COMMUNITY STANDARDS OF DECEPTION

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ABSTRACT

When is deception ethical? In this article, I develop and test a descriptive moral theory to shed light on this fundamental question. This research provides insight into how individuals value honesty and deception for making moral judgments, for learning information about themselves, and for communicating with others.

INTRODUCTION

A central justification for the moral prohibition of deception is the conviction that deception robs individuals of their autonomy and their right to truth (Kant, 1785; Bacon, 1872, Bok, 1978). For example, Immanuel Kant proclaimed that lying “annihilates a man’s dignity” because lying interferes with individuals’ freedom and ability to make rational decisions (Kant, 1785). Similarly, modern philosophers proclaim that deception is only ethical when it upholds the principle of autonomy: the only lies that are ethical are the ones that can be “openly debated and consented to in advance” (Bok, 1978: p. 181).

This justification for truth telling assumes that people value truth and would only consent to deception in rare circumstances. Individuals, however, frequently choose to avoid information and eschew truth (see Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010 for a review). In fact, people are often complicit in others’ attempts to deceive them. Individuals routinely avoid spoiling surprises and accept false compliments, even when they suspect deceit. Many individuals also avoid learning about negative news that they cannot control (e.g., Yaniv, Benador, & Sagi, 2004). Consider a patient who can learn whether or not he has an incurable disease. He may prefer not to know – or even to be deceived – about the disease precisely because he wishes to maintain his autonomy: the freedom to live as if he were not ill. In this case, the patient may believe that honesty would cause him serious harm and that deception would be ethical.

Existing research on deception has failed to consider when and why people want to be deceived and how this affects the moral judgment and use of deception. In the present investigation, I integrate research on moral psychology, information avoidance, and behavioral ethics to unearth community standards of deception, the implicit psychological principles that justify the use of deception. Rather than assuming that most people value honesty as a rule and that deception is a rare exception, I assume that people have systematic rules that govern judgments of and preferences for deception.

No prior research has documented these rules. Consequently, basic questions on deception remain unanswered. For example, when, specifically, do individuals endorse deception? What qualities of a target justify the use of deception? What qualities of true information justify deception? How do individuals’ own preferences for information, honesty, and deception influence their moral judgments of deception?
Through a large inductive study, and a series of vignettes, I answer these questions. I demonstrate that lay people have a codified set of rules that guide their moral judgments of deception. A basic theory underlies these implicit rules: deception is perceived to be ethical and individuals prefer to be deceived when honesty causes unnecessary harm. Perceptions of “unnecessary harm” are driven by two factors: the potential for honesty to injure an individual in the short-run and the potential (or lack of potential) for honesty to benefit a target in the long run. Individuals endorse deception when honesty causes immediate harm and when honesty has no potential to help in the future. These two factors are influenced by the content, timing, context, and target of honesty (or deception). For example, the emotional fragility of the target, the target’s capacity to understand truthful information, and the possibility that honest feedback can be implemented in the future all critically influence perceptions of unnecessary harm and consequently, the implicit rules of deception.

This research makes important contributions to our understanding of deception, moral judgment, and human communication. First, I develop a descriptive moral theory of deception. It is important to develop descriptive, rather than normative, moral theories because descriptive theories predict social judgment, moral reasoning, and everyday human behavior (e.g., Knobe & Nichols, 2008; Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007, Haidt, 2001; Nucci, 2004). Just as Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler’s (1986) foundational work on community standards of fairness overturned the assumption that individuals universally value self-interest, and demonstrated that concerns about fairness place systematic, rather than anomalous, constraints on market behavior, the present research challenges the assumption that people universally value truth, and demonstrates that concerns about unnecessary harm place systematic constraints on honest communication.

Thus, this research highlights the circumstances in which truthful information will not be shared with others and the circumstances in which honesty will be penalized. Integrating community standards of fairness into the study of economic behavior shed light on predictable market failures (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986a, 1986b). Similarly, integrating community standards of deception into the study of social communication sheds light on predictable communication frictions. Although this research draws from individuals’ exposure to deception in both their personal and professional lives, the experiments focus on some of the most difficult conversations individuals face at work. This research offers novel insight into the rules that govern how people provide and respond to personal critiques, negative performance feedback, and terminal prognoses.

INDUCTIVE STUDY: ESTABLISHING THE RULES OF DECEPTION

First, I ran an inductive study to elicit community standards of deception. I examined moral judgments of deception and preferences for deception in my inductive study to investigate the similarity between these two perspectives. The purpose of the inductive study was to 1) develop grounded theory about lay perceptions of deception and 2) unearth the implicit rules that govern moral judgments of deception.

Method

Participants. I recruited two separate samples of participants to ensure that my effects were robust to the characteristics of any particular population. The first sample consisted of 118 adults recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (50% female; $M_{age} = 37$ years, $SD_{age} = 12.8$; $M_{work}$
Experience = 16 years, SD work experience = 11.6). The second sample consisted of 186 adults recruited from a Northeastern University research pool (58% female; \( M_{\text{age}} = 24 \text{ years}, \ SD_{\text{age}} = 9.09; M_{\text{work experience}} = 5 \text{ years}, \ SD_{\text{work experience}} = 8.9 \)). There were no systematic differences between the two samples with respect to perceptions of and preferences for deception. Thus, I report results collapsed across samples.

Procedure. All participants completed an online survey in which they answered free-response questions about deception. I randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions in a between-subjects design: Ethics or Preferences. Participants either answered three questions about the ethicality of deception (the Ethics condition) or their preferences for deception (the Preferences condition). After participants completed the main questionnaire, they answered questions about their demographics and were dismissed.

Analytical approach. My goal in this study was to develop a codified set of rules and an underlying theory regarding lay perceptions of deception. To do this, I adopted an iterative coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I adapted the coding scheme and procedure from DePaulo et al.’s (1996) diary coding, which was used to produce a taxonomy of lies told in everyday life.

Results

A single construct – (the prevention of) unnecessary harm – emerged as the key justification for deception. Perceptions of “unnecessary harm” were driven by the potential for honesty to injure an individual in the short-run and the potential for honesty to benefit the target in the long run. That is, participants generally endorsed deception when it prevented harm (or provided help) to the target and when honesty had no potential benefits to the target in the future.

In addition to revealing the importance of unnecessary harm, participants elucidated the specific circumstances in which this principle applies (i.e., the circumstances in which deception prevents unnecessary harm). These circumstances illustrate a number of implicit rules of deception, which pertain to the attributes of the target, the topic of honest information, and the context of the conversation. These rules can be summarized as:

**It is acceptable to lie to targets who:**
1. Are emotionally fragile
2. Cannot understand the truth
3. Are in their final days of life

**It is acceptable to lie about things that are:**
4. Subjective
5. Trivial
6. Uncontrollable

**It is acceptable to lie when:**
7. True information would ruin a sacred event (e.g., a target’s wedding)
8. Honest information can no longer change behavior
9. Honesty would embarrass the target in front of others
Each of these rules describes circumstances in which honesty would be particularly harmful in the short-run (and thus deception would be particularly beneficial) and/or honesty could not benefit the target in the long-run. For example, participants endorsed lying to emotionally compromised targets (Rule 1) because they believed that honesty would cause the greatest immediate pain to fragile targets. On the other hand, participants endorsed lying to targets that could not understand the truth (Rule 2) and targets that were near death (Rule 3) because honesty would not have the capacity to help these targets.

**VIGNETTES: MANIPULATING THE RULES OF DECEPTION**

I used an inductive study to ascertain the implicit rules of deception. To provide convergent evidence of these rules and examine how implicit rule violations causally influence perceptions of deception, I manipulated these rules directly in a series of scenario studies. I chose six rules and constructed six separate scenarios to manipulate each rule.

**Method**

I administered Scenarios 1, 2, and 3 to an Amazon Mechanical Turk sample (N = 267 participants; 46.8% female; M<sub>age</sub> = 35 years, SD = 11.9; M<sub>work experience</sub> = 14 years, SD = 10.6) and Scenarios 4, 5, and 6 to a Northeastern University subject pool, (N = 195; 52.3% female; M<sub>age</sub> = 25 years, SD = 10.6; M<sub>work experience</sub> = 6 years, SD = 9.2).

In each scenario, I manipulated whether or not the relevant implicit rule was violated. This was a between-subjects factor. After participants read each scenario, I asked participants, “Which of the following options is the more ethical response?” Participants chose between: “Tell the truth to the target” and “Lie to the target.”

**Scenarios and Results**

The purpose of the scenario studies was to demonstrate that judgments of deception are governed by multiple rules, rather than to examine the differences between these rules. Thus, consistent with Kahneman, Knetch, & Thaler (1986), I analyzed each scenario independently. Participants responded to multiple scenarios, but never saw more than one version of the same scenario. I randomized the order in which the scenarios were presented.

*Scenario 1: Inappropriate clothing and the ability to change.* The first scenario depicted an individual who was wearing an inappropriate suit. I manipulated whether or not the target had another suit that he could wear. That is, I manipulated whether or not the target was able to implement the feedback and change his clothing (Rule 8). Participants were more likely to endorse deception when the target could no longer change his clothing (64.4%) than when the target had the ability to change (7.6%); \( \chi^2 (1, N = 267) = 93.31, p < .01 \).

*Scenario 2: Infidelity on your deathbed.* The second scenario depicted an individual whose spouse cheated on him. I manipulated whether or not the target was on his deathbed (Rule 3). Participants were more likely to endorse deception when the target was near death (63.8%) than when the target was likely to recover (31.0%); \( \chi^2 (1, N = 267) = 28.67, p < .01 \).

*Scenario 3: Poor performance in a fragile state.* The third scenario depicted an individual who had performed poorly on a work task. I manipulated the emotional state of the target (Rule
Participants were more likely to endorse deception when the target was in a fragile emotional state (19.5%) than when the target was not notably distressed (3.0%); $\chi^2 (1, N = 267) = 18.36, p < .01$.

**Scenario 4: Salty soup and a trivial opinion.** The fourth scenario depicted a host who made salty soup. I manipulated whether or not the host was a professional chef. That is, I manipulated whether or not the information was trivial or important to the target (Rule 5). Participants were more likely to endorse deception when the information was trivial to the host (a home cook) (44.9%) than when the information was important to the host (a professional chef) (18.6%); $\chi^2 (1, N = 195) = 15.60, p < .01$.

**Scenario 5: Layoffs before your wedding.** The fifth scenario depicted an employee who was going to be fired. I manipulated whether or not this news became available immediately before the employee’s wedding. That is, I manipulated whether or not honest information would distract an individual from a sacred event (Rule 7). Participants were more likely to endorse deception when bad news (impending layoffs) preceded a sacred event (a wedding) (48.5%) than when bad news preceded a normal day (25.0%); $\chi^2 (1, N = 195) = 11.54, p < .01$.

**Scenario 6: Cancer and children.** The sixth scenario depicted a patient who was diagnosed with a terminal illness. I manipulated whether the target was either a 4 year-old child or a 44 year-old adult. That is, I manipulated whether or not the target was able to understand his prognosis (Rule 2). Participants were more likely to endorse deception when the target could not understand the prognosis (i.e., the target was a child) (34.7%) than when the target could understand the prognosis (i.e., the target was an adult) (8.2%); $\chi^2 (1, N = 195) = 20.18, p < .01$.

**Discussion**

Across six scenarios, I provide convergent evidence of systematic rules that govern moral judgments of deception. I find that the ability to implement feedback, the target’s proximity to death, the target’s emotional state, the target’s ability to comprehend information, the importance of the true information, and the timing of the conversation profoundly influence the endorsement of deception. In several cases (Scenarios 1, 2, and 5), the majority (i.e., significantly more than 50%) of the participants endorsed deception when it corresponded with an implicit rule.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Across one inductive study and six vignettes, I explore the community standards of deception. Consistent with research on the centrality of harm and care in moral judgment (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014; Gray, Young, & Waytz, 201; Haidt & Graham, 2007), I find that individuals’ implicit moral rules prohibit unnecessary harm, but allow deception. Individuals are most likely to endorse deception when it prevents immediate harm to the target and when honesty has no potential to benefit the target in the future.

The specific rules of deception that embody this descriptive theory align with individuals’ own desires to be deceived. Individuals endorse deception when targets are emotionally fragile, cannot understand the information, or are on their death beds, when the information is subjective, trivial, uncontrollable, or already known, and when true information would ruin a sacred event, could not change behavior, or would publically embarrass the target. These rules share many features with the antecedents of information avoidance in everyday life.
Importantly, this research offers a descriptive account of the morality of deception. In contrast to normative theories that assume that deception is always wrong and that deception undermines autonomy (Kant, 1785; Bok, 1978), this research demonstrates that individuals often praise and appreciate deception.

Notably, lay beliefs also contradict utilitarian views of deception. Utilitarians argue that deception is morally justified when its benefits outweigh its costs, regardless of who bears those costs and benefits (Bentham, 1843; Martin Luther, cited in Bok, 1978). For Utilitarians, a small lie that tremendously benefits the liar may be morally indistinguishable from a small lie that tremendously benefits the deceived party. Alternatively, lay people focus primarily on the consequences of deception for the deceived party.

This research also provides novel insights into the construct of unnecessary harm. My results suggest that deception may be justified when it either prevents harm (or provides help) at the moment of communication or when honesty has little future benefit, but deception is most likely to be preferred to honesty when both of these features are present. This is precisely what separates necessary harm from unnecessary harm. For example, when honesty can bring about future benefits – as is often the case with critical performance feedback – honesty may be perceived to be a necessary evil (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Although honesty is difficult to hear and may cause psychological pain in the short-run, honesty is still preferred to deception, because honest feedback is expected to yield valuable benefits in the future. However, when honesty cannot yield benefits – for example, when an individual offers critical feedback on a stable attribute that cannot be changed – honesty becomes an unnecessary evil.

Finally, this research illuminates the moral value of discretion in human communication. Participants believed that individuals should lie in many situations (e.g., in front of others, or during times of strife), but reveal the truth later. Similarly, participants said they wanted to be protected and deceived during particular moments, but that they would want to uncover the truth at a later point in time. This reflects a pragmatic view of honesty; people believe that the use of both honesty and deception should be constrained by the particular needs of the particular people involved in a particular conversation.

ENDNOTES

1. In addition to ethical judgments, I also asked participants about their most preferred response – if they would want to be told the truth or lied to – in each scenario. I found no differences between moral judgments of and preferences for deception. I also collected measures of psychological harm and long-term benefits of honesty. Across the scenarios, there is robust evidence that perceptions of psychological harm and long-term benefits mediate the effects of implicit rule violations on the endorsement of deception. For ease of exposition, I focus on ethical judgments in this article.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR