

## Northwestern University IRB Guidelines for Research Involving Deception or Incomplete Disclosure

### Overview:

The IRB recognizes that deception and incomplete disclosure may be valuable research methodologies, yet their use presents special challenges to ensure that the research is conducted ethically. At times, especially in social and behavioral research, deception or incomplete disclosure is necessary to avoid study bias or to test a hypothesis that requires the participant's misdirection. On the other hand, the regulations for obtaining informed consent from research participants (§45 CFR 46.116), in general, require full disclosure of all elements relevant to the participant's decision about participation in the research. The IRB understands that providing adequate consent information does not entail explaining every study aim/hypothesis to potential participants – however, the IRB regulations do require that the consent process include an explanation of the purposes of the research and a description of the study procedures.

Deception and incomplete disclosure raise concerns as they potentially interfere with the ability of the participant to make a fully informed decision about whether or not to participate in the research. Thus, proposed research involving deception or incomplete disclosure necessitates special considerations by the IRB. To determine when certain restrictions apply, the IRB will consider the extent to which the deception or incomplete disclosure, in any given study, interferes with the participant's right to and ability to give fully informed consent.

These guidelines include distinguishing whether "deception" or "incomplete disclosure" (without deception) is involved, whether there is sufficient justification for use of such measures, and whether there is an appropriate consent and debriefing process in place.

The purpose for the guidelines on the use of deception and incomplete disclosure is to provide researchers, IRB staff, and IRB committee members with a common understanding of the following:

- Definitions of deception and incomplete disclosure in research;
- When is deception or incomplete disclosure allowed;
- Points to consider when deception or incomplete disclosure may be used; and
- Debriefing participants when deception or incomplete disclosure is utilized.

### What is Deception?

Deception is when researchers purposely mislead participants by providing them with overt misdirection or false information about some aspect of the research, whether it is in the procedures or the purpose of the research. Examples include:

- Participants are told they are working with a group of other participants on a task, but in actuality, they are the only participant in the study. The other "participants" are actually confederates or research staff acting as participants or a computer generated 'other participant' and not a real person.
- Participants are told they scored poorly on a task, when in actuality, they are given that

feedback regardless of their actual performance.

- Participants are told something is real when it is made up specifically for the study such as a journal article or 'research' facts, etc.

### **What is Incomplete Disclosure?**

Incomplete disclosure is when researchers withhold information about some aspect of the research, whether it is in the procedures or the purpose of the research. An example might include:

- Participants are informed about the purpose of the study in general terms that are true, but are not detailed enough to reveal the true objectives of the study.

### **When is Deception or Incomplete Disclosure permitted?**

In keeping with federal regulations and ethical codes, the IRB will consider the following points when reviewing research involving the use of deception or incomplete disclosure:

- The proposed research is minimal risk.
- The use of deception or incomplete disclosure is justified in the protocol to show that the research cannot be performed in the absence of deception and the benefits of the research will sufficiently outweigh any risks that deception may create.

Research participants cannot be deceived about significant aspects of the research such that it would affect their willingness to participate or that would cause them physical or emotional harm. Participants may not be put in a position of engaging in illegal or stigmatizing behavior because of the deception.

### **Consent Information and Debriefing**

The basic principles that guide the ethical conduct of human research support complete informed consent that provides participants with sufficient information in an understandable format to allow them to make an informed decision about whether to participate in a study. Research designs that use deception or incomplete disclosure do not allow participants to prospectively provide fully informed consent. Investigators should use the following measures to allow participants appropriate autonomy in the consent process for research that involves deception or incomplete disclosure:

- **Authorized deception.** Whenever possible, informing participants as part of the consent process that a study will not be described with complete accuracy or that some procedures will be deceptive provides an opportunity to decide whether to participate on these terms.

***Sample language for authorized deception:***

*For scientific reasons, this consent information does not include a complete description of the research questions [and/or study procedures] being tested. When you have finished participating in the study, we will give you more information about the study and an opportunity to ask questions.*

- **Debriefing**

Debriefing is intended to mitigate the lack of fully informed consent by explaining the rationale for using deception as a research technique. Deception must be explained to participants (debriefed) as early as is feasible. Many studies that only use incomplete disclosure (without deception) are not required to debrief participants – however, if the incomplete disclosure involves material information that could have significantly influenced individuals’ decisions to be in the study, then debriefing should be carried out (for example, if the incomplete disclosure involves not telling participants that the study involves examining correlations between political affiliation and characteristics of empathy). Participants should be given a simple, clear and informative explanation of the rationale for the use of deception and should have the opportunity to ask questions.

The process to debrief participants must be explained in your IRB protocol. Your protocol must indicate how participants will be debriefed, who will debrief participants, and when participants will be debriefed. The IRB expects that the person conducting the debriefing process is a member of the research team who has knowledge about the research.

A debriefing sheet/script must be included with the IRB submission documents and should include a detailed description of the ways in which deception/incomplete disclosure was used and why. The IRB has prepared template language for you to use when preparing debriefing documents – **please see the Debriefing Template (HRP-1720) on the IRB website.**

***Participant option to withdraw data upon debriefing:*** The researcher can decide, or the IRB may require, that the debriefing include an option for participants to withdraw their data from the study after they learn the true nature of the research. If the study involves deception (or incomplete disclosure) at the time of participant enrollment or consent that could have materially influenced the participant's decision about study participation, and/or the deception/incomplete disclosure would likely be perceived by participants as an invasion of privacy (e.g., videotaping without prior consent), the IRB may require re-consent for use of data as part of the debriefing process. If the researcher chooses, or the IRB requires, to provide participants with the option to withdraw their data upon being debriefed, the research team will need to keep sufficient identifiers or links to identifiers for participants to exercise this option.

**Online Debriefing:** Some research requires a debriefing after participants have completed an online survey/task. Online debriefing information should be similar to the debriefing process done during in-lab experiments. The debriefing information should be available immediately after the final survey/task. Participants should be reminded to print a copy of the debriefing information for their records.

**Delayed Debriefing:** In rare cases, debriefing immediately after a participant has completed study participation would compromise study results (e.g., the study is ongoing and early participants might tell others about it, making it impossible for the researchers to obtain valid/unbiased results from later participants). Under such circumstances the IRB may approve a delayed debriefing process, such as sending debriefing information to participants via email or regular mail (if participants' contact information is kept) or giving participants a website URL where they can get debriefing information when the study has been completed.

**Debriefing as an Educational Tool:** Some University schools or student participant pools recommend that feedback be provided at the conclusion of the study to further the education of the participants (as opposed to giving information that was previously withheld or falsified). This is not debriefing in the sense of the IRB ethics review and the regulations. In such cases, the original consent may mention this will be done, and the "Additional Information" document may include bibliographical citations advising participants where they can obtain additional information on the topic if they wish.

**Exceptions to Debriefing:** There may be rare instances when debriefing would be inappropriate, such as when the debriefing itself may present an unreasonable risk of harm to the participant without a countervailing benefit. For example, if an individual were selected for participation in a study about group behavior based on a previously measured "negative" behavior such as bias or bigotry or an unattractive physical characteristic, it might not be appropriate for the debriefing to describe the selection process. In such cases, the IRB would not recommend or require detailed debriefing. If you use deception and are requesting to not debrief participants, you must provide a compelling rationale in your protocol for not debriefing.