



## FlashReport

# “I can't lie to your face”: Minimal face-to-face interaction promotes honesty<sup>☆</sup>



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We randomly assign people to communicate face-to-face (FTF) or through an intermediary prior to and during a game.
- We find that in-game FTF interaction promotes honesty relative to communication through an intermediary.
- The effect of in-game communication medium was mediated by individuals' attunement to their moral-interest.
- We rule out accounts involving mechanisms like rapport and perceived trust.
- The effect was not moderated by the removal of anonymity during a pre-game interaction.

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have noted that face-to-face (FTF) interaction promotes honesty because it provides opportunities for conversation in which parties exchange information and build rapport. However, it is unclear whether FTF interaction promotes honesty even in the absence of opportunities for back-and-forth conversation. We hypothesized a *minimal interaction effect* whereby FTF interaction promotes honesty by increasing potential deceivers' consideration of their own moral-interest. To test this account of how FTF interaction may promote honesty, we used a modified version of the deception game (Gneezy, 2005). We found that people were more honest when communicating FTF as opposed to through an intermediary. While FTF interaction tended to promote honesty irrespective of whether it occurred prior to or during the game, the effect was more pronounced when it occurred during the game. The effect of in-game communication medium was mediated by the activation of potential deceivers' moral-interest. We also ruled out alternate accounts involving interpersonal liking, expected counterpart trust, and retaliation fear as honesty-promoting mechanisms. Furthermore, because these effects were not moderated by whether participants had been visually identified during a pre-game interaction, we suggest that our effects are distinct from theoretical accounts involving anonymity.

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## Introduction

Face-to-face (FTF) interaction promotes a host of social benefits relative to anonymous interactions, including increased honesty (Citera, Beauregard, & Mitsuya, 2005; Rockmann & Northcraft, 2008; Valley, Moag, & Bazerman, 1998). The honesty-promoting quality of FTF interaction has primarily been explained as a result of its communication richness relative to other forms of interaction (e.g., Swaab, Galinsky, Medvec, & Diermeier, 2012). However, others have argued that FTF interaction might activate more moral concerns than alternate

forms of communication (e.g., Rockmann & Northcraft, 2008). Though evidence has supported the former account, to our knowledge no research has provided an adequate test of the latter account of FTF interaction's honesty-promoting virtues. Reliance on paradigms involving unrestricted back-and-forth communication render it difficult to determine whether simply delivering information to a potential deception target via FTF interaction is sufficient to promote honesty by attuning decision makers to their moral-interest as opposed to their self-interest. To test this hypothesis, we used a research paradigm that omits the back-and-forth conversation typical of FTF interaction. In so doing, we sought to understand the mechanism by which FTF interaction promotes honesty.

The communication richness account holds that the visual and auditory cues available in FTF interaction increase the rate of social information transmission (Walther, 1992, 1994), which improves coordination (Turnbull, Strickland, & Shaver, 1976) and reduces miscommunication (Kruger, Epley, Parker, & Ng, 2005). These factors

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are critical for the development of rapport (i.e., mutual liking and positive feelings towards others) and cooperation (Drolet & Morris, 2000; McGinn, Milkman, & Nöth, 2012; Morris, Nadler, Kurtzberg, & Thompson, 2002; Sally, 1995; Swaab, Postmes, van Beest, & Spears, 2007), each of which should reduce the likelihood of deception (Rockmann & Northcraft, 2008). In addition to promoting rapport, FTF interaction also increases the risk of deception-signaling nonverbal cues leaking in the face of persistent questioning (Buller & Burgoon, 1996; Valley et al., 1998). Given that prior research comparing deception in FTF to other forms of interaction has used contexts involving extended back-and-forth conversations such as negotiations and meetings, these findings are unsurprising. By providing more opportunities to ask questions and share information (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008), FTF interactions facilitate rapport development and raise concerns about deception being revealed.

The primary goal of the current research is to examine whether FTF interaction promotes honesty even in situations where back-and-forth communication cannot be used to build rapport and scrutinize potential deceivers. Though these factors may still be activated to a degree during FTF interaction, we wanted to understand whether FTF interaction could promote honesty independently of these factors. We hypothesized a *minimal interaction effect* whereby FTF interaction promotes honesty in an impoverished interaction that omits the conversational element typical of FTF interaction.

We expected FTF interaction to curtail deception by encouraging individuals to consider moral-interest in favor of self-interest *when being presented with an opportunity to deceive*. When people behave opportunistically, they capitalize on information asymmetries by misleading others about their intentions or other information relevant to a task at hand (Bok, 1978; Kray, Kennedy, & Van Zant, 2014). Given that the strategic disclosure of one's intentions or interests occurs in the context of task-relevant communication (Dawes, McTavish, & Shaklee, 1977), we consider whether FTF interaction promotes honesty during a brief exchange of information directly relevant to a task at hand. Unlike task-irrelevant communication, task-relevant communication attunes people to moral values like fairness (Cohen, Wildschut, & Insko, 2010) and promotes cooperation (Bouas & Komorita, 1996; Dawes et al., 1977).

Even when they are identifiable, people tend to be more self-aware when communicating task-relevant information FTF than they are when communicating via other mediums (Hecht, 1978). This increased self-awareness makes them more likely to evaluate whether their behavior meets personal ethical standards (Rockmann & Northcraft, 2008), which should curtail opportunistic behavior motivated purely by self-interest. The prospect of violating one's ethical standards triggers an anticipation of negative affect (Ruedy, Moore, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2013) and lay theories about gaze aversion are consistent with this notion. Although gaze aversion is not a reliable cue to deception (DePaulo et al., 2003), the faulty lay perception that it is (Rotenberg & Sullivan, 2003; Vrij & Granhag, 2007) may reflect expectations of a nonverbal reaction to shame (Keltner & Harker, 1998) triggered by telling a lie. Because FTF interaction increases individuals' self-awareness and attunes them to moral values, it may deter deception.

We note that one means by which FTF interaction differs from other forms of communication is that it is inherently less anonymous. Whereas two individuals become identifiable the moment they have visual access to one another in FTF interaction, other forms of interaction—particularly those conducted through an intermediary—may allow them to interact under anonymity. Many have argued that anonymity promotes the depersonalization of others (Coleman, Paternite, & Sherman, 1999; Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001; Moore, Kurtzberg, Thompson, & Morris, 1999; Postmes & Spears, 2002) and serves as a route to moral disengagement that can promote anti-social behaviors (Diener, Fraser, Beaman, & Kelem, 1976; Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952; Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 1969). However, we argue that FTF interaction can promote honesty independently of its removal of anonymity. Because exchanging task-relevant information

FTF can attune people to moral-interest, the aversive prospect of acting immorally by lying to another's face should be sufficient to promote honesty irrespective of whether both parties are identifiable. If increased honesty during task-relevant FTF interaction is driven by more than identifiability, it should be robust to the removal of anonymity in a prior task-irrelevant interaction. Furthermore, we expected the effect of task-relevant communication medium to be mediated by the consideration of moral-interest as opposed to self-interest.

## Method

We adapted the deception game developed by Gneezy (2005). This dyadic paradigm involves a decision by a “sender” to provide truthful or deceptive information to a “receiver” in an attempt to influence both parties' financial payouts. We modified several aspects of the original game to suit our research question. First, we created a FTF condition of the game where senders delivered their choice to receivers in person. Second, to reduce the possibility that receivers would attempt to influence senders' choices during this interaction, research confederates acted as receivers. Third, senders and receivers traded basic demographic information prior to playing the game, either via FTF interaction or through an intermediary. This allowed us to manipulate identifiability prior to the game to assess whether any honesty-promoting quality of FTF interaction is simply the result of a loss of anonymity. In combination, we utilized a 2 (pre-game communication medium: FTF versus intermediary)  $\times$  2 (game communication medium: FTF versus intermediary) between-subjects design.<sup>1</sup>

### Participants

We recruited 306 individuals from a participant pool at the University of California, Berkeley. Nine participants failed to complete experimental questionnaires and were thus omitted from analyses. Among the remaining 297 participants, 148 (50%) were males.

### Procedure

After participants arrived at the laboratory, an experimenter informed them that they would engage in a one-shot strategic game with another research participant and that their payment would depend on the choices made by both players. To reduce concerns about possible retaliation from counterparts, the experimenter emphasized that monetary payouts would occur at the end of each session in private. A pre-game task required participants and their counterparts to exchange an introduction form containing basic demographic information. Participants then played the game by deciding whether to send their counterpart a truthful or deceptive message.

### Pre-game communication medium manipulation

Prior to receiving instructions about the game, participants circled their gender and age on a written introduction form. In the intermediary condition, the experimenter ostensibly delivered each participant's introduction form to a matched counterpart in an adjacent room before returning to deliver the counterpart's form. In the FTF condition, participants privately met their counterpart in-person in the hallway outside the two rooms to exchange introduction forms. The interaction lasted just long enough for participants to exchange forms and return to their room. Research confederates playing the counterpart role maintained a neutral demeanor and remained silent while exchanging

<sup>1</sup> We conducted this experiment over two academic semesters. In the first semester, participants were randomly assigned to either the FTF pre-game/FTF in-game condition or the intermediary pre-game/intermediary in-game condition. In the second semester, participants were randomly assigned to either the FTF pre-game/intermediary in-game condition or the intermediary pre-game/FTF in-game condition. We analyzed all conditions simultaneously after ensuring that the two participant pools were comparable on demographic and Big-5 personality profiles.

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