



**The Ethics of Deception in Social Science Research: Case 1**

Ann Smith is a social psychologist who wants to study attitude change. She submits a proposal to her institution outlining details of a study that will examine the attitude change of participants following a workshop on environmental issues. Smith plans to identify attitude change by administering a pretest and a posttest. She is worried, however, that the participants will recognize that she is looking for changes in their attitudes and that this knowledge will influence their answers on the posttest. To address this problem, she plans to disguise the issues she is most interested in; when she administers the tests, she will give a very broad explanation that does not fully disclose the nature of the study. Her proposal includes these procedures and an explanation of why she believes they are necessary; she also includes a plan to “debrief” the subjects (tell them the real purpose of the study) after they finish taking the second test.

1. What might be the benefits of this research, if any? What risks to subjects, if any, do you detect?
2. What issues should be raised regarding Smith’s proposal?
3. How would you weigh the benefits of the research with the risks to subjects in this case?
4. Based on your assessment of the benefits and risks, would you approve Smith’s proposal as submitted? If not, what changes would you suggest?

**The Ethics of Deception in Social Science Research: Case 2**

For a study on conformity to group norms, Ann Smith constructs a survey designed to measure attitudes toward a controversial topic. The research proposal she submits describes her study procedures: She will use as subjects students in a large introductory psychology course she teaches. She includes the following paragraph in her syllabus: “One of the requirements of this course is your participation in a psychology experiment, through which you will be introduced to the methods of psychological research. If you prefer not to participate in the experiment, you may instead complete a 50-page research paper on a psychology topic of your choosing.” She will bring two groups into the laboratory, ostensibly simply to obtain their attitudes on the survey. One group will be encouraged to discuss responses to the survey freely amongst themselves; the members of the other group, acting as controls, will take the survey independently. In the first (experimental) group, Smith will “plant” several confederates instructed to advocate loudly one side of the issue in question. Based on the results of similar studies, Smith believes that the majority of responses given by subjects in this experimental group will conform to the position advocated by the confederates, indicating the powerful influence of the group norm. Following the experiment, all subjects will be debriefed as to the true purpose of the experiment.

1. What are likely to be the benefits of this research, if any? What risks to subjects do you identify?
2. What issues do you see regarding this proposal?
3. For the subjects involved, are there consequences of participation in the experiment that did not exist for Case 1? Are these consequences negative or positive? How do the effects of debriefing in this case differ from its effects in Case 1?

### Deception in Research

1. Is deception ever justifiable?
2. Do potential benefits of such experiments outweigh psychological risks to subjects? At what point, if ever, do benefits of such experiments outweigh costs?
3. How might conducting experiments that involve deception of subjects affect the researcher? Is there any way in which such experiments could reflect upon science itself? If so, how?