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The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Faculty of Social Sciences

Psychology Department

**The lie is in the eye of the beholder:**

**Moral judgment of different types of lies**

Proposal for Master’s Thesis

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**Abstract**

People lie often. A prominent reason for lying is a selfish one: people lie to secure material gains for themselves. Another reason for lying is prosocial: people misreport the truth to benefit others. In this proposal, we set to compare moral judgments of prosocial and selfish lies. Our main hypothesis is that unethical dishonest behavior is judged less harshly if it benefits another person than the self. We compare judgment of selfish and prosocial lies that are made in the same context, involve the same moral transgression, inflict the same harm, and lead to the same benefit to self or other. We report initial findings in support of our hypothesis, and propose four additional experiments that will test judgments of selfish and prosocial lies from different perspectives, in different contexts and using different population pools. If our hypothesis is correct, then it implies that people should be less concerned about behaving unethically, if this behavior is intended to help another person rather than themselves.

**Introduction**

# In June 2019, former Deputy Director General at the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, Ezra Saidoff, admitted criminal offence in a plea bargain. He was indicted with spending state funds on meals worth 175,000 NIS, on behalf of Prime Minister Netanyahu’s wife. The judge stated that “Before reaching a plea bargain, the court took into consideration that Saidoff had committed his offences out of dedication and devotion to Sara Netanyahu and a willingness to commit criminal crimes to please her” (Hovel, 2019). The court also noted that Saidoff took nothing for himself.

It seems that the judge considered Saidoff’s offence more lightly, because its aim was to help another person. This decision raises both normative and descriptive questions. In this thesis, we focus on the latter. We ask whether individuals’ judgment of immoral acts, and deception in particular, hinges on the identity of the beneficiary of the act – the person who committed it, or someone else. We build on findings on unethical behavior to hypothesize that even if a dishonest behavior is committed in the same context, involves the same moral transgression, and leads to the same harmful consequences, it is judged less harshly if it benefits another person, and not the person who committed it. If our theory is correct, then people should be less concerned about lying for the sake of others, as they will expect less social condemnation in these cases. Below we provide a brief theoretical background on moral judgment and deception and propose a series of studies testing our hypothesis. We report a first study with some initial findings supporting the hypothesis.

**Theoretical Background**

Recent years in social psychology and in behavioral economics have seen extensive research regarding selfish deception, that is, deception that increases the payoff of the deceiver (Gneezy, 2005; for review see Gerlach et al., 2019). Deception was found to be common in everyday life (Depaulo et al., 1996; Hofman et al., 2004). People tend to inflate their performance in order to increase their gains both in lab experiments (e.g., Gino et al., 2009; Mazar et al., 2008; Schurr et al., 2012), and in the field (e.g., cheating on taxes payments; Mazur & Plumley, 2007; Shu et al., 2012).

Whereas most research focused on selfish deception, recent research has also studied prosocial deception. Levine and Schweitzer (2014) define prosocial lies as “false statements made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target” (p. 108), meaning that in contrast to selfish lies, where the goal of the liar is to benefit themselves, the goal of prosocial lies is to benefit another person. Examples for prosocial lies are a person who tells her friend that her haircut looks wonderful, even though she thinks it is awful, or a physician who wishes to ease the mental suffering of a terminally ill patient, and therefore tells her that there is still hope that her medication will help, even though the doctor knows it to be false (Levine et al., 2018). The recent research on prosocial lies has mainly studied cases where liars intend to merely benefit someone else, and to cause no harm to anyone (such as in the doctor’s example). However, one can think of prosocial lies that benefit some, while hurting others, such as in the example of Ezra Saidoff who helped the Prime Minister’s wife, at the expense of hurting the public.

Deception has long been regarded as fundamentally unethical (Kant, 1785). Indeed, individuals judge people who lie to their own benefit as immoral and unethical (Gneezy, 2005; Mazar & Ariely, 2006; Shalvi et al., 2011). Selfish liars accordingly expect to be judged negatively if their lie is exposed (Choshen-Hillel et al., in press; Gneezy et al., 2018; Mazar et al., 2008). Prosocial lies seem to be an exception, as people do not seem to consider them unethical. For example, in one line of studies, participants were asked to rate the morality of a past participant who, when playing a deception game, could either tell the truth or lie to help another player (i.e., increase the other participant’s pay in the experiment). Participants rated a player who told a lie to help another participant as more moral and benevolent than a player who told the truth (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014). People also showed more benevolence-based-trust towards players who told a prosocial lie (in the same deception game), than towards those who told the truth (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). Consistently, liars who benefited others, in addition to themselves, felt less guilty about their dishonest behavior (Gino et al., 2013) and even tended to cheat more than liars who cheated solely for their own profit (Weisel & Shalvi, 2015).

Putting together previous findings implies that, by and large, selfish lies are viewed negatively, whereas prosocial ones are viewed positively. However, the two types of lies have been investigated in separate lines of research, where they were each independently compared to the truth (and not directly to each other). Thus, while the straightforward difference between selfish and prosocial lies is the identity of the beneficiary of the lie (self or other), we suggest that other factors might have differed in their operationalization and could explain the way they were judged. Specifically, a prominent difference in the operationalization of selfish and prosocial lies in previous studies was the harm caused by the lie. Studies on selfish lies often investigated lies that involved unethical behavior with direct negative consequences to others (e.g., Koning et al., 2011; Schurr & Ritov, 2016). For example, people who under-reported mileage to insurance companies in order to reduce what they pay in premiums, cause harm to the insurance companies (Shu et al., 2012). On the other hand, studies on prosocial lies typically focused on cases where the lie did not hurt anyone (e.g., instilling hope in a dying patient; Levine et al., 2018). Some researchers have even referred to this type of prosocial lies as white lies, highlighting the fact that these lies did not have significant material or emotional consequences (Erat & Gneezy, 2012). Thus, it is possible that the fact that selfish lies were studied in contexts where they directly harmed others, whereas prosocial lies did not, may account for the differences previously observed in moral judgment.

**The Current Research**

In this research, our main goal is to directly compare moral judgment of selfish and prosocial lies. We will examine cases where the lie is part of an unethical behavior that involves clear harm. The only factor that we will vary is whether the lie benefited the self or another person. We hypothesize that prosocial lies will be judged more positively than selfish ones. We expect that this will be true even when we hold the contingencies constant: the lies are made in the same context, involve the same moral transgression, and lead to the same harm. Going back to the opening example, our prediction implies that had Saidoff personally benefited from public funds, rather than benefit the prime minister’s wife, people would have judged his behavior more harshly.

We will test moral judgment of prosocial versus selfish lies from three different perspectives. In Studies 1, 2, 4 and 5 we will elicit judgments by third parties. For example, in Study 1 presented below, we asked participants to judge an employee who lied and inflated the number of hours that he or his colleague had worked, in both cases stealing money from the employer. In Studies 3 and 4 we will examine moral judgment from the perspective of the liar. Although people’s moral judgment of their own action tends to be egocentric (Epley & Caruso, 2004), we predict that people would expect to be judged more harshly by others, if they lied to help themselves rather than someone else. This prediction is consistent with Choshen-Hillel’s recent line of research, whereby decision makers are highly sensitive to others’ moral judgment of their actions, sometimes ironically leading them to increased immoral behavior (Choshen-Hillel et al., in press; Shaw et al., 2018). Finally, in Study 5 we will also test the perspective of the victim of the lie (e.g., the employer who is being cheated). We expect that although the victim suffers from the outcome of the lie, she too will judge the liar less harshly if the lie was prosocial than selfish.

**Study 1 – Initial Findings**

#### In study 1, we tested our basic hypothesis whereby third parties would judge prosocial liars more positively than selfish ones. We presented participants with a scenario describing an employee who was in charge of reporting his and another teammate’s work hours, effectively determining their salaries. Participants were told that the employee had inflated *his* (selfish condition) or his *teammate’s* (prosocial condition) hours, and asked to rate the employee’s morality and intentions. To verify that the participants understood that the employee had lied, participants were also asked to rate the degree to which they believed the employee was telling the truth. We expected participants to rate the employee truth telling similarly in both conditions, acknowledging that the digression from the truth was the same. Importantly, however, we predicted that participants would rate the employee’s morality and intentions more positively when he lied to help his teammate rather than himself.

#### Method

#### Participants. Participants were recruited through a student email list at the Hebrew University. The students participated in this 4-minute study for a chance to win 100 shekels (approximately 25$) in a lottery. We pre-registered our hypothesis and sample size on [http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=y6z97k](about:blank). We aimed to collect 120 participants (60 per cell), as according to a power analysis this would give us a power of 0.8 and a good chance at detecting a medium size effect (*d* = 0.5). We ended up collecting 157 participants (47% females, *Mage* = 29.51, *SDage* = 5.86). According to the pre-registered rule, we excluded from the analyses 5 participants who failed the reading comprehension question (see below).

#### Procedure. The participants read the following scenario (in Hebrew):

Barak and Jonathan work in a large company. Both of them work from home, and their salary is determined by their respective work hours. Barak, who is in charge of reporting their hours, reports to the head of the department at the end of each month how many hours each of them has worked.

In October, the head of the department gave Barak and Jonathan a new project to work on. At the end of the month, the head of the department asked Barak how many hours they had each worked on the project. Barak knew that they worked on the project 50 hours each.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between participants conditions - selfish or prosocial. Participants in the selfish condition found out that “Barak reported to the head of the department that **he** **(Barak)** worked 55 hours and that **Jonathan** worked 50 hours.” Participants in the prosocial group read instead “Barak reported to the head of the department that **Jonathan** worked 55 hours and that **he (Barak)** worked 50 hours.” All participants were then asked to judge Barak’s morality and intentions (items were adapted from Levine & Schweitzer, 2014). Specifically, participants rated on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale: “Barak is a moral person”, “Barak has good intentions”. Participants also rated their agreement that “Barak told the truth” on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Finally, participants answered a reading comprehension question with 4 options (“Who will receive a higher salary than he deserves?”), and a few demographic questions.

**Results**

First, we verified that participants in both conditions realized that the employee had lied to the same extent. Indeed, there was no significant difference between conditions with regard to Barak (the protagonist’s) telling the truth (prosocial condition, *M* = 1.48, *SD* = 0.77, selfish condition, *M* = 1.53, *SD* = 0.83), *t*(150) = 0.4, *p* = 0.685. . Bayesian analysis confirmed that this measure did not differ between conditions: the Bayes factor was 5.3, which indicates that the data was 21.2 times more likely to have occurred under H0 than under H1. This Bayes factor is higher than the conventional value of 3, suggesting evidence in favor of the null hypothesis (Jeffreys, 1961). The Bayes factor for the *t*-test was computed using the JZS prior (Liang et al., 2008; Rouder et al., 2009). Importantly, however, and as predicted, participants judged Barak as more moral when he lied for the benefit of another employee (prosocial condition, *M* = 3.29, *SD* = 1.26) than for his own benefit (selfish condition, *M* = 2.60, *SD* = 1.09), *t*(150) = -3.58, *p* < 0.001, *d* = 0.59. Participants also judged Barak as having better intentions in the prosocial condition (*M* = 5.28, *SD* = 1.26) than in the selfish condition (*M* = 2.09, *SD* = 1.20), *t*(150) = -15.92, *p* < .001, *d* = 2.59.

The findings of Study 1 provide initial support for our hypothesis that although people realize that the person digressed from the truth to the same extant, they judge the morality and the intentions of the liar more positively if s/he lied to help someone else rather than her/himself.

**Method of Suggested Research**

Following the initial Study 1, we propose four additional studies that will compare judgments of prosocial and selfish lies, through different perspectives and in different contexts. The goal of Study 2 will be to validate the findings of Study 1, employing a new scenario and a different pool of participants (Amazon Mechanical Turk). The new scenario will describe a common setting used to study cheating in the lab (Batson et al., 1997; Cohn et al., 2014). In particular, participants will be told of a past participant in a lab experiment who cheated in reporting a private coin flip result, in order to take extra money from the lab. The study will involve two between-participants conditions, with the only difference being that the goal of the liar will be described as either benefiting himself or another participant (see full scenario in appendix A). As in study 1, in both conditions, we will measure participants’ perceptions of morality and intentions, as well as verify that they realize that the protagonist was not telling the truth. We will recruit 120 participants as we aimed to do in Study 1. We expect to conceptually replicate the findings of Study 1, employing this new scenario.

Study 3 will focus on liars’ expectations of others’ judgments of them when they tell a prosocial or a selfish lie. We will use the scenario from study 1, but tell participants that they are the protagonist who over-reported work hours for their teammate or for themselves. We will tell them that their colleagues found out that they lied, and ask them to rate their expectations of how their colleagues will perceive their morality and intentions as well as their expectations of whether their colleagues will think that they were telling the truth. We will recruit 120 participants through the Mechanical Turk. We expect that liars will validly predict that others would view their immoral behavior more positively, if it benefits someone else rather than themselves.

In Study 4, we will elicit judgments from liars and from third party judges, regarding real-life lies. Specifically, we will ask participants to write a short description of a time when they lied, either for their own sake, or for someone else’s (in a between participants design). We will collect 60 stories. Each storyteller will be asked to rate her expectations about how others would have judged her, had they found out about her lie. We will use the same morality and intentions scales as before. We will also add new scales for measuring participants’ expectations about how others would judge their honesty and how much they think others would trust them. Next, we will ask an independent group of 480 participants (to be recruited online) to judge the morality, intentions, honesty and trustworthiness of the depicted liar. Every 40 participants will rate 5 stories. We will compare the liars’ expectations and the third parties’ judgments, predicting that both will judge prosocial lies less harshly than selfish lies.

Study 5 will test judgments of prosocial and selfish lies from the perspective of the person who was lied to, and from the perspective of a third party. We will use the hour-report scenario from studies 1 and 2. Participants will be described the scenario as before (i.e., from a third-party perspective), or be asked to take the perspective of the employees’ manager. Thus, the study will employ a 2 (type of lie: selfish or prosocial) by 2 (perspective: third party or victim) between participants design. All participants will be asked to judge the employee who inflated the hours for his own benefit, or for another employee’s benefit, using the same questions as in Study 1. We predict that while all participants will judge prosocial lies more positively than selfish lies, this difference will be smaller for victims of the lie than for third parties. We will recruit 240 British adults for this study through Prolific online platform.

**Method of Suggested Data Analysis**

In Study 2, we expect participants to judge a past participant who lied to help another participant to be more moral and have better intentions than a past participant who lied to help himself. We do not expect to find a difference in ratings of the participant telling the truth. To test these hypotheses, we will conduct a separate *t-test* for each of our three dependent variables, comparing the selfish to the pro-social conditions (as in Study 1). We will conduct a Bayesian analysis to test the predicted null effect on telling the truth.

In Study 3, we test the same hypotheses as in Study 2, only in a different context, and when the participants herself is the protagonist (the liar). We will use the same analyses as in Studies 1 and 2.

In Study 4 we will employ a 2 (type of lie: prosocial or selfish) x 2 (perspective: storyteller or third party) between participants ANOVA. We will conduct a separate 2 x 2 ANOVA for each of our dependent variables. We expect a main effect for prosocial lies, such that participants will judge the prosocial liar as more moral, as having better intentions, as more trustworthy and as being a more honest person. There can also be a main effect for perspective, whereby storytellers might judge their own lies more favorably than third parties. We do not predict an interaction between type of lie and perspective. If we do find one, however, we will follow up the ANOVA with post-hoc contrasts.

In Study 5 we will also conduct a 2 (type of lie: prosocial or selfish) x 2 (perspective: victim or third party) between participants ANOVA. We will conduct a separate 2 x 2 ANOVA for the same variables we tested in study 1, 2 and 3. We again expect that although participants in both conditions would similarly judge that the protagonist was not telling the truth, we would find a main effect for the type of lie for morality and intentions. We also expect a main effect for perspective, whereby victims would judge liars more harshly than third parties. Finally, we expect to find an interaction between type of lie and perspective, such that there will be a larger difference in moral judgment between the prosocial and selfish conditions condition in the third party than in the victim condition. We will run planned contrasts between the selfish and prosocial ratings, for the third-party condition and for the victim condition.

**Expected schedule**

I expect to run studies 2-5 by the end of August 2020. I aim to submit my thesis by October 2020.

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**Appendix A**

**Coin Scenario**

Here are the full texts that will be shown to participants in the different conditions of Study 2:

Selfish condition:

We have recently conducted an experiment in our lab where participants were asked to flip a coin 8 times, and report to us the number of Heads they received. Each participant flipped the coin in private.

We ran 500 participants in total.  
Participants knew that they will receive a flat fee for participating in this study.

They also knew that **they would earn a bonus of 25 cents for each Heads they reported.**

We are interested in what you think about the following case:

**Imagine a participant named Jim who flipped 4 Heads (out of 8), but decided to report flipping 8 Heads (out of 8).**

Prosocial condition:

We have recently conducted an experiment in our lab where participants were asked to flip a coin 8 times, and report to us the number of Heads they received. Each participant flipped the coin in private.

We ran 500 participants in total.

Participants knew that they will receive a flat fee for participating in this study.

They also knew that **another participant whom they would not meet, and who would not know their identity, would earn a bonus of 25 cents for each Heads they reported.**

We are interested in what you think about the following case:

**Imagine a participant named Jim who flipped 4 Heads (out of 8), but decided to report flipping 8 Heads (out of 8).**

Questions for both conditions

Confirmation: How many times did Jim actually flip Heads? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (open question)

Confirmation: Who profited from Jim's report?

1. Jim
2. Another participant
3. Jim and another participant
4. No one

How moral would you think Jim is?

1- Not at all 2 3 4 5 6 7- extremely

Jim has good intentions

1- Not at all 2 3 4 5 6 7- extremely

Jim tells the truth

1- Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5 6 7- strongly agree

Please explain your answers briefly \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (open question)

Please fill out some details about yourself:

Gender: Man/Woman

Age \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (open question)

Comments (if you have any) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (open question)