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Paternalistic lies

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ABSTRACT

Many lies that are intended to help others require the deceiver to make assumptions about whether lying serves others' best interests. In other words, lying often involves a paternalistic motive. Across seven studies (N = 2,260), we show that although targets appreciate lies that yield unequivocal benefits relative to honesty, they penalize paternalistic lies. We identify three mechanisms behind the harmful effects of paternalistic lies, finding that targets believe that paternalistic liars (a) do not have benevolent intentions, (b) are violating their autonomy by lying, and (c) are inaccurately predicting their preferences. Importantly, targets' aversion towards paternalistic lies persists even when targets receive their preferred outcome as a result of a lie. Additionally, deceivers can mitigate some, but not all, of the harmful effects of paternalistic lies by directly communicating their good intentions. These results contribute to our understanding of deception and paternalistic policies.

1. Introduction

People often lie with the intention of benefitting others (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). In many cases, however, it is not immediately obvious whether lying will, in fact, benefit the recipient of the lie (henceforth "target"). For example, an employee may inflate impressions of a colleague's performance on a presentation because he believes honesty will cause emotional harm and demotivate the colleague. Yet this belief may not necessarily be correct. A truthful statement might be seen as more beneficial in the eyes of the colleague, and could actually motivate the colleague to learn from his shortcomings and improve his performance in the future. If this colleague were to find out that the employee lied about his performance, how might he react?

In this research, we investigate how targets respond to lie-tellers (henceforth "deceivers" or "liars") whose lies require them to make subjective judgments about the target's best interests. We label these lies as paternalistic lies. Paternalistic lies are ubiquitous and have important consequences in a variety of contexts. For example, government officials might tell paternalistic lies to citizens by concealing facts about potential security threats to avoid inciting national panic; doctors might tell paternalistic lies to patients by giving them overly optimistic prognoses in order to provide hope; and friends and romantic partners might tell paternalistic lies to each other by delivering false praise with the intention of preventing emotional harm. In all of these cases, deceivers might lie out of genuine concern for the well-being of the targets, but targets may not appreciate these lies because judgments about whether the lie is ultimately more beneficial than the truth are inherently subjective. Thus, well-intended paternalistic lies may backfire. Because paternalistic lies are prevalent and can have important effects on people's lives, it is crucial to understand how they influence interpersonal judgment and behavior.

Here, we provide the first investigation of paternalistic lies. In addition to providing practical advice to those who might be tempted to tell paternalistic lies, we fill an important gap in existing deception research by introducing the construct of paternalistic lies, distinguishing this construct from related forms of deception, and documenting a strong distaste towards paternalistic lies and those who tell them across several dependent variables. This research also deepens our understanding of the primacy of perceived intent in moral judgment; we find that the perceived intentions of paternalistic liars play a critical role in responses to these lies.

1.1. Prosocial and paternalistic lies

Research investigating the consequences of deception has linked lying with a number of harmful effects. Lies have been shown to increase negative affect, damage trust, provoke revenge, harm

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Table 1
Definitions of terms, with examples.

Prosocial lies False statements made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015)	
Unequivocal prosocial lies False statements made with the intention of misleading a target, *and are known to both the deceiver and the target to be in the target's best interests*	**Paternalistic lies** False statements made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target, *and require the deceiver to make assumptions about the target's best interests*
Example: Your spouse has terminal cancer. **You and your spouse told your doctor in the past that you both would prefer to remain hopeful about the prognosis rather than receive complete candor**. Your doctor falsely tells you that your spouse may be eligible for a new experimental treatment soon.	**Example:** Your spouse has terminal cancer. **You and your spouse had never discussed with your doctor whether you both would prefer to remain hopeful about the prognosis or receive complete candor**. Your doctor falsely tells you that your spouse may be eligible for a new experimental treatment soon.

relationships, and promote further dishonesty (Boles, Croson, & Murnighan, 2000; Croson, Boles, & Murnighan, 2003; Greenberg, 2016; Greenberg & Wagner, 2016; Schweitzer & Croson, 1999; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006; Tyler, Feldman, & Reichert, 2006). However, the majority of this work has studied the effects of *selfish lies*, or lies that benefit the deceiver, potentially at a cost to the target. Given the conflation of deception with self-interested motivations in much of the existing literature, it has been difficult to conclude whether interpersonal penalties towards deception reflect an opposition to selfish behavior or deception per se.

To shed light on this issue, scholars have recently examined the consequences of prosocial lies. People tell *prosocial lies*, or false statements made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015; Lupoli, Jampol, & Oveis, 2017), on a regular basis (DePaulo et al., 1996). Given that individuals not only consider actions, but also the intentions behind and the consequences of those actions when making moral judgments of themselves (Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011; Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal, 2015) and others (Cushman, 2008, 2013; Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2010; Greene et al., 2009; Miller, Hannikainen, & Cushman, 2014; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011), it is likely that prosocial lies are perceived differently than selfish lies.

Indeed, recent work provides evidence for this assertion. Individuals who tell prosocial lies that yield monetary benefits to the target are viewed as more ethical than those who tell the truth, regardless of whether the deceiver benefitted from lying (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014). Importantly, this research demonstrates that positive moral judgments of prosocial liars are driven by the perceived benevolence, rather than honesty, of the deceiver. In addition, prosocial liars are sometimes perceived to be more trustworthy: Levine and Schweitzer (2015) found that individuals were more likely to pass money in a trust game to those who told a prosocial lie than those who told harmful truths. Although prosocial lies increased benevolence-based trust (the willingness to make oneself vulnerable based on beliefs about another person's good intentions, which is captured by the trust game), the authors also found that prosocial lies harmed integrity-based trust—that is, the willingness to make oneself vulnerable based on beliefs about another person's adherence to moral principles, such as honesty and truthfulness. Thus, reactions towards prosocial lies are not universally positive.

While this research has advanced our understanding of prosocial lies, it has focused on one specific type of prosocial lie: lies with objective monetary benefits. Specifically, the majority of research on prosocial lies has utilized economic games to study the decisions to lie (Erat & Gneezy, 2012), as well as reactions to lying (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015). In these studies, lying is unambiguously beneficial for the target relative to the truth because a dishonest statement from a deceiver results in a monetary gain for the target, the magnitude of which exceeds the payoff resulting from honesty. Other work has investigated prosocial lying that helps a third party, whereby individuals cheat on a task for the monetary benefit of another individual (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013; Gino & Pierce, 2009; Wiltermuth, 2011). We conceptualize all of these lies as *unequivocal prosocial lies* because lying is known to both the target and the deceiver to be in the best interest of the target or third party. When people tell unequivocal prosocial lies, targets perceive the liars' benevolent intentions to be sincere, and thus, targets react favorably to deception (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014).

However, in many cases, both the consequences and true intentions associated with prosocial lies are unclear. For example, imagine that an employee (Bob) asks a colleague (Joe) for feedback on a presentation. When Bob asks Joe how he performed, what should Joe say? One option is to provide an honest opinion, believing that Bob would prefer to hear the truth and that knowing his presentation was unsatisfactory might help him improve in the future. Alternatively, Joe could lie to Bob, believing that Bob is looking for positive reinforcement and that hearing his performance was poor would devastate him. Without knowing how the truth or a lie would affect Bob emotionally or help him in the future, Joe must rely on his assumptions about Bob's best interests when deciding whether to be truthful. This scenario illustrates that when given the opportunity to tell a prosocial lie, individuals often lack insight into others' preferences for truthfulness, as well as the negative consequences that lying might have on them. Thus, this type of lie can be considered a *paternalistic lie*.

We define paternalistic lies as *lies that are intended to benefit the target, but require the deceiver to make assumptions about targets' best interests.* As such, paternalistic lies are a subset of prosocial lies (see Table 1). When individuals tell paternalistic lies, they are motivated by the assumption that targets are better off being lied to, even though this assumption cannot be objectively verified. Thus, the targets themselves might not agree with this assessment. In short, while unequivocal prosocial lies are known to help the target, paternalistic lies help the target only according to the beliefs of the deceiver. By studying paternalistic lies, we build knowledge of how different types of lies influence interpersonal judgment and behavior, and gain insight into the circumstances in which targets believe versus discredit the prosocial intentions of liars.

It is important to note that although we dichotomize the distinction between unequivocal prosocial lies and paternalistic lies for the ease of investigation, the degree to which deceivers have insight into targets' best interests—and thus the degree to which a lie is paternalistic—falls along a continuum. We use the terms "paternalistic lies" and "unequivocal prosocial lies" as endpoints on this continuum. We do not claim that there are lies that are unequivocally prosocial to all people in all settings. However, we do claim that there are cases in which a deceiver can be more or less confident about what benefits the target. For instance, consider the aforementioned example of Joe, who is asked to give feedback on Bob's poor presentation. If the two have an existing relationship and have already discussed how Bob responds to blunt critiques and words of encouragement, Joe's assumptions about whether honesty or deception are in his colleague's best interests may be fairly accurate. However, if the two have no existing relationship, then his assumptions will be less informed. Without explicit knowledge about how a lie will affect the target and the target's preferences for