

THE DECEIVER AND THE DECEIVED: EFFECTS OF RECOLLECTING  
PROSOCIAL LYING ON EMOTIONS AND VALUES

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my sister, Diana, who inspires me every day to follow my dreams- no matter how outlandish they may seem. To the moon and stars.

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## ABSTRACT

Prosocial lying—or lying to be polite—is a common behavior. Very limited research, however, has examined individuals' recollection of telling versus being told prosocial lies. This study explored attitudes and behaviors related recalling prosocial lying experiences. We hypothesized that recalling deceiving versus being deceived would influence subsequent judgements of the importance of different values (i.e., honesty vs. kindness). Specifically, we predicted that participants who recollected telling a prosocial lie would report kindness as more important than participants who recalled being the recipient of such a lie. Thus, participants (N = 243) were randomly assigned to two conditions: (1) participants were asked to recall a time they told a prosocial lie and (2) participants were asked to recall a time they think someone told them a prosocial lie. Afterwards, participants answered questions regarding which value was more important in relationships (kindness versus honesty) as well as their attitudes about the recalled experience (e.g., levels of relief; levels of betrayal). Our hypothesis was supported. Participants who recalled telling lies rated kindness as more important whereas those who recalled being told lies felt honesty was more important in relationships. Additionally, contrary to the idea that white lies are a kind behavior, participants had negative associations with being told such lies. These findings have implications for how individuals feel about prosocial lying and suggest that recollections of past social behavior can influence more abstract social judgements. Given the negative affect associated with being told a prosocial lie, future research should compare feelings when told such lies versus blunt truths.



## **I. THE DECEIVER AND THE DECEIVED: EFFECTS OF RECOLLECTING PROSOCIAL LYING ON EMOTIONS AND VALUES**

Individuals are faced with complex social interactions every day. In some social interactions, the individual might feel the need to tell a small lie to avoid insulting another other person. This type of lie is known as a prosocial lie. Prosocial lies are often told in efforts to maintain the relationship and to avoid harming the other individual or relationship classifying them as prosocial lies (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DePaulo & Bell, 1996; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015; Lupoli et al., 2017). For example, a person may tell their friend that they cooked an exceptional meal when they did not, for the sake of protecting the friend's feelings. In contrast, antisocial lies that are used to protect the deceiver, unlike prosocial lies (Warneken & Orlins, 2015). On average, people report lying using both antisocial and prosocial lies several times a day (DePaulo et. al, 1996).

Multiple studies have examined the use of prosocial lying, with a large fraction of the research examining how children react to receiving disappointing gifts . For example, Talwar et al. (2007) investigated how children, ages 3-10, prosocially lied with the use of a bad gift paradigm. The study had three conditions: (1) children were given a bad gift and asked their opinion of the gift by the gift-giver, (2) the child was encouraged by their parent to tell a prosocial lie when asked their opinion of the gift by the gift-giver, and (3) the parent was given a bad gift and the child was encouraged to lie for their parent. They found that, across conditions, children executed the behavior of prosocial lying suggesting they do tell white lies in politeness situations.

Other studies have used different paradigms with children. Much like Talwar et al. (2007), Warneken & Orlins (2015) wanted to examine if children tell prosocial lies to

be polite when evaluating a bad drawing. Further, they investigated whether children tell prosocial lies to be polite or if they tell them to improve the other person's mood. Their work consisted of two phases that (1) studied children's use of prosocial lying when presented by an artist to give an opinion about a bad drawing and (2) whether children would choose to tell a prosocial lie after the behavior was demonstrated by an adult. Their results indicate that children were aware of the other person's emotional state when choosing to tell a prosocial lie (i.e., told more lies to sad artists) and their use of prosocial lies was significantly increased after the behavior was modeled by an adult. Both Talwar et al. (2007) and Warneken & Orlins (2015) indicate the early emergence of prosocial lying, but do not capture the potentially increased nuance of prosocial lying in adulthood, given that prosocial lying increases with age (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998).

Some research has examined the nuanced factors leading to prosocial lying in adulthood. For example, Buta et al. (2020) explored individual's attitudes in regard to lying and their self-reported lying tendencies across the lifespan. Overall, they found that adults reported more lenient attitudes towards telling white lies. Their results suggest how adults feel towards lies in general influences the frequency with which they tell them, but their work did not address the motivations for telling a lie. Despite the gap in Buta et al. (2020) study, there is some literature that addressed the motivation of the deceiver, including two studies conducted by Lupoli et al. (2017) and Xu et al. (2019).

Lupoli et al. (2017) and Xu et al. (2019) have investigated what influences the use of white lies in adulthood. Lupoli et al. (2017) examined whether adults' use of white lies was influenced by compassion. Xu et al. (2019) studied whether prosocial lying is influenced by concern about another's sadness, which the authors term "sadness

empathy”. Lupoli et al. (2017) found that compassion influences prosocial lying, more specifically, individuals who rated higher in compassion were more likely to tell a prosocial lie. Similarly, Xu et al. (2019) found that individuals with sadness empathy show kindness through prosocially lying. These studies suggest that adults may be motivated to tell prosocial lies out of kindness for the receiver, classifying these acts as kind. However, these studies only inquired about the motivation and emotions of the deceiver and not of the deceived.

Previous research has established that prosocial lying—or lying to be polite—is a common behavior. Additionally, these studies have shown that prosocial lying increases with age and is used with the intention of being kind. Very limited research, however, has examined individuals’ reaction to being told prosocial lies. One possibility is that prosocial lying has differential impacts on the tellers, who believe it to be kind, versus the recipients, who may not find it to be so kind. Further, prosocial lying may operate differently in real-world contexts versus the more artificial laboratory contexts in which it is typically studied.

### **The Present Study**

In this study, we investigated adults’ attitudes and behaviors of when recalling telling versus being told a prosocial lie. This study uses a between-subjects design with two conditions. We had individuals recall a time they told a prosocial lie (the deceiver) or recall a time they think someone told them a prosocial lie (the deceived). We hypothesized that recollecting telling a prosocial lie (Condition 1) would cause participants to report valuing kindness more than recalling being the recipient of such a

lie (Condition 2). We also examined the affective experiences of telling, versus being told, such lies.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 243 undergraduate participants were recruited online via SONA. We excluded 34 participants (14%) for failure to pass attention checks or failure to answer questions. Our final sample size was 209 SONA participants (33 men, 169 women, 3 non-binary, 4 did not disclose). The participants were between the ages of 18- 30 years old with a mean age of 19.3 years old ( $SD= 1.97$ ). There were ( $N= 104$ ) participants in Condition 1 and ( $N= 105$ ) participants in Condition 2. Participants were compensated for completing the study with course credit.

### **Materials**

#### ***Conditions***

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions: (1) recalling being the deceiver and (2) recalling being deceived.

**Condition 1.** Participants were asked to recall a time they told a prosocial lie. We asked the participants to include whom they lied to, what they lied about, and why they told the lie.

**Condition 2.** Participants were asked to recall a time they think someone told them a prosocial lie. We asked the participants to include who told them the lie, what they lied about, and why they think that person told the lie.

#### ***Attitudes Scale***

Depending on the condition participants were assigned, the Attitude scale question asked them to recall how (1) telling a prosocial lie or (2) being told a prosocial lie made them feel. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1- not at all to 5- a great deal) for the following positive and negative attitudes/emotional responses: (1) anxious, (2) happy, (3) embarrassed, (4) guilty, (5) helpful, (6) relieved, (7) kind, (8) stressed, (9) hurt, (10) excited, and (11) betrayed.

### ***Relationship Values Scale***

After completing the condition manipulation, participants were asked how important honesty and kindness are in three different relationships: (1) significant other, (2) family, and (3) friend. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1- not at all important to 5- extremely important). Participants were asked to indicate which value was the most important (1) honesty or (2) kindness for each relationship.

### ***Attention Checks***

Participants were asked to indicate which condition they were in (1) telling a prosocial lie or (2) being told a prosocial lie. Additionally, we asked participants to select “somewhat likely” in response to a prompt. Participants were excluded for failure to pass one or both attention checks.

### ***Demographic Questionnaire***

Participants were asked to self-report demographic questions about their gender, age, relationship status, length of relationship, and parental academic level.

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited online via SONA, a participant pool for students in Introduction to Psychology. After signing up, participants were provided with the link to

the Qualtrics survey, where they completed electronic informed consent. Participants were randomly assigned to either condition: (1) recall a time you told a prosocial lie (deceiver) or (2) recall a time someone told you a prosocial lie (deceived). Participants were given open-response questions about the prompt asking them to report who told the lie/who they lied to, what the lie was about, and why they lied/think the lie was told. Participants then completed the Attitudes Scale. After, participants were reminded with a prompt which condition they were assigned to. Participants were asked to complete the Relationship Values scale. Then, we asked the participants to self-report their demographics. Finally, the participants were thanked, debriefed, and granted course credit.

## **Results**

### ***Ease of Recollection***

We recorded the total time the participants took to answer the open-ended questions regarding the prosocial lie. We wanted to ensure that there was no significant difference between conditions of how long it took individuals to recall the lies. We found that there was no significant difference between Condition 1 ( $M=519.89$ ,  $SD=1768.22$ ) and Condition 2 ( $M=544.02$ ,  $SD=1424.8$ ),  $t(207) = -.109$ ,  $p = .947$ .

Additionally, we asked participants to self-report how easy or difficult they believed it was to answer the prompt in reference to recalling a prosocial lie. We wanted to ensure that there was no significant difference in ease that would affect the data. We found that there was no significant difference between Condition 1 difficulty ( $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ) and Condition 2 difficulty ( $M=3.12$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ) on how difficult it was to recall the lie ( $t(207) = .331$ ,  $p = .726$ ).

### *Valence of Recollection*

Participants were asked to report on our Attitudes Scale how they felt telling the lie (Condition 1) or how they felt being told the lie (Condition 2). Participants in Condition 1 reported higher levels of helpfulness ( $t(204) = 8.48, p < .001$ ), kindness ( $t(205) = 2.57, p = .042$ ), guilt ( $t(204) = 8.48, p < .001$ ). In Condition 2, participants reported higher levels of embarrassment ( $t(205) = -2.35, p = .001$ ), betrayal ( $t(207) = -7.71, p = .000$ ), and hurt ( $t(207) = -5.60, p = .001$ ). Additionally, our results indicated there was no significant difference between conditions for feelings of relief, happiness, excitement, stress, or anxiety ( $ps > .05$ ). Overall, we found that individuals that were told lies reported having more negative feelings towards prosocial lies than positive.

### **Figure 1**

*Reported feelings for Condition 1 and Condition 2*

- Same in both conditions
  - More when recalling being deceived
  - More when recalling telling a lie
- \*,  $p < .05$ ; \*\*,  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*,  $p < .001$



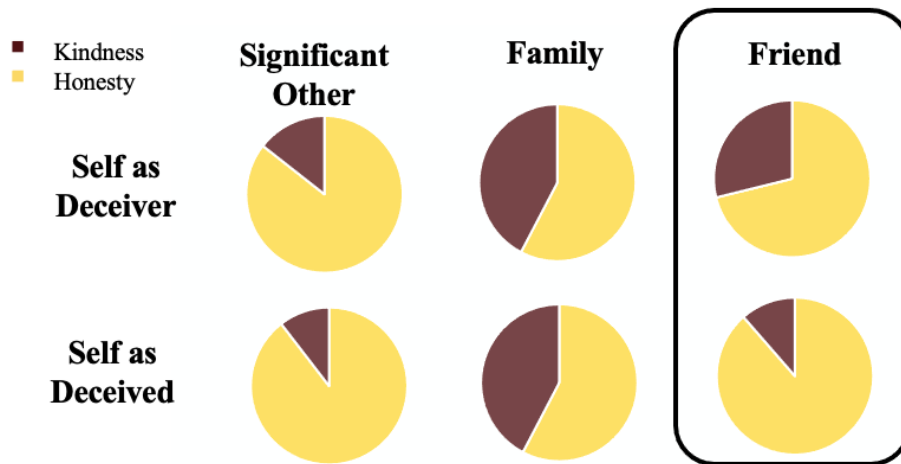
### *Value Judgements*

We found that there was no significant effect of condition (recalling telling versus being told a lie) on whether participants valued honesty or kindness more in relationship with significant others or family members. However, there was a significant difference on

whether participants valued honesty or kindness more in relationships with friends. Individuals in Condition 2 (the deceived) recollecting a prosocial lie that someone told them placed more value on honesty than kindness in friendships as compared to those who recalled telling such lies ( $X^2(1) = 9.87, p=.002$ ).

**Figure 2**

*Honesty vs. Kindness Values in Relationships*



### Discussion

Our study investigated adults' attitudes and behaviors regarding recalling telling versus being told a prosocial lie. The participants were randomly assigned to two conditions: (1) recall a time you told a prosocial lie (deceiver) or (2) recall a time someone told you a prosocial lie (deceived). In addition, participants were asked about their attitudes (e.g., levels of relief; levels of betrayal) and which value was more important in relationships (kindness versus honesty). We hypothesized that recollecting telling a prosocial lie (Condition 1) would cause participants to value kindness more than recalling being the recipient of such a lie (Condition 2). Our hypothesis was supported. When asked about value prioritization in friendships, participants who recalled



deceiving others reported prioritizing kindness more than those who were randomly assigned to recall being deceived.

Our results indicate that the experimental manipulation, recalling a prosocial lie, influenced what values participants reported valuing in relationships. One explanation of these findings could be that after recalling lying to someone, individuals felt the need to justify their behavior and that the values that associated with their previous behaviors are activated. That is, participants who recall not being honest (i.e., telling a prosocial lie) do not want to report honesty as an important value, since that would imply they violated that value. Instead, they report kindness as important, since prosocial lies are widely regarded to be kind.

We found that our experimental manipulation only influenced participants' value prioritization in the friend relationship conditions. There may be a few explanations for these findings. Different relationships may have different values structures. For example, friendships could potentially have more flexible value structures when compared to significant other or family relationships. Supporting the idea of different value structures across relationships, our results showed that honesty was prioritized in relationships with significant others, but kindness was more important in family relationships. Our results could also be due to noise within the dataset, illustrating the importance of replicating our friend-specific findings in future studies.

Despite theories that the act of prosocial lying is kind, we found that participants had negative associations with being told such lies. The tellers of such lies reported higher levels of helpfulness, kindness, and guilt than recipients. These findings support the idea that people tell prosocial lies in order to be kind or helpful. In contrast,

participants in Condition 2 reported higher levels of embarrassment, betrayal, and hurt. These findings underscore the importance of examining prosocial lies from the perspective of both the deceiver and the deceived, in order to examine how it feels to be lied to.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Our study does present a few limitations. First, the demographics of our sample size was mostly women with an average age of 19. In this study, having a sample size with limited diversity could have affected our results. Some research has shown that women may tell or respond to prosocial lies differently than men due to certain societal roles. Future studies should collect a more diverse sample to remove any sample bias that may affect their results.

Second, we asked participants to self-report with an online survey, rather than conducting an experimental study in-person. Participants may not have reported their experience accurately impacting the results of our study. Subsequent studies should consider conducting in-person data collection with prosocial lying scenarios where participants reflect on controlled experience. A future study design for in-person data collection, could create a scenario that may induce participants to tell or be told a prosocial lie in the moment, such as, giving feedback on a drawing or essay. We might recall experiences in a way that makes us look better or doesn't reflect how we really felt in the moment.

Lastly, we have no comparison group to examine how recalling telling a blunt truth versus being told a blunt truth feels. People tell prosocial lies to be nice, but in our study, we found being told lies made people sad. Potentially, hearing the truth may still

feel worse, thus making the lie a relatively kind act. However, our study does not show whether hearing or telling the blunt truth makes individuals feel worse than a prosocial lie. In the future, researchers should consider looking at participants' attitudes and behaviors of telling versus being told a blunt truth in comparison to prosocial lies.

Even within this dataset, future investigations could examine the written responses of participants, which asked participants to give the social context of the lie. The differences between conditions on who was reported telling (or being told) the lie would be an interesting variable to examine. For example, a participant in Condition 1 (the deceiver) may be more likely to recall telling a lie to a coworker, a somewhat distant relationship; whereas a participant in Condition 2 (the deceived) may be more likely to recall being told a lie by someone they have a close relationship with (e.g., family or friend). Additionally, future work could analyze the motivations for the lie. Participants may feel the need to over explain themselves and their reasoning when they were the deceiver to mask negative feelings of telling a lie.

Our results have implications for how individuals feel about prosocial lying and suggest that even brief recollections of past social behavior can influence more abstract social judgements. Although we cannot identify the exact mechanism driving the effect of this recollection prime, it is possible that individuals feel the need to reconcile their value judgements with their past behavior. Particularly interesting is the fact that being told prosocial lies tends to make us feel betrayed and hurt. These findings are contrary to the established literature asserting how prosocial lies are a politeness tool. Continued examination of how and why we lie has important implications for human socialization.

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