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 benefiting 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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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 conflated 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...
target (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). We de-

In contrast to prior research that has assumed that deception is im-

Our research makes two central contributions to our understanding

demonstrate that perceptions of honesty and deception are far more

We also distinguish prosocial lies from white lies. White lies involve

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).

As 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

that 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 cer-

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 rea-

To help a patient (e.g. Iezzoni, Rao, DesRoches, Vogeli, & Campbell, 2012). In the present research, we explore the tension between justice and care by studying prosocial lies. Prosocial lies represent a justice violation (e.g. 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).
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