Are liars ethical? On the tension between benevolence and honesty

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Deception is sometimes perceived to be ethical.
- Prosocial liars are perceived to be more moral than honest individuals.
- Benevolence may be more important than honesty for judgments of moral character.
- The moral principle of care is sometimes more important than justice.

ABSTRACT

We demonstrate that some lies are perceived to be more ethical than honest statements. Across three studies, we find that individuals who tell prosocial lies, lies told with the intention of benefitting others, are perceived to be *more* moral than individuals who tell the truth. In Study 1, we compare altruistic lies to selfish truths. In Study 2, we introduce a stochastic deception game to disentangle the influence of deception, outcomes, and intentions on perceptions of moral character. In Study 3, we demonstrate that moral judgments of lies are sensitive to the consequences of lying for the deceived party, but insensitive to the consequences of lying for the liar. Both honesty and benevolence are essential components of moral character. We find that when these values conflict, benevolence may be more important than honesty. More broadly, our findings suggest that the moral foundation of care may be more important than the moral foundation of justice.

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"*To me, however, it seems certain that every lie is a sin…*"
—St. Augustine (circa 420 A.D.)
"*By a lie, a man annihilates his dignity.*"
—Immanuel Kant (circa 1797)
"*…deception is unethical.*"
—Chuck Klosterman, The New York Times, "The Ethicist" (2014)

For centuries, philosophers and theologians have characterized lying as unethical (Kant, 1785; for review, see Bok, 1978). Similarly, ethics scholars have argued that honesty is a critical component of moral character (e.g. Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968; Wojciszke, 2005) and a fundamental aspect of ethical behavior (e.g. Ruedy, Moore, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2013).

The conceptualization of lying as immoral, however, is difficult to reconcile with its prevalence. Lying is common in everyday life (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996). Not only do people lie to benefit themselves (e.g. lying on one's tax returns), but people also lie to benefit others (e.g. lying about how much one likes a gift)

or to serve both self-interested and prosocial motives. This broader conceptualization of lying to include prosocial or mixed-motive deception has been largely ignored in ethical decision-making research.

In studies of ethical decision-making, scholars have routinely confounded deception with self-serving motives and outcomes. This is true of both theoretical and empirical investigations of deception (e.g., Boles, Croson, & Murnighan, 2000; Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013; Koning, Steinel, Beest, & van Dijk, 2011; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009; Ruedy et al., 2013; Schweitzer, DeChurch, & Gibson, 2005; Shalvi, 2012; Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011; Shu, Mazar, Gino, Ariely, & Bazerman, 2012; Steinel & De Dreu, 2004; Tenbrunsel, 1998). For example, ethics scholars who have conflated lying with self-serving motives have investigated behaviors like cheating on one's taxes (e.g. Shu et al., 2012), inflating self-reported performance (e.g., Mazar et al., 2008; Mead et al., 2009; Ruedy et al., 2013), misreporting a random outcome for financial gain (e.g. Shalvi et al., 2011) and lying to a counterpart to exploit them (Koning et al., 2011; Steinel & De Dreu, 2004).

Related research has studied the interpersonal consequences of deception. This work has found that lying harms interpersonal relationships, induces negative affect, provokes revenge, and decreases trust

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(Boles et al., 2000; Croson, Boles, & Murnighan, 2003; Schweitzer & Croson, 1999; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006; Tyler, Feldman, & Reichert, 2006). All of this research, however, has studied lies that are motivated by self-interest, such as the desire for reputational or financial gains. As a result of this narrow conceptualization of deception, what we know about the psychology of deception is limited. Quite possibly, our understanding of deception may simply reflect attitudes towards selfish behavior, rather than deception per se.

In contrast to prior research that has assumed that deception is immoral, we demonstrate that lying is often perceived to be *moral*. In the present research, we disentangle deception from self-interest and explore the moral judgment of different types of lies. Across three studies, we find that lying to help others *increases* perceptions of moral character.

Our research makes two central contributions to our understanding of deception and moral judgment. First, we challenge the universal presumption that deception is immoral and that honesty is moral. We demonstrate that perceptions of honesty and deception are far more complex than prior work has assumed. This qualifies extant research and illustrates the need to explore a broader set of dishonest behaviors when investigating attitudes towards deception. Second, we explore the conflict between two universal moral foundations: justice and care. Justice is a moral foundation that prioritizes fairness, honesty and moral principles and rules; care is a moral foundation that prioritizes the obligation to help and protect other people (Gilligan, 1982; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Walker & Hennig, 2004). Prior studies that have focused on violations of either justice *or* care offer little insight into how individuals resolve dilemmas with competing moral principles. Our investigation has broad practical significance because in many settings, justice and care conflict. Prosocial lies reflect this conflict.

Prosocial lies

In routine interactions, individuals often face opportunities to tell prosocial lies. We may tell a host that their meatloaf was delicious, a child that we love their artwork, or a colleague that his or her work makes an interesting contribution. Consistent with prior research, we define lies as false statements made with the intention of misleading a target (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). We define *prosocial lies* as *false statements made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target* (Levine & Schweitzer, 2013). We distinguish prosocial lies from altruistic lies and define altruistic lies as a subset of prosocial lies; *altruistic lies* are *false statements that are costly for the liar and are made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target* (Erat & Gneezy, 2012; Levine & Schweitzer, 2013).

We also distinguish prosocial lies from white lies. White lies involve small stakes and are "of little moral import" (Bok, 1978: 58). White lies can be either self-serving or prosocial. We define white lies as *false statements made with the intention of misleading a target about something trivial*. In contrast, prosocial lies are intended to benefit the target and can have small or substantial consequences. For example, parents may tell prosocial lies about their marriage to protect their children (e.g. Barnes, 2013), government authorities may tell prosocial lies to citizens, hoping to protect them (e.g. Bok, 1978), and doctors may tell prosocial lies about the severity of a prognosis to help a patient (e.g. Iezzoni, Rao, DesRoches, Vogeli, & Campbell, 2012; Palmieri & Stern, 2009; Park, 2011). In fact, a recent study found that over 55% of doctors describe prognoses in a more positive manner than warranted, and over 10% of doctors explicitly lie to patients (Iezzoni et al., 2012).

A few studies have explored the frequency of deception in routine communication. This work found that individuals lie in approximately 20% of their social interactions, and many of these lies are prosocial (DePaulo et al., 1996). Studies have also found that women tell more prosocial lies than men (Dreber & Johannesson, 2008; Erat & Gneezy, 2012) and that prosocial lies are most often told to close family

members (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998) and to people who are emotionally invested in the content of the lie (DePaulo & Bell, 1996). Prosocial lies are often told as a form of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967).

In the present research, we explore moral judgments of prosocial lies. Prosocial lying is an ethically ambivalent act; prosocial lying signals care for others (a positive moral signal), but also disregard for the moral principle of honesty (a negative moral signal). By pitting the signals of care and honesty against each other, we build our understanding of the relationship between ethical conflicts and moral character judgments.

Judging moral character

To manage and coordinate interpersonal relationships, individuals assess the moral character of those around them (e.g. Reeder, 2009). Research on moral character judgments has largely focused on perceptions of an actor's motives. When individuals observe an unethical act, they can make either personal or situational attributions for the action (e.g. Knobe, 2004; Young & Saxe, 2008; Yuill & Perner, 1988). In making these attributions, individuals seek to understand the intentionality of the actor's actions (Alicke, 1992; Darley & Pittman, 2003; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Bloom, 2003). Individuals make inferences about an actor's intentionality by using characteristics of the decision-making process as information (see Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009 for review). For example, individuals who make quick moral decisions are perceived to be more moral than individuals who take their time to arrive at a moral decision, because a quick decision signals that an actor was certain about her judgment (Critcher, Inbar, & Pizarro, 2013).

Recent research has expanded our understanding of the different signals, such as decision speed, that influence perceptions of ethicality. However, there is still much to learn about the traits and values that really matter for judgments of moral character (e.g. Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007).

Scholars argue that justice and care are two key components of moral character (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Lapsley & Lasky, 2001; Walker & Hennig, 2004). Justice reflects respect for overarching moral rules, such as "do not lie." Care reflects the obligation to help and protect others (Gilligan, 1982; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Walker & Hennig, 2004). Though many scholars identify these two components as the core foundations of moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1969), others have expanded the set of moral foundations to include Purity, Authority, and In-group Loyalty (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009, Haidt & Graham, 2007). In our investigation, we focus on justice and care.

Extant ethics research has primarily studied acts that violate either justice *or* care (e.g. Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011). In these cases, the ethical choice is often clear. However, when justice and care conflict, the ethical choice is unclear. Surprisingly, little work has examined the moral judgment of competing moral principles (for an exception, see Uhlmann & Zhu, 2013). In the present research, we explore the tension between justice and care by studying prosocial lies. Prosocial lies represent a justice violation (e.g. "Never tell a lie") that signals care.

The majority of research in moral psychology argues that, at its core, "morality is about protecting individuals" (Haidt & Graham, 2007: 100). Caring for others is fundamental to the human experience and humans are hardwired to detect harm to others (Craig, 2009; De Waal, 2008; Graham et al., 2011). For example, individuals often construe immoral acts as causing harm, even when no objective harm has been done (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014). Some scholars have even suggested that moral rules of justice evolved to protect people from harm (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012). That is, the reason we value justice may have more to do with its role in protecting individuals, than our preference for formal rules (Rai & Fiske, 2011; Turiel, 1983; Turiel, Hildebrandt, & Wainryb, 1991).