Why we should lie

Joseph P. Gaspar [a,*], Emma E. Levine [b], Maurice E. Schweitzer [b]

[a] School of Business, Quinnipiac University, United States
[b] The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, United States

We are honest.
— Dell Inc., Code of Conduct, 2015

For centuries, philosophers and ethicists have railed against deception. The belief that deception is harmful has been promulgated by theologians such as St. Augustine, who claimed that "every lie is a sin," and philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, who argued that "The greatest violation...is lying." These beliefs permeate modern thinking. Recent scholars have argued that honesty is a minimum moral standard for both society and organizational life, and modern organizations, such as Dell Inc., reflect this idea in their codes of conduct.

The reverence accorded to honesty, however, is difficult to reconcile with the ubiquity of deception. Deception pervades both organizational and interpersonal interactions. Employees routinely lie to their subordinates, coworkers, and superiors; job applicants frequently misrepresent their qualifications; negotiators pervasively lie to their counterparts; and spouses, parents, and children frequently lie to each other—often multiple times a day.

The inconsistency between the public condemnation and the private practice of deception makes it difficult for individuals to make wise ethical decisions. People implicitly recognize that some types of deception are acceptable, but by refusing to explicitly acknowledge when and why deception is moral, we—as scholars, parents, and leaders—have failed to provide guidance with respect to ethical dilemmas involving the use of deception.

We argue that the key reason that deception has been unfairly disparaged is that scholars have conflated deception with the pursuit of self-interest. For example, in a seminal paper on the "Market for Lemons," George Akerlof of Georgetown University presumes that sellers of used cars will *always* lie to buyers if they can profit by doing so. The premise that individuals will lie to advance their self-interest is either an implicit or an explicit assumption in much of the academic literature.

Integrating prior research, we define deception as *the intentional misrepresentation of information or emotions*. Intentionality is an important dimension of this definition; to practice deception, a person must intend to mislead a target. In terms of content, deception includes the misrepresentation of information, emotions, or both. What is absent from this definition—and other definitions of deception—is any mention of self-interest. Curiously, the extant empirical literature investigating deception has almost ubiquitously conceptualized deception as a *self-interested* behavior. We contend that conceptualizing deception as a self-interested behavior is overly narrow, and that by failing to consider the full range of motivations for engaging in deception, we have severely limited our understanding of deception. In fact, in many contexts, people are motivated to lie to benefit others. As Galinsky and Schweitzer articulate in *Friend & Foe*, deception can be used for both cooperation and competition. Rather than advance self-interest, prosocial lies often protect others' feelings or promote the success of others. By focusing on *self-serving* lies, we as scholars have failed to develop a broad understanding of deception. Most of what we know about deception reflects what we know about

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: Joseph.Gaspar@quinnipiac.edu (J.P. Gaspar),
Emmased@wharton.upenn.edu (E.E. Levine),
Schweitzer@wharton.upenn.edu (M.E. Schweitzer).

self-serving deception. For example, we know surprisingly little about the antecedents and consequences of prosocial lies.

In addition, by conflating self-interest with deception, we have sent conflicting and hypocritical messages to our employees, students, and children. We have exhorted them not to lie, while often modeling and even *requiring* them to engage in deception. For example, we tell children not to lie, but then demand that they mislead their grandparents about how much they like a gift and their schoolmates about birthday party plans so as not to hurt others' feelings.

This hypocrisy is particularly salient in organizations. We tell employees that honesty is imperative and broadcast this message in codes of conduct, but often require these same employees to mislead others. For example, we might expect negotiators to misrepresent their intentions or managers to misrepresent feedback to fired employees. Similarly, we expect employees to mislead others about how much they look forward to working with them or about the company's pipeline of future products. In fact, we routinely train employees to misrepresent their emotions to conform to organizational display rules. For example, Ritz Carlton employees are instructed to ''smile—we are on stage,'' and to use phrases such as ''my pleasure'' and ''I'll be happy to'' irrespective of how they might actually feel. Though research has termed this type of emotional expression emotional labor, it is also a form of emotional deception.

Furthermore, by focusing on the costs of deception, we have ignored the potential *costs of honesty*. Honesty, like deception, can be used to cause pain and harm to others. For example, honest criticism can be delivered with the intention of embarrassing or undermining employees—especially when it is done in front of their peers. Individuals may deliver cruel or inappropriate interpersonal feedback, but assuage their guilt and justify their behavior with the excuse that ''I was just being honest.'' By presuming that honesty is moral, we justify some harmful behaviors.

In contrast to the view that honesty is moral and dishonesty is immoral, we suggest that *some types of deception are moral*. Further, we argue that we should teach our employees, students, and children when it is ethical to lie. By doing this, we can become more ethical and less hypocritical. In particular, we propose that *if we can teach employees to use deception thoughtfully and deliberately, we can create more ethical organizations*. We encourage managers to teach employees to consider the benefits of deception and the costs of honesty so that they can make better decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas. We call for scholars and managers to think differently about deception and, in particular, to think more carefully about deception, ethical policies, and proclamations regarding honesty and deception.

TYPES OF DECEPTION

Misrepresentation can take many forms. For example, people may use false statements or emotions to mislead a target by *commission*; people may omit relevant information or conceal their emotions to mislead a target by *omission*; and people may *palter* by strategically using truthful statements or emotions to create a misleading impression.

Importantly, people tell not only selfish lies, but also prosocial lies. In contrast to selfish lies, prosocial lies benefit others. Prosocial lies can have small or large consequences, and differ from what the philosopher Sissela Bok terms white lies, small-stakes lies of little moral importance.

Prosocial lies are particularly important because they characterize most of the lies we tell in our everyday social interactions. People tell such prosocial lies for many reasons. For instance, people may use prosocial lies to protect others or to be polite. In some cases, people might even use prosocial lies as a sign of respect. For example, rather than admit to having forgotten about a meeting, individuals may offer a more respectful (and false) explanation (e.g., ''I had a family emergency''). And correspondingly, targets of this type of deception often prefer the courtesy of a well-crafted lie. For example, a professor may prefer to hear about a fabricated illness than the honest explanation (e.g., ''I just slept through your class'').

Prosocial lies are common in many organizations and industries. For instance, doctors may overstate the likelihood that an experimental drug will work. Lisa Iezzoni of Harvard Medical School found that more than 55 percent of doctors tell their patients that their prognosis is better than it really is. When doctors seek to help their patients by misrepresenting a prognosis, they engage in prosocial deception.

Emma Levine and Maurice Schweitzer of the Wharton School recently documented the benefits of prosocial deception. When the intentions are clear, people perceive those who tell prosocial lies to be more ethical than those who tell the truth. The results of these studies indicate that when moral values conflict, people often favor benevolence over honesty.

In a second article, Levine and Schweitzer focus on the effect of prosocial deception on interpersonal trust. In contrast to conventional wisdom that lying harms trust, they find that prosocial deception can *increase* trust. Results from these studies demonstrate that in some situations benevolence is more important than honesty in fostering trust.

In general, prosocial lies pit two moral principles against each other: honesty and benevolence. When these principles conflict, we postulate that benevolence is more important. Consequently, we advocate teaching our children, our students, and our employees to recognize this conflict and in some cases to privilege benevolence. At the same time, we recognize that judgments of what is benevolent may be ambiguous, and that individuals may be tempted to rationalize their self-interested decisions as benevolent. We believe that by making the tradeoff between honesty and benevolence explicit, we can make informed, ethical decisions and develop tools for assessing the consequences of our actions. Ultimately, we aim to help individuals make careful tradeoffs between honesty and benevolence that account for both the short-term and long-term consequences of their actions.

Future research is needed to understand the conflict between benevolence and honesty. Quite possibly, to make systematic choices, some organizations may seek to establish explicit rules that proscribe when—and under what conditions—benevolence is more important than honesty. This notion raises important questions. First, what rules about deception should we make explicit to employees, students, and children? Recent research by Emma Levine offers insight into this question. For example, whether or not a target can

understand or implement honest feedback is a critical factor in determining the ethicality of a lie.

Second, what cross-cultural issues should we consider? The costs and benefits of prosocial deception are likely to vary substantially across cultures. Heterogeneity in both organizational and broader cultures with respect to politeness, aversion to conflict, and face (or social image) concerns may directly influence expectations regarding the use of prosocial lies. For example, cultures that value face (e.g., Eastern Asian cultures) may prefer that people engage in prosocial deception in social interactions—particularly those that take place in the presence of others. In contrast to cultures that value blunt and direct communication (e.g., Israel), cultures that emphasize kindness and politeness (e.g., United States) may endorse the use of prosocial deception. In a recent study of respondents from the United States, Levine and Schweitzer (2014) found that when moral values conflict, people privileged benevolence over honesty.

Third, how can we understand what is really benevolent? In this respect, perspective taking and a careful accounting of others' emotions should inform our judgments. The decision of how and when to employ deception is complex and far more nuanced than the standard exhortation to simply tell the truth.

IMPLICATIONS

We argue that teaching employees to use deception, and prosocial deception in particular, will enable employees to make more ethical decisions. By explicitly considering the benefits of deception, we can promote ethical behavior. First, we can promote benevolence and we can prevent employees from using honesty as an excuse to deliver messages that harm others (e.g., "I was just being honest"). Second, we can curtail the hypocrisy engendered by (a) mission statements and codes of conduct that enshrine honesty as a fundamental value, and (b) the frequent expectation that employees will engage in deception within and on behalf of the organization. When managers publically denounce deception, and then lie—even for a good reason—they signal that their public statements are not credible. They may be judged to lack integrity, which could undermine the ethical culture of an organization. However, if managers explicitly acknowledge the circumstances in which deception is acceptable, they can tell an ethical lie and maintain both their personal integrity and the integrity of the organization.

By considering the benefits of deception, we can learn to use deception systematically, both as individuals and as organizations. Having an open conversation about the appropriateness of deception can help managers promote honesty when it fosters development and learning and discourage honesty when it causes unnecessary harm. Managers can help employees identify these contexts by providing examples of ethical dilemmas in which harm and honesty conflict.

Feedback represents a particularly good context within which to explore this tension. For example, consider an unprepared intern who is about to deliver an important presentation. Although the intern's presentation might benefit from substantial changes, providing honest feedback right before the intern delivers the presentation may trigger anxiety and ultimately harm, rather than help, the intern's performance. Or, consider an employee who has turned in a low-quality report. If the employee solicits feedback in front of his or her peers, honest feedback in the moment may cause embarrassment and breed insecurity. The most ethical behavior may be to lie in public and to share honest criticism during a private meeting at a later point in time. By promoting benevolence, rather than focusing only on honesty, managers can ensure that employees deliver messages (e.g., feedback) that bolster confidence and performance rather than breed competition and insecurity.

Just as medical students learn to provide ethical care by wrestling with conflicts between autonomy and beneficence, managers should wrestle with conflicts between honesty and benevolence. By building greater awareness of moral conflicts and a deeper appreciation for the costs and benefits of deception, managers can lead more ethical organizations, teachers can educate more ethical students, and parents can raise more ethical children.

Ultimately, we should revise codes of conduct, such as Dell's proclamation: "We are honest." Instead of aspiring to be honest, we should aspire to exercise discretion and to use deception and honesty wisely and *kindly*. Mark Twain (1880) summarized the importance of discretion beautifully by offering the following advice:

> *Lying is universal - we all do it. Therefore, the wise thing is for us diligently to train ourselves to lie thoughtfully, judiciously; to lie with a good object, and not an evil one; to lie for others' advantage, and not our own; to lie healingly, charitably, humanely, not cruelly, hurtfully, maliciously; to lie gracefully and graciously, not awkwardly and clumsily; to lie firmly, frankly, squarely, with head erect, not haltingly, tortuously, with pusillanimous mien, as being ashamed of our high calling.*

We urge employees, managers, and leaders to follow this advice. By training ourselves—and others—to lie thoughtfully, we can create more ethical organizations.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

For a discussion about how deception can be used to promote cooperation and competition, see A. Galinsky and M. Schweitzer, *Friend & Foe* (NY: Random House, 2015).

For a review of research on deception in negotiations, see J. P. Gaspar and M. E. Schweitzer, "The Emotion Deception Model: A Review of Deception in Negotiation and the Role of Emotion in Deception," *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, 2013, 6, 160—179.

For information on prosocial lies and interpersonal trust, see E. E. Levine and M. E. Schweitzer, "Prosocial Lies: When Deception Breeds Trust," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 2015, 26, 88—106.

For information on prosocial lies and ethical perceptions, see E. E. Levine and M. E. Schweitzer, "Are Liars Ethical? On the Tension Between Benevolence and Honesty," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2014, 53, 107—117.

For research on the philosophy of lying, see S. Bok, *Lying: Moral Choices in Public and Private Life* (NY: Pantheon, 1978); and I. Kant, *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1785/1959).

For information on lying in everyday life, see B. M. DePaulo and D. A. Kashy, "Everyday lies in Close and Casual Relationships," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1998, 74, 63—79; and B. M. DePaulo, D. A. Kashy, S. E. Kirkendol, M. M. Wyer, and J. A. Epstein, "Lying in everyday life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1996, 70, 979—995.

This paper also includes references to G. A. Akerlof, "The Market For Lemons: Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 1970, 84, 488—500; L. I. Iezzoni, S. R. Rao, C. M. DesRoches, C. Vogeli, and E. G. Campbell, "Survey Shows That At Least Some Physicians Are Not Always Open or Honest With Patients," *Health Affairs*, 2012, 31, 383—391; and M. Twain, "On the Decay of the Art of Lying," *Presented at the Historical and Antiquarian Club of Hartford, Connecticut*, 1880.

Joseph P. Gaspar is an assistant professor of management in the School of Business at Quinnipiac University. His research focuses on deception and ethics. His research has been accepted for publication in *Business Ethics Quarterly, Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, the Journal of Business Ethics, and *The Journal of Social Psychology*. (Quinnipiac University, School of Business, 400 Mount Carmel Ave., Hamden, CT 06518, United States. Tel.: +1 203 582 5022, e-mail: joseph.gaspar@quinnipiac.edu)

Emma E. Levine is a fifth-year doctoral student at Wharton, studying behavioral ethics. Her main stream of research examines how individuals balance the tension between honesty and kindness and how this influences interpersonal judgment and trust. Her research has been published in journals such as *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. (The Wharton School, 3730 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19147, United States. Tel.: +1 414 732 0664, e-mail: emmased@wharton.upenn.edu)

Maurice E. Schweitzer is the Cecilia Yen Koo Professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on deception, emotion, and negotiation. (The Wharton School, 3730 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19147, United States. Tel.: +1 215 898 4776, e-mail: schweitzer@wharton.upenn.edu)