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Author: Sanjiv Erat

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Avoiding Lying: The Case of Delegated Deception[†]

Sanjiv Erat[‡]

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Abstract

People do not always lie, even when lying increases their monetary payoffs. Still, even when lying is aversive, can hiring someone to lie for you allow a person to avoid the disutility from lying, while at the same time ensuring higher payoffs? The current article investigates this empirical question - the possibility of delegated deception - through a laboratory experiment. The results indicate that a significant fraction of people employ an agent (to lie) even when they could lie themselves. Moreover, the likelihood of delegating to an agent depends on the incentives, with more people choosing to delegate when the lie hurts to a greater extent the person being lied to. Finally, analysis of gender differences in the tendency to use an agent revealed that that women are more likely to delegate to an agent compared to men, especially so when the harm inflicted by the lie is larger.

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[‡]Rady School of Management, UCSD, email: serat@ucsd.edu

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