

Research at PLNU

Guidelines for Debriefing

What is debriefing?

Debriefing is the process of returning subjects to the state they were, prior to participation in your research. Debriefing helps to assure that the benefits of the research outweigh the risks of participation.

Why debrief? Some aspect of the research can increase sensitivity to the topic under study. For example, in a study on self esteem that includes questions on the confidence a subject has when making decision, can heighten anxiety if the subject was already thinking about how indecisive they were, compared to their friends. We cannot know the emotional state and issues with which a subject may be struggling; debriefing is needed. Additionally, there is interest that participation not raise unintentional anxiety. For example, in a study on Christian living, a freshman who came to PLNU wanting to live a better Christian life, but realized they had made little spiritual progress. Such a student may feel angry or frustrated or betrayed. The reaction occurred despite the researcher's intent. Some subjects fear their responses may have ruined the study, or else they responded in some inappropriate way. Subjects may need to be reassured that all you as a researcher wanted was their true response, whatever that happened to be.

How to debrief? Debriefing is an attempt to resolve the questions and consequences of participation in research after data is collected. It is informational and reassuring. Debriefing includes:

- a. telling the subject(s) the primary point of your research
- b. report any rigged or deceptive aspect of the research
- c. provide subjects with an opportunity to ask questions about the research
- d. subjects may want to know what typical responses are
- e. allowing students to vent their concerns or reactions to questions or the study

The perceptions and reactions of subjects are real and need to be treated as real. While one researcher may conduct the debriefing session, it is helpful to have others present who can help to check the response or reactions of the subjects. You do not want to embarrass a subject by directly asking them if they have a problem in front of other subjects, but it is essential to speak with them about reactions they might have. Listen to what subjects have to say. Offer reassurance and comfort. If you think a subject is significantly upset, refer them to someone with professional training.

When to debrief? Debriefing is done ideally at the completion of whatever data collection activity you use. Include in your time estimate of how long participation will take, time for debriefing. You must be careful that debriefed subjects do not contaminate other subjects.

In your proposal state how you plan to debrief. All research should provide debriefing.