

The acceptability of lies: A comparison of Ecuadorians and Euro-Americans

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Abstract

This study examined differences between Ecuadorian and Euro-American college students in the perceived acceptability of lies. Six different lie domains were examined: flattery, impression management, conflict avoidance, enhancement of others' self-esteem, self-aggrandizement, and instrumental lies. Overall, Euro-Americans rated lies as more acceptable than Ecuadorians. In both cultures, lies motivated by a desire to benefit others were considered to be more acceptable than lies that primarily benefited the self. Additionally, lying to the outgroup was perceived as being more acceptable than lying to the ingroup. These results were interpreted in light of the findings that Ecuadorians scored higher on measures of uncertainty avoidance and power distance, whereas Euro-Americans scored higher on levels of independence. The implications of these findings for intercultural relations and future directions for research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Lies and other forms of deception are pervasive in our daily lives. They are often used as a device to avoid or handle uncomfortable situations. Politicians tell partial truths to make themselves appear to be better candidates. The media often provide biased coverage of current events. Magazines become famous by exaggerating stories beyond recognition.

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Children, and adults, escape punishment by lying. In the business world, deception is an all too common practice. In fact, lies and deception are so common that one expert has written that “one cannot adequately understand history, nature, personality, and society without also understanding the nature and functions of deception” (Rue, 1994, p. 4).

One definition of deception states that it is an “act that is intended to foster in another person a belief or understanding which the deceiver considers false” (Zuckerman, Depaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981, p. 3). One specific type of deception is lying. A lie is “an untrue statement made with the intent to deceive” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1994). In other words, a lie is a verbal form of deception.

Western intellectuals have long argued that lying is immoral and has devastating consequences for interpersonal relations (e.g. Bok, 1978; Kant, 1964; Sartre, 1956). These consequences may be very profound, not only for the person deceived, but also for the deceiver. They may include, but are not limited to: ruined relationships, broken business deals, hostility and aggression, and such costs as the hiring of incompetent people who claim to be competent. Judgments of dishonesty may even trigger warfare (Triandis, 1994). Perhaps it is for these reasons that researchers have shown an enduring concern with determining the best way to detect deceit (Depaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985; Ekman, 1992; Ekman, O’Sullivan, Friesen, & Scherer, 1991; Forrest & Feldman, 2000; Vrij, Edward, Roberts, & Bull, 2000; Zuckerman, Spiegel, Depaulo, & Rosenthal, 1982).

Yet, some philosophers have gone so far as to defend lying. The highly regarded English ethicist Henry Sidgwick indicated that lies which create a hedonistic satisfaction for both the self and others may be generally beneficial. Plato went so far as to defend “the noble lie.” According to Plato “the noble lie” referred to calibers of metal in the blood determined one’s rank in life, by stating that it was necessary to maintain the social structure. And Nietzsche confronted traditional moral attitudes towards deception by asking, “Why must we have truth at any cost anyway?” (Solomon, 1998, pp. 1–2). In fact, the more pragmatic philosophers maintain that lying is only wrong when the lie causes more harm than good (Solomon, 1998). Lies may even be considered an essential, even valuable, part of daily life and social interactions (Solomon, 1998; Zuckerman et al., 1981).

In fact, despite the pervasive disapproval of lying, people indicate that they lie frequently and do not feel a great deal of remorse about doing so (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). Why do people lie so easily and so often? Researchers have found that there are a number of factors that motivate people to lie (Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984; Hample, 1980; Turner, Edgley, & Olmstead, 1975). These motivations include saving face, avoiding conflict, obtaining power, influencing social interactions, controlling levels of intimacy (Turner et al., 1975), defending one’s actions (Hample, 1980), and protecting self-esteem (Camden et al., 1984). People also lie to obtain something that they want and to flatter others. Thus, the question we pose in this study is, are some types of lies more acceptable than others and, if so, do the types of lies that are acceptable vary across cultures?

1.1. Cultural differences

Hofstede (1991) has identified five primary cultural dimensions along which cultures differ: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and long/short term time orientation. Of these variables, it seems most likely

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