

CHANGER cafés

Deceiving research participants: Untangling the research ethics guidance on a tangled issue

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European Research Council

Established by the European Commission

A mental health tech company ran an AI experiment on real users. Nothing's stopping apps from conducting more.

NBC NEWS, 14/01/2023

Koko app: peer support when experiencing suicidal thoughts or intentions

Peer support was replaced by ChatGPT-driven responses without making users well aware

Deception?

Deception: inducing or maintaining a false belief in the participants' study understanding, to increase control

Almost dizzying diversity of study designs, research questions and thus ethics issues



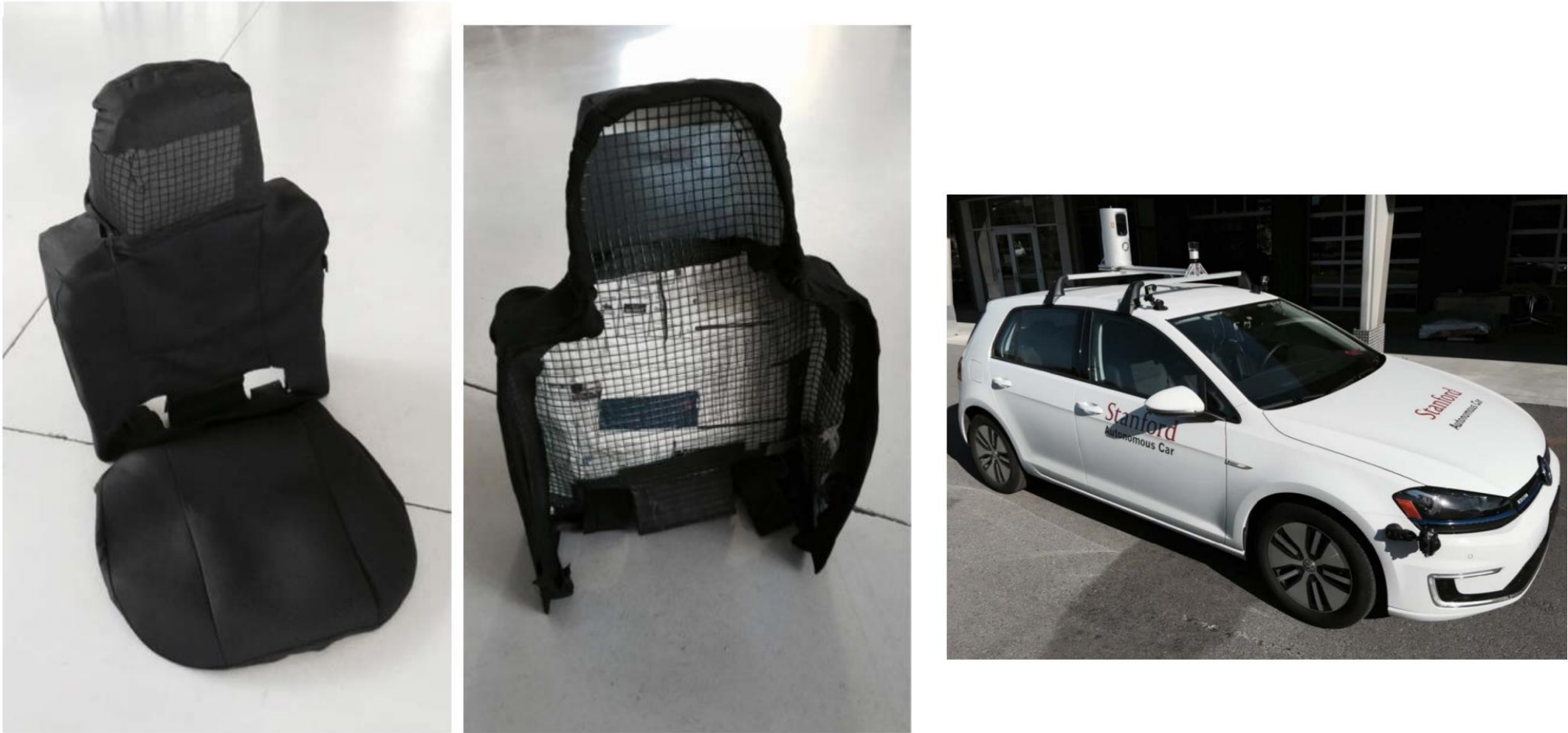


Fig. 2. The **seat cover costume** was sheer so that the driver could see through, and had arm outlets so that the driver could steer the car.

Rothenbücher, D., Li, J., Sirkin, D., Mok, B., & Ju, W. (2016, August). Ghost driver: A field study investigating the interaction between pedestrians and driverless vehicles. In *2016 25th IEEE international symposium on robot and human interactive communication (RO-MAN)* (pp. 795-802). IEEE.

Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology
1963, Vol. 67, No. 4, 371-378

BEHAVIORAL STUDY OF OBEDIENCE ¹

STANLEY MILGRAM ²

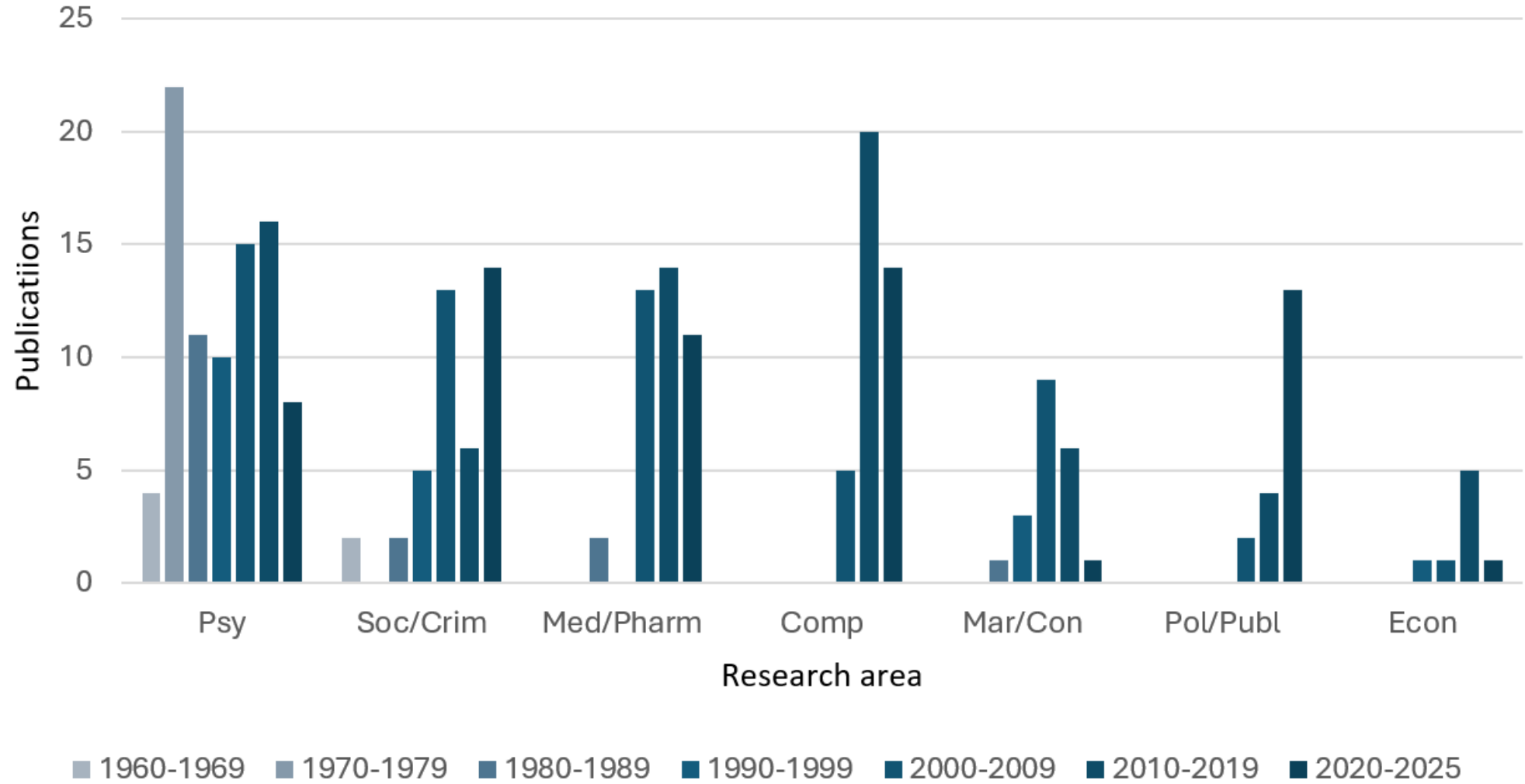
Yale University

APA guideline (2017)

Any study that uses deception should

- (a) Be justified by the study's value
- (b) Not have feasible effective non-deceptive alternative procedures.
- (c) Not cause physical pain or severe emotional distress.
- (d) Should include debriefing, data withdrawal, and minimization inflicted harms

Trends in the research ethics literature on deception



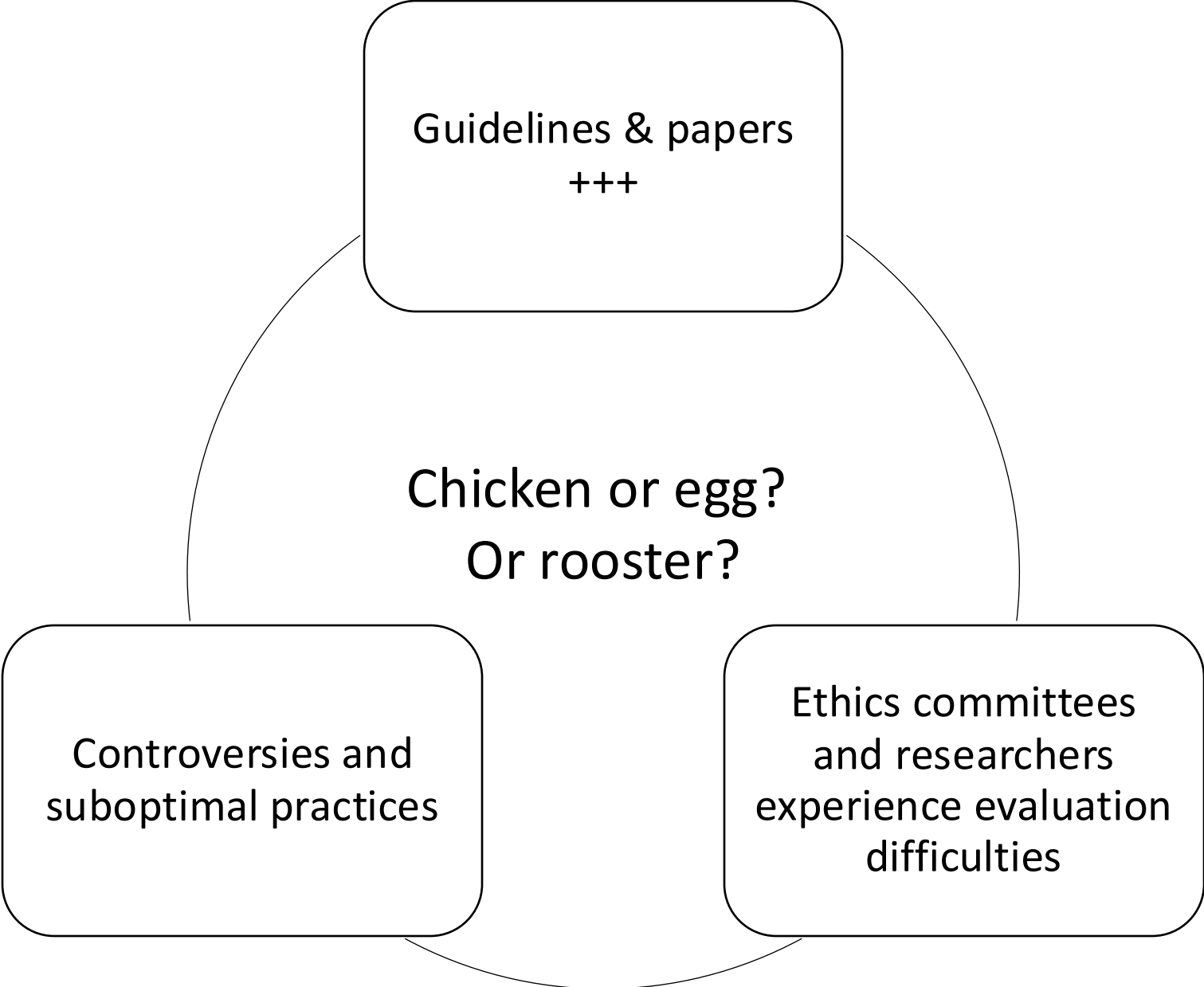
Widespread doubts remain

Australia, medical research – substantial disagreement on whether deception is *ever* justifiable (Handal et al., 2021)

Czech republic – of those ethics committees sometimes requiring a review for social science studies, merely 16% always did so for deceptive studies (Veselska et al., 2024)

Europe – disagreement between ethics committees for the same deceptive study (Pedersen et al., 2022)

Similar findings when surveying researchers and in analyses of deceptive study publications.





1 What do guidelines say?

2 How do researchers evaluate their use of deception?

1. Guidelines

Systematic review - PRISMA

Thematic analysis of 55 guidelines

Verbeke et al. (2023). Informed consent and debriefing when deceiving participants: a systematic review of research ethics guidelines. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 18(3), 118-133.

Verbeke et al. (2024). Assessing the acceptability of individual studies that use deception: A systematic review of normative guidance documents. *Accountability in Research*, 31(6), 655-677.

Recommendations/Requirements

Plan a debriefing and some form of informed consent (when feasible)

Informed consent

- Provide relevant information, deception closer to the truth, consent to be deceived, etc.

Debriefing

- Provide information on the deception and the study design, restore trust and understanding, do so after participation, etc.

Risk-benefit balance **proportionate** and **better than** that of a non-deceptive alternative

Analysis

01

Agreement on
general rules

02

Plenty of variation
in the details

03

Several
unanswered
questions

Good basic principles, but far removed
from practice

2. Researchers

Interviews with **24 researchers** with recent and extensive experience deceiving their participants; diverse disciplines, methods and geographical areas

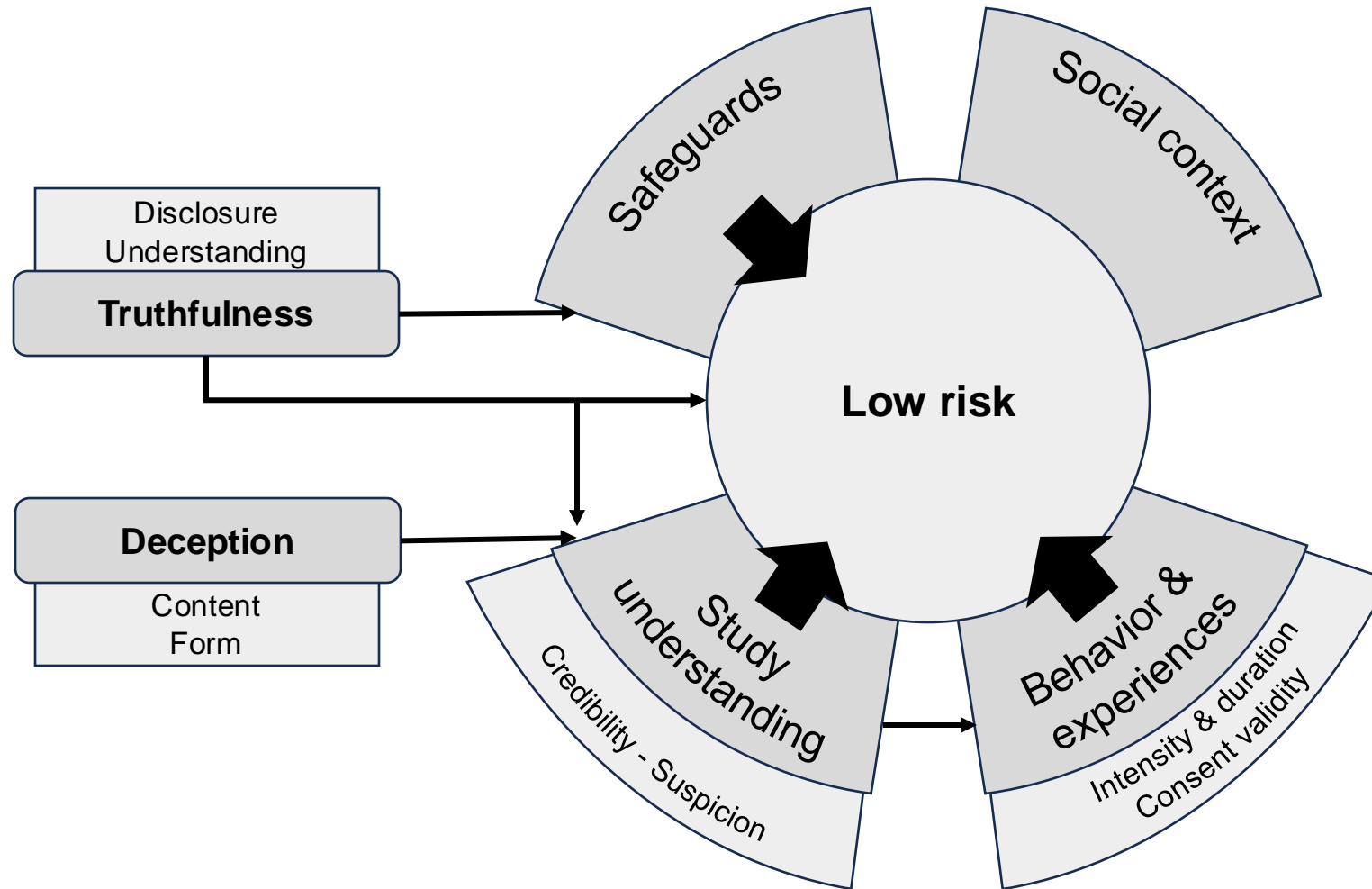
Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews

Verbeke et al. (accepted). What's in a lie? Interviewing researchers on how they judge the justifiability of deception. *Ethics & Human Research*

Verbeke et al. (2024). Truthfulness as the basis for ethical safeguards in deceptive research: An interview study with researchers. *Accountability in Research*, 1-29.

“Because if you get someone who's **depressed or very anxious**, then maybe the idea of being lied to, could trigger other **negative beliefs** such as, ‘I'm stupid’ or ‘people make fun of me.’ This kind of negative thinking. So, I wouldn't want to reinforce that by doing that to a clinical sample.”

(researcher 9; studies the placebo effect)



Analysis

01

Deception and truthfulness as the yin and yang of deceptive studies

02

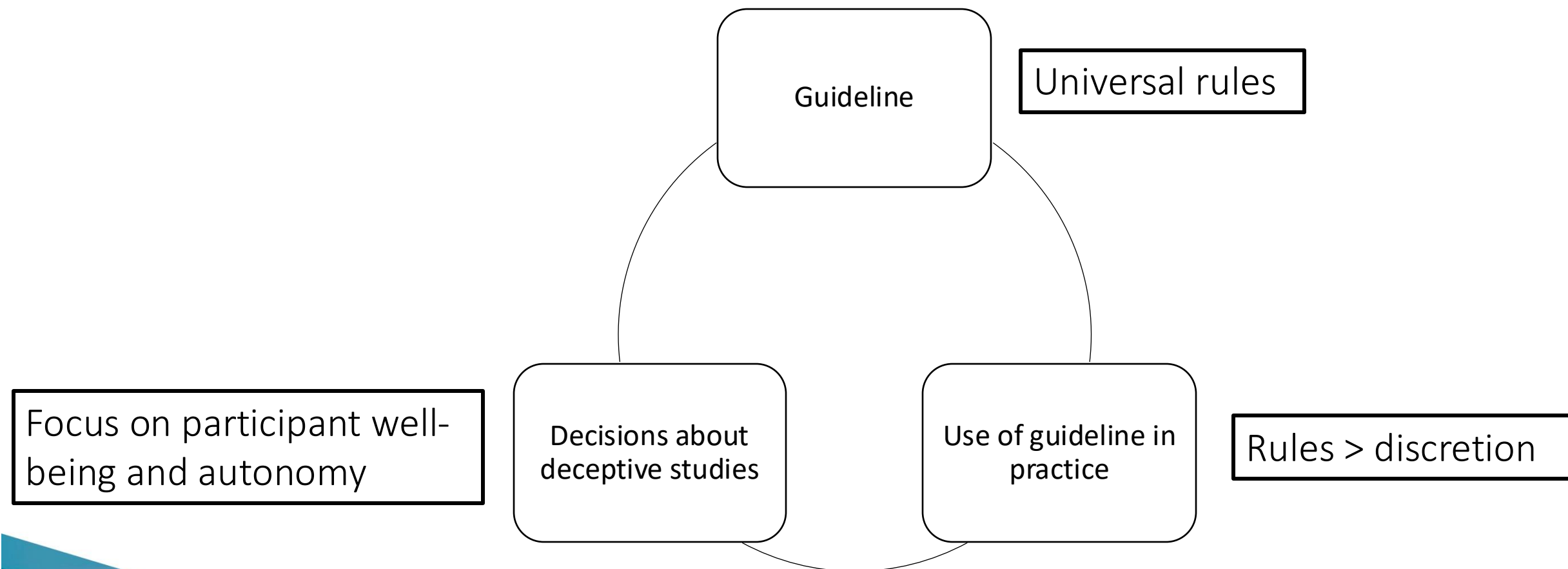
Practice details coupled to **shared framework**

03

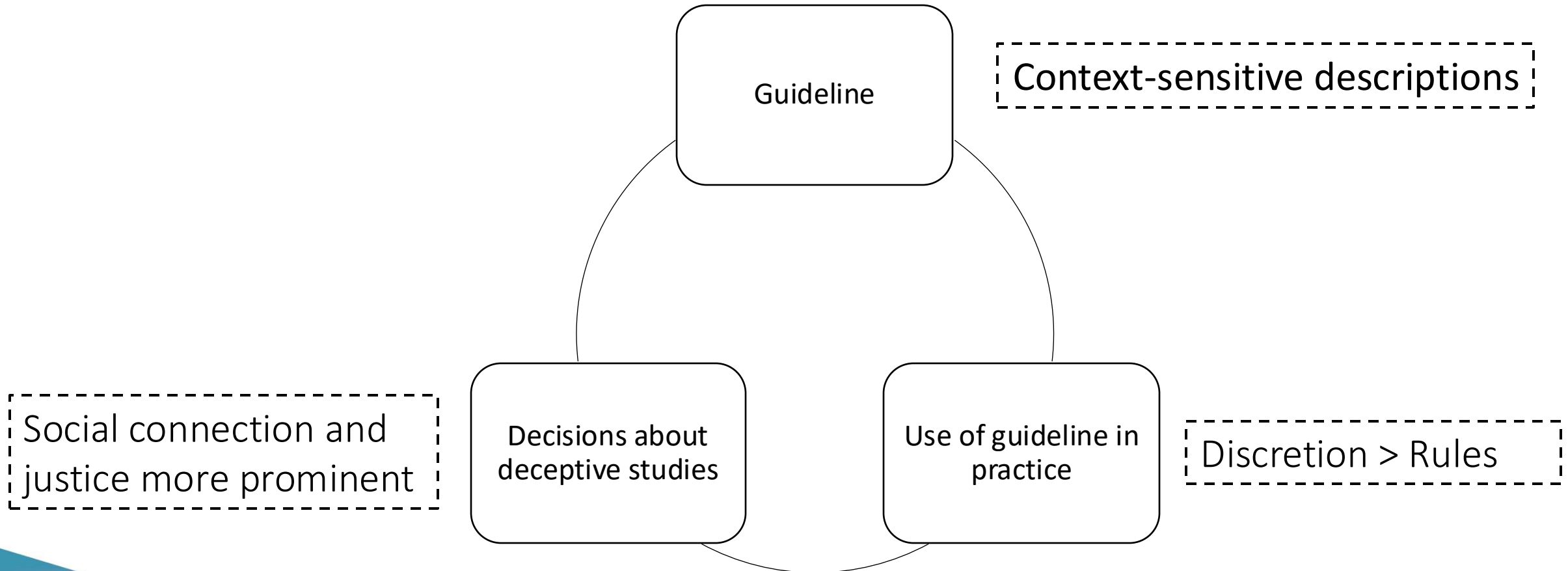
Do not reach **general rules** found in guidelines

Good descriptions of experiences, but
so what?

3. Support



3. Support



Rules: some general, consistent and authoritative rules



Descriptions: how the concrete elements of a protocol go together with each other and with the general rules



ABCDE of deception

Koko

What went wrong?

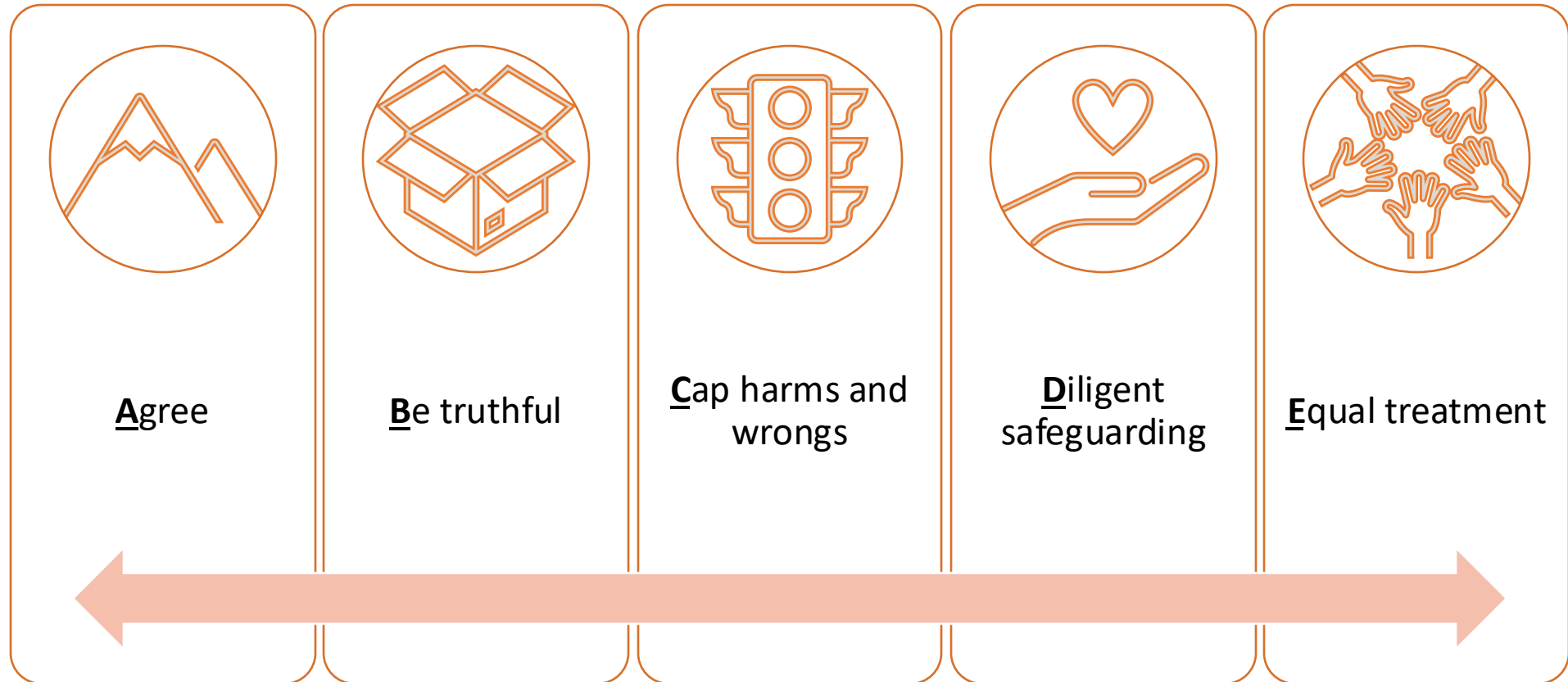
- Rule violation – discretionary decision-making difficulties?

*“The **indignity** of not being provided with the service they sought when using the platform (that is, the ability to message with another human), coupled with [the CEO]’s **self-congratulatory tweets** discussing their data, demonstrate how excitement about novel technologies all too often results in a **lack of consideration of ethics**” (Hiland, 2023).*

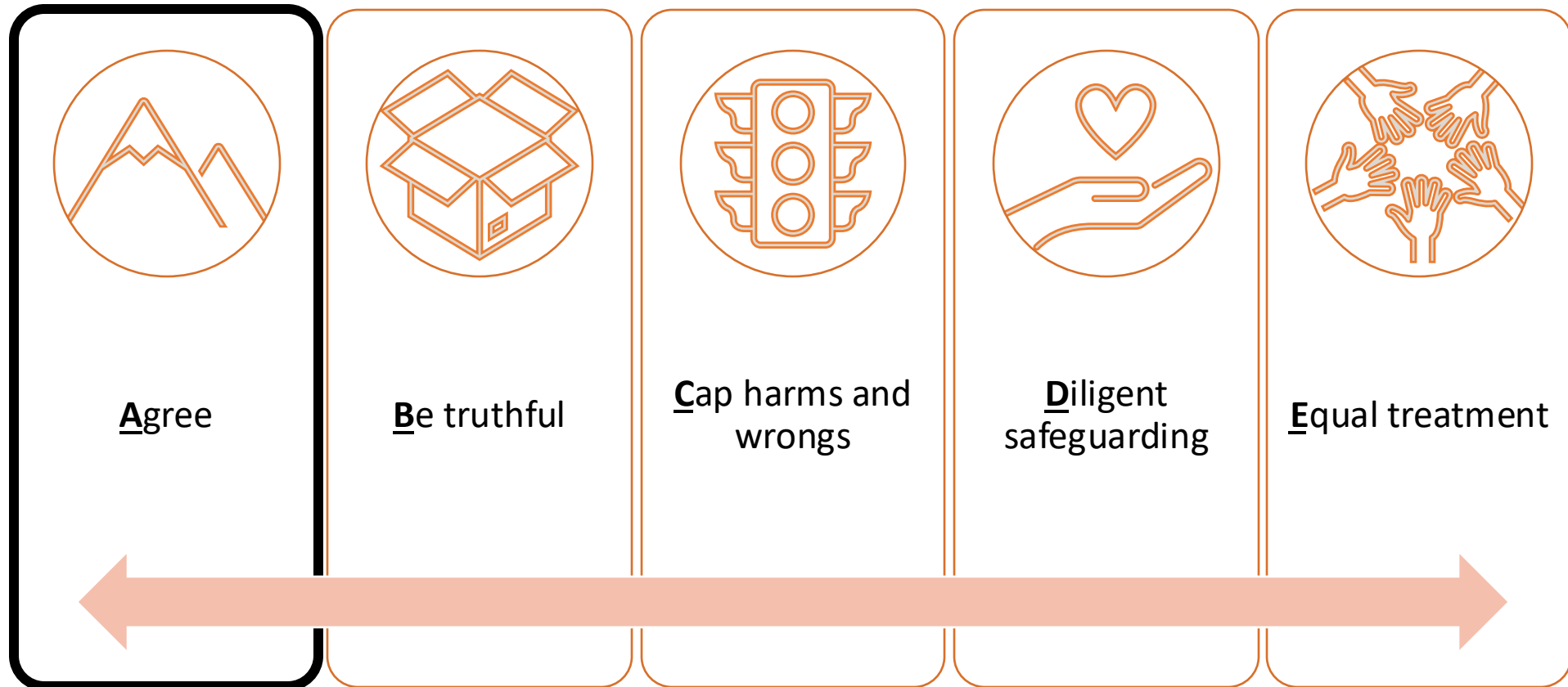
Imagine ...

you are reviewing the
app developer's
proposal

Researcher-participant interaction



Researcher-participant interaction



Agree

Rule

Decide together on study's justifiability

Prospective evaluation by ethics committee for *all* participants

Evaluation by researcher and participant for the *individual* participant

- Informed consent, debriefing, in-between
- Often tacit

Evaluating impact on autonomy, well-being, social connectedness, justice

To consider

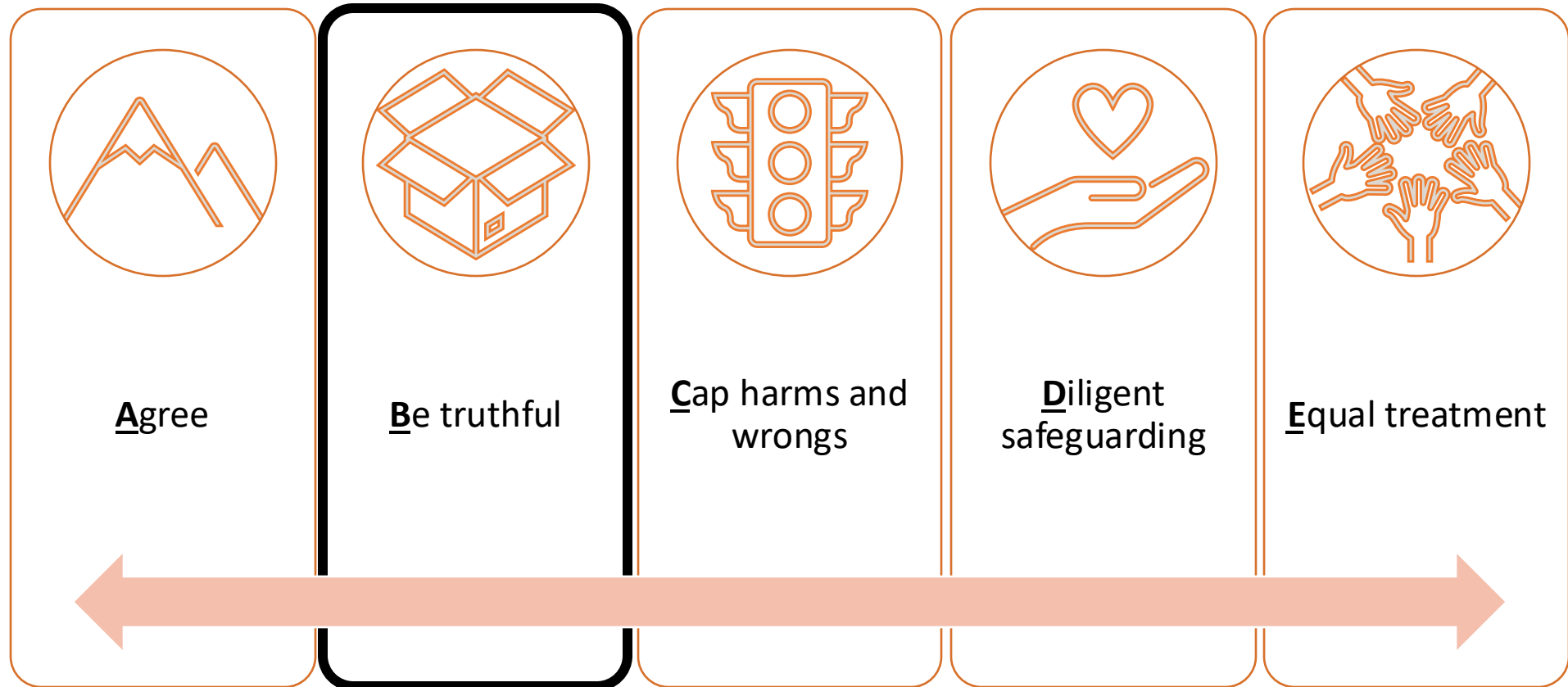


Exchange and attunement: interaction is not what it seems, difficult evaluation

Partners: effectiveness ChatGPT3, needs of app user

Non-verbal and contextual cues: experiencing “genuine support,” which could lead to a breach of trust

Researcher-participant interaction



Be truthful

Rule

Ensure everybody is up to speed as much as possible

- **Balance** methodological value and study understanding
- **Continuous**
- **Level imbalance in study understanding between** researcher and participant

To consider



①

Information: Withholding information, providing real hotlines

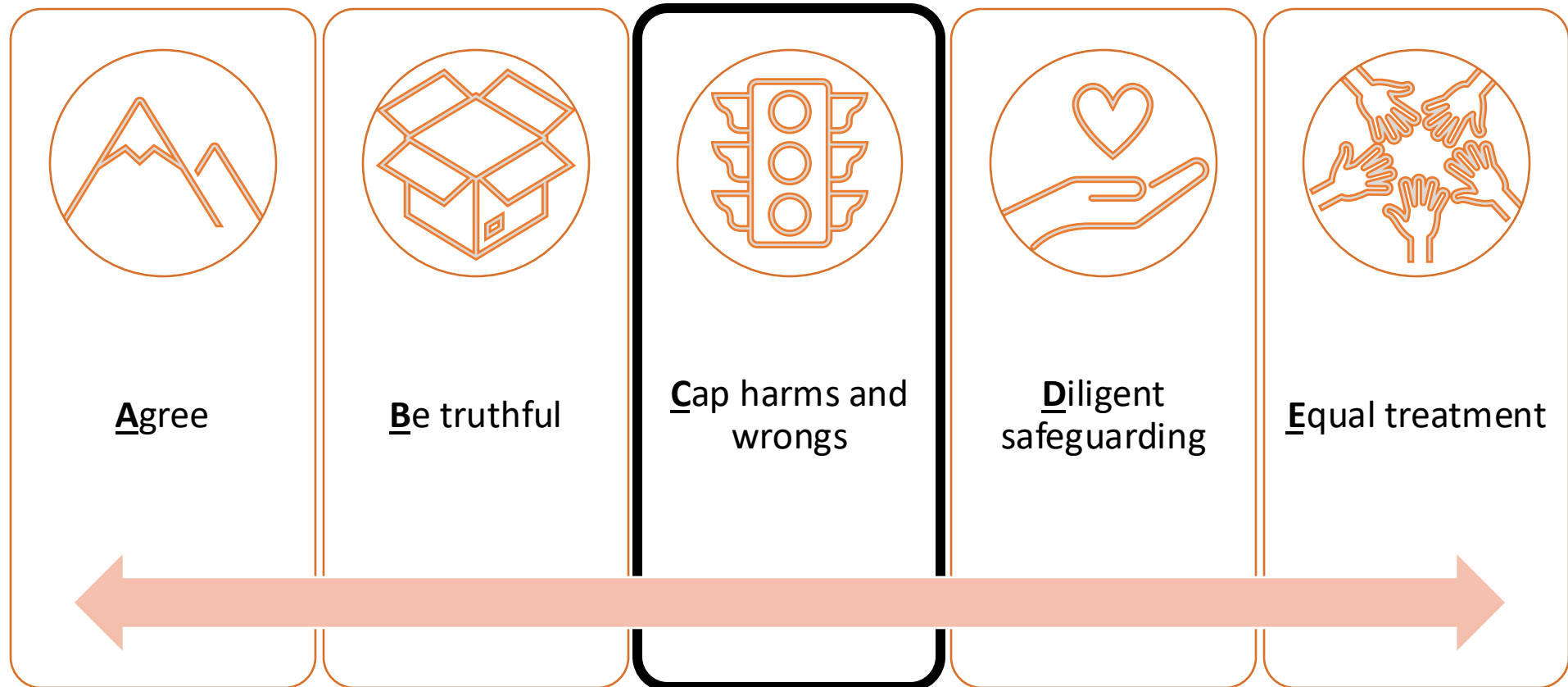
②

Disclose and interpret: testing effectiveness, “I am talking to a peer”

③

Attunement: leveraging expectations, power use, vulnerability

Researcher-participant interaction



Cap harms and wrongs

Rule

1. No more than a **low risk to participants** that could not be reasonably anticipated by them
2. Not convincing participants that they **cannot make decisions**
3. Maintaining sufficient **attunement** to enable (tacit) evaluation by researcher and participant

To consider



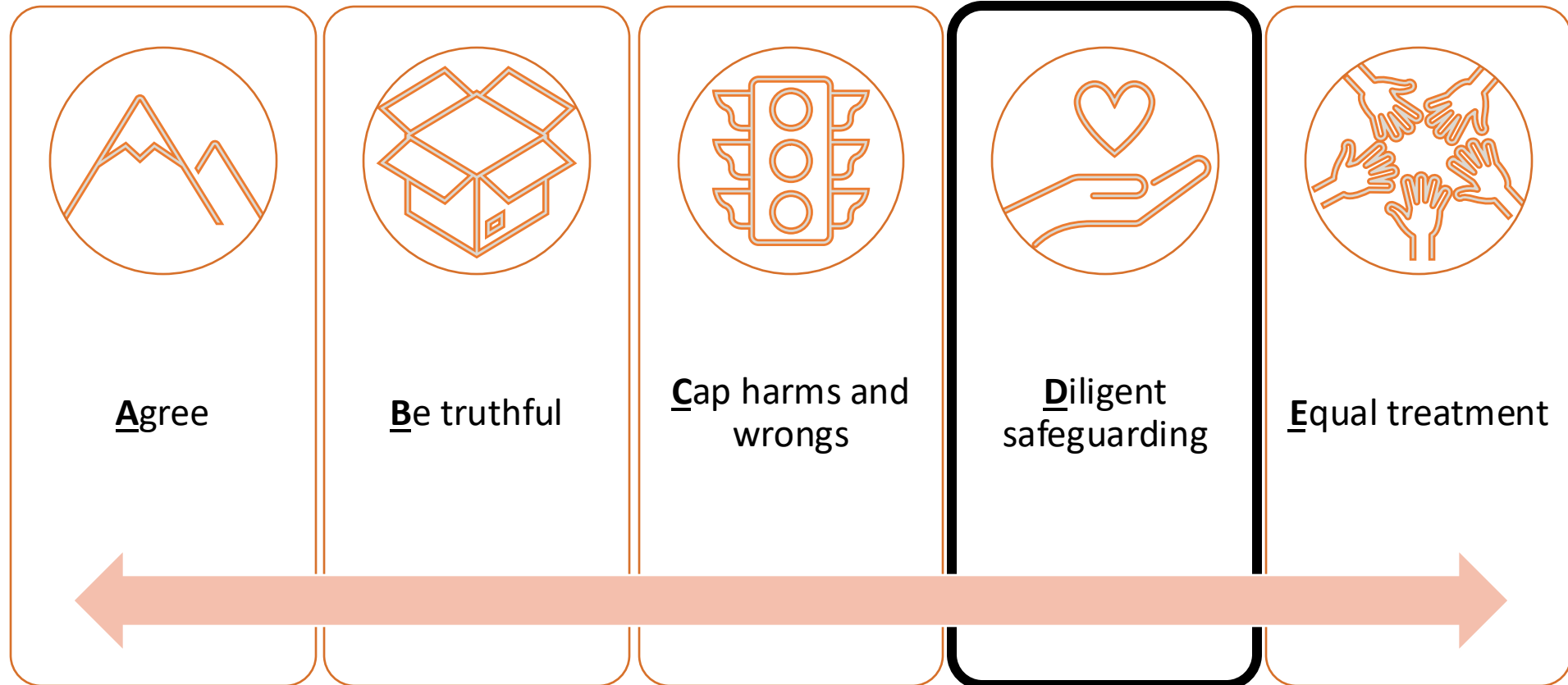
② **Interpretation:** Data collection and analysis

④ **Reaction:** denial

① **Reaction:** connection, recognition

③ **Interpretation:** anger, doubt, isolation

Researcher-participant interaction



Diligent safeguarding

Rule

Prevention is better than the cure

Curing preferably causal instead of symptomatic

Interactive and contextual (tacit) **exchange** between researcher and participant

To consider

Planned, by researcher

Little/no information,
unclear data protection

Unplanned, by researcher

Not picking up distress
signals, not engaging in
conversation with angry
participants



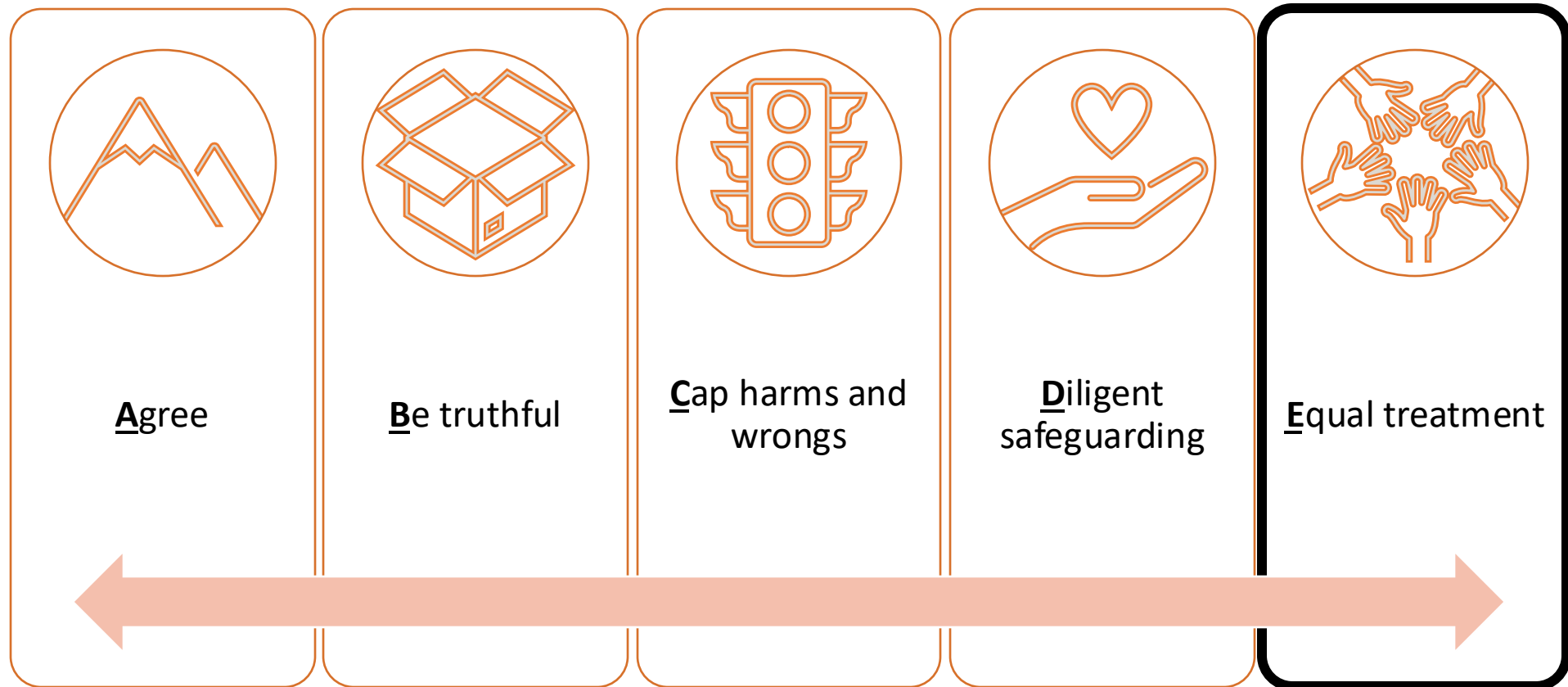
Planned, by participant

No consent, no participatory
design

Unplanned, by participant

No data withdrawal, public
controversy

Researcher-participant interaction



Equal treatment

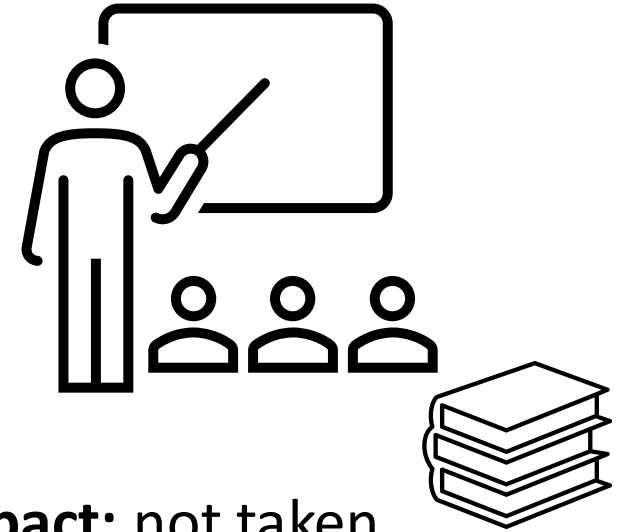
Rule

Proper distribution of goods and responsibilities

1. Mapping **existing inequalities**, their causes and potential mitigation measures
2. Do not **create, worsen or perpetuate** inequalities within/outside of the researcher-participant interaction



To consider



③ **Group-impact:** not taken seriously, stigmatising



① **Identity:** vulnerable app users, diverse needs



② **Interaction:** difficulties seeking support, suspicion



Take home

01

Better support needed
for evaluation deceptive
studies

02

Complementary
approaches of
guidelines and
researchers could meet
in the middle with a
**combination of rules
and descriptions**

03

The **ABCDE of
deception** illustrates
such a combination of
rules and descriptions

The Partnership



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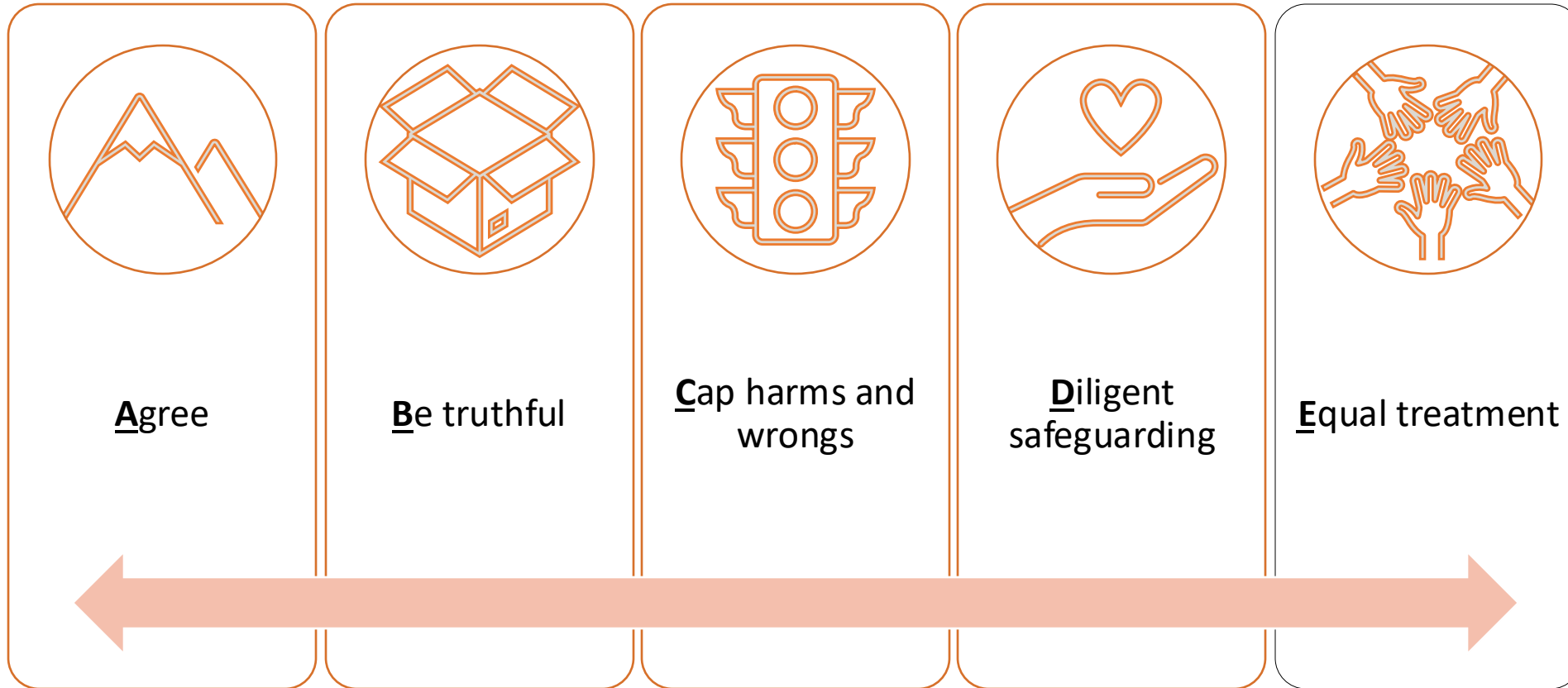
Embassy of Good Science:

embassy.science/wiki/Initiative:Df0d11b5-2efa-4b58-b94f-6845c6e83b11



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