

# Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods

## Deception

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According to *Webster's Dictionary*, *deception* is the act of making a person believe what is not true; that [p. 183 ↓ ] is, misleading someone. The use of deception in survey research varies in degree. Typically, its use by researchers is mild and is thought to cause no harm to survey respondents and other research subjects. At times, however, the use of deception has been extremely harmful to research subjects. Thus the nature of deception involved in research must be carefully considered. Currently, contemporary researchers in the academic and government sectors submit research proposals to their institutional review board (IRB) primarily to ensure that research participants are protected from harm. In the commercial sector in the United States, this process may not be followed as closely.

It is not uncommon in survey research that some deception occurs, especially in the form of not telling respondents in advance of data collection what is the actual purpose of the study being conducted. The justification for this type of deception is the fact that telling respondents of the actual study purpose in advance of gathering data from them is likely to bias their responses.

For example, psychologists studying differences in thought patterns of depressed and nondepressed individuals may use mild deception in the form of omission of information to avoid sensitizing the subjects to the purpose of the study and thereby biasing the findings. For example, one study conducted by Carla Scanlan in 2000 did not disclose to subjects that the purpose of administering a particular screening questionnaire was to identify depressed and nondepressed subjects; the questionnaire was an untitled version of the Beck Depression Inventory—II (BDI-II), which asked subjects to read 21 sets of statements and choose the statement in each set that best described how she or he had been feeling for the past 2 weeks, including today. The consent form merely stated that the participant would fill out various questionnaires in order to determine for which experiments subjects qualified. Later, subjects were told that the purpose of this particular research project was to study the emotional state of students coming to college for the first time. After data collection and data analysis were completed, a written summary of the results was provided to those interested in the outcome. This debriefing process was complete and disclosed the purposes of the research. If the purpose of the research had been fully disclosed to participants beforehand, data collection would have been compromised.

In another example, in 2006, Scott Keeter conducted several studies in order to investigate whether cell phone only individuals differed from individuals who had landlines. That goal was not disclosed at the outset of the call; some of the questions were political in nature and others were demographic. The purpose of the call was given as a political survey, although the real intent was to investigate how cell only individuals differed from landline users. In this example, failing to disclose this purpose harmed no one and preserved the integrity of the survey responses, and it was deemed that no debriefing was necessary.

Although the uses of mild deception in survey research almost never causes harm to the respondent, there have been nonsurvey research situations utilizing deception that have caused grievous harm to the participant. For instance, the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study was conducted from 1932 to 1972 in Macon County, Alabama. The purpose of this study was to investigate the progression of untreated syphilis. The men (all blacks) were told that they were receiving treatment for their disease when actually it was actively withheld; the researchers secured the cooperation of all medical personnel in the county to withhold treatment from the men. Although penicillin became the standard treatment for syphilis in 1947, it continued to be withheld from the participants in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study until 1972. Some of the men had untreated syphilis infections for 40 years before they finally received treatment, but, shamefully, many of the men did not survive the disease. By 1947, if not earlier, their suffering and deaths could have been easily prevented by a penicillin injection. No one ever told them. In this case, research deception caused irreparable harm and death.

During recent presidential election years, a form of "survey" has been carried out that pretends to be gathering opinions from potential voters but in fact is an attempt to sway large numbers of voters' opinions in a particular direction as a primary approaches. This practice is known to survey professionals as a *push poll* and is actually a form of political telemarketing. For example, members of an organization that support Candidate X hire personnel to stage a telephone "survey" in which initially it may appear that a legitimate survey is being conducted. However, after the apparent legitimate start of the "interview," the person administering the "survey" begins to convey unfavorable and often false information about Candidate Y in the guise of survey questions. This is done to persuade the person being "interviewed" to vote against [p. 184 ↓ ] Candidate

Y. No debriefing takes place in these push polls, and the deceptive practice is highly unethical.

In contrast, if this approach were being done as part of a legitimate survey that involved deception, at the conclusion of the interview an ethical researcher would have interviewers debrief the respondents about the deception that took place. For example, the debriefing would honestly disclose why the false information was conveyed about Candidate Y and a sincere attempt would be made to undo any harm that the deception may have caused, including informing the respondent that the information about Candidate Y in the questions was not accurate.

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*See also*

#### Further Readings

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