

## THE UBIQUITY OF DECEPTION AND THE ETHICS OF DECEPTIVE RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

Does the fact that deception is widely practised – even though there is a general prohibition against deception – provide insight into the ethics of deceptive methods in research, especially for social-behavioral research?

I answer in the affirmative. The ubiquity of deception argument, as I will call it, points to the need for a concrete and nuanced understanding of the variety of deceptive practices, and thus promises an alternative route of analysis for why some deception may be permissible in social-behavioral research. As an alternative argument it also promises to break the stalemate that emerges in debates on the ethics of deceptive methods in social-behavioral research.

In the current paper I (1) motivate and articulate the ubiquity argument in order to clarify the significance of ubiquity and discharge some initial objections. Then, on the recommendations of the ubiquity argument, I (2) highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships for understanding the ethics of deception. Following this insight I (3) provide an analysis of several features of the researcher-participant relationship relevant to the understanding of the ethics of deception in research. I then (4) conclude the argument with some recommendations for the ethical use of deceptive methods in social-behavioral research.

### ARTICULATING THE ARGUMENT

From its earliest point, the debate regarding the ethical use of deceptive methods in social-behavioral research has oscillated between only a handful of arguments with no promising resolution in sight.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> S. Milgram. 1963. Behavioral Study of Obedience. *J Abnorm Psychol*, 67: 371–378; S. Milgram. 1974. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial; D. Baumrind. 1964. Some Thoughts on Ethics of Research: After Reading Milgram's 'Behavioral Study of Obedience.' *Am Psychol*, 19: 421–423; D. Baumrind. 1985. Research Using Intentional Deception: Ethical Issues Revisited. *Am Psychol*, 40: 165–174.

Proponents of deceptive methods generally rely on appeals to experimental necessity. If the research subjects were aware of certain aspects of the experiment, they would respond quite differently. In order to capture realistic or ecologically valid behaviour in participants deception is necessary for some research. Thus, if the social value of the research is sufficient – and other protections for research participants are in place, such as debriefing and exposing participants to no more than minimal risk – deception should be permitted.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A.C. Elms. 1982. Keeping Deception Honest: Justifying Conditions for Social Scientific Research Stratagems. In *Ethical Issues in Social*

Opponents of deceptive methods, on the other hand, appeal to either a principle of autonomy (respect for persons) or the potential harms posed by deceptive methods. Regardless of the social value of research, they argue, deceptive methods fundamentally undermine a person's autonomy, which in bioethical terms means the person is not given an adequate opportunity for informed consent.<sup>3</sup> Misleading an individual about the potential harms or other substantive features of the experiment effectively hinders the participant's ability to make a rational, self-determined decision about participating in the research. They also argue that research participants, upon learning of the deception, may feel duped, embarrassed, and distressed at being deceived; or worse, the deception may reveal something undesirable in the participant's own character, thus negatively affecting the participant's self-esteem and possibly leading to long-term harm. The end result may be a lower regard by the public for the research enterprise and the professional standards that guide social-behavioral research.<sup>4</sup>

Each of these arguments has received much attention in the research ethics literature, to the point of stalemate. For example, although professional codes of ethics in the social sciences do allow deceptive methods, within certain constraints,<sup>5</sup> much controversy still surrounds proper informed consent procedures and protections against possible harm. Given growing public awareness of past abuses in the treatment of human subjects, many worry about the long-term effect the use of deception will have on the moral underpinnings of the profession and on public support. In short, the debate focuses exclusively on the proper balance between autonomy, harms, and the potential value of research. Each faction gives greater or lesser weight to one or another of these arguments.

Yet, there exists an under-appreciated argument that promises progress in the debate without appealing exclusively to the well-traveled arguments about potential harm, autonomy, or value of research *per se*. The current paper focuses on what I call the 'ubiquity of deception argument' or 'ubiquity argument'. The ubiquity argu-

ment appeals to the widespread practice of deception in everyday life as providing reasons for thinking that some deceptive methods in research are ethically justified. It is an argument that is often alluded to in discussion of deception in research, but to the best of my knowledge, has not received any sustained treatment. In his book on the history of deception in social psychology James Korn comes as close as anyone to providing an explicit statement of the argument:

Deception is everywhere in American culture and has a long history . . . In this context, social psychologists do not see their deception as serious, but as comparable to the typical experiences of everyday life, which are what they seek to understand. The little lies told by psychologists are part of the same culture that includes big lies told by presidents . . . Thousands of college students have taken part in studies that use deception. For any one student that deception is only one among the many encountered every day. This sometimes is used as a justification for the use of deception; it is no worse than anything that often happens to any of us.<sup>6</sup>

According to Korn's formulation, the ubiquity argument simply claims that the deception used in the laboratory (of social psychologists) is ethically and historically no different from the deception one encounters in everyday life. It is, as he emphasizes, only one among the many examples of deception encountered every day. The use of deception in the laboratory, then, is justified on account of its ubiquity, its commonality with the prevalent use of deception in society more generally, or at least because it is not an extraordinary occurrence in the life of any individual.

Korn goes on to criticize the apparent shallowness of this argument. The fact that deception in social psychology research may be no worse or no more exceptional than anything that happens in everyday life is, according to Korn, a curious way to justify the use of deception. As he points out, the culture of deception includes the malicious, the harmful, and the underhanded forms of deception that no one would consider ethically acceptable. ' . . . [T]hat is precisely why it is an important issue. Deception in research adds to the deception that permeates our culture, but takes place in an institution, the university, which is dedicated to the search for truth.'<sup>7</sup> According to Korn, not only does deceptive research contribute to the unscrupulous deception that permeates culture, it does so with a certain amount of institutional

*Science Research*. T. Beuachamp et al., eds. Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press: 232–245.

<sup>3</sup> R. Macklin. 1982. The Problem of Adequate Disclosure in Social Science Research. In *Ethical Issues in Social Science Research*. T. Beuachamp et al., eds. Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press: 193–214.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Baumrind. 1964, *op. cit.* note 1; Also, see J.E. Sieber. 1984. Informed Consent and Deception. In *Ethical Issues in Social and Animal Research*. J. E. Sieber, ed. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 39–76.

<sup>5</sup> For example, American Psychological Association. (2002). *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*. Available at: <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html> [Accessed 9 June 2006].

<sup>6</sup> J.H. Korn. 1997. *Illusions of Reality: A History of Deception in Social Psychology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press: 9–10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*: 10.

hypocrisy; it institutionalizes and legitimizes questionable practices of deception.

Korn's objection is representative of responses to the ubiquity argument: they reject the argument as superficial, blind to the obvious evils of deception. Korn's objection, however, relies on normative and empirical assumptions that should be scrutinized. At the very least the objection presents the ubiquity argument in very uncharitable terms.

Korn's criticism of the ubiquity argument relies on a standard analysis of deception that views *all* deception as *prima facie* wrong because, as the analysis goes, deception undermines individual autonomy and poses unacceptable harms to human sociality. For instance, deception is one of the easiest ways to abuse or otherwise take advantage of others in pursuit of strategic and nefarious goals. Moreover, deceiving someone demonstrates a degree of disrespect towards the individual deceived which is ultimately destructive of fruitful human relations, because deception undermines the trust that serves as the basis for all other human interaction.<sup>8</sup> On this standard analysis of deception, appealing to the widespread practice of deception is not a legitimate counter to the *prima facie* wrongness of that practice; ubiquity is no defense for a fundamentally corrupt practice.

The normative and empirical assumptions in the standard analysis are problematic. It is certainly true that as a general rule deception may pose serious harms to individuals and threats to individual autonomy, but it does not follow that the general claim applies equally to all forms of deception. Korn's formulation of the ubiquity argument credits social psychologists with viewing their use of deception 'as comparable to the typical experiences of everyday life.' Korn includes in 'the experience of everyday life' the 'small lies' told by researchers and the 'big lies' told by presidents. But it is unfair to consider the small and large lies as ethically equivalent. The long history of deception in American culture (as in other cultures) includes deception for strategic, self-serving, and malevolent reasons, as well as more benevolent forms, including white lies and deception to protect others from unjust harm. To group the wide variety of deceptive practices together in a single category is to miss a valuable point of the ubiquity argument. Deception is used for many different purposes, is achieved by many different means, and is practised in a wide variety of contexts, each of which are important for understanding the ethics of deception. As I will develop the point below,

the appeal to the ubiquity of deceptive practices is fundamentally a call to look at the *variety* of deception not just the *popularity* of deception when evaluating deceptive research. The standard analysis which views all deception as *prima facie* wrong begs the question against the ubiquity argument.

A clearer and more obviously defensible formulation of the ubiquity argument is needed. The ubiquity of deception argument can be articulated in a number of ways. A first formulation of the ubiquity argument can be put simply:

*Deception is ubiquitous and since everyone does it, there is no reason why researchers shouldn't do it as well. Thus, deception in research is ethically permissible.*

Clearly this formulation is a poor argument. Just because everyone is doing it, does not tell us that it should (or should not) be done. Slavery, subjugation of women, child labour and other behaviours were, at one time, common practices, but we do not need to show here why the popularity of these practices does not provide moral justification for them.<sup>9</sup> The appeal to the ubiquity of deception is not simply an appeal to the popularity of the practice as justification for it. A more charitable, but still problematic, formulation of the ubiquity argument is as follows:

*Deception is ubiquitous in society, and research practices should not be judged by different moral standards than those commonly accepted in society at large. Thus, deception in research is ethically permissible.*

This is an improvement over the first formulation in so far as it introduces a moral reason calling for parity in the evaluation of practices inside and outside the research enterprise. The practice of deceptive research methods should be judged on par with common practices (and judgments) of deception in society at large. As the argument stands, however, it requires that deception be generally accepted as ethical, if for no other reason than it is ubiquitous. As opponents argue in the standard analysis, even though deception is ubiquitous, it is usually viewed as unethical. As such, the second formulation of the ubiquity argument should lead us to the conclusion that deceptive research is unethical.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A. Buchanan. 1996. Judging the Past: The Case of the Human Radiation Experiments. *Hastings Cent Rep*, 26: 25–30.

<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, even if it turned out that deception was widely accepted as ethical or at least not unethical, there are still plausible exceptions for particular uses of deception. For example, there may be good reasons for thinking that as an ordinary social practice deception is permissible, but it should not be instituted in, say, doctor-patient relations, educational practices, or even social-behavioral research.

<sup>8</sup> S. Bok. 1978. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. New York: Pantheon Books; S. Bok. 2001. Deceit. In *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. L. Becker & C. Becker, eds. London: Routledge: 378–381.

A third and more defensible formulation of the ubiquity argument is a modification of the second:

*Deception is ubiquitous in society, and research practices should not be judged by different moral standards than those commonly accepted in society at large. Given that some deception is ethically permissible (or even obligatory), it follows that insofar as deceptive research practices are analogous/parallel to those accepted forms of deception, then such research is ethically permissible.*

Articulated in this way, the ubiquity of deception argument avoids the problems of the first two formulations. It doesn't rely simply on the widespread use of deception to justify its permissibility in research, nor does it require a general acceptance of deceptive behaviours as ethical. Instead the ubiquity argument relies on two valuable principles. First it emphasizes a standard of rational consistency in ethical judgment: judgments about the moral permissibility of deception in one domain should transfer to other domains, not withstanding relevant differences that should account for differences in judgment. Second, it relies on a concrete understanding of the variety of deceptive human practice and thus the ethical import of that practice in its various forms. The ubiquity of deception argument recommends that when we look at the variety of deceptive practices in society at large, judgments about the use of deception in the research environment will be informed accordingly. This is the chief virtue of the ubiquity argument. It expects an appreciation of the diversity of human practice to inform the ethical analysis of deception rather than relying on general appeals to abstract ethical principles (e.g. individual autonomy and blanket prohibitions against potential harm) which by themselves may incorporate questionable normative or empirical assumptions.

The point I have been driving at in this section is that there is a certain merit to the ubiquity argument that is under-appreciated in the existing literature. Opponents of deceptive methods – leaning heavily on the standard analysis of deception – appear to identify the use of deception in research as deception *simpliciter* (thus not ethical), rather than as deception *qua* variety of social practices (some ethical, some not). The result is a broad brush approach that fails to appreciate the nuances of deceptive practice and its meaning for social interaction. Given the premise that some deceptive practices are or should be judged as ethical practice, the ubiquity argument recommends a concrete understanding of those conditions under which deception is so judged. If it turns out that some deceptive research is analogous with other permissible forms of deception, then those forms of deceptive research may be ethically permissible. At the very

least the ubiquity of deception argument demands that a concrete understanding of the role of deception in other arenas come to the forefront when making ethical judgments about deception in social-behavioral research. In large part, the current stalemate in the debate regarding the ethics of deception in social-behavioral research results from not appreciating that fact. Thus the ubiquity of deception argument promises to offer an alternative route through this stalemate.

## NUANCED RELATIONSHIPS

On the standard analysis deception is unethical because either it harms an undeserving person or it violates a fundamental principle of respect for persons necessary for civil society (e.g. a principle of autonomy). Hence, those cases in which deception is ethically permissible are reserved for instances that 'will prevent imminent and otherwise avoidable harm', or so-called 'white lies' for which no harm is likely and the individual's autonomy remains intact.<sup>11</sup> Given this standard account, it is no wonder that deceptive research in the social-behavioral sciences is suspect: it neither prevents an otherwise avoidable harm (deceptive research creates the opportunity for harm) nor is it done without the expectation of undermining a person's autonomy (e.g., genuine informed consent is threatened). Limiting the exceptions to the general prohibition against deception to just those cases, however, overlooks the variety and value of many instances of deception.

Certainly, the potential harm posed by deception should be a consideration in evaluating deception, and proper respect should be accorded for the autonomy of individuals, but the standard account is far too general to have much to say about the nuances of deceptive practices suggested by the ubiquity argument. The variety and widespread use of deception evidences the likely possibility that some deception is perfectly legitimate, perhaps obligatory in some cases, and even necessary for a fruitful and moral life.<sup>12</sup> Thus attention to the concrete specifics of deceptive practices is of utmost importance for evaluating the ethical permissibility of those practices.

I contend that what is missing in the standard account of deception is an appreciation of the role interpersonal relationships play in the ethics of deception. The following examples should suffice to illustrate the basic idea. I will then turn to several features of the researcher-

<sup>11</sup> Bok 2001, *op. cit.* note 8.

<sup>12</sup> See D. Nyberg. 1993. *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

participant relationship and how this informs the ethics of deceptive methods in research.

Consider the case of Juliet. Juliet has contracted a venereal disease but wishes to keep this a private matter. When asked by a casual friend (e.g. a co-worker) about her health, she accordingly leaves out the fact that she has contracted a venereal disease, or may even explicitly deny she has any sexually transmitted disease. On the standard analysis this is a permissible form of deception, a white lie that causes no serious harm to herself or her casual friend. Now, imagine that Juliet is asked about her health by an intimate friend with whom she may become sexually involved. Is it ethically permissible for her to implicitly or explicitly deceive the other about her status as a carrier of a venereal disease? Presumably, no. Why? On the standard analysis her deception poses a serious risk to her potential sexual partner, and may undermine that partner's ability to make an autonomous (i.e. informed) decision about future romantic encounters with Juliet.

The two Juliet scenarios yield different conclusions, even though Juliet was involved in the same type of deception in each scenario – deception about her status as a carrier of venereal disease. Why then the difference in ethical evaluation? On the standard account, the answer would have to be that the two scenarios demonstrate either different risks or different applications of the principle of respect for persons. Agreeable as this may be, the answers provided by the standard account do not offer sufficient guidance as to why we apply these principles (harms or autonomy) differently in these two cases. That is, appeals to potential harms and respect for persons are insufficient explanations for why the same deception is ethical in one scenario (with the casual friend) but not the other (with the intimate friend).

What is missing from the analysis is an explicit appreciation of the context in which the deception takes place. In the two scenarios involving Juliet, the relevant difference is the type of interpersonal relationship she is in with the deceived. In the first scenario, it is a casual acquaintance for which her venereal disease probably carries no serious consequences and for which she is not expected to reveal her sexual health status. In the second scenario, it is a more intimate, potentially sexual relationship for which her disease state has significant consequences. The difference in relationship provides a guide for the appropriate evaluation of acceptable risks and the proper bounds of autonomy to be respected. The standard analysis either leaves this aspect out entirely, or assumes it uncritically.

Nevertheless, it might be objected that the types of risks posed by Juliet's deception in these two scenarios

are so different that one may easily overlook the nature of the relationship as an essential part of the analysis. In the first scenario, no risk of spreading disease is likely, but in the second scenario it is. The fact that she may or may not engage in sex is the overriding issue, not the particular relationship she is involved in with the friend. I agree the Juliet scenarios demand a close assessment of potential harms, but this doesn't negate the need to consider the type of relationship involved. In fact, as the following cases illustrates, the type of relationship is crucial for assessing potential harm.

Consider a set of similar cases involving Julian, who has also contracted a venereal disease and wishes to be discreet about his condition. In the course of frank discussions with a casual acquaintance, Julian denies having a venereal disease. Similarly to the first scenario involving Juliet, it is reasonable to think that this is a permissible form of deception on Julian's part. Now, consider the same conversation between Julian and a close personal friend, with whom he is not sexually intimate, nor likely to be, but with whom he has a very close long-term relationship. Is it permissible for Julian to deceive his close friend regarding his venereal disease? The case is not so clear. It will depend on how we understand the nature of the relationship between Julian and his close friend. I tend to think that Julian would be wrong to deceive his close friend, because even though there is no overriding ethical demand to divulge intimate details to casual acquaintances, in closer friendships there is a greater emphasis on honesty regarding the details of one's life. Regardless, the evaluation one makes of Julian's deception with his close friend will crucially depend on the nature of their relationship and the expectations of that relationship. But – and this is the crux of the issue – it is not dependent on the nature of the risk posed by Julian's sexual health *per se*. In both scenarios involving Julian, the deceptive act is the same and the risk to the deceived is essentially the same; neither the casual friend nor the close friend are in danger of contracting a venereal disease from Julian. Yet we can come to differing conclusions about the permissibility of deception in these scenarios involving Julian. What accounts for the difference? The standard account fails to provide guidance. There is no general principle of protection against harm or abstract applications of autonomy that helps here – that is, no abstract, universally applicable measure of acceptable harm, or bounds of respect that can be applied. What accounts for the difference in evaluation is the nature of the interpersonal relationship. The details of the relationship between Julian and his friend will determine what harms are acceptable or unacceptable, and what the proper bounds of autonomy are that should be respected.

The standard analysis of deception simply doesn't capture this detail.

The concrete nature of human relationships is an ineliminable feature of assessing potential harms and the limits of autonomy in deceptive practice. A complete and realistic account of the ethics of deception should include the details of the interpersonal relationship involved. This is no easy task. Such an account can become complex very quickly. For instance, as a general rule intimate relationships may carry greater obligations for honesty than casual relationships, but this can be subverted depending on the content and context of the deception involved. The nature of intimate relationships may in fact positively call for deception on occasion. It is certainly not impermissible to deceive one's spouse regarding the aesthetics of his or her recent weight gain, especially if one's spouse possesses a fragile bodily self-image. Moreover, the moral significance of the specific relationship may increase or decrease depending on the type and form of deception involved. There may be cases in which the nature of a relationship plays little or no significant role in the evaluation, so that deception of that sort is always wrong (or right) regardless of the relationship between the deceived and deceiver. But in many cases the nature of the relationship between deceived and deceiver is extremely important. This is certainly the case with regard to the researcher-participant relationship.

## THE RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP AND DECEPTIVE RESEARCH

What details or features of the researcher-participant relationship bear on the ethical evaluation of deceptive methods in social-behavioral research? When compared to the physician-patient relationship the researcher-participant relationship is highly under-theorized for ethical purposes. In what follows no attempt is made at comprehensiveness, nevertheless, there are a number of interrelated features of the researcher-participant relationship I want to draw out that bear on the ethics of deception in research.

First, the researcher-participant relationship is essentially a professional relationship. That is to say, the expectations of the relationship are organized within the context of a recognized and institutionalized discipline whose aims and methods are generally accepted and valued inside and outside that discipline. The reason for researchers and participants to engage with each other is not personal intimacy, but to produce some useful knowledge as a result of the interaction. For any professional

relationship, what counts as productive or useful depends on the aims and methods of the discipline within which the relationship is forged. For instance, a physician-patient relationship is formed on the basis of the patient's need for health care or medical advice. The physician has the appropriate knowledge base and wherewithal to help the patient. Thus the physician and the patient are expected to behave in certain ways as a result of the type of institution within which the relationship is formed. The professional nature of the relationship provides ethical guidelines for the interaction.

Since the researcher-participant relationship is primarily a relationship grounded in a professional association, one might think that deception would be ruled out. This is not necessarily the case. Consider the physician-patient relationship. It is generally accepted as wrong for a physician to deceive the patient about a diagnosis or the availability of relevant interventions because it goes against the ideal of acting on behalf of the patient's health interests. The professional nature of the relationship may limit the type of deception permitted, but a complete prohibition is unlikely. For instance, arguably it is ethical for the physician to deceive the patient if (among other things) it entails the well-being of the patient, such as placebo treatments to calm an anxious patient; or asking the patient to count to three before receiving a shot in the arm, but injecting it on the first count, and so on. These examples may seem trivial, but they reveal that in virtue of the physician-patient relationship – the type of professional relationship, the purposes for which the relationship is formed, and a host of other considerations – certain forms of deception are or are not permissible. The mere fact that it is a professional relationship doesn't preclude the permissibility of some deception.

Second, the physician-patient relationship is not the best model for understanding the ethical limits of the researcher-participant relationship and its significance for the permissibility of deception. For one thing, the physician-patient relationship is embedded in a widely recognized and socially sanctioned set of expectations, primarily to provide medical services to those in need. As such, the relationship has several well-defined formal features that allow for targeted analysis and evaluation especially with regard to deception. If the patient is deceived about the nature of his or her ailment or the type of therapeutic intervention that is most likely to bring them back to health, the physician would not be fulfilling the crucial role expected of physicians. When we come to a less formally defined or socially recognized professional relationship, such as researcher-participant relationships, the analogy with the physician-patient relationship may actually import unacceptable assumptions that do not

accurately represent the unique ethical features of the researcher-participant relationship.

One of the primary differences between a physician-patient and researcher-participant relationship is the purpose for entering into the relationship in the first place. The researcher-participant relationship is not (necessarily nor essentially) for the benefit of the participant. The goal of the physician-patient relationship is to benefit the patient, whereas the goal of research is essentially to produce reliable and generalizable knowledge. As a result, the aim of a particular research program may not coincide with the participant's needs or interests. In fact, there is no necessary connection between the two; unlike in the physician-patient relationship. This is one reason why clinical research raises serious questions with regard to proper ethical practice. In clinical research the role of physician and researcher are often confounded. Accordingly, the clinician/researcher and the patient/participant may be confused as to the appropriate expectations when entering into that clinical research relationship.<sup>13</sup> Given the differing goals and methods of a physician and researcher, this can lead to serious ethical conflicts. Likewise, drawing a close analogy with physician-patient relationship will distort the proper evaluation of the permissibility of deception within the researcher-participant relationship.

Third, the fact that research is not of necessity aimed at the benefit of the participant means that the choice of research goals and appropriate methods for achieving those goals are ultimately defined by the researcher (and the research profession), not by the goals or needs of the participant; the relationship is defined primarily by the researcher's curiosity and available methodologies, not by the interests of the participant. As a result, it can be said that the participant is, to a very large degree, subject to the demands of the research discipline as a volunteer. Insofar as the goals of the research are worthwhile, the participant is implicitly 'going along with' or 'subject to' the accepted practice of the research profession. This is not to say that anything goes. The researcher does not have some inviolable right to use the participant in whatever ways he or she deems fit. There are limits, of course. But insofar as the goals and methods of the researcher-participant relationship are defined by the researcher and not by the participant, we can understand the researcher-participant relationship as more like a teacher-student relationship than a physician-patient relationship in many important respects.

In a teacher-student relationship the teacher is not simply representing or advocating for the student's interests in the way that a physician is advocating for a patient's health. It is true that the teacher is ultimately acting for the benefit of the student – contributing to the students' knowledge or skills – but it is equally true that the student may not know what is in his or her best interest regarding the significance of their own knowledge base or skill base, including the proper methods for achieving an education. The teacher's role is instrumental in the development of the student's capacity to identify and exercise those interests and autonomy. In a sense, the student is subject to the demands of the educational discipline, and the teacher is empowered, by the very nature of the relationship with the student, to act in accord with the demands of the educational discipline, even if these demands do not correspond to explicit desires of the student. As a society, we recognize the value of (primary) education and so entitle the educational profession to implement the appropriate discipline. This may include acting on the student's best interest without him or her knowing about it or even being deceived about the process. For example, when teaching a student about a skill or specific task, it may benefit the student to be ignorant of the actual circumstances under which he or she is expected to perform. If a gymnast is unnerved by certain heights, a coach may legitimately deceive a gymnast about how high the balance beam is from the floor. The coach may ease the athlete's anxiety by deceiving the student so that he or she may concentrate on the exercise itself. Once the exercise is completed, however, the coach – in virtue of his role as coach/teacher – is expected to reveal to the student the actual height. This serves two purposes: first, it acknowledges that the deception is not meant to be capricious or malicious, and second it works to bolster the athlete's confidence. Now the gymnast knows he or she can successfully achieve the exercise under conditions previously thought impossible or disturbing.<sup>14</sup> In effect, the coach/teacher has improved the skill/knowledge base of the athlete/student by using deception, and within the context of that relationship the deception is ethically permissible because it fulfills the function of the relationship.

Although the researcher-participant relationship is not intrinsically designed to benefit the participant, it is similar to the teacher-student relationship in this crucial

<sup>13</sup> See R. Wachbroit. 2006. Research as a Profession. *Philos Public Policy Q*, 26: 18–20.

<sup>14</sup> One might question the necessity of revealing the deception if the student/athlete currently fails. Future efforts under the same deception may be fruitful. The answer will depend essentially on how the teacher-student relationship is conceptualized, not on an objective account of potential harms or appealing to abstract principles of respect for individuals.

respect: the researcher is ideally in a better position to effect a reliable outcome given the demands of the research discipline. The professional relationship between researcher and participant is built on this assumption. As a result, the participant is, at the very least, implicitly subject to the demands of the discipline as a volunteer in much the same way a student is subject to the pedagogic demands of an education.<sup>15</sup> Hence, insofar as deception is an experimentally valid methodology – it produces reliably valid results – then given the nature of the researcher-participant relationship, deception should be a legitimate and permissible candidate method.

Fourth, even though the goals of the research may not coincide with, nor take into consideration the interests of the participant, the participant is still deserving of special consideration in virtue of the researcher-participant relationship. In effect, by volunteering the participant can be seen as doing a favour for the researcher by helping the researcher to satisfy some experimental curiosity. Consequently, the participant may rightly expect a combination of certain protections and some type of ‘payback’ or other benefit. At the very least, a volunteer participant has a justified expectation to be protected from unreasonable harm or risk and a degree of confidentiality consistent with the nature of his or her contribution to the experiment. Benefits may include financial compensation, but should also include further benefits, which are not essentially monetary. I have in mind something that can be called an ‘enrichment benefit’.

Recall the coach-gymnast example above. After the exercise has been successfully completed, the deception is revealed to the gymnast not just to demonstrate that the deception was not malicious but, more importantly, because the revelation serves to enrich the educational process that is part of the teacher-student relationship; the student learns more about his or her abilities. In much the same way, revealing the findings, purposes, or methods of the researcher to the participant can provide an enriched experience to the participant. This revelation has the multiple effect of conveying the value of the research and including the participant as a genuine participant, not merely as a *subject* of research. But more importantly, revealing the research can result in an

<sup>15</sup> A similar argument that uses a contract metaphor can be found in E. Aronson & J.M. Carlsmith. 1985. Experimentation in Social Psychology. In *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. 2. G. Lindzey & E. Aronson, eds. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley: 35: ‘... although the subject was not aware of the true purpose of the experiment, he at least knew he was in an experiment. As such, he is aware of the fact that his relationship to the experimenter is that of a subject. Indeed, the two principles are, in effect, parties to an experimenter-subject contract. The occasional use of deception can be considered one of the implicit clauses in this contract.’

enriched experience for the participant and possibly for the researcher. This appears to be especially true with regard to deceptive research. Studies suggest that participants in social-behavioral research have a more enriched experience when it is revealed the research they are involved in included some deception than when it did not use deceptive methods.<sup>16</sup> Deception apparently provides an added benefit to the participant that non-deceptive methods do not provide. A brief exploration of why this may be so should help clarify the type of enrichment benefit deceptive research may provide participants.

Take the case of what I call a ‘joking deception’. It is not uncommon for good friends to play pranks on each other in the name of good fun. We might feign to pull the chair from underneath them, or falsely warn them that their ‘crazy ex’ is on the way over, ‘... you’d better get out of sight in this closet.’ These pranks are intended to catch one’s friends off guard, to surprise them, make them squirm, among other things. And it is widely accepted as a permissible form of deception within certain friendships. What permits this type of deception, I contend, is not that it is a form of entertainment, but rather that it acts as a sounding board for how much intimacy, trust, or care there is in the relationship as well as providing insight into one’s own character. It is the combination of these features that provides for an enriched relationship.

Joking deceptions among friends reveal us at our most vulnerable, exposed, and in unintended ways that in other contexts would be devastating or genuinely harmful. In so far as the intent is not to harm the friend but to share in the experience, such joking deceptions may actually strengthen certain relationships – an unexpected result given the standard account of deception. In effect, joking deceptions may act to demonstrate that A knows B well enough to identify what is or is not important in their relationship, defining the nature of the relationship in crucial ways. If A pranks B about some past life event, it may be A’s way of helping B relax and cope with that event. Or it may be A’s way of showing that B can trust A. The revelation of the deception is an occasion not only to laugh at one’s own behaviour but also to reaffirm the bonds among friends. Paradoxically, joking deceptions between friends may in fact be an assertion of the person’s worth and act as an affirmation of respect. Standard accounts of deception are too sterile to account for this

<sup>16</sup> E. Soliday & A.L. Stantton. 1995. Deceived Versus Nondeceived Participants’ Perceptions of Scientific and Applied Psychology. *Ethics Behav*, 5: 87–104; See also Milgram 1974, *op. cit.* note 1; Elms, *op. cit.* note 2; and S.S. Smith & D. Richardson. 1983. Amelioration of Deception and Harm in Psychological Research: The Important Role of Debriefing. *J Pers Soc Psychol*, 44: 1075–1082.



aspect of deception. There are limits to such friendly pranks, but in general it is the fact that we are unintentionally exposed in front of our friends that provides for greater trust and intimacy in the relationship. But it is also an opportunity to better understand our own character, to enrich our understanding of who we are, and the types of relationships we enter into.

The use of deception within the context of a researcher-participant relationship can offer a similar type of enrichment to both the participant and the researcher: it can provide insight into one's character and relationships. One may worry that this analogy with joking deceptions among friends is inappropriate for the research context. What provides the possibility of enrichment in joking deceptions is the fact that the deceived and deceiver are close friends. The researcher-participant relationship is neither intended nor likely to be a variety of close or intimate friendship; it is essentially a professional relationship. But joking deceptions are not limited only to friends. They can also be applied in a friendly manner to complete strangers. This use of deception may be more controversial, but is still telling of the possible enrichment effects of deception. Consider the type of public deception one witnesses in shows such as *Candid Camera*, or more recently *Girls Behaving Badly* and MTV's *Punk'd*, that set up elaborate pranks in which people are secretly filmed. In what way might such shows use deception ethically and provide some enrichment to participants? These are not cases of close personal relationships being tested or affirmed; rather it is a public display of human foibles. Humour and the (presumed) willingness of the participants to be shown in such a public light appear to be part of the answer.

The lesson of such shows is two-fold. Firstly, and most obviously, it is a titillating anthropological study, revealing what makes people tick and the wonders of the human condition. Apparently this is the humorous part of the ploy, 'catching Americans in the act of being themselves' and capturing 'the reaction of ordinary people to extraordinary, and even bizarre, situations.'<sup>17</sup> The other, less obvious lesson is that no one is immune to such foolish deception and, notwithstanding the transient embarrassment of the situation, being a good sport about it is just as important as the anthropological lesson. Though not exactly a scientific exploration of human nature, such public deceptions among strangers reveals something about ourselves (as the deceived and as the deceiver) that may be valuable in itself. The interpersonal connection between strangers relies on the recognition of

this fact: human behaviour often is inadvertently humorous. The permissibility of deception among strangers is tempered by a keen understanding of the comic side.<sup>18</sup>

Deception in the context of social-behavioral research should not take on the atmosphere of entertainment, nor should it focus specifically on the humorous characteristics of the deception. What joking deceptions demonstrate is that being deceived may be a valuable practice in itself because it reflects on some feature of human experience that is telling. In friendships it can reveal one's character and reinforce the trust held between friends. In the friendly deception of strangers, the deception provides insights into the human condition. Research methods that use deception – though not in a comic fashion – may provide an 'enrichment benefit' for just these reasons. It allows the participants to see something of themselves (or others) in light of conditions to which they normally do not have access. Thus, the use of deception should be seen as an opportunity to provide this type of insight, not merely as a potentially embarrassing experience for the participant. If the participant is viewed as volunteering without the usual expectations of direct benefit, and as doing a favour for the researcher, then the justification of deceptive methods may appeal to this potential 'enrichment' opportunity. It is an opportunity that appears to be unique to the researcher-participant relationship, and so should inform the ethics of deception in such research.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The ubiquity of deception argument provides an insight into the ethics of deceptive research that is often underappreciated. It recommends that we look at the variety of deception, not just the popularity of deceptive practices. Accounting for the variety of deception – and the differing judgments of that deception in everyday contexts – requires an examination of the type of interpersonal relationships that exists between the deceiver and the deceived. In the context of deceptive research the ubiquity argument thus recommends an alternative avenue for ethical analysis, breaking the stalemate that characterizes current debates on the ethics of deceptive research, and, hopefully, providing greater insight into ethical research practice.

The account argued for in the current paper is very general. I have said nothing about the use of deception in

<sup>17</sup> *Candid Camera*. 2006. Available at: <http://www.candidcamera.com> [Accessed 9 June 2006].

<sup>18</sup> Another class of joking deceptions not discussed here, but worthy of some consideration, include the deception that occurs in the context of illusionist shows, carnival sideshows, tall-tale narratives, and fantastical theatrical productions.

research that uses children, people who are mentally incapacitated, or other vulnerable subjects. These cases pose special problems for evaluating the use of deception. Nonetheless, any account of deception with vulnerable subjects will have to include a clear appreciation of the type of interpersonal relationship that does or ought to exist between the researcher and these participants. That is work for another time.

The account presented in this paper – under the auspices of the ubiquity of deception argument – is consistent with the basic framework for regulating the use of deception in social-behavioral research as proposed by the APA.<sup>19</sup> Not only is the current argument consistent with the APA framework, it also provides an insight into how to interpret and apply this framework. It recommends at least three considerations:

First, understanding that the ethics of deception is dependent on the researcher-participant relationship requires that researchers (and ethics review bodies) carefully consider the nature of this relationship. Of course, professional organizations should take a lead in clarifying the researcher-participant relationship, but this should not be the sole source of prescription. As I have argued, appeals to existing practice outside of the research context should be part of the discussion.

Second, in virtue of the current account, the importance of effective and thoughtful debriefing should be obvious. In order to bring research participants ‘into the fold’ or to provide an ‘enrichment benefit’, greater attention should be given to the debriefing process. Standards of best practice should be made clear and accessible to all researchers (and ethics review members), and one of the goals of debriefing should be to provide the participant with an enriched experience as a result of their participation.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> APA, *op. cit.* note 5.

<sup>20</sup> See also Smith & Richardson, *op. cit.* note 16.

Lastly, in designing and justifying deceptive methods to others in the profession (as well as ethics review bodies) the current account points to the need for an appreciation of the variety of actual deceptive practices in the research context. Deceptive methods take a variety of forms, such as misleading cover stories, use of confederates, false feedback and deceptive debriefing, among others. Each type of deception may require independent ethical assessment. By identifying the unique deceptive elements in their protocol, and under what conditions these elements may or may not be permissible, researchers have the opportunity to better inform and more clearly justify their practice. Though attention should be paid to possible harms that result from deception, it might also be helpful to draw explicit parallels with similar deceptive practices outside the research context to guide the evaluation of that deception. In the end, this type of professional and critical self-evaluation is exactly what the ubiquity of deception argument recommends, a concrete and nuanced appreciation of deceptive practices that inform our judgments regarding the ethical use of deception in social-behavioral research.

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