The Consequences of Dishonesty

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Abstract

We review recent findings that illustrate that dishonesty yields a host of unexpected consequences. We propose that many of these newly-identified consequences stem from the deceiver choosing to privilege other values over honesty, and note that these values may relate to compassion, material gain, or the desire to maintain a positive self-concept. Furthermore, we argue that conflict between these values and honesty can be used to explain the unexpected consequences of dishonest behavior. We demonstrate that these consequences need not be negative, and discuss research that illustrates that dishonest behavior can help actors generate trust, attain a sense of achievement, and generate creative ideas. In addition, we discuss recently-identified negative consequences that can result from privileging other values over honesty.

The Consequences of Dishonesty

People have long known that dishonest behavior can yield enticing rewards. Lies allow people to feel better about themselves, protect themselves from embarrassment, look better in others' eyes, and foster positive relations with other people [1]. Consequently, the motives for most lies baffle few people and the topic may seem deserving of little further scholarly attention. We suggest, however, that analyzing why people tell particular lies may illuminate the likely consequences of those lies. We therefore take this approach in reviewing the recent research identifying novel and important consequences of deception.

Motives for Dishonesty

Although people lie in as many as a fifth of their interactions [1], most of their statements are true. People default to honesty for many reasons: honesty can make life less cognitively depleting [2,3], it can lower the risk of social sanctions [4], and it can allow people to see themselves as morally virtuous [5,6,7,8]. When someone decides to eschew these benefits by lying, they privilege a value other than honesty over honesty [9]. This can and does lead to some predictable negative consequences for the actor, for the recipient of the lie, and for society. As recent articles have shown, dishonest behavior can lead to some important and nonobvious negative consequences [10,11,12,13,14]. Just as interestingly, privileging another value over honesty can also produce positive consequences in ways that have only recently been discovered.

We argue that the value that people privilege over honesty when they tell a particular lie has critical implications for the type of consequences that the lie is likely to generate. We discuss below the likely consequences of privileging three primary categories of values over honesty,

and acknowledge that in the real world people may simultaneously possess multiple motives for telling any particular lie.

Compassion

People lie about their feelings more often than they lie about anything else [1]. When people state that they feel more positively about something than they actually do, they build rapport with others and spare others' feelings [15]. Lying in such prosocial ways can actually increase benevolence-based trust, such that people exhibit more trust toward those who tell altruistic lies and mutually-beneficial lies than they do toward people who privilege honesty over compassion by telling the truth [16]. Furthermore, people perceive others who lie in altruistic or mutually-beneficial ways as more moral than people who state the truth [17], which suggests that the consequent gains may more than compensate for any deficits in integrity-based trust created by altruistic or mutually-beneficial lies. Telling prosocial lies may therefore send a useful signal both to the self and to other people that the deceiver cares about acting benevolently and compassionately. In contrast, antisocial lies may degrade perceptions of the liar's intentions towards others and his or her general trustworthiness [18].

Prosocial and antisocial lies also create different consequences for social networks. Recent models have shown that telling prosocial lies enables people to maintain larger social networks than would otherwise be possible because those who tell prosocial lies are able to connect otherwise relatively unconnected parts of social networks [19]. Antisocial lies motivated by self-interest, in contrast, constrain network size and fragment social networks because they alienate people—reducing the likelihood of social cohesion. If counter-deception strategies are not

developed to overcome this negative consequence of antisocial lies, society becomes fragmented into small but well-connected groups opposing each other.

It should be noted, however, that not all deception motivate by compassion has positive consequences. Prosocial lies may also reduce people's abilities to make accurate forecasts of their likelihood of success [20,21]. If a potential entrepreneur contemplates starting a business and solicits advice from social contacts, those social contacts may decide out of kindness to express more enthusiasm about the idea than they really feel. If so, their advice may bias the entrepreneur to be more likely to start the business than they otherwise would.

Material Gain

In many cases, people forsake honesty because lying offers them access to resources that they would not otherwise obtain [15,22]. When people lie because they are valuing material gain over honesty, they often create negative consequences for themselves. People trust the actors less [18] because the actors have demonstrated the primacy of their self-interest over any sense of obligation to be honest.

The decision to privilege material gains over honestly can have consequences beyond the deceiver. When actors demonstrate the primacy of self-interest over honesty, their behavior also sets a descriptive norm [23] and signals to other actors that the choice of self-interest over honesty is a common and acceptable way to behave. As a result, one actor's dishonesty can be socially contagious and increase the likelihood that others will behave unethically [10,11,24,25,26]. Demonstrating this phenomenon, Innes and Mitra [10] found that individual propensities for honesty decline in the face of evidence that a large proportion of one's peer group is dishonest—even when the stakes are quite small.

Importantly, people do not always become more likely to behave dishonestly after seeing someone else act dishonestly. People are likely to emulate the behavior of in-group members and of those psychologically close to them [27], but are less likely to act dishonestly after observing out-group members behave dishonestly [25]. Whether dishonesty has a positive or negative effect on others' dishonesty therefore depends upon the social landscape in which the dishonesty occurs.

This signal to others that the actor is willing to compromise honesty may, in some contexts, be beneficial to the actor. Pierce and Snyder [28] demonstrate that employees who are willing to act dishonestly on behalf of customers, relative to those who are not, are rewarded with a lower risk of termination and greater financial gains. In this way, their willingness to behave dishonesty becomes a social currency desirable to people who might benefit from their dishonesty (i.e., the clients).

People who behave dishonestly for personal gain rather than for prosocial reasons face the challenge of reconciling their actions with their need to see themselves as good, moral people [7,29]. People may do so in three chief ways, which lead to distinct sets of consequences.

Moral Disengagement. The first way to reconcile past dishonest actions with a view of the self as an honest person involves rationalizing one's behavior and morally disengaging by using cognitive mechanisms (e.g., displacement of moral agency, disadvantageous social comparison) to reduce tendencies to self-sanction [11,30]. People who pursue this strategy, ironically, may find themselves on a slippery slope, such that they start to rationalize and subsequently engage in more significant lies, particularly if they have a prevention mindset [31]. In an interesting demonstration of the slippery slope phenomenon, Gino, Norton, and Ariely [32] showed that

people who were instructed to wear counterfeit glasses developed feelings of inauthenticity that led them to abandon moral standards and behave more dishonestly in subsequent tasks. Also demonstrating the danger of the slippery slope as a consequence of moral disengagement, Welsh et al. [14] found that a gradual increase in monetary incentives over three rounds of a task made people twice as likely to overstate their performance in the final round as were people whose incentives rose abruptly or began at the maximum level. Small initial acts of dishonesty can therefore lead to consistent (and escalating) trends in behavior, which is particularly problematic because a slow erosion of ethics is less noticeable than abrupt moral degradation [33].

Motivated Forgetting. Another strategy for reconciling one's dishonest actions with one's desired self-view is by engaging in motivated forgetting of moral views. Across several studies, people who broke moral rules by behaving dishonestly on a game suppressed their knowledge of the rules relevant to the immorality of their behavior, while maintaining memory of the non-moral aspects of the rules [34,35]. As a consequence, dishonest behavior can diminish memory of some forms of information. In similarly motivated behavior, people will also resolve dissonance caused by their dishonesty by presenting themselves as virtuous and condemning others particularly harshly for the same forms of dishonesty that they had committed [36].

Moral Compensation. A third way to reconcile past dishonest actions with a positive self-view is through moral compensation. People can morally compensate for past dishonesty by performing prosocial actions or by providing justifications for their behavior [37,38,39], especially if they place great importance on having a positive moral identity [40]. People can also morally compensate for future unethical behavior by accruing moral credentials—that is, moral credits in a potentially unrelated domain [41].

Recent research has started to clarify when dishonest behavior leads to further dishonest behavior, motivated forgetting of moral rules, or compensatory prosocial behavior. Cornelissen, Bashshur, Rode, and Le Menestrel [42], for example, have shown that people's ethical predisposition influences whether past unethical behavior is more likely to yield subsequent unethical or ethical behavior. Specifically, they illustrate that outcome-focused actors are likely to balance dishonest behavior with honest behavior, whereas rule-based actors are likely to act consistently and therefore less ethically after acting dishonestly originally.

Desire to Maintain Positive Self-Concept

As the above research suggests, people's need to maintain a positive self-regard can influence the nature of the consequences of dishonest behavior. This same need can also motivate people to lie even when they have little financial or material reason to do so [43,44,45,46]. For example, people who have a need to see themselves as intelligent or skilled at some task may inflate reports of their performance on tasks. When demonstrating intelligence or skill is the motive that trumps honesty, dishonesty can lead to positive emotions because it instills feelings of self-satisfaction amongst those who get away with dishonest behavior [47].

Similarly, lying motivated by the need to see oneself as skilled or intelligent can lead people to forget that dishonest behavior played a role in their success. As Chance, Norton, Gino, and Ariely [48] demonstrated, people who exploit opportunities to cheat on tests infer that their performance indicates intelligence and therefore, are likely to make misguided bets about their future performance on tests in which they have no opportunity to cheat. As such, dishonesty and the ego-protective processes that ensue can lead people to make inaccurate predictions and bets.

Even if lying is not motivated by a need to demonstrate one's intelligence, it can have positive consequences for one form of intelligence—creativity. When people behave dishonestly they break out of a rule-following mindset. Doing so leaves them better able to break rules within a domain to create new connections between previously unrelated cognitive elements, and ultimately construct more creative ideas [49].

Future Directions

Future research could productively examine whether telling prosocial lies can escalate into telling self-oriented lies. Because people rely on different rationalizations to excuse themselves for telling these two distinct forms of lies, people may not suspect that the prosocial lies that they tell their friends could eventually escalate to more self-interested lies. However, when people privilege a value over honesty they may start to devalue honesty relative to other values. Moreover, telling prosocial lies may make people feel like they are acting morally; they may therefore feel licensed to tell lies motivated by self-interest.

Future research could also examine whether people's espousal of distinct moral foundations [50] predicts whether they would punish others for privileging the moral foundation over honesty. For example, dishonesty stemming from following the orders of authorities may create fewer negative social consequences in cultures that embrace authority. Lastly, it may be productive to explore how people can effectively communicate their aversion to or embracement of specific forms of dishonesty. As recent work has shown, people who take a utilitarian approach to ethical decision-making will consider beneficiaries' moral preferences when they are known [51].

Conclusion

Pinocchio's nose grew whenever he would lie. The consequences of deception are much less clear for the rest of us, but patterns are starting to emerge. In this work, we suggest that many of the intriguing and recently-identified consequences of dishonesty can be productively understood as a function of the motives that conflict with honesty.

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