Guidelines on Use of Deception

What counts as a deception?
Deception is where a researcher actively misleads participants about the purpose of the research, or the research procedures. (Note that this is different to withholding certain details of the research that are then revealed to participants during debrief.)

Why might deception be a problem?
Deception can be problematic for the following reasons:
1. Participants may get upset upon learning that they have been deceived.
2. Participants may not have consented to take part in the research, had they been aware of its true purpose.
3. The deception may undermine trust in the discipline. This may make it more difficult for researchers to collect valid data in the future.

What does the BPS say about deception?
The BPS states the following:
1. Deception should only take place where it is essential to achieve the research results required and where the research objective has strong scientific merit.
2. Deception should only take place where there is an appropriate risk management and harm alleviation strategy.
3. Deception is inappropriate where it is likely to lead to discomfort, anger or objections among participants when revealed.
4. If a research study involves deception it should be designed in such a way that it protects the dignity and autonomy of the participants.

What should I do if I want use deception in my research?
1. You should first consider whether the deception is essential. If it is possible to use an alternative means of collecting the data you should not use deception. In your ethics application you should be clear about why you believe the deception to be essential.
2. You should consider the impact of the deception on your participants and indicate how you intend to minimise the risks of them being upset when the deception is revealed.
3. You should consider using a verbal debrief. This could explain why the deception was necessary and give the participant the opportunity to ask questions. Participants may be less likely to get upset if they feel the researcher has considered their feelings. If you are using a verbal debrief you should submit a guide for this along with your ethics application form (see attached example).
4. Following the debrief we would recommend asking participants whether, having learned the true purpose of the study, they would like to withdraw their data.

If you deviate from the above guidelines you should be explicit about your reasons for this in your ethics application form.
TEMPLATE FOR VERBAL DEBRIEF FOLLOWING DECEPTION

For researcher use only

NB. The following should be used as a guide, rather than a script, and adapted to suit participant responses and queries.

Thank you for taking part in this study! I can now tell you a little bit more about what we were looking at and what we were expecting to find.

[Explain the aims of the study here.]

[Explain the deception here.]

We didn’t tell you this at the time because [insert justification for deception here].

We hope you don’t mind that we didn’t tell you about this at the start of the study! And if you do want to withdraw the information we collected from you at that point of the study then we’re very happy to do that.

Do you have any questions about that part of the study?

Is there anything else you’d like to know about the study?

If you do think of anything else you’d like to ask then please feel free to get in touch.

If you know of anyone else who might take part in this study we’d really appreciate it if you didn’t share this information with them since this may influence their responses.