing upon industry codes of conduct to establish that the practice is considered problematic.

**Study of Consumer Responses To Deceptive Practices**

**Overview**

Respondents evaluated four deceptive practices that might be considered unavoidable and justifiable (subject to the above criteria): study purpose and sponsor deception, undisclosed taping, and interview length deception. Benefits from research participation were also explored, consistent with Schuler’s (1982) observations on the importance of assessing research costs and benefits for participants. Scenarios were manipulated in an attempt to determine whether the remedial measures we have identified may reduce respondent concern about deceptive practices and increase the likelihood of future participation in research. We sought ethical evaluations and emotional reactions of consumers as well as measures of the impact of these practices and of possible remedial measures on research participation.

**Development of Scenarios**

*Pilot study.* In a mall-intercept study, 352 adult consumers were asked to imagine that they were a participant in a given market research scenario and to indicate their response to the described
event. In total, the pilot study examined consumer reactions to 35 scenarios (each respondent rated 3 unrelated scenarios). The practices found to be most egregious to consumers were: study sponsor deception, breach of confidentiality, frugging (fundraising under the guise of research), videotaping without consent, and the non-disclosure of a follow-up interview. Some remedial measures were tested; for example, warning people of a follow-up interview led to more positive ratings.

The criteria for selection of scenarios for the current study were whether the deceptive practice was ethically suspect (relative to industry codes), perceived to be relatively frequent, and arguably unavoidable. Accordingly, practices included in the pilot study that are clearly avoidable were dropped from the main study, including frugging and the non-disclosure of a follow-up interview. A further consideration was the scope for remedial measures that lessen the potential for harm and reduce negative reactions to the research experience. In addition to the pilot study, the development of the main study scenarios was informed by a separate investigation of practitioner and consumer respondent experiences of market research. Following pretests, the final set of 23 scenarios was adopted. Below, we describe the scenarios used and our rationale for their selection.

1. Length of Interview. Interview length deception often occurs because interviewers fear respondents would decline to participate if given an accurate estimate of the time needed, perhaps because they have overlong and poorly constructed questionnaires. It is widely regarded as frequent and problematic. We regard deception by commission, where interviewers lie about the interview length, as unethical and clearly avoidable. This is consistent with industry codes that prohibit deception to secure cooperation (e.g., ICC/ESOMAR 1986) or specify that “respondents must not be enticed into an interview by a misrepresentation of the length of the interview” (CASRO 1995, p.

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1 Two separate studies were helpful in developing the scenarios used here. A survey of American Marketing Association (AMA) practitioners provided confirmation of prior research on the prevalence of specific suspect practices and suggestions for alternative approaches and perceived justifications for practices considered unavoidable. Secondly, a mall-intercept study improved our understanding of consumers’ positive and negative feelings toward research and of the context within which ethically problematic practices may arise.
5). Deception by omission is more troubling. Some recent industry initiatives require interviewers to state the likely duration of the interview (MRA CAC 1993). However, for some studies, length may vary substantially, according to consumer responses and interest (Laroche, McGown, and Rainville 1986). Accordingly, five scenarios involving interview length were tested: (1) the interview is said to last 15 minutes and it does last 15 minutes; (2) the interview is said to last 15 minutes and it takes 30; (3) the interview is said to last 30 minutes and it does take 30; (4) the respondent is not told the interview length and it takes 15 minutes; (5) the respondent is not told the interview length and it takes 30 minutes.

2. Taping. Undisclosed taping of an interview would be deception by omission. Researchers may not wish to disclose taping because it might bias responses or influence participation rates. The CMOR (1999) Respondent Bill of Rights states that respondents will be told in advance if an interview is to be recorded, consistent with CASRO (1995) and PMRS (1984). However, ICC/ESOMAR (1999), in a change to its code, permits recording without advance notice if it would otherwise result in “atypical behavior”. However, respondents must be told about the recording at the end of the interview. Accordingly, two possible remedial measures for audiotaping were examined: debriefing and forewarning. There were three scenarios: (1) a control scenario in which the respondent becomes suspicious of taping (due to “clicking” heard on the phone line) but the respondent is never informed of the taping by the interviewer; (2) the respondent is informed at the end of the survey that the interview was taped; (3) the respondent is forewarned (during solicitation) that the interview will be taped.

3. Deception Concerning Purpose of Study. Revealing the purpose of a study may bias responses. CMOR’s (1999) Respondent Bill of Rights commits researchers to disclosing the nature of the survey. The MRA CAC (1993) guidelines suggest that this need only note the general topic of discussion. Particularly troubling are instances of deception by omission where a different
purpose is implied though unstated. For example, Tessar (1994) reported consumer frustration at being asked to do one thing (watch television programs) and then being questioned on something else (advertising). Accordingly, a typical advertising effectiveness research scenario was utilized to examine purpose deception. The respondent in the scenario is asked to watch a television program, even though the purpose of the study is to test advertisements aired during the program. Five remedial measures (or combinations thereof) for this deception were examined: (1) forewarning that the purpose cannot be revealed; (2) debriefing about purpose; (3) providing a benefit to compensate for the deception (a quiz about the program, with the possibility of winning a prize); (4) forewarning and debriefing; (5) forewarning, debriefing, and providing the benefit.

4. Deception Concerning Sponsor of Study. Revealing the sponsor of a study also might bias responses. Moreover, it can conflict with an obligation of research companies to protect client confidentiality that is specified in most industry codes. CMOR’s (1999) Respondent Bill of Rights, the MRA CAC (1993) guidelines, and some other codes, commit researchers to disclosing the name of the interviewer and the research company. This disclosure is unlikely to produce biased responses because it does not reveal the study sponsor. The problem is more difficult for in-house researchers where nondisclosure or deception may seem unavoidable (Sudman 1998). Accordingly, five scenarios were tested: (1) control condition in which sponsor is not mentioned; (2) sponsor of research (client) is revealed; (3) respondent forewarned that sponsor cannot be revealed; (4) research firm identified and respondent forewarned that sponsor cannot be revealed; (5) respondent forewarned that sponsor cannot be revealed in advance, then is debriefed about sponsor identity.

5. Benefits. The effects of research participation benefits were examined, in keeping with our earlier discussion of compensation in psychological research. Monetary incentives are recommended (e.g., Bearden, Madden, and Uscategui 1998) and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR 1999) advocates incentives as a “best practice” for maximizing
response rates. One of CMOR’s earliest initiatives was the development of “thank you” cards for mailing to survey respondents that explained the benefits of market research. We tested four scenarios: (1) a control condition in which no benefits or incentives were given (same as control condition in study sponsor deception), (2) indirect benefits of research (“participation in research helps produce products that people would like to see in the stores”), provided during solicitation; (3) indirect benefits of research provided at the conclusion of the interview; (4) $5 voucher incentive; and (5) $20 voucher incentive.

Method

Data were collected in mall-intercept interviews in a middle class mall in Jacksonville, Florida. Potential participants were stopped as they shopped and were asked to participate in the study. Each respondent saw one scenario only, to minimize possible demand effects. Respondents were asked to read the scenario and then answer 3 sets of questions on the following two pages. The first two sets of questions asked for reactions to the scenario, the third asked respondents for demographic information and their level of participation in market research studies. When they were finished, respondents were thanked for their participation and given a written debriefing. A sample scenario (undisclosed study purpose with forewarning) is provided below:

Imagine that one afternoon you are at home and the phone rings. The person on the other end of the phone says:

"Hello, I'm with a national marketing research firm and we are calling consumers to ask whether they would be willing to participate in a study by watching a new TV program airing on network TV this evening. We will call you after the show to discuss your reactions. We would like you to watch this program as you would any other program, therefore we cannot say anything more about the specific questions you will be asked. Would you be willing to participate?"

You agree. After the show the research firm calls. The first few questions are about the TV program, the remainder of the 15 minute interview is about the advertising that appeared during the program.
**Dependent measures.** Our dependent measures were primarily intended to establish whether consumers would respond more favorably to research practices that include remedial measures to mitigate deception. Two sets of dependent measures were used, presented to the respondents as questions 1 and 2 (rotated within each scenario type to minimize possible order effects). One set measured respondents’ ethical evaluation of the market research company’s action described in the scenario. The set comprised the eight items of the Reidenbach and Robin (1990) multidimensional ethics scale (MES) and a single unidimensional measure of ethical evaluation (very ethical/not at all ethical). It should be noted that these measures are of respondents’ perceptions of the ethics of the research practices. Many deceptive practices could still be unethical regardless of how they might be evaluated by research respondents.

The second set of dependent measures comprised 7 items measuring emotional reactions to the scenario, its effects on research participation, and whether respondents felt deceived. More specifically, respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with seven statements relating to participation in the study described (where appropriate), future participation in market research, and whether they would feel upset, angry, happy, irritated, or deceived by the experience. Our assessment of emotional reactions to research practices is in contrast to previous studies. While practitioners and academics may discuss questionable practices in terms of whether or not they are ethical, it is quite possible that consumers themselves may evaluate practices in terms of how irritating or upsetting they are. Again, our purpose is to establish the effectiveness of remedial measures. We expect consumers to respond more favorably to the more effective remedial measures on one or more of our dependent measures.
Sample. Four hundred and six individuals agreed to participate in the study (a 24.5% participation rate). The sample was 50.5% female and median household income was $30,000-44,999. Relative to the U.S. population, minorities were overrepresented (25.9% of respondents were black, 60.2% were white) and the sample was skewed toward the young (66% were 37 or younger), and was better educated (65.3% had one year of college or more). Respondents were familiar with market research; two-thirds had been asked to participate in a marketing research study in the previous 12 months, 27.8% reported having been asked to participate 3 or more times in the past year (the mean value for prior research participation was 2.41).

Results

Table 1 shows mean values for respondent ratings of the different scenarios. Below, we discuss the analysis of each group of scenarios in turn. ANOVA’s and contrast tests were conducted to analyze differences in responses across scenarios. Because the dependent measures “irritated,” “upset,” and “angry” were highly correlated, they were averaged as an index of negative reactions (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$). Ethical evaluations reported in the table and analyzed below reflect the unidimensional measure only.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

1. Length of Interview. In examining interview length, we are interested in: (1) whether deception about length led to a more negative reaction than did the truth (or no information) about length; (2) whether the actual length of the interview would have an impact on respondents’ reactions; and, (3) whether telling versus not telling respondents about the length of the interview

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2 The contract research firm reported a refusal rate (percentage of people who said no when asked to participate) of less than 1%. However, this is after “wave-offs”, people who, when passing the interviewer, indicate that they are not interested in participating in a research study. The research firm reported a wave-off rate of 75.5%, consistent with other studies it has conducted in this mall. Hence, the participation rate for this study was 24.5%.

3 We conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to test the dimensionality of the MES in this study. This revealed a two-factor structure rather than the three dimensions of the scale, suggesting
would influence responses. As Table 1 shows, respondents had the greatest negative reaction when they were deceived about the length of time the interview would take. Respondents who read the scenario in which there was deception about the length of the interview (“told 15/actually 30”) had significantly higher negative reactions ($t(84) = 2.93, p < .01$) and felt significantly more deceived ($t(84) = 3.52, p < .01$) than respondents who saw the other scenarios. Deception about length did not significantly affect how happy respondents would feel ($t(84) = .47, n.s.$), or how ethical they judged the research to be ($t(84) = .65, n.s.$).

The two scenarios in which the interview lasted 15 minutes were contrasted against the two scenarios in which the interview lasted 30 minutes (the deception scenario was excluded). The length of the interview did not affect responses to scenarios: the t-scores for contrasts for all seven of the dependent measures were non-significant. There were also no differences in reaction between scenarios in which the length of the interview was disclosed during solicitation and when the length was not disclosed (the deception scenario was again excluded from this analysis). Those who were not told the length of a 30 minute interview were more likely to participate in the future ($t(84) = 2.91, p < .01$), had less of a negative reaction ($t(84) = 3.09, p < .01$) and felt less deceived ($t(84) = 2.95, p < .01$) than did those who were deceived about interview length.

In summary, respondents appear to be most sensitive to being deceived about the length of the interview. The actual length of the interview (15 or 30 minutes) did not affect ratings nor did the disclosure of the interview length at the commencement of the interview. However, participation in future research would appear to be more likely if people are not told the length of a 30 minute interview, rather than told that it will be 15 minutes and it takes 30 minutes.

2. Taping. Two possible remedial measures for audiotaping were examined: debriefing and forewarning. These two procedures were contrasted against a control scenario in which the

that attempts to understand the underlying rationale for respondents’ ethical judgments, based on the MES,
respondent becomes suspicious of taping. Debriefing respondents at the end of the interview did not affect reactions relative to the control (all t values were n.s.). Forewarning, however, did prove to be a successful remedial measure. Forewarned respondents were significantly happier with their participation, felt less deceived, and judged that the procedure was significantly less unethical than respondents in the other two taping conditions (t(47) = 2.28, p < .05, t(48) = 2.19, p < .05 and t(48) = 2.82, p < .01, respectively). Forewarning produced no significant differences in negative emotional reactions or willingness to participate in the future.

3. Deception Concerning Purpose of Study. Five remedial measures (or combinations thereof) for study purpose deception were examined. Forewarning respondents that they would not be told the purpose of the study (as opposed to simply deceiving them) led respondents to be significantly more likely to participate in the future, and significantly more likely to be happy with the experience (t(100) = 2.48, p < .05 and t(100) = 2.46, p < .05, respectively). Debriefing respondents (relative to the control group) had a diverse impact on reactions to the scenario: debriefed respondents were significantly more willing to participate in the future and were happier with the research experience (t(100) = 3.82, p < .001 and t(101) = 2.46, p < .05, respectively). But they also felt more deceived and had more of a negative reaction to the scenario than did the control respondents (t(100) = 3.22, p < .01 and t(100) = 2.77, p < .01, respectively). The other remedial measures (incentive; forewarning and debriefing; and forewarning, debriefing and incentive) did not have any significant effect on reactions and no remedial measure had any significant effect on ethical judgments relative to the control condition (all t values were n.s.). Thus, while forewarning produced some positive reactions, debriefing produced both positive and negative reactions, perhaps because it reveals the deception. Accordingly, in combining forewarning and deception, the

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would not be reliable in this context.
positive effects of the forewarning appear to be canceled out by telling respondents they were deceived. In addition, offering an incentive did not ameliorate the effects of the deception.

4. Deception Concerning Sponsor of Study. Methods of protecting against bias due to respondent awareness of the study sponsor were examined by comparing a control scenario in which the sponsor is identified with three alternative practices. As Table 1 shows, the means across the different scenarios are quite similar. There were no significant differences between the control scenario and the alternative strategies (with the exception of a single significant finding: respondents felt more deceived when they were forewarned that they would not be told the study sponsor compared to when the sponsor was identified). However, when contrasted against a generic control, where there was no identification of the study sponsor, all four of these remedial measure scenarios evoked less negative reactions. There were significant differences on the negative reactions measure between the control and forewarning ($t(83) = 3.03, p < .01$), research firm/forewarning ($t(83) = 2.25, p < .05$), and forewarning/debriefing ($t(83) = 2.18, p < .05$), though not for the other dependent measures (all $t$ values n.s.). Thus, the findings suggest that not identifying the study sponsor can be problematic and show that remedial measures can reduce respondent concerns, but they do not speak to the superiority of any one remedial measure.

5. Benefits. The effects of explaining indirect benefits of research to consumers and of offering a voucher incentive were examined. The explanation of indirect benefits during solicitation did not significantly affect reactions relative to the control (in which respondents were simply asked to participate). The explanation of indirect benefits at the end of the interview, however, did leave respondents feeling significantly less deceived than respondents in the control ($t(84) = 2.08, p < .05$). The vouchers did not have any effect on respondents relative to the control, except for the finding that the $20 voucher led to significantly lower negative reactions compared to the control ($t(84) = 2.80, p < .01$). Thus, there is some indication that the incentives for participation in
research need to be reasonably substantial. However, there were no significant differences on any of the measures between the $20 voucher scenario and the indirect benefits scenarios, suggesting monetary incentives may not be needed if respondents can be persuaded the research is worthwhile.

**Discussion**

Overall, we found that remedial measures did reduce perceived negative consequences and mitigate the use of deceptive practices. Consistent with prior industry research (e.g., Humbaugh 1998), we also confirmed that deceptive practices (specifically, interview length deception and study purpose deception) appear likely to reduce future participation, at least relative to remedial measures. Our study points to the potential effectiveness of remedial measures in market research, at least for the deceptive practices investigated. Subject to our study limitations, research industry efforts to promote development of these measures might well be warranted, as well as their more widespread adoption by academic researchers. Below, we comment on each measure in turn.

Telling the truth is more of an alternative to deception than a remedial measure. Clearly, from an ethical standpoint, it is preferable to avoidable deception. However, researchers may be uncertain when a deception is avoidable. Our study suggests that it is possible to test when a deception can be avoided without compromising research integrity or participation rates. For example, we found that disclosure in advance of the actual length of even a 30-minute interview did not result in more negative evaluations relative to nondisclosure or relative to disclosure of a 15-minute interview. Also, we found that disclosure of the research firm in combination with forewarning (that sponsor identity could not be revealed) was no different to forewarning alone.

The results of our study suggest that forewarning has considerable potential in mitigating adverse consequences of deception in market research. Forewarning about taping led respondents to feel happier with the research experience, to feel less deceived by the research, and to judge it as more ethical than did debriefing or failing to disclose that the interview was being taped. Likewise,
forewarning respondents that they would not be told the purpose of the study made them happier with the experience and more likely to participate in the future. Forewarning also reduced negative reactions to study sponsor deception. Thus, telling respondents ahead of time that they will be taped, or that they will not be told the sponsor or the purpose of a study, appears to be an effective remedial measure.

Debriefing was less effective in reducing respondent concern about deceptive practices. In some cases, debriefing generated negative reactions, including feeling deceived—perhaps because the deception is revealed and its effects are not fully assuaged as a result of the debriefing. However, from an ethical standpoint, this may not make it any less necessary as a way of redressing a deception, at least in the absence of forewarning. Nonetheless, forewarning alone may suffice for much commercial research, given our findings on forewarning. In particular, it may be sufficient in most studies to forewarn respondents that a study sponsor cannot be revealed for reasons of client confidentiality. One test to be applied is whether advance knowledge of the identity of a research sponsor would have influenced the respondent’s decision to participate.

Compensation also appears to be effective, though perhaps it need not be monetary. Explaining the benefits of research participation at the end of an interview appeared to be advantageous. While not significantly affecting willingness to participate in the future, or positive or negative feelings about the research relative to a control condition, telling respondents why their participation is worthwhile reduced feelings of deception, and was generally as effective as providing a $20 voucher.

Turning more specifically to implications for academic research, we note that Toy, et al. (1989) found that many academic marketing studies employ deception, though less than 40% reported conducting a debriefing. While the proportion of debriefings that actually took place was likely higher, it’s very possible that many researchers are not sufficiently familiar with debriefing
techniques or the ethical obligations that go with the use of deception (Toy et al. 2001). Our
discussion of deception shows that there may be good reasons for journal editors to require that the
use of debriefings be reported and, perhaps, the rationale for the deception (Adair, et al. 1985). A
further consideration is the obligation of an educational compensation to academic research
participants, who are often students.

Limitations

Interpretation of our results must be tempered by the study limitations. First, although our
findings for remedial measures overall are relatively robust, this was a broad and inevitably
exploratory study and this limits claims that can be made about the relative merits of different
remedial measures or their most appropriate levels. A more complete design would extend to a
greater number of treatments and levels for each treatment and with more scope for analysis across
issues. Second, there are inevitable trade-offs between control and richness in the use of an
experimental design. More specifically, respondents read descriptions of research situations, and
were not subject to the questionable practices directly. While we considered the latter approach, we
concluded that to deliberately engage in unethical practices in order to test their effects would not be
appropriate. Third, it is likely that there is some degree of non-response bias influencing our
findings. We had only respondents willing to participate in the mall-intercept. In many respects,
however, the participants in our study represent the segment of greatest interest to research
practitioners: those who are willing to participate in research and comprise the pool of available
respondents for market research. Fourth, although administered as a mall-intercept, all the scenarios
in our study questionnaire referred to phone research. Finally, the scenarios were set in a market
research context, though we believe they are applicable to academic consumer research as well as
commercial research. Problematic practices and remedial measures could be explored within the
context of academic research, perhaps with researchers testing different approaches as part of other studies (e.g., changes in respondent satisfaction with short or long debriefings).

**Conclusion**

In sum, we argue that deception in commercial and academic consumer research may be avoidable because alternatives are often available. Academic researchers are well advised to anticipate IRBs drawing their attention to possible alternative non-deceptive approaches. Where alternative procedures are not available, the researcher must consider whether an intentional deception is warranted by the possible benefits of the study, even if the deception is mild. If the deception is considered justifiable, its effects may be mitigated by the use of forewarning and debriefing. This approach may make research participation less aversive in addition to being less potentially unethical and reducing any harm that might otherwise be perpetrated.

**References**


## TABLE 1

Respondent Ratings of Scenarios (N = 406)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Participate</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Deceived</th>
<th>Happy</th>
<th>Unethical</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Length of Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>told 15/actually 15</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>3.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>told 15/actually 30</td>
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<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.59</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>not told length/actually 15</td>
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<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>3.22</td>
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<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.11</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>4.76</td>
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4 Approximately 18 respondents per scenario.