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Truth or consequences

Regarding "Psychology's Tangled Web" (SN: 6/20/98, p. 394), I suggest the dictum of my favorite philosopher, Pogo: "Always tell the truth, 'cause then you doesn't have to keep track."

*Reverend James E. Hacke
Griffin, Ga.*

I had an experience with the unpleasantness of deception in psychological experimentation in 1962 when I was a first-year college student. Students taking an introductory course were compelled to serve as subjects in experiments. When I showed up for my session, I was first given a questionnaire about my attitude (as a white person) toward minorities. Then I was given a task of matching certain objects. The experimenter hostilely told me that I had failed in this task and that he had lost my questionnaire. He asked me to fill it out again.

It was at this point that he blew his cover. I realized that he was trying to manipulate me

into giving more negative responses in my second questionnaire. I was determined to retaliate for his abusiveness by making my responses to the second questionnaire even more positive than those to the first.

Of course, I kept my mouth shut. I wanted my psych course credits, and I wanted my results entered as a mess-up factor in his work. Notably, he never debriefed me and had I not understood what the point was, I would have left the session feeling incompetent. I also see the compulsory nature of my participation and his failure to debrief as quite unethical.

*Marguerite Babcock
Acme, Penn.*

How ironic that Taylor and Shepard's concern about deception in psychological research stemmed directly from an accidentally deceptive situation with one of their studies! I'm concerned that there are those who seem more than willing to absolutely dismiss all deceptive practices out of hand. Those who use or support occasional subterfuge at least cite data to suggest this practice is not necessarily the ruination of the discipline.

Cover: Children cavort in a kaleidoscope of mirrors, an exhibit designed to demonstrate how light is reflected. Increasingly, museums—especially science museums—are employing a scientific approach to making exhibits both appealing and informative. **Page 184** (Photo: Amy Snyder/The Exploratorium)



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Might I suggest an empirical way to determine if research participants have seen through deceptions: Intentionally "plant" a few talented actors or actresses as fake subjects to interact with the real participants and casually ask about this after the study.

*Barlow Soper
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Ruston, La.*

I'm surprised that psychologists are only now waking up to the unethical behavior of "experimental dissimulation," that is, lying. I complained about it 22 years ago to *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY*. I wrote then that the experimenter knows he is a liar, and some of the subjects guess this from his manner, at least on an unconscious level. This invalidates the experiment. Also, the subject who knows about the deception might then suspect that most psychologists are liars. This will bring all psychological publications under suspicion. I suggested that lying by experimenters be classified officially as unprofessional behavior.

*I.J. Good
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