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Probing Suspicion Among Participants in Deception Research

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Deception is a popular and useful technique for examining a variety of important social psychological phenomena. Indeed, deception has proved to be indispensable in studying and establishing causality within a variety of important human social phenomena (e.g., aggression, prejudice, obedience, conformity, impression management). Upwards of 81% of studies published in the top social psychological journals use deception in their procedures (Adair, Dushenko, & Lindsay, 1985).

One typical aspect of deception experiments is the postexperimental inquiry in which experimenters, using interviews or paper-and-pencil questionnaires, probe whether participants were deceived and whether they truly believed the ostensible purpose of the study. The goal of the inquiry is to identify and perhaps eliminate data from participants whose behavior stems from an awareness of the deception or hypotheses rather than a natural response to the manipulations. Participants who identify the deception may supply data that reflect a response to their knowledge of the deception rather than a response to the manipulated variables, thus providing an inadequate test of the experimental hypotheses.

Researchers using deception techniques obviously make an assumption that participants will report any and all suspicions about the experiment and that the experimenter can ferret out instances in which participants have uncovered or guessed the nature of the deception and the experimental

hypothesis. However, a recent event in our laboratory prompted us to pause and re-evaluate the effectiveness of established procedures (see Greenberg & Folger, 1988) for detecting suspicion of deception among research participants.

Eight introductory psychology students were recruited to participate in a pilot study examining the effect of practice task feedback on subsequent performance. Because of a last minute cancellation, we recruited a graduate student to step in and pose as a participant. Fortunately, the seven real participants in the study were unaware that the eighth participant was a graduate student who knew of the deception and the purpose of the experiment. During the study, the experimenter was required to leave the room for a brief period. Although they were admonished not to, the real participants began to discuss the experiment among themselves during the experimenter's absence. By comparing feedback they had individually received, the participants uncovered the deception and realized that their individual feedback was false. When the experimenter returned, no participant revealed his or her ill-found knowledge but, instead, continued to participate as though nothing had happened.

Because we were piloting new procedures, the experimenter took great care during the postexperimental inquiry to assess whether participants were suspicious of the procedures and aware of any deception. After announcing that the experiment involved deception, the experimenter asked participants on three separate occasions whether they were suspicious of the procedures or anything that happened in the experiment. Although the participants were clearly aware of the deception, none divulged this knowledge.

Why did participants not divulge their suspicions of the procedures and their awareness of the deception? It is possible that participants did not report their suspicions because to do so would reveal that they had blatantly disobeyed the experimenter's instructions not to interact during his brief absence. Participants may also have fallen

into the role of "good subject" (Orne, 1962), withholding any information they felt might undermine the experiment, affirm the experimental hypotheses, or otherwise cause problems for the experimenter. Furthermore, participants may have refrained from voicing their suspicions to avoid appearing foolish should the knowledge they gained illicitly about the deception be in error.

Perhaps most troubling was the inability of a highly trained experimenter to identify suspicious participants. Not only did participants not divulge their knowledge of the deception when questioned, but their responses to manipulation check questions completed before the questioning provided little evidence that they were aware of the deception. Six of the seven participants responded to the manipulation check items in a manner that was consistent with the cover story and feedback yet was inconsistent with the knowledge they had gained during their discussion. Perhaps participants are conscious that it is problematic for them to know more about an experiment than they are told and that such knowledge may invalidate their data or the experiment (Orne, 1962).

Of course, our seven participants do not represent all experimental participants. Nevertheless, their behavior suggests that, even when pressed, participants cannot be counted on to reveal knowledge they may acquire or suspicions they may develop about the deception or experimental hypotheses.

Our serendipitous discovery has several implications for investigators using deception in their research. First, admonishing participants not to discuss the experiment among themselves in the experimenter's absence is clearly inadequate. Experimenters using deception should make it a point never to leave unsupervised any participants who have knowledge that, when shared, could lead to discovery of the deception or hypothesis. In general, it is problematic to leave participants unsupervised in any setting where discussion might alter responses to stimulus material. Second, investigators need to evaluate more carefully the procedures they use to assess suspicion among research participants. Merely having par-

ticipants respond to questionnaire items assessing the extent to which they believed the cover story (e.g., that they believed their responses would not be evaluated in a no-evaluation condition) may be insufficient. Moreover, being more direct during the postexperimental inquiry (Page, 1973) may be ineffective in uncovering suspicions. Perhaps experimenters could reinforce participants during the postexperimental inquiry for expressing suspicions or for correctly guessing the hypothesis or the nature of the deception. The goal would be to structure the environment so that participants would want to reveal any suspicions they might have or to inform the experimenter of any information they acquired during the experiment that might undermine a fair test of the hypotheses.

Our observation also has implications beyond experiments involving deception and is important for any study in which the investigator depends on participants to follow specific instructions (such as not sharing responses with others) or to provide truthful responses. Participants who deviate from an investigator's explicit instructions and then withhold this fact from the investigator place the test of the investigator's hypothesis in jeopardy. For example, when a participant in a medical study fails to follow an experimental treatment regimen and then withholds this information from the researcher, the findings from the research may be compromised. Likewise, a participant in a blind experiment who inadvertently learns that she or he is in a specific condition may undermine the results by not disclosing this information to the researcher. Our observation suggests that participants may fail to supply, and may even withhold, information that is crucial to evaluating whether the procedures provide a valid test of the hypothesis. If participants cannot be counted on to divulge such information on their own, then researchers need to take additional precautions to assess participant suspicions and perceptions.

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The Journal Wedge

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Most psychologists have a core area of interest and an assortment of other related areas of interest surrounding that core that are important to their thinking, teaching, and research but are somewhat peripheral to their primary focus. These are areas in which we want to keep up but for which we simply lack the time for careful reading of the primary literature. One way we can keep up is by joining an organization or an American Psychological Association (APA) division devoted to the peripheral area of interest.

As organizations and divisions develop and grow, however, there is a perceived need for a new journal in the field. Leaders of the group contact publishers, who inform the group that a journal is possible but only on the condition that all members receive the journal. This condition necessitates a substantial increase in dues. As a result, the peripheral members find that they no longer can justify the expenditure of funds to retain membership in the organization or division in which they are interested but not focally so. At first, the group loses members, but it typically recovers and thrives. A new journal is born, and all seems well.

What is not well, but is often unrecognized, however, is that this process adds to

the already rampaging centrifugal forces that are driving psychologists progressively apart from each other and causing many to lose any hope of a unified psychology. Almost every year, one can find an *American Psychologist* article documenting and lamenting the balkanization of psychology. The era of the generalist is long gone, and it is becoming more difficult to have any substantial breadth. This trend is accelerated by organizations' decisions to add journals and by publishers' requirements that the journals be sent to all members. The new journal thus produces an unintended consequence of driving a wedge between the related fields of inquiry—the journal wedge.

I have no really good solution to the problem. The process seems virtually inevitable. Many of the new journals serve useful functions, and I would not advocate a journal cap. However, I do have one suggestion that might lessen the impact of the journal wedge. If organizations could maintain more complete and up-to-date home pages on the developing World Wide Web (WWW), well linked to other home pages and accessible to nonmembers, it would be easier for nonmembers to keep up with the field of concern. The information going into newsletters generally already exists in electronic form, and it is increasingly easier to place such material on the WWW. Granted, there is a problem. Organizations need numbers, and the more information they provide free to nonmembers, the less the incentive will be to join the organization. However, in the long run, perhaps if they can get and keep the peripheral psychologist interested by providing information of this sort, they may be better able to recruit the new members who will help the organization to grow. Those new members may then ultimately help control the cost of the journal and other aspects of the organization's operating budget. Even if this does not happen, the organization can help spread the work of its existing members and provide an important service to psychology at large by making it a bit easier for psychologists to retain some degree of breadth.

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