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Concerning “Perception of Altruism”

NESH (The National Research Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities) has an advisory capacity, and does not issue formal approvals of research projects. The following constitutes NESH’s advice concerning the project “Perception of Altruism”.

The purpose of the experiment is to study how trust develops and whether there are differences between “poor” and “rich” people in relevant respects. Confidence is developed through donations of monetary amounts. In the experiment, small amounts of real money are used. The research subjects are not informed that they will be playing against a machine rather than against real people. The research subjects involved are psychology students (not recruited from the researcher’s own classes), and they receive information about the research after the session.

NESH sees three potential ethical challenges in the project as presented through the submitted documentation. (1) Research participants might be confronted with their own greed in unwanted ways. (2) Research participants are deceived concerning their interaction with a computer. (3) Research participants are deceived concerning the purpose of the research.

As for the first research ethically relevant dimension, NESH finds that the design of the research in this respect makes a negative impact sufficiently weak for it not to pose a great challenge. As for the second and third research ethically relevant dimensions, NESH would recommend the following.

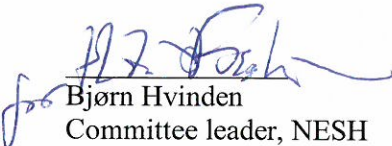
1. One should avoid unnecessary deception by deleting the phrase “while playing with anonymous people”.
2. The information session with the participants after the research session should explain properly to them why the deception was deemed necessary.
3. The information to the participants which explains properly to them why the deception was deemed necessary should also be made available in written form. In the current project description, there is no proper justification of why deception regarding the purpose of the research is required; such a justification should be

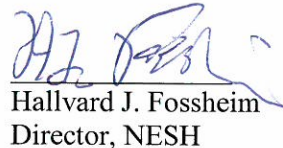
provided in a language and form which the research participants can themselves understand.

4. In order for any deception to be justified as part of a research design, the importance of the research must be established. The importance of the current project must be properly and believably explained to the participants in the debriefing session. This justification should also be made available in written form.
5. The information session should also allow for the participants to report back to the researchers on how they judge the deception ethically. This is knowledge which the researchers should allow their research to be shaped by in similar projects in the future.
6. The issue of the participants' making a profit suffers under a potential conflict internally. On the one hand, it is stressed that the profit would not be sufficient to motivate anyone, while on the other hand, it is stated that keeping the profit is deemed a requirement for motivating the participants. These two claims should be fully articulated in such a way that there remains no potential for contradiction between them.
7. The submitted documentation does not fully ensure that anonymity will be taken care of, and the fact that the project will collect signed consent forms from the participants may pose a challenge to protecting their anonymity. The consent forms should be collected and stored safely by somebody other than the responsible researcher.

NESH takes very seriously the demand that informed consent be made the basis for research (cf. the NESH guidelines, §§ 5-9: <http://www.etikkom.no/Forskningsetikk/Etiske-retningslinjer/Samfunnsvitenskap-jus-og-humaniora/B-Hensyn-til-personer-5---19/>). During the committee's discussion of this project, opinions were divided on when deception may be justified in research. Provided that the above recommendations are followed, NESH can find acceptable the deception included in the design of the present project.

On behalf of NESH,


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