

Honesty in Personal and Professional Life

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Why do people struggle to be honest in difficult conversations?



We wanted to see if: **A** fear of causing *social* (vs. self) harm underlies cases of dishonesty (omitting, deflection, etc.) and **B** to test the robustness across professional domains outside of the lab.

“Recall the last time you struggled to communicate honestly...”

- 1 **LAYPEOPLE** (*Prolific*)
Measure psychological experience of (dis)honesty
 - Motives
 - Costs & benefits
 - Intertemporal judgments
- 2 **LAYPEOPLE** (*Prolific*)
- 3 **POLITICIANS** (*CivicPulse*)
- 4 **PHYSICIANS** (*UChicago Med*)

Key takeaways & practical implications

- Across diverse contexts, people most frequently report **concern for social harm** (vs. self harm).
- The **costs of honesty** loom larger than the benefits over time.
- We can help public-facing professionals adopt a more long-term perspective, thereby **increasing trust in societal leaders**.

Study 1: Psychological experiences of honesty...

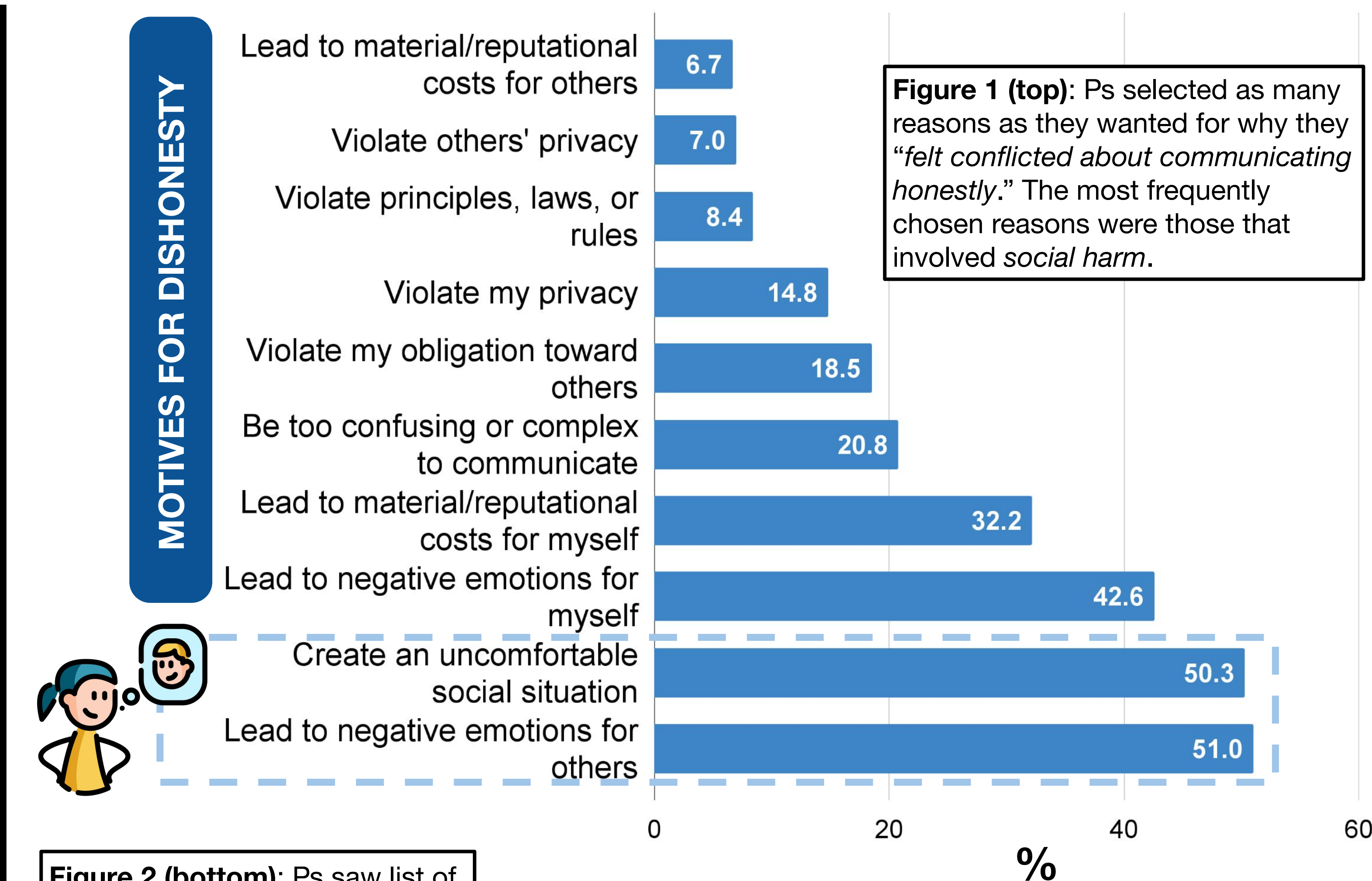
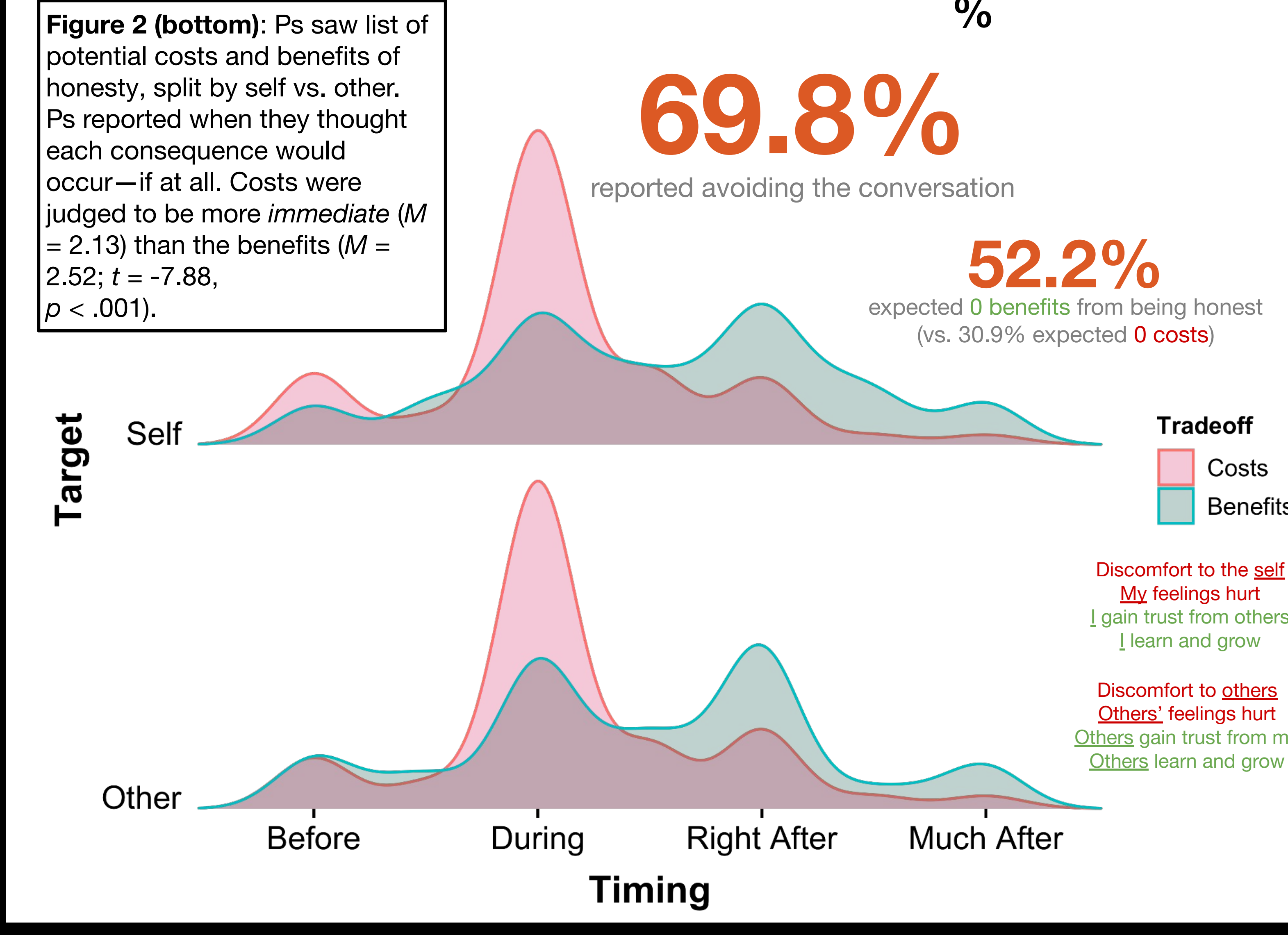


Figure 1 (top): Ps selected as many reasons as they wanted for why they “felt conflicted about communicating honestly.” The most frequently chosen reasons were those that involved *social harm*.



Studies 2–4: ...are replicated across diverse contexts and conversations!

	Caring for or avoiding harm to others	Preserving social harmony
Study 2: Laypeople	I lied to a friend who had invited me to a social gathering, by saying that I was too busy to go. I was not busy, and I simply wanted to stay home. However, I <u>did not want to hurt his feelings</u> ...	A friend of mine has been cheating on her husband... I <u>recently spent an entire weekend with this friend and decided to pretend I didn't know this information</u> , even when she mentioned she was having marriage issues.
Study 3: Politicians	I realized that a <u>fellow council member would respond in a political, defensive manner</u> if I approached the situation directly like I usually would. Some politicians do not behave rationally, so manipulation was more successful...	I was <u>concerned that my words would be taken out of context and widely spread</u> . I felt I had to very carefully choose every word which made it difficult to have an open and genuine conversation.
Study 4: Physicians	A patient with very advanced cancer that has progressed on multiple treatments asked me if there were additional options for treatment... I <u>felt that supportive care and hospice were most appropriate</u> ... I presented her this option without really delving into potential treatment options.	The patient or family is giving too much information or requiring more time than expected... In these situations, <u>due to competing pressures of responding to patient needs but also completing all work in a timely and prioritized manner</u> , I have said I needed to urgently leave to address something else.

Table 1 (top, L): Select qualitative data on laypeople and professionals' experiences (focusing on those who felt conflicted between being honest and avoiding social harm).

Figure 3 (R): Ps selected one moral value to complete the sentence, “I felt conflicted between being honest and ____.” Laypeople were far less likely to ultimately prioritize honesty (32.3%), compared to politicians (56.2%) and physicians (59.6%). Values related to *social harm* are color-coded in blue.

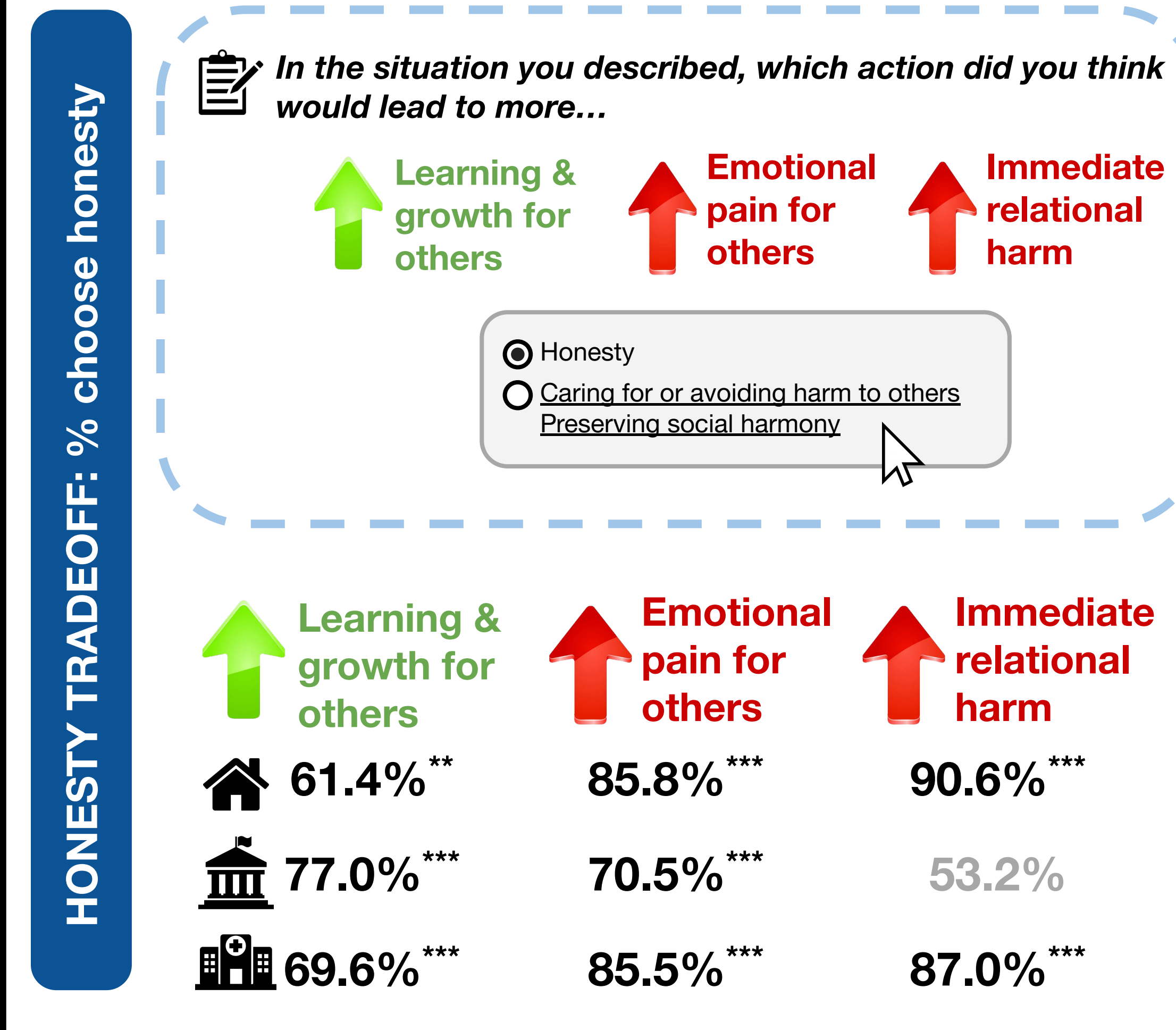


Figure 4 (bottom, L): Ps reported which action (*Honesty* vs. *Social harm-relevant value*) would lead to different outcomes. Proportions choosing *Honesty* significantly different from null 50-50% distribution. Across our samples, people perceived honesty to have intertemporal tradeoffs.

