



Studying deception without deceiving participants: An experiment of deception experiments[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Like avoiding labor protection laws via foreign subcontractors, banning deception in economic experiments does not exclude experiments with participants in the role of experimenters who, similar to properly incentivized subcontractors, can gain by deceiving those in the role of proper participants. We compare treatments with and without possible deception by ‘experimenter-participants’ in a dictator experiment and test whether participants in the role of experimenters engage in deception and whether deception affects the behavior of ‘participant-participants.’ We find that most participants in the role of experimenters engage in deception and that there is no difference in the behavior of participant-participants between treatments, even when repeating the experiment without deception after debriefing. Our results can be viewed as a contribution to studying the effects of unethical behavior via outsourcing it to subcontractors, by letting them do the harm.

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1. Introduction

Deception in experiments is not just a topic of academic discussion in the ivory tower of experimental researchers.¹ Putting a ban on the use of certain practices, such as the payment of unfair wages to workers, does not prevent employers from engaging in such exploitative practices by subcontracting. Indeed, in many Western economies the effects of labor regulations can be easily circumvented by outsourcing the hiring of workers to foreign subcontractors. In this sense, deception in experiments is analogous to exploitative practices on the labor market. Becoming guilty of engaging in deception can be avoided by allowing a properly incentivized participant to deceive other participants.²

In this sense the authors of this study engage in subcontracting in order to study deception – a taboo in experimental economics – without getting ‘their hands dirty’ because we do not engage in deception. As experimenters, we allow, and properly incentivize, a participant in the experimenter role, called ‘experimenter-participant,’ to deceive participants in the usual role of experimental participants, called ‘participant-participants.’

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¹ For a discussion of the use of deception in economic experiments, see Hey (1991), Davis and Holt (1993), and especially Andersson (2002).

² Uri Gneezy has pointed this out and encouraged us to discuss the analogy of studying deception in experiments without deception and subcontracting. The latter has also been investigated experimentally in the context of principal-agent relationships and delegation, see, e.g., Hamman et al. (2010), Bartling and Fischbacher (2012) and Erat (2013).

The experimental scenario is a variant of the dictator game (Forsythe et al., 1994) in which two participant-participants – an allocator and a recipient – must decide without knowing that the experimenter-participant can increase her payoff substantially by excluding one of them – the recipient – from interaction. To motivate our choice of experimental scenario, imagine an allocator who sacrifices own payoff to help the recipient. Doing so strongly depends on trusting that the recipient actually gains from own sacrifice. On the other hand, an allocator who cares greatly about the recipient might be frustrated when learning – after debriefing – that her solidarity might have been in vain.

In our view, this suggests that it might be possible to observe the often feared effects of deception in experiments, i.e., that after being deceived once, a participant will doubt the instructions forever (see, e.g., Hey, 1991; Davis and Holt, 1993 and Ledyard, 1995).

To capture deception effects, we repeat the experiment without forewarning after debriefing participant-participants on the actual role of the experimenter-participant. In the repetition of the experiment, the two participant-participants play in the same role and the experimenter-participant is unable to exclude any participant-participants from interaction. Based on this experimental scenario, we test for differences in behavior of participant-participants in the same (dictator) game context before and after debriefing on possible deception. Despite the apparent reasons why deception might impact on the behavior of participant-participants, we find no evidence for its effects. This is in line with the results of previous studies finding no clear deception effects.³ We also support the hypothesis that strong incentives to deceive others induce people to deceive. This is consistent with the evidence from previous experiments (e.g., Gneezy, 2005) that people are more likely to deceive, the higher the amount they may gain from deceiving. More generally, our results show that ruling out ‘bad practices’ by banning them without guaranteeing that they cannot be outsourced via subcontracting is ineffective.

To justify our choice of experimental scenario further, we compare it with another, which is more in the spirit of deception game experiments (e.g., Gneezy, 2005; Charness and Dufwenberg, 2005; Hurkens and Kartik, 2009; Sutter, 2009; Sobel, 2013). Unlike in the ultimatum game (Güth et al., 1982), in the so-called ‘yes/no game’ (Güth et al., 2005) a responder must accept or reject the offer by a proposer without knowing the actual offer. This could be implemented by first allowing the proposer to make some stated offer, though not necessarily the true one, to the responder, who, depending on the stated offer, can then accept or reject the offer.

In our view, such a scenario would more often than not trigger suspicion about the truth of the message. Thus, the disappointment of actually learning that one has been deceived by the proposer will not be completely unexpected. We believe therefore that deception effects are more likely and stronger when one is unaware of possible deception and, moreover, has done something very costly, based on the trust that everything has been done in accord with perception. We do not claim that deception games like the one just described cannot capture the crucial aspects of our deception design but (still) consider being deceived by the social scenario – whether or not there exists a recipient – as an unsettling experience from which to expect more detrimental effects.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The experimental scenario is described in detail below (Section 2), followed by a presentation of the experimental procedures and hypotheses (Section 3), and an illustration of the experimental results (Section 4). A discussion and final remarks conclude the paper (Section 5).

2. The experimental scenario

In our experimental scenario, an experimenter-participant can ‘employ’ either one or two participant-participants to play a variant of the dictator game. More precisely, there are three roles:

- role E of an experimenter-participant,
- role A of an allocator, and
- role R of a recipient.

We refer to E as experimenter-participant, and to A and R as allocator and recipient, respectively.

In the dictator game, the allocator is given a positive monetary amount p to share with the recipient. This monetary amount, p , can be either small, i.e., $p = \underline{p}$, or large, i.e., $p = \bar{p}$, thus $0 < \underline{p} < \bar{p}$. The allocator must decide how much of p to pass on to R. The recipient decides the minimum allocation by A that she is willing to accept. Thus, as in reward allocation (see Shapiro, 1975; Mikula, 1973) and dictator experiments (see Forsythe et al., 1994), R cannot punish A but can reject an unacceptable gift and may possibly voice her anger (see Xiao and Houser, 2005). Neither A nor R know whether \underline{p} or \bar{p} can be shared when deciding. A and R condition their choices on both \underline{p} and \bar{p} , knowing only the probability distribution, i.e.,

³ Ortmann and Hertwig (2002) review a wide range of psychology studies involving deception. They find mixed results on the impact of deception on negative emotions such as embarrassment, sadness, or discomfort. Some studies show that deceived participants do not experience such emotions. In contrast, other studies reveal that such negative emotions do have an impact on the behavior of participants. They also find that suspicion impacts on the behavior of participants in experiments. However, such effect appears to be significant only when experiments are similar to previous ones. Jamison et al. (2008) test the effect of deception regarding the identity of other players on future behavior in experiments different to the initial one. They find evidence that deception has some (minor) impact on both the selection and the behavior of participants who return to the lab. However, they are unable to differentiate between the effect of selection of participants and the effect of deception. For a more general discussion on the use of deception in experiments, see, e.g., Bonetti (1998), Hey (1998), McDaniel and Starmer (1998), and Hertwig and Ortmann (2008).

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