Prosocial Lies: The relationship between deception and trust

Emma E. Levine **Maurice E. Schweitzer**

Background

Deception deprives people of two of the most principal *instruments for interpersonal action—trust and belief.* -Sir Francis Bacon

- Philosophers and scholars assume that deception is immoral, deception harms trust, and honesty is essential to moral character.
- Scholars have confounded deception with self-interest in nearly all investigations of deception
- As a result, we do not know what deception per se does
- In this research, we examine:
- 1) Does deception, per se, harm trust?

Study 3:

Disentangling prosocial intentions from deception

Study 3: Mturk, N = 974

Design:

- 2(Choice set: altruistic lie-selfish truth vs. selfish liealtruistic truth) x 3(Intentions: altruistic, selfish, no information)
- Participants learn about a deception game that was played by a confederate (in which lying was either selfish or altruistic), and then learn that the confederate either made the selfish decision (which was honest or deceptive), the altruistic decision (which was honest or deceptive), or they do not learn the confederate's

Study 4: Continued

Real world example of the rely-or-verify decision: A prospective employee has an incentive to inflate his credentials, but it is risky (there is big payoff if he gets away with it, he doesn't receive the job if he gets caught). A firm can verify the employee's claim, but search is costly. The decision to verify (i.e., *trust*) the employee's claims depends on perceptions of the employee's integrity.

In our experiment:

Participants could make the decision to *Rely* or *Verify* a confederate's claims about the amount of money in a jar of coins. The game had the following payoffs:

Rely

Confederate earns \$0.75 Participant earns \$1.50

Wharton

2) How do people value honesty and benevolence when they conflict?

Studies 1 and 2: Prosocial lying and trusting behavior

• Study 1: Mturk, N= 125; experience deception • Study 2: Behavioral Lab, N = 257; observe deception

Design:

- Participants play (observe) a deception game in which their partner (a target) either tells a prosocial lie or is selfishly honest.
 - **Prosocial Lie:** Lie about the outcome of a coin flip in order to generate \$1.75 for partner, \$1 for self
 - **Selfish Truth:** Accurately report the outcome of a coin flip in order to generate \$0 for partner, \$2 for self
- Participants play a trust game with the partner (target)

Honesty Prosocial Lie

56%

decision. Then, they play a trust game with the confederate.



Main findings:

- Prosocial decisions (regardless of whether or not they are deceptive) *increase* trust (relative to no information).
- Perceived benevolence matters very much in the trust game; perceived honesty does not matter at all.

Study 4: What about different types of trust?

The trust game captures benevolence-based trust, which



- 2(Prosocial lying vs antisocial honesty) x 2(trust game vs. Rely-or-Verify Game)
- Participants observed a confederate who either told a prosocial lie or a hurtful truth four times in the deception game. Then, participants made a benevolence-based trusting decision (trust game) or integrity-based trusting decision (Rely-or-Verify).





- Participants also judge the target who told a prosocial lie to be more benevolent, less honest, and more trustworthy (all p's <.01)
- Benevolence, but not honesty, mediates the relationship between prosocial lying and trust
- Follow-up studies demonstrate that mutually beneficial lies, lies that help the receiver and the liar, have the same effect. Mutually beneficial lies increase trust.

characterizes some of our most important trust decisions (e.g., Kim et al., 2006), such as the decision to loan money or property to another person or the decision to rely on someone for emotional support. Some trust decisions, however, reflect perceptions of integrity rather than benevolence. In Study 4, we introduce a new trust game, to capture integrity-based trust: the Rely-or-Verify game. C_1, C_2



Payoffs in the **Rely-or-Verify** game are structured such that: For Player 1: providing inaccurate information is risky. For Player 2: verification is costly, but minimizes risk.

Conclusions

- Deception can increase trust.
- Identical decisions can have divergent effects on different types of trust (benevolence-based trust versus integritybased trust).
- The trust game only captures one type of trust. We introduce a new tool to measure integrity-based trust.
- Future research should distinguish between different types of trust and disentangle the importance of benevolence and integrity for different decisions and relationships.