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Why we should lie



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We are honest.

— Dell Inc., Code of Conduct, 2015

For centuries, philosophers and ethicists have railed against deception. The belief that deception is harmful has been promulgated by theologians such as St. Augustine, who claimed that “every lie is a sin,” and philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, who argued that “The greatest violation...is lying.” These beliefs permeate modern thinking. Recent scholars have argued that honesty is a minimum moral standard for both society and organizational life, and modern organizations, such as Dell Inc., reflect this idea in their codes of conduct.

The reverence accorded to honesty, however, is difficult to reconcile with the ubiquity of deception. Deception pervades both organizational and interpersonal interactions. Employees routinely lie to their subordinates, coworkers, and superiors; job applicants frequently misrepresent their qualifications; negotiators pervasively lie to their counterparts; and spouses, parents, and children frequently lie to each other—often multiple times a day.

The inconsistency between the public condemnation and the private practice of deception makes it difficult for individuals to make wise ethical decisions. People implicitly recognize that some types of deception are acceptable, but by refusing to explicitly acknowledge when and why deception is moral, we—as scholars, parents, and leaders—have failed to

provide guidance with respect to ethical dilemmas involving the use of deception.

We argue that the key reason that deception has been unfairly disparaged is that scholars have conflated deception with the pursuit of self-interest. For example, in a seminal paper on the “Market for Lemons,” George Akerlof of Georgetown University presumes that sellers of used cars will *always* lie to buyers if they can profit by doing so. The premise that individuals will lie to advance their self-interest is either an implicit or an explicit assumption in much of the academic literature.

Integrating prior research, we define deception as *the intentional misrepresentation of information or emotions*. Intentionality is an important dimension of this definition; to practice deception, a person must intend to mislead a target. In terms of content, deception includes the misrepresentation of information, emotions, or both. What is absent from this definition—and other definitions of deception—is any mention of self-interest. Curiously, the extant empirical literature investigating deception has almost ubiquitously conceptualized deception as a *self-interested* behavior. We contend that conceptualizing deception as a self-interested behavior is overly narrow, and that by failing to consider the full range of motivations for engaging in deception, we have severely limited our understanding of deception. In fact, in many contexts, people are motivated to lie to benefit others. As Galinsky and Schweitzer articulate in *Friend & Foe*, deception can be used for both cooperation and competition. Rather than advance self-interest, prosocial lies often protect others’ feelings or promote the success of others. By focusing on *self-serving* lies, we as scholars have failed to develop a broad understanding of deception. Most of what we know about deception reflects what we know about

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self-serving deception. For example, we know surprisingly little about the antecedents and consequences of prosocial lies.

In addition, by conflating self-interest with deception, we have sent conflicting and hypocritical messages to our employees, students, and children. We have exhorted them not to lie, while often modeling and even *requiring* them to engage in deception. For example, we tell children not to lie, but then demand that they mislead their grandparents about how much they like a gift and their schoolmates about birthday party plans so as not to hurt others' feelings.

This hypocrisy is particularly salient in organizations. We tell employees that honesty is imperative and broadcast this message in codes of conduct, but often require these same employees to mislead others. For example, we might expect negotiators to misrepresent their intentions or managers to misrepresent feedback to fired employees. Similarly, we expect employees to mislead others about how much they look forward to working with them or about the company's pipeline of future products. In fact, we routinely train employees to misrepresent their emotions to conform to organizational display rules. For example, Ritz Carlton employees are instructed to "smile—we are on stage," and to use phrases such as "my pleasure" and "I'll be happy to" irrespective of how they might actually feel. Though research has termed this type of emotional expression emotional labor, it is also a form of emotional deception.

Furthermore, by focusing on the costs of deception, we have ignored the potential *costs of honesty*. Honesty, like deception, can be used to cause pain and harm to others. For example, honest criticism can be delivered with the intention of embarrassing or undermining employees—especially when it is done in front of their peers. Individuals may deliver cruel or inappropriate interpersonal feedback, but assuage their guilt and justify their behavior with the excuse that "I was just being honest." By presuming that honesty is moral, we justify some harmful behaviors.

In contrast to the view that honesty is moral and dishonesty is immoral, we suggest that *some types of deception are moral*. Further, we argue that we should teach our employees, students, and children when it is ethical to lie. By doing this, we can become more ethical and less hypocritical. In particular, we propose that *if we can teach employees to use deception thoughtfully and deliberately, we can create more ethical organizations*. We encourage managers to teach employees to consider the benefits of deception and the costs of honesty so that they can make better decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas. We call for scholars and managers to think differently about deception and, in particular, to think more carefully about deception, ethical policies, and proclamations regarding honesty and deception.

TYPES OF DECEPTION

Misrepresentation can take many forms. For example, people may use false statements or emotions to mislead a target by *commission*; people may omit relevant information or conceal their emotions to mislead a target by *omission*; and people may *palter* by strategically using truthful statements or emotions to create a misleading impression.

Importantly, people tell not only selfish lies, but also prosocial lies. In contrast to selfish lies, prosocial lies benefit others. Prosocial lies can have small or large consequences, and differ from what the philosopher Sissela Bok terms white lies, small-stakes lies of little moral importance.

Prosocial lies are particularly important because they characterize most of the lies we tell in our everyday social interactions. People tell such prosocial lies for many reasons. For instance, people may use prosocial lies to protect others or to be polite. In some cases, people might even use prosocial lies as a sign of respect. For example, rather than admit to having forgotten about a meeting, individuals may offer a more respectful (and false) explanation (e.g., "I had a family emergency"). And correspondingly, targets of this type of deception often prefer the courtesy of a well-crafted lie. For example, a professor may prefer to hear about a fabricated illness than the honest explanation (e.g., "I just slept through your class").

Prosocial lies are common in many organizations and industries. For instance, doctors may overstate the likelihood that an experimental drug will work. Lisa Iezzoni of Harvard Medical School found that more than 55 percent of doctors tell their patients that their prognosis is better than it really is. When doctors seek to help their patients by misrepresenting a prognosis, they engage in prosocial deception.

Emma Levine and Maurice Schweitzer of the Wharton School recently documented the benefits of prosocial deception. When the intentions are clear, people perceive those who tell prosocial lies to be more ethical than those who tell the truth. The results of these studies indicate that when moral values conflict, people often favor benevolence over honesty.

In a second article, Levine and Schweitzer focus on the effect of prosocial deception on interpersonal trust. In contrast to conventional wisdom that lying harms trust, they find that prosocial deception can *increase* trust. Results from these studies demonstrate that in some situations benevolence is more important than honesty in fostering trust.

In general, prosocial lies pit two moral principles against each other: honesty and benevolence. When these principles conflict, we postulate that benevolence is more important. Consequently, we advocate teaching our children, our students, and our employees to recognize this conflict and in some cases to privilege benevolence. At the same time, we recognize that judgments of what is benevolent may be ambiguous, and that individuals may be tempted to rationalize their self-interested decisions as benevolent. We believe that by making the tradeoff between honesty and benevolence explicit, we can make informed, ethical decisions and develop tools for assessing the consequences of our actions. Ultimately, we aim to help individuals make careful tradeoffs between honesty and benevolence that account for both the short-term and long-term consequences of their actions.

Future research is needed to understand the conflict between benevolence and honesty. Quite possibly, to make systematic choices, some organizations may seek to establish explicit rules that proscribe when—and under what conditions—benevolence is more important than honesty. This notion raises important questions. First, what rules about deception should we make explicit to employees, students, and children? Recent research by Emma Levine offers insight into this question. For example, whether or not a target can

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