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978-1-107-10539-3 - Cheating, Corruption, and Concealment: The Roots of Dishonesty

Edited by Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. van Lange

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1 Cheating, corruption, and concealment

An introduction to dishonesty

Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. van Lange

People can be dishonest creatures. Many exaggerate their achievements, downplay their moral failures, lie about the number of hours they have put into a collaborative project, and cheat on their spouses. When reporting income taxes, many people are tempted to strategically “forget” their sources of income. Treasurers of professional organizations are found to transfer collective funds to their private account. Also, prominent people in society are regularly caught performing dishonest behavior. The past decade has seen various instances of high-profile corporate fraud cases, in which powerful managers embezzled large sums of money or deliberately misrepresented their profits to stakeholders. Politicians that publicly stand up for traditional family values have been discovered in shady hotel rooms with prostitutes. Prolific scientists have committed plagiarism or data fraud. In fact, at the moment of writing this chapter, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) corruption scandal is still unfolding, and many high-ranked officials have been arrested under the charge of accepting bribes when allocating important soccer tournaments to competing countries. Clearly, dishonesty is part of human nature and can be found in all layers of society.

Dishonesty can hurt too. In many interdependent social situations, pursuing self-interest is at the expense of the interests of others (Van Lange, Balliet, Parks, & Van Vugt, 2014), and hence dishonesty can substantially harm its victims. The infamous former National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations (NASDAQ) Chairman Bernard Madoff robbed many people of their life savings with his Ponzi scheme. National governments miss out on valuable resources – which could be used to improve healthcare, education, social security, infrastructure, or developing aid – due to widespread tax evasion of citizens and companies. Corruption is a major impediment to economic progress, particularly in developmental countries – thereby perpetuating poverty among the most vulnerable people in the world. Finally, impactful, high-profile incidents of dishonesty cause an erosion of public

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trust, leading to negative emotions and destructive behaviors among citizens (Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014).

There is a paradox in the prevalent and pernicious nature of dishonesty though: Most people claim that morality is a primary motivation of their behavior. Specifically, people have been found to care substantially about justice and fairness, as they display strong emotional and behavioral reactions when they believe themselves to be unfairly treated (Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2004), as well as when they believe that others were unfairly treated (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986). In interdependent social situations, people stabilize cooperation and group-oriented behaviors by punishing selfishness, a response that is driven by anger-based emotions (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). The “better-than-average” effect is particularly strong in the moral domain, as most people believe themselves to be more likely to display moral behaviors than others (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Van Lange, 1991). Finally, people frequently act morally, as they display altruistic, other-oriented behavior, help others in need, and display substantial prosocial motivation (e.g., Sober & Wilson, 1998). All in all, people are moral beings, have a desire to see themselves as moral, claim not to commit dishonesty themselves, and resent dishonesty committed by others. How can we reconcile these insights with the notion that dishonesty is such a widespread phenomenon in the world?

One step toward resolving this paradox is by recognizing that dishonesty is more complex than the assertion of “Homo Economicus” that people’s behavior is motivated solely by the pursuit of material self-interest and a rational calculation of costs and benefits in social exchanges (see also Steinel, Koning, van Dijk, & van Beest, Chapter 4, this volume). Indeed, dishonesty is more likely to be a multifaceted phenomenon that involves a combination of self-interest, self-justification, self-serving biases, moral concerns (such as feelings of entitlement), and a range of personality and situational influences. Thus, at a macro-level it is undeniable that dishonesty occurs frequently, but it is not fully clear why, at a micro-level, people give in to the temptation of dishonesty all too often. In the present book, our main goal was to scrutinize the complex dynamics regarding the psychology of dishonest behavior at the micro-level. For this purpose, we invited prominent social scientists, with substantial research expertise on this topic, to contribute a chapter in which they share their views on the nature, origins, and influences of dishonest behavior. These chapters were organized in four parts within the book, in order to address four interrelated questions about dishonesty: (1) What motivates dishonesty? (2) How can people commit dishonesty while maintaining that they are good, moral persons? (3) What individual or

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situational factors make dishonest behavior more likely? (4) What can we do to reduce dishonesty?

In the following, we will first conceptualize dishonesty and illuminate the various ways in which people can be dishonest. Although it may be difficult, if not impossible, to capture all the possible acts of dishonesty in a comprehensive taxonomy, we will make the case for a parsimonious approach in which we propose three complementary dishonest strategies: “Cheating” (i.e., individually bending or breaking rules to gain an unfair advantage for self or others), “Corruption” (i.e., bending or breaking rules in collaboration with others to gain an unfair advantage for self or others), and “Concealment” (i.e., misrepresenting or withholding information to mislead others). We specifically argue that most acts of dishonesty contain at least one, and often more, of these elements. After that, we briefly introduce the four parts in the book, along with all the chapters.

Cheating, corruption, and concealment

Although there are many ways in which one can be dishonest, most acts of dishonesty are characterized by a set of structural elements. We try to capture these elements by identifying three interrelated strategies that people may endorse to acquire an unfair advantage for themselves or others, namely cheating, corruption, and concealment. Importantly, these are not mutually exclusive categories of dishonesty: Often people use multiple dishonest strategies in tandem to reach their goals. For instance, many acts of cheating also contain a necessary element of concealment. A case in point is tax evasion, which clearly is an act of cheating as it involves individually breaking rules and norms imposed by one’s national government regarding the requirement to pay income tax. At the same time, tax evasion also utilizes the strategy of concealment, as it involves a misrepresentation of information (in this case, the actual income one has earned over a year). Another case in point is bribery: Engaging in such a corrupt collaboration does not exclude the possibility that one of the partners violates the corrupt agreement at some point (i.e., individually cheating on the corruption partner). Moreover, successfully maintaining such a corrupt collaboration in the long run may necessarily involve a misrepresentation of information toward the outside world in order to avoid suspicion (i.e., concealment). As such, cheating, corruption, and concealment should be regarded as interrelated elements of dishonesty, and frequently people combine multiple strategies to reach their goals.

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The strategy of cheating is based on the recognition that rules, regulations, and informal norms constrain people's possibilities to get ahead in their pursuit of wealth, pleasure, fame, and success. Such formal or informal rules are in place for various reasons, one being to ensure a level playing field where all the relevant people have equal chances of success. Utilizing performance-enhancing drugs is forbidden in professional cycling, as they provide an illegitimate advantage over cyclists that refrain from such drugs. Cheating, thus, is the dishonest strategy of getting ahead by breaking the rules – in this case, by using forbidden drugs to win a professional cycling competition. Other examples of dishonesty that clearly incorporate cheating are stealing, illegitimate abuse of power, the use of foreknowledge to get a business advantage, and data fraud among scientists.

The strategy of corruption is also based on the recognition that occasionally breaking the rules may be instrumental in helping one to gain an unfair competitive advantage. However, frequently cheaters need the help of others to be successful at this. After a professional cyclist has decided to cheat the competition by utilizing performance-enhancing drugs, he may realize that he will need the help of a doctor who has access to such drugs and who is knowledgeable about issues such as when to administer the drugs, what the appropriate doses are, and how to avoid getting caught. The introduction of such a corrupt collaboration introduces new dynamics into the dishonest act, such as trust and loyalty between corruption partners and the expected payoff for each corruption partner (e.g., the doctor is unlikely to help the cyclist for free; moreover, there is more risk involved for the cyclist as the doctor might blow the whistle eventually). Corruption extends the strategy of cheating by creating a functional network of multiple dishonest actors. Other examples of dishonesty that involve corruption are bribery, organized crime, and large-scale forms of fraud that necessarily involve multiple accomplices (e.g., rigged elections).

The strategy of concealment is based on the idea that one person often has information that others lack, and people can strategically use such information asymmetry to their benefit. Whereas passively concealing information may not constitute dishonesty in all cases (e.g., in negotiations it can be defensible, and even desirable, to not be too open about the maximum price one is willing to pay for a product), it can be an act of dishonesty when one uses such information asymmetry to intentionally mislead others. Often dishonest cyclists are able to passively hide their acts simply by not talking about their use of performance-enhancing drugs. Sometimes, however, they need to resort to a more deceptive form of concealment by explicitly lying, exacerbating the dishonesty that they

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were already committing. For years Lance Armstrong was subject to allegations of using performance-enhancing drugs, and for years he actively denied these allegations (until further denial was no longer credible in light of an enormous amount of incriminating evidence) – he even pressed legal charges against the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) for slander. In the end, this gave him the reputation of being a liar, above and beyond being a cheater. Concealment, thus, refers to the act of deception by deliberately misrepresenting information. Other examples of dishonesty that incorporate the element of concealment are politicians not sharing crucial information with the parliament, not disclosing defects when selling a product, exaggerating one's achievements, or misinforming stakeholders of companies.

Overview of the book

Throughout the book, prominent scholars will address the psychology of dishonesty, characterized by the elements of cheating, corruption, and concealment. The book is subdivided into four parts. In the first part, “Motivations for dishonesty,” three chapters will examine the question of how dishonesty emerges. Are people truly morally motivated, or do they just want to appear moral? Can evidence suggesting that one is a moral person actually motivate subsequent dishonest behaviors, by providing a moral self-license? And, what goals do people have in mind when deceiving others – are these goals necessarily always selfish?

In the second part, “Justifying dishonesty,” four chapters address the question of how people are able to reconcile their acts of dishonesty with their perception of themselves as a moral person. To this end, various aspects of such a self-justification process are highlighted. How morally flexible are people? How do people deceive themselves into believing they acted morally, despite the fact that their actions actually were quite dishonest? To what extent do people utilize the benefits for others to justify acts of dishonesty – and what does this imply for the emergence of corrupt networks?

The third part, “Influences on dishonesty,” addresses the question of what individual and interpersonal variables are likely to increase the likelihood of dishonesty. How exactly is narcissism related to dishonesty? Are creative people more likely to be dishonest? Can we expect most dishonesty among the wealthy societal “elites” (i.e., high social-economic status) or among people with relatively low social-economic status? Does power corrupt – and if so, why exactly?

The fourth part, “Reducing dishonesty,” examines factors that might decrease the prevalence of dishonesty in social life. How effective is

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religion, and religious activity, in reducing dishonest behavior? Can people be “nudged” toward more ethical behavior by implementing minor changes in the direct physical environment? What can we do to increase people’s capacity to resist immoral norms? And how can interviewers find out if people are lying or telling the truth? In the following, the individual chapters of these four general parts are introduced in more detail.

Part I: Motivations for dishonesty

In the first part of the book, “Motivations for dishonesty,” three chapters will illuminate some of the underlying psychological processes that drive people toward dishonest behavior. In Chapter 2, C. Daniel Batson addresses the basic question of why people often fail to act morally through a motivational lens. Specifically, he poses the question as to whether people are motivated by moral integrity (i.e., a desire to be moral) or whether they are motivated by moral hypocrisy (i.e., a desire to *appear* moral while, if possible, avoiding the cost of actually being moral). The chapter presents an overview of a line of research where people are faced with a moral dilemma that provides them with the opportunity to display either moral integrity or moral hypocrisy. The evidence that emerges from this line of research supports the idea that people are motivated by moral hypocrisy, but it offers little support for the idea that people are motivated by moral integrity. Batson subsequently offers various explanations for these findings.

In Chapter 3, Daniel A. Effron examines the possibility that evidence that one is a moral, virtuous person may actually motivate subsequent acts of dishonesty. Specifically, people often fabricate moral credentials – that is, evidence that they have a virtuous character – which in turn gives them a license to display an incident of dishonest behavior. Put differently, a history of good deeds induces the feeling that one should be allowed to commit a single bad deed. Effron argues that, besides actual good deeds, people have various alternative sources of moral credentials at their disposal that free them to be dishonest. Specifically, people can create a moral license for themselves because they intend to do good deeds, because they have not committed bad deeds in the recent past, because they would have done good deeds if the situation had been different, or because they identify with people that committed good deeds. The chapter closes with a discussion of various strategies for creating such moral credentials and broader implications of the process of moral licensing.

The contribution by Steinel, Koning, van Dijk, and van Beest (Chapter 4), then, specifically focuses on the motivations that bargainers

have to deceive others. Are these motives necessarily always selfish in nature? According to Steinel and colleagues, pure self-interest is a too narrow approach for a complete understanding of deception. Instead, they offer an instrumental approach that posits deception to be a function of the goals that bargainers have and the means that they have at their disposal to pursue these goals. For instance, sometimes deception may be used to attain prosocial instead of selfish goals; moreover, deceptive bargaining strategies may vary in their effectiveness across situations, which influences bargainers' tendency to consider alternative means to reach their goals.

Part II: Justifications of dishonesty

One overarching theme that stands out in some of the chapters of Part I is a tension between a desire to be a moral person on the one hand and a desire to reap the benefits of dishonesty on the other hand (e.g., see Batson, Chapter 2; Effron, Chapter 3, this volume). The chapters in Part II zoom in on this tension between these seemingly incompatible motives. How can people maintain to be moral if they commit dishonesty? In Chapter 5, Francesca Gino introduces the concept of moral flexibility: that is, people's "ability to justify their immoral actions by generating multiple and diverse rationales for why these actions are ethically appropriate." In the chapter, Gino illuminates how skilled people are at finding justifications for their dishonest behavior. Moreover, she introduces factors that facilitate people's capacity to self-justify unethical acts and proposes avenues for further research on moral flexibility.

In Chapter 6, Celia Moore focuses on the related phenomenon of self-deception in unethical behavior: Through biased reasoning processes, people are able to perceive themselves as the "heroes of their own narratives," despite their dishonest actions suggesting the contrary. Moore specifically focuses on three strategies to deceive the self into believing one has acted morally after an act of dishonesty. These three strategies are motivated attention (i.e., selectively attending to, or ignoring, information to uphold a moral view of the self), motivated construal (i.e., redefining one's immoral actions to make them justifiable), and motivated recall (i.e., selective forgetting, remembering, or inventing of information to uphold a view of the self as moral). The chapter concludes by addressing the question as to what extent self-deception is adaptive.

Whereas the previous two chapters focus on the self (through moral flexibility, or self-deception) in justifying dishonesty, the next two chapters extend these insights by incorporating the question of how people may utilize the outcomes of others when justifying their dishonest

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behaviors. In Chapter 7, Wiltermuth and Raj make the case that people are more likely to display dishonest behavior if they can plausibly persuade themselves that others benefitted from their dishonesty. Besides relatively innocent “white lies,” such dishonesty can also take on more pernicious forms, as people may justify dishonesty that benefits themselves through the cognition that it also benefits others. The authors then extensively suggest remedies to prevent other-benefitting dishonesty.

Chapter 8 by Shalvi, Weisel, Kochavi-Gamliel, and Leib extends these insights by discussing the implications of such other-benefitting dishonesty in the context of corruption. Why do people form corrupt networks in which they cooperate to achieve goals that harm the collective interest? Shalvi and colleagues argue that one important factor is the recognition that corruption serves the interest of the corruption partner. If people believe that dishonesty benefits not only themselves but also their corruption partner, then they are better able to justify such dishonesty. As a consequence, the expected benefits for the outcomes of others can motivate people to engage in corrupt collaborations, by reinforcing a belief that they are serving a greater good.

Part III: Influences on dishonesty

The first and second parts of the book describe the basic psychological processes underlying dishonest behavior. It stands to reason, however, that not all individuals are equally susceptible to these processes, and hence one can expect substantial variation in the tendency to be dishonest. The third part of the book is designed to examine individual and interpersonal variables that are likely to predispose people toward dishonesty. In Chapter 9, Campbell and Siedor focus on narcissism, a personality trait that frequently has been linked to dishonesty. They describe the basic processes associated with narcissism and dishonesty, and provide an overview of the literature on this link in applied situations. At the end of the chapter, the authors present a novel model – the SAC (Self-enhancing, Adaptive, and Callous) model – to illuminate how three key factors moderate the link between narcissism and dishonesty.

In Chapter 10, Vincent and Polman explore the dark side of creativity by examining the question as to what extent it leads to dishonesty (see also Gino, Chapter 5, this volume). They specifically argue that in our society creativity is considered a valuable attribute that is necessary for innovation, which provides creative people with a sense of status and entitlement. As a consequence, creativity provides people with a moral license to behave badly. Vincent and Polman then address the question of whether

creativity without dishonesty is possible and suggest avenues for further research.

Whereas Chapters 9 and 10 address individual attributes that influence dishonesty, Chapters 11 and 12 address interpersonal attributes. In Chapter 11, Piff, Stancato, and Horberg examine the question of how social class (the extent to which one is wealthy, educated, and employed in a prestigious job) is related to dishonesty. Their basic argument is that people high in social class tend to be more oriented toward their own internal states and goals and that people low in social class tend to be more oriented toward the social context and other individuals. As a consequence, high social class is associated with more dishonesty. Piff and colleagues extensively discuss the evidence for this assertion and establish boundary conditions and mitigating factors for this effect.

In Chapter 12, then, Blader and Yap focus on social power. They first focus on the question as to whether power corrupts and review evidence that it often does. The main issue, then, is how to explain this link: How can power lead to dishonesty? Contrary to the common view that people high in power lack a motivation for justice, Blader and Yap argue that power holders are concerned about justice as much as people who lack power. However, due to the psychological dynamics that are associated with social power, power holders construe justice differently, leading to dishonest acts that they themselves believe to be fair. Put differently, power can corrupt not despite power holders' justice motives but because of their justice motives.

Part IV: Reducing dishonesty

Understanding the roots of dishonesty is one thing; understanding how to reduce dishonesty is quite another challenge. The chapters in the fourth part of the book address the issue of how to reduce, stand up against, or recognize dishonesty. In Chapter 13, Kramer and Shariff examine the relation between religion and dishonesty. Religions often place a premium on honesty as a core virtue, and people frequently assume that religious people are more honest. The authors critically examine this claim. They reveal that religious priming and religious activity decrease dishonesty, but only in the short run. Furthermore, contrary to common assumptions, intrinsic religiousness is not associated with decreased dishonesty. Religious people self-report more honesty, but a closer examination of the evidence reveals that this is mainly due to increased self-enhancement motives, involving either unconscious self-deception or even a deliberately misleading form of impression management.

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In Chapter 14, Andy Yap examines how ordinary aspects of the physical space that people function in can influence their ethical or unethical behaviors. Yap specifically discusses the effects of illumination (i.e., the influence of dark vs. light environments), physical spaciousness (e.g., work spaces that yield expansive or contracted bodily postures), density (i.e., overcrowding), physical cleanliness, and orderliness of the physical environment on the likelihood of honest versus dishonest behaviors. He further discusses potential moderators of these effects and provides avenues for future research. These insights may provide practical tools, which are relatively easy to implement, to reduce dishonesty.

In Chapter 15, Piero Bocchiaro focuses on the question as to when people are inclined to resist dishonesty. He specifically focuses on productive disobedience, which he defines as a “peaceful noncompliance with norms or laws that, if followed, would hinder the moral progress of society.” Examples are whistleblowing or refusing to comply with immoral norms, laws, or requests. Bocchiaro discusses the distinctions between productive versus civil disobedience and presents a novel line of research that investigates this phenomenon in the lab. He then delineates situational factors that increase people’s capacity to resist dishonesty through productive disobedience.

In the final chapter, Chapter 16, Vrij, Fisher, Blank, Leal, and Mann examine the phenomenon of lie detection. Specifically, what can interviewers do to find out if someone is telling the truth? These authors introduce the cognitive lie detection approach, which involves the complementary techniques of imposing cognitive load on interviewees, encouraging them to provide more detail through various methods, and asking unexpected questions. Liars find it harder to cope with these techniques than truth tellers. The authors also present a qualitative review of relevant studies and conclude that the cognitive lie detection approach is more effective in eliciting cues that indicate deceit than a standard approach.

Concluding remarks

Taken together, the chapters in this volume all seek to solve part of the puzzle of why people are often dishonest through cheating, corruption, and concealment. Admittedly, many of the insights provided here may give rise to pessimism about human nature, and it is understandable if reading this book decreases the trust that one is willing to place in others. Perhaps we should therefore conclude this introductory chapter by reiterating that besides cheating, corruption, and concealment, honesty, justice, and altruism are also part of being human. Indeed, throughout the