Guidelines for generating debriefing forms

The British Psychological Society, in their document “Ethical principles for conducting research with human participants”, explicitly requests researchers to debrief participants in their study: “Following the research, especially where any deception or withholding of information had taken place, the Committee wished to emphasise the importance of appropriate debriefing. In some circumstances, the verbal description of the nature of the investigation would not be sufficient to eliminate all possibility of harmful after-effects. For example, an experiment in which negative mood was induced requires the induction of a happy mood state before the participant leaves the experimental setting.” This passage potentially allows for verbal debriefing, though, where it is practical, a written debriefing sheet (with or without accompanying verbal debriefing) may be preferable. The FSHREC requests a copy or transcript of written or verbal debriefing information to be submitted with applications for research ethics approval.

**1. Participants from the Department of Experimental Psychology Experimental Hours Scheme**

Because it is intended that students taking part in the Department of Experimental Psychology Experimental Hours Scheme receive an educational experience through their participation in a research study, investigators need to provide carefully drafted debriefing information. The debriefing form **(a blank copy is provided below)** should be tailored to fulfill the educational objective, and hence appears different from one drafted for the general public.

The general objective is to describe both theoretical and methodological aspects of the study such that students can relate their experience of having participated to relevant content from their taught courses.

The form fits onto a single page, and has the following format:

* *Title*, which should be concise yet clearly identify the experiment
* *Background/Hypothesis.* This section should outline the relevant research background of the study, and how the hypothesis tested in the experiment is derived. A slightly extended Abstract format is probably sufficient. Although a certain level of background knowledge can be assumed, the key aspect is to *avoid technical and scientific jargon* that would render the information difficult to understand to a non-expert. Remember that a good portion of our participants are open-unit students who may not have the necessary methodological background to understand specific statistical terms, etc.
* *Design and Dependent Variables* – does the study use questionnaires, or is it in experimental format? If the latter, are response latencies, or accuracies (or both) the dependent measures? Are variables varied between- or within- participants?
* *Intended Analysis* – how will the data be analysed? (ANOVA, regression, etc.)
* *Useful Readings* – list a few key references in the research area that would allow a student to begin a further inquiry into the area if they wish to do so.

**2. Participants from the General Public**

Although participants from the general public (recruited through adverts, emails, flyers, etc.) typically receive monetary compensation for their participation, this does not obviate the researcher’s need to provide adequate debriefing. A debriefing form addressed to this target group would avoid any specialised scientific and statistical terms, and attempt to describe the research background and aims of the study in a manner as accessible as possible. The sections on Design, Measures, and Intended Analysis present in the student debriefing forms can be omitted, but useful readings should be included in order to facilitate participants’ access to the research domain. Verbal debriefing may be appropriate, but the FSHREC requests a written transcript of the information that the investigator intends to provide. Researchers are also encouraged to disseminate their results to the public, perhaps via publishing the results on a web site.

**3. Participants in Developmental Studies**

In the interest of public awareness of scientific research, and the general aim of engagement of the public with science, it is highly desirable to communicate the general findings of developmental studies that have taken place in schools back to the hosting institutions. Although it may be difficult to debrief participants and their parents individually, at minimum the head teacher should be debriefed about the main results; more appropriate forms of debriefing may be to present the results in a brief talk, or via a poster board displayed in the school. Investigators may also consider issuing participation certificates to children that have taken part in a study. The FSHREC requests an outline of how the investigator intends to provide debriefing information to the school and/or participant.

**Department of Experimental Psychology**

###### Experimental Hours Debriefing Information

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| --- | --- |
| **Name of Experimenter** | |
| Title of Experiment | |
| **Experimental Hours Code**: |  |
| Background/Hypothesis | |
| Design and Dependent Measures | |
| Intended Analysis | |
| Useful Reading | |