



## Case Report

## Does loyalty trump honesty? Moral judgments of loyalty-driven deceit

John Angus D. Hildreth<sup>a,\*</sup>, Cameron Anderson<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Cornell University, United States<sup>b</sup> University of California, Berkeley, United States

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## ABSTRACT

People sometimes engage in deceit out of loyalty to their group. How are these “loyal lies” judged? Are they viewed as unethical, because lying is wrong, or as ethical, because loyalty is a virtue? Conversely, how is “disloyal honesty” judged, or behaving truthfully when deceit would benefit one's group? In four studies, we found that people evaluate loyal lies and disloyal honesty differently, depending on whether they are evaluating others' or their own actions. When evaluating others' behavior, people viewed loyal lies as unethical and as less ethical than disloyal honesty, just as they viewed lies and honesty in other conditions (Studies 1, 3 and 4). However, when evaluating their own behavior, people who actually lied to benefit their groups in conditions of loyalty judged their deceit as ethical, and as more ethical than did actors who engaged in disloyal honesty – even though the latter behaved truthfully (Studies 2 and 4). Therefore, when people were called to be loyal to their group, loyalty trumped honesty, in that people viewed a loyal but dishonest act as more ethical than a disloyal but honest act.

## 1. Introduction

Groups often demand loyalty, but all too often, loyalty can corrupt individuals to engage in deceit (Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004). For example, out of loyalty to their party, politicians have downplayed concerns about their leaders' wrongdoings (Azaci, Bacon Jr., & Enton, 2017), feigned faith in policies that can damage their constituents (Greenblatt, 2013), and lied about their investigations into fellow party members (Lizza, 2017). Motivated by loyalty to their firm, corporate executives have overstated earnings (Suzuki & Beade, 2017), misrepresented the dangers of their company's products (Ewing, 2017; Suzuki & Beade, 2017), and overlooked their employees' predatory sales practices (White, 2017).

The current research examines how people view deceit that is driven by loyalty to a group. Do people view “loyal lies” as immoral – because it involves deceit – or as moral because loyalty is a virtue? Conversely, when individuals called to be loyal behave truthfully, even when deceit would benefit their group, is their “disloyal honesty” viewed as ethical or unethical? Building from recent work on moral judgment (e.g., Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001), we propose that people view loyal lies and disloyal honesty differently, depending on whether they are evaluating the behavior of others or are the ones lying or telling the truth. Specifically, we expect outside observers to view loyalty-driven lies as unethical and less ethical than disloyal lies because the deceit benefits the liar's own

group (and typically the liar him/herself) at the expense of others. However, liars who deceive out of loyalty will view their lies as ethical, and as more ethical than individuals who engage in disloyal honesty, because in the context of loyalty, the imperative to support one's group and the psychological stakes of the moment blind individuals to universalist moral considerations.

## 2. Ethical dilemmas and loyalty

People view deceit as unethical and morally wrong (Bok, 1978; Gneezy, 2005), especially when it benefits the liar at the expense of others (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). Perceptions of deceit change, however, when lies are more prosocial in nature and benefit others. Moral judgments of prosocial deceit tend to be less harsh than judgments of selfish deceit that benefits the deceiver alone (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013; Wiltermuth, 2011) and less harsh than judgments of honesty when prosocial deceit is possible (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014). Having a reputation for telling prosocial lies even benefits the individual: others are more willing to trust prosocial liars (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). Consistent with this more positive view of prosocial lies, people tend to cheat more when others stand to benefit from their cheating than when they alone might benefit from it (Erat & Gneezy, 2012; Gino & Pierce, 2009; Shalvi & De Dreu, 2014; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015).

But how do people view loyal lies and disloyal honesty? We hypothesize that when evaluating someone else's behavior, observers will

\* Corresponding author at: Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell College of Business, Sage Hall, 106 East Ave, Ithaca, NY 14853, United States.  
E-mail address: [hildreth@cornell.edu](mailto:hildreth@cornell.edu) (J.A.D. Hildreth).

view loyal lies as unethical. In contrast to prosocial lies, loyal lies are inherently selfish and biased. Loyalty, defined as moral partiality towards an object such as a group (Hildreth, Gino, & Bazerman, 2016), is inconsistent with Universalist conceptions of morality (e.g. Bentham & Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism). Universalism states that loyalty is immoral (Carbone, 1997; Hume, 1969) because of its inherent partiality (i.e. preference towards specific group members; Goodin, 1988). Loyal lies, which benefit one's own group (and often oneself) at the expense of others, should thus be perceived by observers as unethical (on an absolute level), and as less ethical than disloyal honesty. We test these hypotheses in Studies 1, 3, and 4.

In contrast, we believe actors who are called to be loyal by their group will view loyal lies and disloyal honesty differently. Unlike observers, actors under such circumstances are immersed in a social context<sup>1</sup> with high psychological stakes – their loyalty is being called on in the moment by their group (Souryal & McKay, 1996). The loyal imperative to act in the best interests of the group introduces substantial pressure on the actor, because failure to fulfil loyal obligations—being disloyal—elicits disgust and moral outrage in others (Haidt, 2003; Rousseau, 1989; Steil, Tuchman, & Deutsch, 1978). Disloyal honesty raises the specter of negative social judgment, ostracism and social exclusion, all of which are highly psychologically threatening (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Williams, 2007).

In emotional contexts, people tend to make less “characteristically utilitarian” judgments (Greene, 2008; Patil, Cogoni, Zangrando, Chittaro, & Silani, 2014)—they care less about universalist considerations and pay more attention to “up close and personal” features of the context (Greene et al., 2001). Functionalist accounts of emotions (Frijda, 1994; Oatley & Jenkins, 1992) also highlight how emotional events focus people's attention and shape their cognition in a way that helps them address the problem immediately at hand (Keltner & Gross, 1999; Levenson, 1994; Oatley & Jenkins, 1992)—in this case, on avoiding social sanctions for disloyalty. It follows that in contexts involving loyalty, not only will people be more likely to lie (as shown in Hildreth et al., 2016), but they will see lying as more ethical and see honesty as less ethical, because this cognitive pattern will encourage behavior (lying) that helps avoid a prominent threat (social sanctions, social-evaluative threat).

Of course, the demands of loyalty are not always salient and need not conflict with other ethical concerns. Prior research suggests that intergroup competition helps to make the loyal imperative salient by focusing individuals' attention on their partiality towards their own group (Hildreth et al., 2016) and often pits loyalty against other moral concerns such as the greater good or acting honestly (e.g., Cohen, Montoya, & Insko, 2006; Waytz, Young, & Ginges, 2014). Intergroup competition also further raises the psychological stakes (Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010) which bolster the effect of emotions on moral judgment (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008). We therefore propose that under conditions where loyalty and intergroup competition are salient, actors who lie out of loyalty will judge their behavior as ethical (on an absolute level), and as more ethical than actors who tell the truth but behave disloyally. We test these hypotheses in Studies 2 and 4.

### 3. Overview of studies

We conducted four studies with 1,392 participants from two different research pools. In Study 1, online participants read about an actor who had either lied or been honest while taking part in a study, and who was in a condition of loyalty and intergroup competition, or in

<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of research on moral judgment considers the observer's perspective—even when people are asked to judge unethical behavior in contexts in which they themselves are the hypothetical actor, they are often asked to judge the actions of a hypothetical other person who experienced a similar context and acted in a particular way (e.g. Gino et al., 2013; Wiltermuth, 2011).

other conditions. Participants then judged the ethicality of the actor's behavior. In Study 2, laboratory participants were actually placed in the context described in Study 1 and given an opportunity to engage in lies that would benefit their group. Participants were asked to judge the ethicality of their own behavior, regardless of whether they engaged in deceit or not. To rule out the possibility that any differences in moral judgments between Studies 1 and 2 might arise due to differences in the research pools (online vs. a university laboratory) or due to temporal or self-selection effects, Studies 3 and 4 recruited participants from the same pool as those recruited in Study 2.

Finally, to rule out the possibility that priming any moral principle would prompt actors to behave and judge their behavior in the same way that they did under conditions of loyalty, we included an additional control condition in Study 2 in which fairness (impartiality across groups) was made salient. If we found different results in conditions of fairness than in conditions of loyalty, this would help rule out that alternative explanation. To maintain consistency between Studies 1 and 2, we also included a corresponding fairness condition in Study 1 as well.

In all studies, we report all measures, manipulations and exclusions; sample sizes were determined before any data analysis. In the lab Studies 2, 3 and 4, the sample sizes were determined with reference to sample sizes used in prior research on loyalty and unethical behavior (Hildreth et al., 2016) and by the availability of subjects in the target research pool who had not already taken a study relating to loyalty. We continued to run Study 2 until the target of 300 subjects (an estimate of the number of available subjects at the time) had been achieved and Studies 3 and 4 until the refreshed research pool had been exhausted. In the online Study 1, a minimum sample size of 600 was determined using a power analysis (GPower: Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) based on the key effect sizes found in prior research.<sup>2</sup> Data collection continued until this target had been achieved.

## 4. Study 1: Online independent observers' perceptions of ethicality

In Study 1, we focused on independent observers' judgements of actors who either lie or tell the truth, in conditions of loyalty and intergroup competition or in control conditions.

### 4.1. Participants

608 participants (343 female;  $M_{age} = 38.1$ ,  $SD = 12.6$ ) recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk were paid \$0.50 for participating in the study.

### 4.2. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to a 3 (loyalty vs. fairness vs. control)  $\times$  2 (intergroup competition vs. no competition)  $\times$  2 (deceit vs. honesty) factorial design. Participants who signed up for the study completed a prescreening questionnaire that included two attention-check questions. Participants who failed the checks were automatically removed from the study before the main study commenced.

The study involved reading a scenario that described an individual “A” who took part in a study. The procedure in that study was based closely on Hildreth et al.'s (2016) research on loyalty and unethical behavior. The scenario varied according to condition such that those in

<sup>2</sup> The effect sizes for the difference in mean ethical ratings in the critical conditions of Study 2 (loyalty competition lied vs. honest  $d = 0.74$ ; Lied loyalty competition vs. other  $d = 1.13$ ; Honest loyalty competition vs. other  $d = 1.05$ ) were large (Cohen, 1988). With  $\alpha = 0.05$  and power = 0.80, the projected sample size needed to detect this effect ( $d = 0.74$ ) is approximately  $N = 30$  (two-tailed),  $N = 24$  (one-tailed). To be conservative we recruited a sample size of 50 per cell, which should be adequate to detect a medium effect size ( $d = 0.50$ ).

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