

# The Rise and Fall of Deception in Social Psychology and Personality Research, 1921 to 1994

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The frequency of the use of deception in American psychological research was studied by reviewing articles from journals in personality and social psychology from 1921 to 1994. Deception was used rarely during the developmental years of social psychology into the 1930s, then grew gradually and irregularly until the 1950s. Between the 1950s and 1970s the use of deception increased significantly. This increase is attributed to changes in experimental methods, the popularity of realistic impact experiments, and the influence of cognitive dissonance theory. Since 1980 there appears to have been a decrease in the use of deception as compared to previous decades which is related to changes in theory, methods, ethical standards, and federal regulation of research.

Key words: deception, research methods, history of psychology

The practice of deceiving research participants has become part of the standard methodology in psychological research, particularly in social psychology. If we accept the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Lindzey, 1954) as the storehouse of knowledge and standards of research practice in this field, we see that deception in research was not discussed as an issue in the first edition in 1954. In 1968, however, the second edition of the handbook contained a chapter on experimentation written as a guide for researchers that contained explicit instructions on the use of deception (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1968). A revised version of this discussion appeared in the third edition (Aronson, Brewer, & Carlsmith, 1985).

Several surveys of the literature documented the increased use of deception through the 1970s. For example, Gross and Fleming (1982) studied the use of deception over a 20-year period and found a significant increase in its use from 1959 to 1969 with no significant decrease between 1969 to 1979. Adair, Duschenko, and Lindsay (1985) found similar results based on their own data and those of other investigators.

In a survey of four social psychology journals, Vitelli (1988) found that the use of deception had decreased between 1974 and 1985. He attributed this decline to an increase in the use of nonlaboratory methods such as surveys and questionnaires that are less likely to require the use of deception. In a more recent survey of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (JPSP), Sieber, Iannuzzo, and Rodriguez (1995) concluded that deception had decreased after the 1960s but had then increased again in the early 1990s.

Previous surveys have shown consistently that the use of deception gained in frequency during the 1960s and was at its peak during the 1970s. Those studies, however, typically compared only 2 or 3 years (e.g., 1961 vs. 1971) and used different definitions of deception. The studies of Gross and Fleming (1982), Vitelli (1988), and Sieber et al. (1995) included nonawareness of research participation as deception, whereas most other surveys only counted explicit misstatement of fact, that is, lies but not secrets. Our study sought to provide a more consistent picture by using one definition, examining several journals in social psychology and personality, and covering an extended period of time, starting in 1921 when the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* (JASP) began publication.

## METHOD

We defined deception as an explicit misstatement of fact: stating a false purpose for an experiment, giving incorrect information about stimulus material, providing false feedback to participants about their or someone else's performance, or the use of confederates. We found that, in general, instances of the use of deception can be determined reliably, but that it is more difficult to classify particular kinds of deception. For that reason our analysis concerns only the combined frequency of all types of deception.

The purpose of the first phase of our research was to determine when deception began to be used. The first author read the method sections of all articles that reported empirical studies with human participants in JASP from its beginning in 1921 through 1948 and counted the number of articles in which deception was used. Later, the second author repeated this search for JASP articles from 1921 through 1933 to confirm that we had found all instances of the use of deception in the early years of this journal. This resulted in the discovery of one additional article that reported the use of deception. As an additional check on reliability the second author also searched all articles in JASP for 1935, 1940, and 1945. We agreed on the classification for 88 of 89 articles.

The rhetorical style of this period made this search more difficult than it was for later years. Authors often wrote narrative accounts of their research that mixed method with results and discussion. There was no section that began with a method heading, followed by subsections on participants and procedures. Sometimes it was difficult to determine what the experimenters told their participants, so that in a few cases we had to infer what was done or said from the context given in the articles.

In the second phase of this research, which covered the period from 1948 through 1994, six different raters reviewed articles. All raters used a standard scoring sheet on which they had recorded information from each article containing deception. In addition to the complete reference for the article, the critical information was a verbatim quotation that indicated how deception was used. Before gathering data each rater was required to demonstrate their understanding of the project by first correctly scoring a sample of articles. Early in this phase of our research we conducted occasional reliability checks that resulted in consistently high (over 95%) agreement on whether the article reported the use of deception. After 1950, when the format of journal articles had become standardized, it was much easier to determine whether deceptive methods had been used. The language concerning the use of deception almost always was specific; for example, "subjects were misinformed . . ." or "were led to believe . . .," or it was stated explicitly that a confederate was used.

Raters reviewed sample volumes of JASP, its successor, JPSP, the *Journal of Personality* (JP), and the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (JESP). We selected these journals as being representative of mainstream research in personality and social psychology. We began with JASP in 1948 because that was the date used in the earliest previous survey (Seeman, 1969) and then used 2 to 6 year intervals. We attempted to compare the use of deception in social psychological and personality research, but abandoned this comparison because of the difficulty of placing many articles into one of these two categories. Neither the title of a journal nor the labeling of sections (as in JPSP) was found to be a reliable guide to the kinds of articles they included. For example, in some years JP published many articles that clearly would be categorized as social psychology. Also, many articles concern topics that are a combination of the two areas.

## RESULTS

The first use of deception reported in JASP was by Hulsey Cason (1925) in his article, "Influence of Suggestion on Imagery in a Group Situation":

The writer gave the above list of stimuli [which previously had been scaled so that all were equally effective] orally to the 50 members of his class in abnormal psychology with the suggestion that the first 6 stimuli in each group would not call out very vivid images, but that stimuli 7 to 12 were much more favorable for calling out clear images. An attempt was of course made to deceive the subjects. (p. 296)

Table 1 shows the percentage and number of articles using deception in JASP from 1921 to 1948. There is considerable variability in the data from year to year, with percentages ranging from 0 to 13.3 and the number of articles reporting deception ranging from 0 to 4.

Table 2 shows that for JASP and JPSP, the use of deception grew steadily from 1948 through 1968, remained above 50% in 1973 and 1979, declined in the 1980s, and then increased slightly in 1989 and 1994. The pattern is about the same if we eliminate articles from JASP that dealt with abnormal psychology (the column headed JASP-SP in Table 2) to provide more consistency in the contents of the two versions of this journal.

Table 2 also includes the data from the other journals surveyed for this study. In JP there was a decrease in the use of deception between the years surveyed in the 1970s and 1980s. Similar to JPSP, JP demonstrated small increases in 1989 and 1994. The highest frequency of the use of deception was found for JESP. Only 1 of the 4 years we examined for that journal had a level of deception lower than 50%.

TABLE 1  
Percentage and Number of Articles Using Deception in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* From 1921 to 1948

Year	%	n	Year	%	n
1921-1924	0.0	(0)	1939	6.1	(2)
1925	7.7	(1)	1940	12.0	(3)
1926-1932	0.0	(0)	1941	13.3	(4)
1933	3.6	(1)	1942	7.1	(2)
1934	2.9	(1)	1943	0.0	(0)
1935	6.0	(2)	1944	12.9	(4)
1936	9.1	(3)	1945	3.2	(1)
1937	4.2	(1)	1946	12.5	(4)
1938	8.3	(2)	1947	5.7	(2)
			1948	12.5	(2)

TABLE 2  
 Percentage and Number of Articles Using Deception in Various Journals From  
 1948 to 1989

Year	JASP		JASP-SP		JPSP		JP		JESP	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
1948	9.0	(2)	12.5	(2)						
1952	19.4	(12)	21.3	(10)						
1957	25.4	(36)	31.6	(36)						
1961	28.2	(59)	34.0	(54)						
1963	30.7	(57)	37.0	(51)						
1968					50.7	(99)	27.5	(11)		
1973					51.3	(102)	31.8	(14)		
1979					53.2	(88)	35.7	(15)	64.3	(27)
1983					41.3	(92)	17.4	(4)	67.6	(21)
1987					24.1	(56)	10.7	(3)	42.9	(12)
1989					29.9	(55)	11.1	(3)	65.5	(19)
1994					31.3	(54)	16.6	(4)	50.0	(11)

## DISCUSSION

This study concerned the growth of the use of deception in social psychological and personality research primarily as represented by the major journals in these fields. We realize that our sample does not include all of the literature of social psychology at any time in the history of this field, but we conclude that the pattern that we found is representative of general research practices.

That pattern has three phases: (a) the development of experimental laboratory methods from the 1920s through the 1950s, when deception in research grew slowly and irregularly; (b) a period from the 1950s through the 1970s characterized by theory development and the popularity of realistic impact experiments; and (c) the 1980s, when changes in theory, method, and ethical standards were related to what appears to be a decline in the use of deception in research as compared with earlier decades.

During the early decades of its development as a discipline, social psychology consisted of a scattered array of topics and issues, with no distinguishing theories to bind the field. Although Gordon Allport (1935) stated that attitudes should be the central topic of social psychology, most work in the area of attitudes concerned their measurement (Smith, 1983) rather than their manipulation in the laboratory. Similarly, measurement had been the focus in the field of personality through the 1930s (Craik, 1986).

Most research in social psychology and personality during this period did not involve manipulation of independent variables. Instead, psychologists were concerned with recording social behavior through naturalistic observation and field studies, as well as with measurement of attitudes and opinions (Craik, 1986; Jones, 1985). Many studies labeled as experimental did not include such features as control groups or random assignment, although materials might be presented to participants in a laboratory setting. With infrequent manipulation of independent variables, the use of deceptive techniques in research was less likely than in later years when certain variables could only be manipulated by deceiving participants.

Kurt Lewin had the greatest impact on theory and method in social psychology, and it was his students in the 1930s and 1940s who began to carry out realistic laboratory experiments that used extensive deception. Lewin came to the United States in 1933, and the research program that he established contained the beginnings of the use of confederates, cover stories, and staged situations. In that same year, Saul Rosenzweig (1933) published an analysis of the experimental situation in which he specifically suggested the use of deception. Following publication of that paper, more studies began to appear that reported using deception, although the practice still was not common.

After World War Two the randomized experiment became the method of choice in experimental psychology and analysis of variance became the favored statistical technique (Rucci & Tweney, 1980). Social psychological studies that incorporated experimental manipulation increased from 30% in 1949 to 83% in 1959 (Christie, 1965). The use of deceptive techniques was an effective way for social psychologists to control many of the problematic extraneous variables that were involved in studying significant human problems. This approach to research design required the careful definition and manipulation of experimental variables, and in social psychology that often required considerable creativity.

Our data show that in 1968 over half of the articles in JPSP used some form of deception. In the same year a new edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1968) appeared and included a chapter on experimentation that was presented as a guide that would help graduate students and others learn how to do laboratory research. The authors described the deception experiment as an important way of creating experimental realism, which they said was an essential component of social psychological research. This chapter made it clear not only that deception was an accepted research technique, but that it was an effective way to study important social problems (the relevance issue of the 1960s) and that those who used it effectively were admired for their creativity.

The use of deception in its more dramatic forms led to an extended debate concerning its ethical implications. This debate began with Diana Baumrind's critique of Milgram's study of obedience (Baumrind, 1964). There were strong arguments that deception is harmful to participants, the profession, and to society (e.g., Kelman, 1967). Others saw most deception as innocuous and argued that

many important questions would be unanswered without its use (e.g., Christensen, 1988). The ethics of deception continues to be of interest (Fisher & Fyrberg, 1994).

Attempts to regulate ethical research practices increased during the 1970s. In 1973 the American Psychological Association revised their ethical principles to place greater constraints on the use of deception (American Psychological Association, 1973). The investigator was now charged with the responsibility of insuring that the use of deception was justified by the study's prospective value, to consider alternative procedures, and, if deception was used, to debrief participants as soon as possible. Deception was not prohibited, however, as long as the investigator considered these issues.

Also during the 1970s, federal regulation of research with humans began to have a more direct impact on psychologists. In 1971, social and behavioral research specifically were included in the federal policy on protection of human subjects. In 1974, regulations on grants administration stated that all research with humans must be reviewed by institutional boards, not only research that placed participants at risk (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). However, the impact of these regulations and the American Psychological Association ethical standards on the use of deception was not seen immediately and did not seem to have an effect until the 1980s.

After 1979 there appears to have been a gradual decline in the use of deception from the levels of the 1960s and 1970s. We also found a decrease in the percentage of studies using deception in JPSP and JP, and the percentage was lower in 1987 than in 1983 for all three journals that we surveyed. Similar to Sieber et al. (1995), we found increases for these same journals in 1989 and 1994. However, these increases were small for JPSP and JP and did not show the use of deception to have returned to the frequency of the 1970s. The data for JESP was more variable than for the other two journals, showing a slight increase in 1979 from 1973, a reduction in 1987, an increase in 1989 and then another reduction in 1994. From these results it appears that the use of deception has decreased from the levels seen in the 1960s and 1970s, with some variability in the last two decades. This apparent decline in the use of deception in social psychology research since the 1970s is related to changes in theory and research practices, as well as the impact of imposing more rigid ethical standards.

One major change in theory between 1979 and 1994 was from the dominance of cognitive dissonance theory to that of attribution theories. Bagby, Parker, and Bury (1990) found that citations to Festinger in social psychological journals increased through the 1960s, peaked around 1972, and then gradually declined. In contrast, the rate of citations to Heider had peaked around 1975 with more than double the citations of Festinger and has only slightly declined since that period.

Jones (1985) discussed reasons for this shift in interest. First, it was easier to do attribution research that relied more on paper and pencil questionnaires than on elaborate scenarios with casts of confederates. Second, ethical standards changed accompanied by "the increasing pervasiveness of institutional monitoring of re-

search practices" (p. 58). Partly because of the risk of rejection by institutional review boards, investigators became less willing to design experiments in which participants undergo manipulations that are psychologically uncomfortable.

Following the 1970s changes also were occurring in the types of methods used, with less emphasis being placed on randomized laboratory experiments and an increase in nonexperimental methods such as surveys and field studies (Adair et al., 1985; Vitelli, 1988; West, Newsom, & Fenaughty, 1992). We examined the articles for 2 years of JPSP and found an increase in the use of nonexperimental studies from 12% in 1973 to 23% in 1983.

In summary, we see that a combination of factors influenced the use of deception in research. Social psychologists developed a laboratory culture in which experimental realism and the impact experiment were valued. The leading theorists provided examples for acceptability in research methods, in terms of what was publishable and what was ethical. Deception also was fostered by the dominance of the randomized experimental design, which required manipulation of independent variables. Deceptive research practices were limited, however, by the codifying of ethical standards in psychology and federal requirements for external review. As new theories and topics became popular in the 1980s, there was a reduction in the extent to which dramatic staged situations were used, and there probably has been some decline in the use of all types of deception. Perhaps, as this century comes to an end, the realism in research will be confined to the virtual reality of the computer screen.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank John Chibnall, Andrew Pomerantz, and James Sweeney for assistance in data collection.

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