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Lie Acceptability: A Construct and Measure

Carrie M. Oliveira & Timothy R. Levine

People likely hold different opinions about deceptive communication. Lie acceptability refers to an individual's attitude about deceptive communication. A self-report measure of lie acceptability was updated and refined, and preliminary data (N = 312) consistent with validity were reported. CFA indicated acceptable fit to the a priori unidimensional model. As anticipated, the lie acceptability scale was positively related to narcissism and negatively associated with religiosity. The scale also predicted likelihood of use ratings of equivocal messages, deceptive omissions, and outright lies. An anticipated sex difference, however, was not replicated. The potential utility of the scale in communication research is discussed.

Keywords: Deception; Lie Acceptability; Scale Validation

Research suggests that lying is a common, everyday occurrence (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer & Epstein, 1996). Despite the prevalence of deception in ordinary life, it is likely that some people lie more than others do. It is also likely that some people have greater expectations for honesty than others, judging others' fabrications harshly. In short, there are those who see prevarication as an acceptable communication strategy for goal obtainment, those who see the veracity of one's words as inextricably linked with one's personal integrity and therefore spurn deceit in themselves and others, and those who fall at various points along a continuum between these extremes. The extent to which people see deception as acceptable likely impacts message production, message processing, and important communication outcomes.

This article conceptualizes and measures an individual difference in general attitude toward deceit as a communicative means to achieving personal and social goals.

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In the early 1990s, McCornack and Levine studied people's reactions to discovered deception (Levine, McCornack, & Avery, 1992; McCornack & Levine, 1990). McCornack and Levine (1990) reasoned and observed that people differed in the extent to which they found deception acceptable. Compared to individuals who saw deception favorably, those who viewed deception as less acceptable reacted more intensely to discovered deception. Levine et al. (1992) predicted and found that men scored more highly on lie acceptability than women, and presumably as a consequence, women reported being more upset by a discovered deception than did men. Despite the apparent utility of the lie acceptability construct, the actual scale items used in these reports were never published.

This paper formally introduces the construct of lie acceptability. The now-dated items used in the McCornack-Levine research of the early 1990s were updated, and preliminary evidence of validity is reported. A refined scale is provided for use in future research.

Lie acceptability can be defined as a person's generalized evaluation of the practice of deception. As an evaluative dimension, it varies along a continuum of good-bad, positive-negative, desirable-undesirable, or acceptable-unacceptable, etc. Because lie acceptability is conceptualized as an evaluative dimension, it fits within the definition of an attitude. Attitudes are often defined as evaluations of some attitude object, in this case, deceptive communication (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Because deceptive communication is a category of events rather than a specific instance, lie acceptability refers to a generalized evaluation or attitude.

People who see lying as acceptable will view deception as one of many viable tactics for accomplishing social and personal goals. They should practice deception relatively more frequently than others, with less remorse than others, and they should be less critical and more understanding of others' deception. On the opposite end of the continuum, there are those who categorically reject deception, quite often on moral or ethical grounds. Such individuals view deception as a practice that should be both avoided and discouraged. They should lie less often than others, experience relatively more guilt when they do lie, be more upset when others lie to them, and judge those who lie more negatively. Most people, however, will likely fall on a single dimension somewhere in between these two extremes.

The idea that individuals differ in the willingness to deceive is far from new. The willingness and ability to lie, for example, were part of the Machiavellian personality construct (Christie & Geis, 1970). In early research, Exline, Thibaut, Hickey, and Gumpert (1970) found that those scoring highly on a Machiavellianism scale not only lied more than low Machiavellians, but they also engaged in more eye contact while lying. Similarly, narcissism is associated with the use of deceptive communication (Ford, King, & Hollender, 1988). A high need for control coupled with a lack of empathy leads those with narcissistic personalities to engage in deceptive and manipulative behavior. Surely there exist numerous other perspectives that suggest individual differences in the proclivity for deceit.

It has already been noted that McCornack and Levine (1990; also see Levine et al., 1992) report individual differences in the extent to which people react

emotionally to the discovery that someone has deceived them. If the current thinking has merit, lie acceptability is an individual difference that is a common antecedent to both the tendency to engage in deception and how one responds as the target of deception. As such, it is an important individual difference variable that is worth assessing.

Because lie acceptability has been conceptualized as a single attitude dimension, a valid lie acceptability scale will need to be unidimensional. Religious people should oppose deception on ethical grounds. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all prohibit lying. The need for admiration from others, the tendency to use others as instruments for self-enhancement, a sense of entitlement, and a lack of empathy should lead the narcissist to accept the practice of deceptive communication more than less narcissistic individuals. People with narcissistic personalities exaggerate personal achievements and are interpersonally exploitative (*DSM-IV*, 2000). Consequently, scores on lie acceptability are predicted to be positively associated with narcissism and negatively related to religiosity. Scores on a valid lie acceptability scale should be positively related to endorsements of equivocal, omission, and falsification messages, but be negatively related to the evaluations of honest messages. Each of these predictions is tested in the current study.

Method

Participants

The participants ($N=312$) were undergraduate students enrolled in various communication classes at a large midwestern university. The sample was approximately two-thirds (67%) female, predominately Caucasian, and the median age was 19. All participants were recruited from a departmental research subject pool, all received research credit in exchange for participation, and data collection was IRB-approved. Statistical power was .999 for medium effects ($r=.3$) and .55 for small effects ($r=.1$).

Procedures and Measures

The data were collected online. The survey instrument was posted online using Web-based survey software. Participants who were interested in completing the study were given access to the link for the survey. Upon accessing the link, participants were provided with the informed consent document, instructions for the completion of the survey, and the survey itself. The measures consisted of the lie acceptability scale, previously published indices of religiosity and narcissism, and a message evaluation task inspired by McCornack (1992).

The lie acceptability scale items were adapted from McCornack and Levine (1990) and Levine et al. (1992). The original scale consisted of ten Likert-type items using seven-point response formats. Items were screened by the authors for wording, and new items were written to replace dated items (e.g., "Lying is a cowardly thing to do" was removed and "Lying is no big deal" and "Lying is just wrong" were added). The revised scale consisted of 11 Likert-type items, and is presented in

Table 1 The Revised Lie Acceptability Scale

-
1. Never tell anyone the real reason you do anything unless it is useful to do so.
 2. Lying is immoral. (R)
 3. It is ok to lie in order to achieve one's goals.
 4. What people don't know can't hurt them.
 5. The best way to handle people is to tell them what they want to hear.
 6. There is no excuse for lying to someone else. (R)
 7. Honesty is always the best policy. (R)
 8. It is often better to lie than to hurt someone's feelings.
 9. Lying is just wrong. (R)
 10. Lying is no big deal.
 11. There is nothing wrong with bending the truth now and then.
-

Note. Items 1, 4, and 5 were omitted based on CFA. (R) indicates reverse-scored items.

Table 1. The seven-point response format was retained, and the scaling was anchored by “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.” The items are scored so that higher scores reflect higher levels of lie acceptability, and the retained items are averaged so that scores can be interpreted along the easy-to-understand one to seven metric.

The religiosity scale was developed by Worthington et al. (2003). It consisted of ten Likert-type items with a seven-point response format. When averaged, scores were relatively flat but not skewed with $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.46$, $\alpha = .95$.

Narcissism was measured with the Margolis–Thomas (MT) narcissism scale (Margolis & Thomas, 1980) and consisted of 24 forced-choice items. Item analysis led to the removal of seven items that detracted from scale reliability. The remaining items were scored to reflect the number of narcissistic options endorsed. The scores were positively skewed and leptokurtic with a median of 3.00, a mean of 3.82 ($SD = 0.94$), a range from 0 to 14, and $\alpha = .70$.

Message endorsements were assessed with a message selection task. Participants read the “Intruding Jo” situation developed by McCornack (McCormack, 1992; McCornack et al., 1992). In the situation, Jo is a person of potential romantic interest, but the reader has a date with another person. Minutes before the real date is to arrive, Jo shows up with a bottle of wine at the reader's door. Participants are asked to imagine themselves in this situation. They were then presented with four messages in response to that situation. One message was a completely honest reply, one presented an outright lie, one was an example of a deceptive omission, and one message equivocal.¹ Previous research shows that outright lies, omissions, and equivocations are considered more deceptive than the honest reply (McCornack et al., 1992). Participants rated each of the four options on a seven-point likelihood of use scale.

Results

The unidimensionality of the lie acceptability scale was assessed with CFA using LISREL 8.8. The initial model fit with all 11 items was less than desirable; $\chi^2(44)$

190.52, χ^2/df ratio = 4.33, REMSEA = .11, CFI = .91, NFI = .89, RFI = .86. Item analysis with SPSS showed that overall scale reliability could be enhanced with the deletion of items 1 and 4. Visual inspection of the standardized matrix also suggested that model fit would be improved with the removal of items 1 and 4. LISREL modification index results further suggested that item 5 was problematic, and item analysis showed that the removal of item 5 did not reduce scale reliability. Thus, the model was re-tested with items 1, 4, and 5 removed. With these modifications, the unidimensional model provided an acceptable fit to the data; $\chi^2(20)$ 55.77, χ^2/df ratio = 2.79, REMSEA = .075, CFI = .97, NFI = .96, RFI = .94. No error terms were correlated in obtaining fit.

The CFA results show that the revised lie acceptability scale is unidimensional, and that the scale performance is enhanced by removal of three items. When averaged, the remaining eight items are distributed normally; $M = 3.35$, $Mdn = 3.38$, $SD = 0.93$, $\alpha = .83$.

It was reasoned that the lie acceptability scale was valid, and that scores on the scale would correlate positively with scores on narcissism and negatively with scores on religiosity. The data were consistent with these predictions; narcissism, $r(284) = +.28$, $p < .001$, religiosity, $r(301) = -.23$, $p < .001$. Scores on lie acceptability were also related to the message evaluation ratings as predicted: honest message, $r(301) = -.17$, $p = .002$, outright lie, $r(299) = +.24$, $p < .001$, omission, $r(301) = +.15$, $p = .01$, equivocation, $r(300) = +.11$, $p < .05$.

Previous research has found that men report higher levels of lie acceptability than women. Although the means were in that direction, this finding was not replicated in the current data, $M_{men} = 3.42$, $M_{women} = 3.33$, $t(299) = 0.75$, $p = \text{ns}$, $r_{pb} = .01$.

Discussion

The results of this study provide preliminary evidence for the validity of the construct and measure of lie acceptability. Evidence for the validity of a revised lie acceptability scale is provided by the results of a confirmatory factor analysis that indicates acceptable fit to a unidimensional model. The scale was also acceptably reliable with $\alpha = .83$. In addition to a unidimensional fit, the lie acceptability scale correlated positively with narcissism and negatively with religiosity. Finally, higher lie acceptability scores correlated positively with the likelihood to use deceptive communication strategies and negatively with the likelihood to use an honest response.

The only hypothesis for which no support was obtained was an anticipated sex effect for lie acceptability. Men were hypothesized as having higher lie acceptability scores than were women; however, these data suggest there is no statistically significant sex difference. It is unclear why the results in this study failed to replicate findings in previous research. The effect size obtained in the previous study (Levine et al., 1992) was $r = .23$, and with the current sample size, the power to detect an effect of this size was $\beta = .99$. In light of the other findings, the failure for a sex effect to manifest does not substantially detract from the validity of the scale as a measure of individuals' attitude toward deception, but it does lead to questions

regarding the generalizability of the sex difference reported by Levine et al. Perhaps moderator variables exist, or perhaps the magnitude of the sex difference has declined over time.

Three items were deleted in the course of the development of the final version of the scale. The deleted items were examined in an attempt to identify why they would have detracted from the unidimensional fit of the overall scale. All of the deleted items were worded in such a way that implicitly suggested (as opposed to overtly stating) dishonesty or deception. Further, the items presented deceptive communication as specifically used to manipulate others or preserve the self. The items remaining on the scale are worded such that deception, lies, or honesty are specifically included in the item rather than merely suggested, and do not specifically indicate the use of deception for manipulative purposes. The deleted items detracted from the validity of the measure by potentially conflating the manipulation of others with deception.

Obtaining the expected relations between the lie acceptability measure and other individual difference constructs suggests that the scale provides a reasonable assessment of individual-level variability in attitudes toward deception. Additional evidence for the scale's construct validity may be obtained in laboratory studies in which participants are placed in a situation in which they need to generate a response to a scenario in which deception might be useful or face-saving. Identifying the participants' lie acceptability scores and comparing them to their message production strategies would provide behavior-based evidence for construct validity that would further increase confidence in the scale's validity.

Given the existing evidence for the scale's validity, there is much potential for the scale to impact communication research. Deception research may benefit from the use of the scale in identifying the extent to which individual lie acceptability scores impact trait levels of suspicion or deception detection accuracy. Interpersonal research might benefit from the use of the scale in examining responses to discovered deception or the propensity to tell (or avoid) "white lies" as face-saving or conflict-avoiding strategies. Further, the predisposition toward lying may also indicate a predisposition toward other dishonest or destructive relational behavior, and may prove useful in predicting aversive relational outcomes.

Although the premise behind this research rests on a purely individual difference approach, a complete picture of deception, both from the message production side and the reception side, will need to consider the individual in context. The situation clearly matters, and a full understanding of deceptive communication requires looking for person-by-situation interactions. For example, different situational constraints provide different degrees of motivation for deception. One might envision situations varying in the ease of goal attainment with deception, the difficulty of goal attainment given honesty, and the projected probability of detection given deceit. Some function of these parameters might be compared to an individual's deception acceptability threshold, with the result determining deception method production. Such a view highlights the need for a measure of lie acceptability, but also explains why modest trait-message correlations are found.

In conclusion, this paper provides a needed measure of lie acceptability. Preliminary but supportive evidence of reliability and validity was reported. This construct and measure will aid in the understanding of deception message production and deceptive message reception.

Note

[1] The messages read as follows:

- *Completely honest.* “Jo, I’m afraid this may hurt your feelings. I probably should’ve told you this before. I’m expecting company here any minute. I have a date with this other guy/girl that I am also interested in. I feel like I was keeping it from you, but I didn’t really mean to. It was just that I was afraid I’d lose your interest if I told you, and I don’t want to lose your company.”
- *Deceptive omission.* “Jo, thanks for stopping by! That was really sweet and thoughtful of you. I really want to see you, but not tonight. Sorry!”
- *Outright lie.* “Jo, Wow! Thanks for stopping by! I’d really love to spend some time with you, but I already have a date with someone else for tonight. It’s this guy/girl that I used to like, but recently s/he’s been getting on my nerves, and so I’m just going out with him/her as a sense of obligation. I hope you understand. You’re not mad are you?”
- *Equivocal message.* “Whaaa?! Uh, Jo, I really appreciate the surprise and would like to spend some time with you, but I have plans for tonight. May I call you tomorrow so we can set something up?”

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