

Review

Prosocial lies: Causes and consequences

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Abstract

Prosocial lies—lies that are intended to benefit others—are ubiquitous. This article reviews recent research on the causes and consequences of prosocial lies. Prosocial lies are often motivated by the desire to spare others from emotional harm. Therefore, prosocial lies are frequently told in situations in which honesty would cause heightened emotional harm (e.g. when a target is fragile) and by people who are sensitive to others' emotional suffering (e.g. those high in compassion). However, targets only react positively to prosocial lies when they prevent emotional harm and when honesty lacks instrumental value (i.e. when they prevent unnecessary harm). Outside of these situations, targets typically view prosocial lies as paternalistic and therefore penalize those who tell them.

Addresses

¹ The University of Chicago Booth School of Business, USA² Monash University, AustraliaCorresponding author: Levine, Emma E. (Emma.Levine@chicago-booth.edu)**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2022, **43**:335–340This review comes from a themed issue on **Prosociality**Edited by **Stefan Pfattheicher** and **Isabel Thielmann**For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 13 August 2021

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.006>

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Keywords

Prosocial lies, Deception, Honesty, Ethics.

People typically think of deception as unethical and as harmful to trust. This idea is pervasive throughout centuries of philosophy and appears in most major religions. It is also perpetuated by empirical research in psychology, economics, and organizational behavior that documents myriad interpersonal and organizational costs of deception (e.g. Refs. [1,2]) and benefits of honesty (e.g. Refs. [3,4]). We argue, however, that this view of deception is overly simplistic. When people speak about and study deception, they typically have one specific type of deception in mind: harmful lies. In other words, people tend to confound deception—both conceptually and empirically—with harm. In daily life,

however, deception and harm are often independent. People certainly tell lies to undermine others and get ahead, but they also tell lies to protect others and offer emotional support. People tell prosocial lies.

Prosocial lies represent a fascinating and important field of study for a number of reasons. Prosocial lies reflect a conflict of moral values, whereby the desire to maintain honesty is pitted against the desire to help others. Examining how people respond to conflicts between these values reveals important insights about how people weigh different moral concerns across contexts and helps us understand the degree to which honesty is truly esteemed as a moral virtue (e.g. Ref. [5]). Studying prosocial lies also gives us a more complete picture of how deception operates in and influences our daily lives.

In this article, we review notable findings from the burgeoning body of research on the antecedents and consequences of prosocial lies. We begin by defining prosocial lies. We then discuss contextual and dispositional antecedents of prosocial lies. Next, we turn to the social consequences of prosocial lies to illuminate when these lies are rewarded versus punished by targets. We summarize these findings in [Table 1](#). We conclude by proposing interesting new directions on the study of prosocial lies.

Defining prosocial lies

We define prosocial lies as statements told with the intention of misleading and benefiting a target [6]. Although prosocial deception can take many forms, including omission [15] and paltering (i.e. saying something true but misleading; [16]), we focus on active lies of commission, which have received the greatest empirical attention. Furthermore, we focus on lies that are intended to benefit the same person they deceive (i.e. the target of the lie). People often lie to benefit parties other than the deceived party, for example, when people cheat or lie to a third party to help a partner [7,8], a friend [9], their in-group [10,11,12*], or their organization (e.g. Refs. [13,14]). However, targets are unlikely to react positively to these lies because targets are not the beneficiaries of a communicator's prosocial intentions in these contexts. Lies that are told to benefit the target of the lie elicit more ambivalent reactions because they involve both deceiving and helping the same person.

Table 1

Summarizing the features, antecedents, and consequences of prosocial lies.

Definition of prosocial lies: Statements made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target (Levine and Schweitzer, 2014)

Features	Antecedents	Consequences
- Helping or avoiding harm to a target is the primary motivation for lying - Prosocial lies can be about trivial or significant topics - Prosocial lies can have trivial or significant consequences	Contextual: - Situations evoking judgments of unnecessary harm (Levine, 2021; see Table 2) - Compassion toward a target (Lupoli, Jampol, and Oveis, 2017) because, for example, a communicator - Has a close relationship with the target (DePaulo and Kashy, 1998) - Believes the target, or people with the target's characteristics, is fragile (Jampol and Zayas, 2021) Dispositional: - Cognitive empathy (Nagar, Caivano, and Talwar, 2020) - Emotional understanding (Demedardi, Brechet, Gentaz, and Monnier, 2021) - Trait compassion (Lupoli, Jampol, and Oveis, 2017) - Agreeableness (Demedardi, Stephan, and Monnier, 2021)	When targets perceive prosocial lies as benevolent: - Targets judge communicators to have high moral character (Levine and Schweitzer, 2014) - Targets experience positive affect (Lupoli, Levine, and Greenberg, 2018) - Targets exhibit high benevolence-based trust toward communicators (Levine and Schweitzer, 2015) When targets perceive prosocial lies as paternalistic: - Targets judge communicators to have low moral character (Lupoli, Levine, and Greenberg, 2018) - Targets experience negative affect (Lupoli, Levine, and Greenberg, 2018) - Targets distrust and feel less close to communicators (Roberts, Levine, and Sezer, 2020)

Notably, we define prosocial lies in accordance with the motivation for lying, not the ultimate consequences of lying. Accordingly, the same false statement could be considered either prosocial or selfish, depending on the deceiver's primary motivation. For instance, telling a colleague that you loved their talk when, in fact, you thought it was boring would be considered prosocial if it were primarily motivated by a genuine desire to spare the colleague from embarrassment or boost their confidence. However, this same lie would be considered selfish if it were primarily motivated by a desire to avoid personal discomfort or to receive reciprocal praise. Of course, these motivations are not mutually exclusive. As people experience greater personal discomfort telling the truth, for example, they may perceive greater social harm from telling the truth. Therefore, lying motivated by personal discomfort may involve both selfish and prosocial motivations. In some cases, selfishness (avoiding personal discomfort) may become the primary motivation, in which case we would no longer classify the lie as prosocial. In short, we distinguish lies as per the deceiver's primary motive.¹

We also note that prosocial lies can have significant and dire consequences. For example, a physician who is motivated by prosocial intentions may provide false hope to a patient [15]. This lie could drastically improve the patient's psychological well-being or lead to

unhealthy behaviors that hasten death. Although much existing work on prosocial lies uses the term 'white lies' (e.g. Refs. [17,18*,19,20*,21]), suggesting that prosocial lies are trivial or harmless, our perspective is that prosocial lies are often not 'white' given their potential to influence others in significant ways.

The antecedents of prosocial lies

Most people work hard to ensure they are not seen—by themselves or others—as a liar. For example, people rarely tell the biggest lie they can get away with [22–24], people use creative conversational tactics to avoid obvious lies of commission [16,25,15], and people try to have others lie on their behalf rather than lie themselves [26,27]. These findings suggest that people generally experience an aversion to lying; they suffer an internal, psychological cost when they lie. Interestingly, even when lying is prosocial, many communicators are reluctant to lie [18,19]. However, many other communicators do tell prosocial lies, and they do so in systematic circumstances. We review several contextual and dispositional antecedents of prosocial lies in the following section.

Contextual antecedents

Recent research suggests that two key judgments guide communicators' decisions to tell prosocial lies: the degree to which the truth would cause immediate emotional harm and the degree to which the truth would have instrumental value for the target ([29**]; see also [30]). Communicators may attend to either or both of these judgments when they make communication

¹ We recognize that, in practice, it is difficult to infer a deceiver's primary motive. Furthermore, deceivers and targets are likely to disagree on the deceiver's primary motive in many cases. Nonetheless, we believe it is theoretically useful to distinguish lies based on the deceiver's motive, given that this is the focal dimension that influences lay judgments of deception (e.g. [6,26]).

decisions. For example, a communicator could lie because they are motivated to protect the listener from emotional harm, because they do not think truthful information would lead to meaningful knowledge or behavioral change, or both. Prosocial lies are particularly common when perceived emotional harm is high and perceived instrumental value is low. In these cases, the truth is perceived to cause unnecessary harm and lying is often seen as more ethical than truth telling [29**].

A number of situational and individual factors influence judgments of unnecessary harm and, therefore, the frequency of prosocial lying. For example, if a target is cognitively compromised or is participating in a sacred event (e.g. a wedding), people tend to believe that sharing hurtful information would cause unnecessary harm. In these circumstances, the truth causes high emotional harm and has little instrumental value; as a result, communicators tend to tell prosocial lies. We provide a more complete list of situational antecedents of unnecessary harm, along with examples of prosocial lies that might be told in these situations, in Table 2.

Communicators, however, also tell prosocial lies outside of these circumstances. Additional situational forces can lead communicators to overweight the importance of avoiding emotional harm to targets and therefore tell lies when the truth does have instrumental value. For example, people tend to focus on avoiding emotional harm to close others [31] and to people they believe are

fragile (e.g. women; [20]) and therefore are more likely to tell prosocial lies to these parties. In general, people tell prosocial lies when they experience compassion toward those who are suffering, even when honesty could help the sufferer improve in the future [32*]. This occurs, in part, because of egocentric biases [33]; people tend to overestimate the emotional harm that honesty causes others because they experience personal discomfort when they have to deliver difficult truths [34]. Further evidence for egocentric engagement in prosocial lies comes from work finding that (1) communicators judge lies of loyalty as more ethical when they (versus others) engage in these actions [10] and (2) communicators, but not targets, believe omission is more acceptable than prosocial lies of commission because omission lessens communicators' personal experience of guilt [15].

Dispositional antecedents

Much of the research on dispositional antecedents of prosocial lying comes from work in developmental psychology. Past research notes that the likelihood of prosocial lying coincides with the emergence of executive functions such as working memory and inhibitory control, around age 4 [35]. Other research documents a positive relationship between the prosocial lying and children's cognitive empathy [36] and emotional understanding [37**]. Overall, this research highlights that prosocial lying requires insight into others' emotional states.

Table 2

Situational antecedents of prosocial lies.

Situational antecedent	Relationship between antecedent and moral judgment of prosocial lies	Example
The target's emotional fragility	It is more acceptable to lie when targets are fragile	Temporarily providing false praise or encouragement to a colleague who is going through a significant personal trauma (e.g. the death of a loved one)
The target's ability to understand	It is more acceptable to lie when targets cannot understand the truth	Providing false comfort to a patient who suffers from cognitive impairment (e.g. dementia)
Degree to which information is subjective (versus objective)	It is more acceptable to lie about subjective information	Providing false praise about a colleague's outfit that the communicator happens to dislike, but knows that other people like
Degree to which information is trivial (versus important)	It is more acceptable to lie about trivial information	Offering false praise about a colleague's presentation when you noticed a minor flaw that has little impact on the colleague's overall performance
Degree to which information can be acted on (versus is out of the target's control)	It is more acceptable to lie about things we cannot control or fix	Offering false praise about new clothing that cannot be returned
Whether the conversation takes place in public or private	It is more acceptable to lie to spare others from public embarrassment	Offering false praise about a person's outfit when feedback is solicited in a group setting
When the conversation would disrupt a sacred event	It is more acceptable to lie to avoid disrupting a sacred event	Offering false praise about a bride's appearance on her wedding day

Note. Levine (2021) established several community standards of deception – systematic circumstances in which people believe deception prevents unnecessary harm to the target and is therefore seen as ethical. We summarize these standards in Table 2.

Research exploring the role of individual differences in prosocial lying among adults is more limited. However, recent work has identified a positive link between prosocial lying and trait compassion, which captures an individual's tendency to be emotionally motivated to alleviate others' suffering [30*]. Interestingly, this attention to the potential emotional suffering caused by honesty may detract from individuals' ability to recognize the instrumental value of the truth to targets and/or lead them to overweight the importance of preventing immediate emotional harm.

Another understudied topic in the domain of prosocial lying concerns broad personality traits (e.g. HEXACO and the Big Five). To our knowledge, only one study has investigated the relationship between these traits and prosocial lying, which found that higher agreeableness (as measured and conceptualized by the Big Five) predicted prosocial lying among children [38]. One might expect this finding to extend to adults given that agreeableness involves kindness and cooperation with others [39]. Suggestive evidence for this idea stems from a meta-analysis showing that agreeableness predicts prosocial behavior in economic games [40].

The consequences of prosocial lies

Often, lies go undetected [41,42]. This may be particularly true of prosocial lies given that people are motivated to believe information that paints them in a positive light. This motivation is so strong that people often seek out mentorship and friendship from communicators who focus on their positive qualities (e.g., Ref. [43**]), even though such positivity may be conveyed through deception.

However, an emerging body of work sheds light on how people react when they do realize they have been targets of prosocial lies. When targets believe that the truth would have caused them emotional harm and holds no instrumental value (i.e. when the truth would cause unnecessary harm), they—like communicators—see prosocial lies as justified [29**]. In these cases, prosocial lies can elicit positive emotional responses among targets, and can improve moral judgments of deceivers because they credibly signal the communicator's benevolence [6,28**]. For example, imagine a friend asks for your opinion on a dress you believe is ill-fitting. If this friend expected that honest feedback about her dress would make her feel embarrassed and she had no ability to change her clothing, she would likely welcome words of affirmation regardless of their veracity, and she would believe you had her best interest in mind when offering them. We note that although prosocial lies are generally seen positively when they prevent unnecessary harm, these lies can still undermine certain forms of trust. Specifically, although prosocial lies can increase benevolence-based trust (the willingness to be vulnerable based on expectations of a communicator's positive

intentions), they also harm integrity-based trust (trust in the communicator's veracity; [44*]). In general, compassion is often perceived to come at the expense of integrity, which can undermine integrity-based trust in compassionate people [45].

However, as reviewed previously, communicators often lie to prevent emotional pain to the target, even when the truth could have instrumental value (i.e. when the truth causes necessary harm). To return to the previous example, if your friend has the opportunity to easily change her dress, she will likely be upset if she realizes that you lied to her to protect her feelings because honesty could prevent later (and greater) embarrassment. In cases like these, in which deceivers make a tradeoff between preventing emotional harm (via dishonesty) and providing instrumental value (via honesty), targets are likely to conclude that deceivers made unwarranted assumptions about what benefits them and that they would have been better off with the truth [28**]. In these cases, prosocial lying often backfires.

Evidence for the potential ill effects of these lies comes from work on paternalistic lies, or prosocial lies that require communicators to make assumptions about targets' best interests. Lying to spare a target from emotional harm, even when the truth has instrumental value, is paternalistic because it reflects an assumption that avoiding harm is more important to the target than learning or improving. Relative to truth-telling, paternalistic lies evoke greater negative affect among targets [28**], lead targets to judge communicators as less moral [28***], and reduce closeness between targets and communicators [46]. Communicators who tell paternalistic lies believe lying could help the target, yet lack full information about how the lie will impact the target as well as the target's preferences regarding deception in a given situation. Part of the reason why targets resent these lies is that they may perceive an instrumental value of honesty that the deceiver either ignores (possibly intentionally) or does not recognize. They may also feel that deceivers have restricted their autonomy or that the motivation for lying was not truly prosocial [28**]. Given that deceivers frequently have imperfect information about how a lie will affect a target and that target's preferences for deception, we expect that in many cases where prosocial lies are uncovered, the target's response will be negative.

Future research on prosocial lies

Over the past decade, research on prosocial lies has thrived. However, many questions remain unanswered that future research might explore. Existing work has primarily relied on scenario studies and economic games featuring one-shot interactions. Understanding how prosocial lies are received in live interactions, in

real relationships, and over time is an important next step in this body of research. It is possible, for example, that even when a target appreciates the prosocial intent of a lie in the short run, they distrust the liar's claims in the future, which could undermine well-being in close relationships.

It will also be important to move the study of prosocial lies beyond dyadic conversations. The last decade has made it strikingly clear that some of the most interesting, problematic, and consequential lies are told by leaders to groups. Understanding the antecedents and consequences of these supposedly 'noble lies' represents an important next step in understanding the variety of prosocial lies that permeate everyday life. One recent example illustrates how decisions to deceive the public ostensibly for its own benefit can yield unintended negative consequences. In the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization recommended against facemask use, despite stating the importance of reserving them for health care workers [47]. While the effectiveness of masks for reducing COVID transmission was not fully understood at the time, given subsequent evidence for their efficacy (e.g. Ref. [48]), the World Health Organization's obfuscation of masks' potential value presumably failed to prevent transmission that could have been avoided with a more cautious stance. In light of this, we suggest that decisions to deceive millions for their ostensible best interest should be treated with caution.

Another potential avenue for future research lies in better understanding the role of culture in prosocial lying, which to date is an underexplored area. One of the few studies on this topic found that German participants indicated that prosocial lies were more inappropriate and rated themselves as less likely to tell these lies compared with blunt truths, whereas there were no differences across prosocial lies and blunt truths for participants from Canada or China [49*]. Thus, while it is possible that endorsement and use of prosocial lies differ across cultures, these differences and the cultural characteristics that underlie them remain largely unknown.

Conclusion

Prosocial lies are common and have the potential to alter lives in both positive and negative ways. Recent research has expanded our knowledge of the conditions that promote the telling of these lies, as well as the factors that influence whether they are praised or punished. Yet, there is still more to be learned about these fascinating and important acts of deception that we urge future work to explore.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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Participants from Canada, China, and Germany watched videos depicting either prosocial lies or blunt truths being told by an actor; participants were aware of the veracity of the statements. German participants rated prosocial lies as less appropriate than blunt truths and reported a lower willingness to tell prosocial lies (versus blunt truths). There were no differences in reported appropriateness or willingness to tell prosocial lies or blunt truths amongst Canadian and Chinese participants.