

Commentary

DEBRIEFING FOR ALL CONCERNED: Ethical Treatment of Human Subjects

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Considerable attention has been given to the need to adequately debrief subjects following their participation in psychological experiments (Blanck, Bellack, Rosnow, Rotheram-Borus, & Schooler, 1992; "Ethical Principles," 1977; Holmes, 1976; West & Gunn, 1978). The need to include the debriefing procedures in journal articles has also been suggested (Korn & Bram, 1988; Perry & Abramson, 1980).

In Rosenthal's review (this issue, pp. 127–134) of the ethical issues of subject recruitment, he notes that subjects grant us their time, attention, and cooperation. I would like to add that subjects often unwittingly grant more than they initially realize, and are not even recognized as participants in the research.

My concern in this Commentary is that debriefing does not include subjects screened out by preexperimental procedures. Frequently, questionnaires raise issues that are disturbing to the respondents and are not properly explained. Potential subjects may be given questionnaires to detect, for example, previous physical or sexual abuse, or behavioral problems in the respondent or members of the respondent's family. The instruments often ask some very probing questions and raise issues that are distressing. After the questionnaires are scored, the subjects who meet the criteria are contacted for further study. No further contact is made with, or explanations given to, those who are not selected.

Rejected subjects are left to ponder the significance of their rejection and the implications of the issues raised. Subjects should be assured that their affirmative answers to some questions do not indicate a personality disorder or a particular sexual preference, especially when the questions are about their children. In an investigation into the seriousness of the problem, I found parents who were very disturbed about questions concerning homosexual activity in their children. Their primary complaint

was not being informed about the significance of the questions. In surveys I conducted with undergraduate students, 10% reported anxiety and resentment after filling out screening questionnaires. The students felt that the implications of the personal questions should have been explained.

Besides the possible harmful consequences to the subject, there is the added problem of the denigration of the experimenter–subject relationship. Subjects who are troubled and believe they have not received an adequate explanation of experimental procedures do not feel kindly toward the people responsible. Failure to debrief the original subject pool undermines the cooperation that is necessary between the investigator and the subject for the collection of accurate research data.

All subjects, including those screened out, should be offered a debriefing following the completion of the experiment. The debriefing session should provide a detailed discussion of the procedures and include the opportunity to ask questions. I have found that if additional credit is offered, attendance is good.

To follow such a procedure would correct subject misinformation, reduce negative aftereffects, prevent arousal of negative feelings toward investigators, and comply with the American Psychological Association's ethical standards. Any one of these reasons is enough to offer debriefing sessions for all subjects; combined, the weight of the argument is overwhelming.

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