

## **The Rise of Dishonest Leaders: Causes and Solutions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Honesty is a fundamental human value. Yet, the world has witnessed increasing indifference towards honesty over the past several years and stood by while dishonest leaders rose to positions of power and influence. This article provides novel theorizing to explain the rise of dishonest leaders. We theorize that intergroup conflict elicits a zero-sum mindset, leading people to focus myopically on how their ingroup can triumph over an outgroup. This focus leads people not only to engage in dishonesty, but also to judge dishonesty more positively in others, including leaders. Specifically, when dishonesty is used to defeat an outgroup, it is perceived as a signal of competence and parochial benevolence, despite being costly in the long run. As a result, people knowingly support (e.g., elect, follow) dishonest leaders. In the present article, we integrate recent findings in organizational behavior, moral psychology, political science, and sociology to build this theory. We conclude by discussing new strategies that individuals and organizations can implement to promote honesty. Ultimately, this research deepens our understanding of honesty and the forces that promote and impede its development in leaders and their followers.

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## INTRODUCTION

The past decade has been marked by a notable decline in public trust, and a striking ambivalence towards science, fact, and truth-telling. Recent research has explored how modern-day methods of information sharing have contributed to the spread of fake news and misinformation broadly (e.g., Effron & Raj, 2020; Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2018). Communicators frequently lack knowledge about the truthfulness of information on social media platforms and fail to deliberate about whether information is truthful before sharing it (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Even when communicators recognize that information may be false, communicators may care more about the social value of sharing information than the accuracy of information. As a result, social media users may share information that signals identification to an in-group or builds their network (Pereira, Harris, & Van Bavel, 2023; Ren, Dimant, & Schweitzer, 2023), regardless of the truthfulness of the information. A growing body of work on misinformation has helped to explain a disregard for truth in current discourse by highlighting these cognitive and social mechanisms contributing to the sharing of false news on social media platforms. In the present research, we propose an alternative, complementary explanation for society's de-prioritization of truth.

Not only are people willing to de-prioritize honesty during information sharing, but we argue that people actually *value* dishonesty at times. Specifically, we propose that dishonesty is more likely to be valued in leaders during intergroup conflict. Intergroup conflict elicits a zero-sum mindset, which causes people to focus on the triumph of the ingroup over the outgroup. When leaders use dishonesty to pursue this goal, they are perceived as benevolent (and

specifically, parochially benevolent, which refers to benevolence directed towards the ingroup), as well as competent by ingroup members. As a result, people often knowingly support and elect dishonest leaders and ignore the long-term costs of doing so. Consider the case of Donald Trump, former President of the United States, who has been criticized for telling frequent lies on everything from the coronavirus pandemic to his personal taxes. Many of Donald Trump's supporters continued to follow and champion him as their candidate, even when certain falsehoods were publicly debunked, such as his claim of fraud during the 2020 Presidential election, because doing so would advance their own group goals. Party members were willing to de-prioritize concerns about Trump's honesty, if it allowed them to advance their in-group's agenda. Even prior to Trump, people have been willing to dismiss or downplay leader dishonesty to help their party stay in power throughout US history (Hildreth & Anderson, 2018; Azari, Bacon Jr., & Enten, 2017). Similarly, sports fans are sometimes supportive of dishonest tactics that help their team win in competition. In 2007, the New England Patriots used dishonesty to their team advantage by illegally filming the coaches of opposing teams during football games (also known as the Spygate scandal). Although these actions were ultimately punished, at least some Patriots fans seemed to appreciate Coach Belichick's commitment to winning, even by dishonest means.<sup>1</sup> These examples illustrate that leader dishonesty may be perceived as valuable during intergroup conflict to the extent that it promotes immediate ingroup success.

To build this argument, we begin by reviewing recent work on intergroup conflict to establish that intergroup conflict promotes zero-sum thinking. In the next section, we discuss the relationship between zero-sum thinking and judgments of dishonesty. Although honesty is

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<sup>1</sup> ESPN reporters discuss Bill Belichick and Spygate in the following article and praise the coach despite the controversy: [https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/\\_/id/17703210/new-england-patriots-coach-bill-belichick-greatest-enigma-sports](https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/17703210/new-england-patriots-coach-bill-belichick-greatest-enigma-sports)

essential for trust and success in the long run, we argue that honesty is seen as less valuable to immediate out-group defeat, and in fact, *dishonesty* can enable defeat in the short run. We draw on recent work on person perception and ethical dilemmas to explain how dishonesty can signal benevolence (e.g., Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015) and competence (e.g., Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013) in these cases. Notably, we argue that leader dishonesty that promotes ingroup success is valued, but that leader dishonesty that solely promotes the leader's individual success, or is not relevant to the group's success, is not valued. In these cases, leader dishonesty would not be seen as benevolent or competent.

We define honesty as “communicating what one believes to be true with the intention of fostering that belief in others” (Cooper, Cohen, Huppert, Levine, & Fleeson, 2023). In contrast, we define dishonesty as “communicating in a way that fosters false beliefs in others.” A leader may be dishonest by directly stating false beliefs (i.e., lying), but also by employing other verbal strategies that intentionally mislead others. For example, *paltering* (i.e., using truthful statements to mislead a communication recipient) and *dodging* (i.e., avoiding answering a question by speaking about tangential information) do not involve lying, but are still considered dishonest in our definition (Gaspar, Methasani, & Schweitzer, 2022).

By integrating research on honesty, ethical dilemmas, and person-perception with research on intergroup conflict, we propose a new framework for understanding *when* and *why* dishonesty is devalued at a societal level (see Figure 1 for a depiction of this framework). After linking micro and macro explanations for the rise of dishonesty, in our final section, we suggest novel solutions to curb it.

## **INTERGROUP CONFLICT AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF ZERO-SUM THINKING**

The social world is filled with different types of groups, from different sports fans to racial groups to competing companies. Awareness of distinct social groups, even without any

actual conflict among groups, can be enough to trigger intergroup bias and lead people to categorize others as “us” versus “them.” Positive feelings towards one’s in-group (i.e., in-group love) often dictate biased intergroup relations more than negative feelings towards one’s out-group (i.e., out-group hate; Halevy, Weisel, & Bornstein, 2012). However, during conflict, intergroup relations can be influenced by both in-group love and out-group hate, due to zero-sum thinking.

When people see conflict as zero-sum, they view in-group successes as directly linked to out-group failures. For example, White people engage in zero-sum thinking when they view instances of less Black bias as indicative of *more* White bias, and conservatives in the United States engage in zero-sum thinking when they view immigrant economics gains as indicative of *less* economic gains for United States-born citizens (Norton & Sommers, 2011; Davidai & Ongis, 2019). Similar dynamics persist in organizations. For example, employees may engage in zero-sum thinking when they assume that another employee must fail for them to advance in an organizational hierarchy. Likewise, a CEO may engage in zero-sum thinking when they assume that a rival company must be undermined for their own company to excel and gain market share. Thus, zero-sum thinking impacts social dynamics at the interpersonal, organizational, and national level.

Zero-sum thinking arises when people feel threatened by out-group success (Roberts & Davidai, 2022) and often invokes emotions such as uneasiness and fear (Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998; Różycka-Tran et al., 2021). Experiencing negative emotions influences decision making and social judgments by sending a signal that something in the environment is problematic (Schwarz, 2000). Therefore, people who engage in zero-sum thinking are typically motivated to alleviate the perceived threat, and their subsequent discomfort, as quickly as

possible. As a result, we posit that zero-sum thinking makes people most concerned with defeating the outgroup, as this should minimize the aversive experience and perceived threat.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ZERO-SUM THINKING AND DISHONESTY**

When concerns with outgroup defeat are salient, people may be willing to forgo long-term group priorities to enable this defeat in the short run. Research in negotiations illuminates this trade-off. People who approach negotiations with a zero-sum mindset tend to focus on extracting concessions from their counterparts and “win” in the moment, often overlooking integrative deals that are more beneficial in the long run (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Thompson & Hastie, 1990; Waytz, Young, & Ginges, 2014). In these cases, negotiators are most concerned with short run defeat of an opponent, which often occurs at the expense of long-term outcomes. Negotiators can lose out on joint solutions that would have provided more value to *both* parties, potentially damaging important long-term relationships, and they suffer reputational consequences that affect future negotiations. Building on this work, we argue that groups of all kinds often prioritize short-term gains over long-term goals when group members rely on zero-sum thinking.

This tradeoff is important for understanding how group members think about honesty. To swiftly defeat the outgroup, people may engage in a host of nefarious tactics, including dishonesty. For example, organizations embroiled in rivalry may rely on dishonesty for short-term gains or profit (Yip, Schweitzer, & Nurmohamed, 2018; Kilduff, Galinsky, Gallo, & Reade, 2016; Kilduff & Galinsky, 2017). In general, people often justify unethical acts against outgroup members during times of conflict, because they assume the outgroup would do the same to them (Mason, Wiley, & Ames, 2018; Cohen, Helzer, & Creo, 2022). However, the use of organizational dishonesty can undermine customer loyalty, employee job satisfaction, and increase employee turnover, leading to significant long-term organizational costs (Cialdini,

Petrova, & Goldstein, 2004). Nonetheless, we argue that group members come to value dishonesty in leaders, because dishonesty that enables the ingroup's immediate success signals parochial benevolence and competence. Though people may recognize that dishonesty undermines long-term group functioning, this is often overlooked in the heat of conflict.

Although our argument is focused on leaders, honesty may be devalued in fellow group members during conflict for the same reasons. However, we focus on leaders for two reasons. First, the moral motive of hierarchy suggests that leaders in particular are seen as responsible for protecting and guiding the group (Petersen, 2020; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Therefore, parochial benevolence and competence may be seen as especially important for leaders (Laustsen & Petersen, 2015), and more important than honesty in the short run during intergroup conflict. Second, leaders have greater influence over group norms than other group members. Therefore, affording status to dishonest leaders may have particularly negative effects on long-term honesty.

### **THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF DISHONESTY DURING CONFLICT**

Certainly, highly honest, benevolent, and competent leaders will be perceived as trustworthy, and often, honesty, benevolence, and competence are aligned. For example, when people have opportunities to tell helpful truths, honesty and benevolence are aligned. Likewise, leaders who share truthful information about their team's performance to help them overcome weaknesses, are behaving honestly *and* competently. People may be high (or low) on all of these values – resulting in a correlation between honesty, benevolence, and competence within individuals (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011). However, we argue that intergroup conflict is a specific situation in which honesty, benevolence (and specifically parochial benevolence), and competence may not be aligned because dishonesty can enable outgroup defeat in the short run.

Honesty is a separable construct from benevolence. Honesty, like benevolence, influences interpersonal judgments and is central to assessments of moral character and



trustworthiness. However, honesty is relatively unique among moral values in that honesty is a “high morality, low warmth” trait (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). In other words, honesty signals high moral character but is not relevant to judgments of interpersonal warmth. In contrast, benevolence -- defined as concern for others’ well-being (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) -- is a “high morality, high warmth” trait. Benevolence is relevant to both morality and warmth. In sum, though both benevolence and honesty are influential for trust and moral judgments, they are distinct values and influence trust through different pathways (Mayer et al., 1995; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Honesty is also separable from competence. People care about others’ morality (including both their honesty and benevolence) because morality conveys intentions about whether a person intends to help or harm you. In contrast, people care about others’ competence because competence signals how able a person is to achieve their intentions (Landy, Piazza, & Goodwin, 2016). We conceptualize competence as a perception of a person’s ability and skill, which may or may not actually be linked to competent or successful outcomes (e.g., Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). The distinction between honesty, benevolence and competence is central to models of person perception (Goodwin et al., 2014) and interpersonal trust (Mayer et al., 1995).

When the social values of honesty, benevolence, and competence are at odds, people are forced to prioritize one value over the other to guide decision-making and interactions. In these situations, the violation of one value (e.g., dishonesty) is positively associated with the presence of another value (e.g., benevolence or competence). In the next two sections, we clarify the

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between honesty and benevolence is also consistent with Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Moral Foundations Theory distinguishes between moral values that relate to protection and care (Care) and coalition-building (Loyalty) and moral values that relate to rule-following and two-way cooperation (Fairness). Benevolence is related to Care and Loyalty, whereas honesty is related primarily to Fairness. Interestingly, however, there has been discussion of including honesty as a distinct moral foundation (e.g., Iyer, 2010), separate from Fairness. Nonetheless, Moral Foundations Theory provides convergent evidence that honesty is distinct from other moral values, including benevolence.

conditions under which honesty conflicts with benevolence and under which honesty conflicts with competence, leading dishonesty to signal benevolence and competence, respectively.

### **When Dishonesty Signals Benevolence**

Honesty-benevolence conflicts are common in everyday life (Levine, Roberts, & Cohen, 2020). When communicators are faced with difficult conversations, such as those involving negative feedback, bad news, or intense disagreement, honesty may cause short-term discomfort and pain for conversational recipients. In these situations, communicators' dishonesty is often motivated by benevolent intentions regarding the desire to reduce harm to recipients (Levine et al., 2020). Importantly, people are willing to be vulnerable to benevolent, dishonest communicators. For example, when participants played a standard trust game with a partner who had either lied for prosocial reasons (to increase monetary gains for another person) or told the truth for selfish reasons (to increase monetary gains for themselves), they were more likely to trust the prosocial liars than the selfish truth-tellers (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015).

Similar trust dynamics arise in cultures of crime. In-group members often trust leaders that they perceive as benevolent towards them, even if such leaders engage in crime or other corrupt and dishonest behaviors that hurt out-group members (e.g., Baccara & Bar-Isaac, 2008; Meier, Pierce, Vaccaro, & La Cara, 2016). Of course, these dishonest actions are generally viewed negatively, but when directed towards one's ingroup, these judgments can shift. In the case of organized crime, and intergroup conflict more generally, we argue that honesty conflicts with *parochial* benevolence, specifically. Broadly, dishonest acts that convey loyalty to the group are typically seen as benevolent by group members (e.g., Galak & Critcher, 2022; Hildreth & Anderson, 2018).

### **When Dishonesty Signals Competence**

Not only is dishonesty valued when it is motivated by a desire to protect the ingroup, but also when it is utilized to obtain successful defeat – in other words, when dishonesty signals competence. For example, honestly revealing sensitive information in distributive, one-shot negotiations can lead to poor outcomes, whereas dishonesty can lead to increased profits (Bazerman, Curhan, Moore, & Valley, 2000; Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013). When a long-term relationship is not at stake, deception can help negotiators claim value by allowing the negotiator to mislead a partner about the true value of a good. In this example, immediate gains may appear competent in the short run, even though repeated acts of dishonesty may no longer appear competent over time.

Honesty is also perceived to conflict with competence in occupations that rely on self-interested persuasion. In occupations such as sales, advertising, and banking, the ability to persuade others to make a purchase that benefits one's company is perceived to be competent but is often associated with dishonesty. Therefore, prospective employees who engage in deception – even deception that is unrelated to their job – are seen as more competent in these occupations (Gunia & Levine, 2019).

### **The Relevance of Parochial Benevolence and Competence to In-Group Success**

Taken together, there is evidence that dishonesty can signal benevolence and competence. We suggest that leaders who use dishonesty to protect the ingroup or enable short run success during intergroup conflict are seen as parochially benevolent and competent (though not leaders who use dishonesty for other goals, such as purely personal gains), and that these qualities are highly valued in the short run. The honesty of a leader becomes more relevant for future trust and interactions, which are not always of utmost concern amidst conflict.

Parochial benevolence, we argue, is perceived to be critical for in-group success because people want leaders who they can trust to offer support and protection during conflict.

Consequently, signals of care in potential social partners or leaders should be highly valued. In support of this idea, past work finds that benevolence is a key determinant of cooperative behavior when conflict is larger relative to when conflict is smaller (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013), likely because greater conflict makes people more vulnerable and, consequently, in greater need of leaders who they can trust to protect them. While benevolence may be prioritized over honesty in interpersonal dynamics, for example if one lies about liking one's outfit to protect a friend's feelings, this tension is especially important for leaders due to their unique role in providing for and protecting the group. People are likely to support a leader who demonstrates parochial benevolence and signals their good intentions towards the group during conflict.

Regardless of whether a leader has benevolent *intentions*, group success also depends on the leader's actual abilities to enact their intentions (i.e., a leader's competence). A benevolent leader who, nevertheless, allows the in-group to suffer at the expense of the out-group is not very valuable during conflict. Instead, a valuable leader should have the ability to navigate intergroup dynamics, govern successfully, and actually achieve group outcomes. In competitive environments, people are likely to prefer leaders who help them secure resources and gain success. Indeed, past work indicates that people prefer leaders with dominant physical features during intergroup conflict specifically, since dominance is viewed as a signal of competence during conflict (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). Group members value competent leaders during conflict, and this is likely to be the case even when leaders rely on dishonesty to achieve in-group success. For example, imagine that a competitor asked an organizational leader about a company's new product launch. This leader faces a choice of whether to be honest about the launch, or dishonestly cover up their company's plans to prevent the competitor from copying their product. Employees of the focal company may reward dishonesty, in this example, because

it promotes the focal company's immediate success over the competitor. These employees may also reward the leader for communicating dishonestly *internally* (with members of their own company), if there were concerns that honest information sharing could lead to an outside leak, create confusion, or undermine the impending product launch. In other words, dishonesty may be rewarded to the extent that it allows for a competent product launch in the short run.

Though it is important to have competent ingroup members during intergroup conflict, a leader's competence is especially important for success. When primed with cues of conflict, people show stronger preferences for dominant-looking leaders, though not friends, because dominance reflects the leaders' ability to coordinate the group, which is vital during conflict (Laustsen & Petersen, 2015). People also spontaneously categorize others based on their competence and generally prefer competent social partners, but the preference for competence is particularly strong for leaders (Bor, 2017). Importantly, a leader or manager may appear competent without actually fulfilling group goals. However, we argue that the *impression* of competence in a leader, which is not always synonymous with competent outcomes, is often prioritized over honesty during intergroup conflict. Although leader honesty is likely to be associated with long run competence, we argue that dishonesty that is linked with immediate success in conflict, and material gains in the present, is likely to seem competent in the short run.

### **THE LONG-TERM COSTS OF DISHONESTY**

Although dishonest tactics may be helpful for defeating an outgroup in the short run, cultures of dishonesty, incivility and unethical behavior are also harmful in the long run, as they erode trust and breed cynicism (e.g., Cialdini, Petrova, & Goldstein, 2004; Pearson & Porath, 2005; Porath & Pearson, 2013). In other words, there are costs to engaging in dishonesty over time.

For example, prosocial lies are not universally positive. Lying for the sake of sparing one's feelings can seem paternalistic (Lupoli, Levine, & Greenberg, 2018), because these lies prevent the recipient from learning and growing in the long run (Levine, 2022; Levine, Roberts, & Cohen, 2020). Even people who *are* accepting of prosocial lies in the present may still be wary of trusting dishonest people in future interactions. In support of this idea, Levine & Schweitzer (2015) found that even though people are willing to be vulnerable to benevolent liars, they lose trust in these liar's words over time. A willingness to tell any lie, even a prosocial one, can signal a general openness to lying and greater likelihood of telling harmful lies as well (working paper, citation blinded for peer review). These dynamics are also relevant for leaders' lies (see Mearsheimer, 2013 for a discussion). For centuries, philosophers have questioned whether it is ethical for leaders to lie to their followers to protect them from harm (i.e., "Noble lies," Bok, 1999; Plato, 1943). Consider, for example, a political leader who is deciding whether to exaggerate the threat of a national security risk or a global pandemic so that constituents will exercise proper caution. It is possible that despite the leader's best intentions, this type of dishonesty feels paternalistic and undermines long-term trust in the leader.

Dishonesty may also influence competence differently in the short run and the long run. While dishonesty may be effective for short-term gains, such as lying to increase immediate profits (e.g., Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2020), these tactics are often costly in the long run, by damaging trust in repeated interactions (Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006; Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013). Moreover, engaging in deception also induces guilt in negotiators, even when negotiating on behalf of others, which ultimately is harmful to the negotiators themselves (Van Zant, Kennedy, & Kray, 2023). Therefore, deception is likely to undermine a leader's reputation and ability to reach effective agreements with new parties in the future.

In sum, although honesty is often perceived positively, being honest can come in conflict with other social values. We argue that leaders who use dishonest tactics with the intention of helping their group members or in attempts to achieve in-group gains are valued during intergroup conflict; however, a leader's dishonesty that is irrelevant to these values (i.e., if the leader lies about their own tax returns) is not viewed positively. Yet, even when group members are accepting of dishonesty that is advantageous for the group in the short run, there are potential pitfalls down the road of trusting dishonest leaders. For example, although Donald Trump's deception may have been perceived positively by ingroup members at times, to the extent that it helped the in-group advance their position, Trump lost the 2020 Presidential election, which ultimately hurt his party. Losing an incumbent seat to an out-group member (i.e., a Democrat) is rare, and in this way, Trump's dishonesty had long-term repercussions. Furthermore, Trump's behavior may reflect poorly on the Republican party overall and may impact party allegiance and voter preferences down the road. This example illustrates how even dishonesty that enables short-term success can ultimately have costs for the group. We predict that these long run costs are not focal during intergroup conflict. Luckily, however, there are ways to highlight the long run costs of dishonesty, as well as reduce concerns with outgroup defeat in the short run, to reprioritize honesty in leaders and society. We discuss these solutions in the following section.

### **SOLUTIONS TO REPRIORITIZE HONESTY**

Our theory helps explain the current disregard for truth-telling in public discourse. The increasingly polarized climate of the United States has exacerbated in-group and out-group distinctions (Finkel et al., 2020), and we argue that this tension triggers zero-sum thinking, which motivates concern for in-group success by any means possible. Short-term desires to defeat the outgroup dominate decision-making, making people more likely to dismiss long-term concerns about group functioning. Therefore, a dishonest leader who helps a group achieve success in the

present, and thus signals care for the ingroup and competence in managing conflict, is valued, even if dishonest leaders can detract from group success over time.

This model helps illuminate new avenues for combatting the disregard of honesty and the spread of mis/disinformation. We have argued that the long-term costs of dishonesty are dismissed during intergroup conflict because zero-sum thinking leads group members to prioritize short-term goals of out-group defeat over long-term goals of intragroup functioning. Consequently, reducing zero-sum thinking can change this decision calculus. Group members are likely to care more about their own group dynamics, and possibly exhibit less willingness to trust dishonest leaders, when zero-sum thinking is minimized. Likewise, efforts to make the long-term costs of trusting dishonest leaders salient may impact judgments of parochial benevolence and competence. Although we have argued that leader dishonesty can signal competence and parochial benevolence in the short run, group members may arrive at different judgments when thinking through the long-term implications of leader dishonesty. In the next section, we suggest strategies to reduce zero-sum thinking and encourage long-term perspective taking as solutions for re-prioritizing honesty.

### **Minimize Zero-Sum Thinking by Emphasizing Integrative Solutions and Reducing Threat**

Although zero-sum thinking permeates intergroup relations, beliefs that out-group gains come with associated in-group losses are often inaccurate. In other words, zero-sum thinking often reflects a bias, and therefore, interventions that help people overcome zero-sum thinking and see integrative potential in the face of conflict are often required. One way to reduce zero-sum thinking is to emphasize in-group gains. Emphasizing in-group gains – no matter how large or small relative to an out-group – can divert focus from relative comparisons (e.g., Brown & Jacoby-Senghor, 2022). Avoiding comparative language generally has been shown to reduce zero-sum thinking (Chun, Sherf, & Slepian, 2023), and therefore, communication focusing on in-



group gains should avoid a reference to other groups when possible. Highlighting win-win solutions to conflict can also lessen out-group hostility and alleviate worries about out-group defeat, thereby re-focusing attention on intragroup dynamics, including a concern for honest leaders.

Given the relevance of threat to zero-sum thinking (Roberts & Davidai, 2022), efforts to reduce feelings of threat may, in turn, minimize zero-sum beliefs. Reminding people of ways in which their own group has influence and control may help lessen feelings of out-group threat (i.e., reading about how one's own political party is dominating politics can reduce feelings of threat of the other political party taking over; Hall, Marsh, Allen, & Kirk, 2023). Alternatively, emphasizing common identities has been shown to reduce threat and animosity between groups in non-organizational settings, such as between Black and White Americans and between Democratic and Republican Americans (Riek, Mania, Gaertner, McDonald, & Lamoreaux, 2010). Similarly, reminding employees about shared organizational identities, or even reminding employees about shared identities *between* organizations, might decrease feelings of animosity towards rivals. Efforts to emphasize community-based identities, in particular, have shown to be effective at diminishing negative outgroup attitudes (Balietti, Getoor, Goldstein, & Watts, 2021; Hartman et al., 2022). Focusing on shared community and business interests, such as in sports or books (i.e., Hartman et al., 2022), may reduce threat associated with competing organizational identities, specifically. For example, organizations can help employees identify shared non-work identities by investing resources towards creating community-minded groups at work, such as running or book clubs, which can bring together employees that might be competing for similar clients or consumers.

While minimizing zero-sum thinking between all group members – leaders and followers – is critical for re-prioritizing honesty broadly, we believe these interventions are particularly relevant to leaders. Minimizing zero-sum thinking in any group member should help eliminate the desire for out-group defeat and re-focus attention to long-term concerns about group functioning; however, a leader’s priorities arguably influence actual group behaviors to a greater extent than other members. For example, an employee on a team competing for limited company funds to develop a new product may be willing to engage in deception to receive the funds, if they believe that their success is dependent on another team’s failure. However, if the leader does not engage in zero-sum thinking and recognizes that there could be joint solutions for both teams to contribute to new product development, the leader’s judgments and guidance throughout the competition are more likely to influence the team’s overall actions – including their use of deception - than the single employee. Not only do leaders exert direct power over group decisions, but they can also influence group members’ subsequent ethical behavior (Moore, Mayer, Chiang, Crossley, Karlesky, & Birtch, 2019). Consequently, we propose that attempts to minimize zero-sum thinking, while broadly important for honesty, are most impactful at the leadership level.

### **Encourage Long-Term Thinking and a Focus on Future Goals**

Focusing on the long-term harm associated with dishonesty may also help reduce support for dishonest leaders. If organizations can broaden people’s focus to the negative long-term consequences of dishonesty, then people may see deceptive leaders as less parochially benevolent and less competent overall. To do this, organizations should highlight previous examples in which short-term success built on dishonesty backfired or caused later harms. Conversely, providing examples of when honesty was ultimately helpful, despite potential immediate harms, might also be effective. Past research suggests that judgments of seemingly

“bad agents” are often uncertain, and consequently, people are willing to update these beliefs rather quickly when presented with counterevidence of bad agents’ morality (Siegel, Mathys, Rutledge, & Crockett, 2018). By the same logic, people might be willing to revise initially negative beliefs of leaders, when presented with examples of how such leaders were helpful towards the group overall. For example, if an employee dislikes a leader who provides honest, negative feedback, focusing on that leader’s positive impact on long-term team outcomes – including the employee’s own growth - may help the employee update their view. Therefore, providing organizational members with specific exemplars, both of when short-term dishonesty was viewed negatively *and* of when honesty led to eventual long-term gains despite short-term obstacles, may help people keep this long-term perspective in mind.

Helping people feel connected to their future selves may also make long-term goals salient. Past research suggests that connectedness to one’s future self is associated with greater willingness to defer rewards and greater patience (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011). Consequently, people may be more likely to think through long-term priorities when thinking about their future selves. Writing down one’s values and goals in advance could also help (Milkman, Rogers, & Bazerman, 2008). For example, if group members were encouraged to articulate what they want in a leader and consider their long-term interests, rather than reacting to potential leaders on the spot, they may be better able to avoid the lure of leaders who will benefit them in the short-term but bring about long-term harm.

We expect that making the long-term costs of dishonesty salient will help re-prioritize honesty, even if people think dishonesty is effective in the short-term. People seem to recognize that the same skills that enable group success during conflict could also lead to problems within the group down the road (Laustsen & Peterson, 2015), suggesting that even those who are

accepting of dishonesty during conflict will understand the downsides of dishonesty overall. For example, people exhibit different leader preferences in war and in peace, depending on whether they are more concerned with in-group success in conflict or exploitation avoidance (Laustsen & Peterson, 2015). Keeping in mind these long-term costs may be difficult for group members when focused on the conflict at hand. Yet, these strategies to connect with one's future self and articulate one's long-term values can help group members think through what they desire in a leader, and ideally result in greater support of honest leaders. Furthermore, the same exercises can be applied to leaders themselves. If leaders are able to consider the implications of their decisions over time (by connecting with their future self or thinking through long-term values), then they might be less likely to engage in dishonesty.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Our model draws on past research chronicling conflicts between honesty and the social values of benevolence and competence. While there is empirical research showing that dishonesty can signal benevolence and competence, dishonesty may also signal other social values. Understanding the extent to which dishonesty can convey other positive qualities for leaders, and other social partners, is critical for understanding when and why honesty is de-prioritized.

Several recent papers suggest that dishonesty can sometimes signal authenticity. Authenticity is defined as one's propensity to act in accordance with their own underlying desires, interests, and personality (Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015). Authenticity is a social value that is relevant to impressions of truthfulness, but distinct from truth-telling. While honesty may feel and be seen as authentic for some people, that is not always the case. For example, leaders may be seen as authentic if their behavior is "true" to their *own* goals and values, even if their communication does not align with widely endorsed truthful or factual information (Hahl,

Kim, & Zuckerman Sivan, 2018). For instance, many people viewed President Trump as an authentic liar; he was true to his persona and his desires while also sharing false information. In part, his deception contributed to perceptions of authenticity because he so openly flouted societal norms. Flouting norms – such as truth-telling - signals that one’s behavior is driven by their internal desires rather than pressures to conform (Hahl et al., 2018).

These findings indicate that authenticity and dishonesty can be associated. This may be particularly likely during some types of conflict. Important recent work suggests that group members are particularly likely to value dishonest leaders during “crises of legitimacy” (Hahl et al., 2018), which occur when one group believes they are not represented or are losing representation or power within an institutional or political setting. However, more work is needed to understand just how pervasive these dynamics are and whether they are relevant to intergroup conflict more broadly. There is also more work needed to clarify the precise relationship between honesty and authenticity as judgments of the self and of others (Bailey & Iyengar, 2022).

In addition to exploring the relationship between dishonesty and other social values, it is critical to empirically test our current theoretical model, which is focused on tradeoffs between dishonesty, parochial benevolence and competence in leaders. Future work should experimentally investigate the relationship between intergroup conflict, zero-sum thinking, and judgments of leader dishonesty, parochial benevolence, and competence. Doing so can help understand these dynamics more precisely and add insight into more ways to re-prioritize honesty.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, we posit that honesty is likely to be devalued in leaders during times of intergroup conflict. When conflict is on the rise, people rely on zero-sum thinking, leading to a

focus on immediate in-group gains over the out-group, often at the expense of long-term group concerns. Therefore, group members will care more about a leader's willingness and ability to effectively advance their group (Petersen, 2020) – signaled by the leader's parochial benevolence and competence – than about a leader's honest character, which is more relevant for long-term goals. This proposition has a number of important theoretical and practical implications.

First, it offers one explanation for the lack of concern for truth-telling, science, and fact in current discourse. Political polarization within the United States has created a dynamic that has led many people to trust, and even elect, dishonest leaders when they believe that dishonesty directed towards out-group defeat is a form of parochial benevolence and competence. Current research attempting to explain the devaluation of honesty in political leaders has focused on instability and crisis (Hahl et al., 2018). However, it is important to understand when and why honesty is devalued *before* crisis arises to prevent the spread of disinformation and rise of lying leaders *during* further crisis. The present work deepens our understanding of how honesty becomes devalued before crisis occurs, by highlighting the psychological mechanisms that lead people to accept dishonesty. In doing so, we develop new insights on why people trust dishonest leaders broadly, even beyond the political domain.

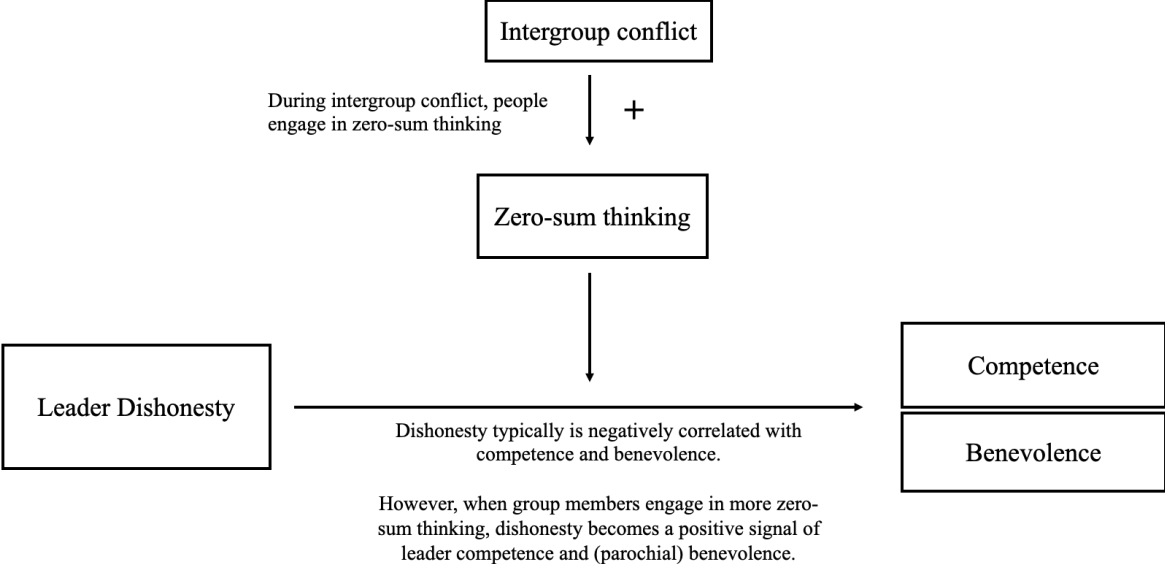
Second, we develop a deeper understanding of how different social judgments relate to each other by highlighting when and why dishonesty signals social values of parochial benevolence and competence. Though previous research has already identified tensions between honesty and benevolence and between honesty and competence, we extend these separate bodies of work by proposing a holistic model for predicting situations in which dishonesty is valued. Specifically, dishonesty is valued in leaders during intergroup conflict when it enables quick outgroup defeat – this defeat, we argue, is interpreted as a signal of parochial benevolence and

competence. Our argument underscores when and why a quintessential moral trait (honesty) is devalued.

This work also points to practical interventions that may help organizations and institutions re-prioritize leader honesty, as well as honesty in fellow group members. With this theoretical model in mind (see Figure 1), leaders may be able to predict the rise of unethical norms in institutions and organizations, and consequently, implement strategies that minimize zero-sum thinking and encourage long-term perspective taking to help combat the spread of unethicity and deception. These strategies can benefit organizations and societal institutions not only by re-prioritizing the importance of honesty, but also by increasing cooperation more broadly. Together, these recommendations have the potential to champion honest, ethical leaders and foster public trust.

**FIGURE 1**

**Theoretical model highlighting how intergroup conflict, and associated zero-sum thinking, leads to the devaluation of leader honesty**



Note: Dishonesty typically signals low competence and benevolence but can signal high competence and *parochial* benevolence during intergroup conflict because zero-sum thinking leads to an increased focus on leader qualities associated with short run in-group success.



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