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*Lie to others as you would have others lie unto you: Community standards of deception*

The moral prohibition of deception rests on the assumption that deception robs individuals of their autonomy and their right to truth (Kant, 1785; Bacon, 1872, Bok, 1978). For example, Immanuel Kant proclaimed that lying “annihilates a man’s dignity” because lying interferes with individuals’ freedom and ability to make rational decisions (Kant, 1785). Similarly, modern philosophers proclaim that deception is only ethical when it upholds the principle of autonomy: the only lies that are ethical are the ones that can be “openly debated and consented to in advance” (Bok, 1978: p. 181).

This justification for truth telling presumes that people intrinsically value truth and would only consent to deception in rare circumstances. Individuals, however, frequently choose to avoid information and eschew truth (see Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010 for a review). In fact, people are often complicit in others’ attempts to deceive them. Individuals routinely avoid spoiling surprises and accept false compliments, even when they suspect deceit. Many individuals also avoid learning about negative news that they cannot control (e.g., Yaniv, Benador, & Sagi, 2004).

Existing research on deception has failed to consider when and why people want to be deceived and how this affects the moral judgment and use of deception. In the present investigation, I integrate research on moral psychology, information avoidance, and behavioral ethics to unearth community standards of deception. Rather than assuming that most people value honesty as a rule and that deception is a rare exception, I assume that people have numerous, systematic rules that govern judgments of and preferences for deception.

Using inductive surveys and a series of experiments, I document the implicit rules of deception. People believe that deception is ethical and prefer to be deceived when honesty causes unnecessary harm. Perceptions of “unnecessary harm” are driven by the potential for honesty to injure a target in the short-run and the potential for honesty to meaningfully benefit a target in the long-run. I consider how the timing, content, context, and target of a lie (or truth) influence perceptions of unnecessary harm, and consequently, influence judgments of and preferences for deception.

Just as Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler’s (1986) foundational work on community standards of fairness overturned the assumption that individuals universally value self-interest, and demonstrated that concerns about fairness place systematic, rather than anomalous, constraints on market behavior, the present research challenges the assumption that people universally value truth, and demonstrates that concerns about unnecessary harm place systematic constraints on honest communication. This research provides insight into how individuals value honesty – and

deception - for making moral judgments, for learning information about themselves, and for communicating with others in both their personal and professional lives.