

Cambridge University Press

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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Cheating, Corruption, and Concealment

Dishonesty is ubiquitous in our world. The news is frequently filled with high-profile cases of corporate fraud, large-scale corruption, lying politicians, and hypocrisy of public figures. On a smaller scale, ordinary people often cheat, lie, misreport their taxes, and mislead others in their daily life. Despite such prevalence of cheating, corruption, and concealment, people typically consider themselves to be honest and often believe themselves to be more moral than most others. This book aims to resolve this paradox by addressing the question of why people are dishonest all too often. What motivates dishonesty, and how are people able to perceive themselves as moral despite their dishonest behavior? What personality and interpersonal factors make dishonesty more likely? And what can be done to recognize and reduce dishonesty? This is a fascinating overview of state-of-the-art research on dishonesty with prominent scholars offering their views to clarify the roots of dishonesty.

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Preface

Protagonists in folklore or fiction that face a moral dilemma are frequently displayed with two metaphysical figures on their shoulders. On one shoulder, they find a little Angel telling them to make a moral choice, which involves being honest, truthful, and mindful of the interests of others. On the other shoulder, they find a little Devil telling them to make an immoral choice, which involves being dishonest, deceptive, and mindful of their self-interest even if it brings about substantial harm to others. Like in real life, sometimes the protagonist follows the Angel's advice and makes an honest choice, and sometimes the protagonist follows the Devil's advice and makes a dishonest choice. There is also a marked difference between reality and fiction, however. Whereas in fiction it is often easy to see which choice represents the Angel and which represents the Devil, in real life people often seem to lack the ability or the motivation to recognize the Devil for what he is. Indeed, a core theme of this book is that people have a strong tendency to justify their own immoral actions to themselves and to persuade themselves that the dishonesty that they committed actually was quite honest or at least legitimate.

This book focuses on the roots of dishonesty. As the above example illustrates, dishonesty involves more than only selfish motivation. It also involves a range of other complementary psychological dynamics such as self-justification, self-deception, impression management, feelings of entitlement, personality, interpersonal dynamics, situational influences, and sometimes even prosocial motivation. For a complete understanding of the question as to why people often are dishonest, appreciating all these factors is necessary. Furthermore, the complexity of these issues constitutes a challenge for efforts to prevent or reduce dishonesty. In order to successfully induce anti-corruption measures, reliable lie detection, and social monitoring that is effective without being intrusive, it is essential to take these micro-level processes underlying dishonest behavior into account.

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Dishonesty is not only psychologically complex but also omnipresent in society. Almost on a daily basis one can read news reports of cheating, corruption, and concealment, including lying politicians, corrupt officials and business people, bribed public employees, cheating sportsmen, and prolific lawyers doing illegal business with criminals. More disturbingly, there is much more dishonesty that never makes it to the news and that often goes unpunished. In developing countries, corruption is sometimes so ingrained in political institutions that it is just a normal part of everyday life for citizens. Large numbers of people admit in anonymous surveys to having cheated on their spouses. Also, in our own academic work situation we occasionally encounter dishonesty, such as the well-documented cases of fraud among colleagues in the field or the less well-documented cases of students who plagiarize a paper from the Internet – and no doubt sometimes students manage to successfully deceive us. Whether it is through cheating (i.e., individually breaking rules), corruption (i.e., collaboratively breaking rules), or concealment (i.e., deliberately deceiving others), at all levels and in all settings dishonesty can, and sometimes does, occur.

This book on cheating, corruption, and concealment was inspired by the two notions that (1) dishonesty is a multifaceted psychological phenomenon and (2) it occurs frequently in society and can be a real problem with far-ranging consequences. Furthermore, the past decade has seen a surge of empirical research on the psychology of dishonest behavior. We therefore decided to ask prominent scholars, who conduct state-of-the-art research on this topic, to contribute a chapter in which they describe their views on this phenomenon. Many of them shared our enthusiasm for this project and generously contributed a chapter with their ideas. We are extremely grateful to all these scholars for their efforts; without them, this project would not have been possible. We organized their contributions in the book by dividing them into four parts that address the following interrelated questions: (1) What motivates dishonesty? (2) How do people justify dishonesty to themselves? (3) What individual and interpersonal factors influence dishonesty? (4) What can be done to reduce dishonesty? These four parts all are designed to inform the reader of the broader issue of why cheating, corruption, and concealment are such a prevalent phenomenon in our world.

Besides the scholars that contributed a chapter, we also would like to thank Hetty Marx from Cambridge University Press for embarking with us on this project. Furthermore, we thank Janka Romero, who took over Hetty's tasks during her maternity leave, as well as other employees from Cambridge University Press that contributed to the book. More generally put, this is our second book project with Cambridge University Press, and

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for a second time they proved to be a pleasant and professional publisher to work with. At our own department, we would like to particularly thank Francesca Righetti and Nils Köbis. With them, we currently work on a research project on corruption (funded by the Dutch national science foundation NWO, grant number 406-12-003) which will form the basis of the PhD by Nils Köbis. Our extensive discussions with them on this topic were of invaluable help, and a rich source of inspiration, when preparing the proposal that ultimately led to this book.

While it is clear that there are many negative aspects associated with dishonesty, perhaps we should end by also noting one of its positive features: There is little as fascinating as the dark side of human nature, and scholars will continue to be interested in the roots of dishonesty in the coming decades. The insights that are offered in this book are a reflection of the current state of the art of this research domain. These insights may help researchers and students in the social sciences come up with new theories and research ideas to further explore the dynamics of dishonesty. Practitioners may benefit from some of the insights that this book offers by better understanding why people sometimes are dishonest, when one can expect most cheating, corruption, and concealment, and what can be done to reduce the likelihood of such dishonesty. Whether you are a researcher, student, practitioner, or a reader that is generally curious about this topic, we hope that you consider the insights that the present book offers not only intriguing but also useful in pursuing your honest goals.