Do We Really like Helpful Liars? Apparently not Everywhere

Piotr Szarota¹ · Katarzyna Cantarero²

Published online: 29 July 2017

© The Author(s) 2017. This article is an open access publication

Abstract In the American study by Pontari and Schlenker (*Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 28, 177–183, 2006), individuals who lied in order to help a friend were rated as less respectable, but more likeable than unhelpful truth tellers. The objective for this study was to find out whether the same effect could be demonstrated in a culture where norms regarding deceit are more rigid. Capitalizing on the existing research (Szarota et al. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 46, 181–185, 2015; Wierzbicka 1994, 1999), we hypothesized that the Polish preoccupation with sincerity might result in a negative judgment of any behavior that is classified as lying, regardless of the liar's intentions. Eighty students (40 women) participated in the study. Participants read stories that depicted either truthful or deceptive, yet helpful behavior towards a friend. They then rated how much they liked and respected the protagonists and if they perceived them as good friends. Results show that in Poland (the same as in the US) helpful liars were judged as less respectable than unhelpful truth tellers. Additionally, they were also perceived as worse friends. However, there was no significant difference between ratings of likeability between these two groups, so the results of the American study were only partially replicated. It seems that in Poland lying for the benefit of others is not socially desirable.

Keywords Lying · Deceit · Helping Behavior · Cross-Cultural Differences

✉ Piotr Szarota
pszarota@psych.pan.pl

¹ Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland

² SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Sopot, Poland

Since the late 1990s scholars have been exploring how people strategically tailor their descriptions of friends (Pontari and Schlenker 2006; Schlenker and Britt 1999, 2001), romantic partners (Pontari and Schlenker 2004), and even acquaintances (Schlenker et al. 2004) to help those they like achieve goals. Schlenker and Britt (1999) asked people to describe their same-sex friends to someone of the opposite sex. If their friends found the other to be attractive, people described their friends consistently with the other's preferences for an extraverted or introverted ideal date. However, if the other was supposedly unattractive, people presented their friend largely opposite to the other's preferences, as if to indicate their friend was not the right type. People therefore altered their descriptions to best suit their friend's social needs.

As people admire and encourage social support, on the one hand, a helpful liar might be regarded positively, yet on the other hand, lying is generally condemned (Backbier et al. 1997) and regarded as morally wrong (Bok 1978). How do people reconcile these mixed views in everyday life? Are helpful liars judged positively or negatively? To answer this question, Pontari and Schlenker (2006) started by making a distinction between the conditions that led to liking and respecting the other person. They argued that liking refers to a positive attitude based on attraction, pleasantness, and approachability, whereas respect refers to showing deferential regard or esteem for another person, usually because of accomplishments, status, competence, or power.

In the experiments conducted in the US cultural context, Pontari and Schlenker (2006) utilized a vignette method: Participants read a story about fictitious characters and then provided their reactions to those characters. Scenarios depicted a central character describing a same-sex friend to a potential suitor who was attractive and whose "ideal date" preferences were clear. The central character either told the truth, which resulted in a suboptimal impression, or tried to

help by exaggerating and, in one condition, lying about the friend. Results showed that central characters were liked more and preferred as friends if they stretched the truth (exaggerated or lied); however, they were respected more if they told the truth.

Although the results of the Pontari and Schlenker (2006) study are clear-cut, they might not be culturally universal. There is a body of research pointing to significant cross-cultural differences in the way people tolerate deceit and accept lying as a part of everyday experiences (Aune and Waters 1994; Mealy et al. 2007; Sims 2009). Research shows that members of collectivistic cultures compared to those of individualistic cultures tend to offer less negative evaluations towards lies that are aimed at bringing benefits to their group, whereas members of individualistic cultures, compared to collectivists, give more positive evaluations towards lies that are aimed at bringing benefits to an individual (Fu et al. 2007). Triandis et al. (2001) found that members of collectivistic cultures, which emphasize hierarchy, would be more prone to use deception to bring benefits to their organization in a negotiation situation than members of collectivistic cultures that value equality.

Apart from the individualism-collectivism dimension, specific cultural values and norms might play an important role in understanding how people deal with deception in different cultures. According to Wierzbicka (1994), *szczerłość* (roughly, sincerity) is one of the core values of the Polish culture. The cultural scripts of *szczerłość* concern the value of presenting one's feelings 'truthfully,' that is, saying and 'showing' what one really feels, even though it may hurt others. Wierzbicka (1994) also points out that the English concept of frankness, which celebrates two values at once: saying what one thinks and paying attention to other people's feelings, has no equivalent in Polish. Showing what one really feels seems to be expected, especially in close relationships. In a recent Polish survey (TNS OBOP 2008) the majority of subjects considered sincerity to be the most important quality of friendship. This finding was confirmed by subsequent research (Szarota et al. 2015).

Preoccupation with sincerity might result in rigid and negative judgments of any behavior classified as lying. In such a cultural context, good intentions are probably not enough to make the lying person likeable. To check this assumption, we decided to replicate Study 1 from the Pontari and Schlenker (2006) paper. In our research we adopted the definition by Buller and Burgoon (1996, p.205), who define a lie as "a message knowingly transmitted by the sender to foster a false belief or conclusion by the receiver." However, as Pontari and Schlenker did, we focus on other-oriented lies that are aimed at bringing benefits not to the liar, but to another person. We expected that even such other-oriented lying would be generally condemned in Poland, regardless of its altruistic intentions, so helpful liars would be

significantly less liked and less respected than unhelpful truth tellers. They would also be perceived as worse friends.

Though there are no gender differences regarding the tendency to lie (e.g., DePaulo et al. 1996), the attitude towards moral transgressions differs as a function of gender and women tend to be more severe in their moral judgments (e.g., Banerjee et al. 2010). Age was also found to be a significant correlate of the attitude towards lying. The older people are, the less they find lying acceptable (Ning and Crossman 2007). These variables were not the core focus of the research presented in the article, yet we considered it appropriate to control for them in the study.

Method

Participants

Eighty undergraduates (40 women) from two Polish universities (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan and University of Wroclaw) participated in the study. They were approached randomly at the university campuses and participation in the study was voluntary. The study was completed in classrooms in groups of 10 to 15 participants. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 25 ($M = 21.2$, $SD = 1.4$). No course credits or financial remuneration were granted in exchange for participation in the study.

Procedure

The experiment was a replication of Study 1 from Pontari and Schlenker's (2006) paper. Participants were told that the study was designed to investigate judgments people make about others based on the short stories. A story used in the Polish study was a "dating scenario" constructed the same way as the story used in Pontari and Schlenker's (2006) paper. Following the American design, we presented two versions of the story, one with a male protagonist, the other with a female protagonist. The friends were always of the same gender as the participants. For ease of presentation here, we use the example of the female scenario and refer to Jola and Ewa.

A story depicted a married female protagonist, Jola, attending a party. That evening, Jola meets Rafal, a person who seems to be a very suitable date for her best friend, Ewa. Ewa, who broke up with her fiancé, has been looking for a new boyfriend for quite a while. Jola wants to help. Rafal looks very likeable and admits that he is also single and looking. However, he also reveals that he prefers outgoing and self-confident women. In the lie condition, Jola helps Ewa make a desirable impression by describing her in line with Rafal's preferences for an ideal date, although Ewa is rather shy and introverted. In the truth condition,

Jola describes Ewa accurately hoping that Rafal will like her anyway.

While female participants read about Jola and Ewa, male participants read about Adam and his unmarried friend, Rafal. Apart from the characters' names, both stories were identical. All participants were asked how much they would like and respect a protagonist on 5-point scales, which were all labeled. The questions, which were given in a counterbalanced order, were: "Would you describe Jola/Adam as a good friend?", "How much do you like Jola/Adam?" and "How much do you respect Jola/Adam?"

Results

We conducted a MANOVA with the experimental manipulation (truthful communicate vs. a lie) and gender as the explanatory variables and the perception of being a good friend, likeability and respect as dependent variables. Results of a MANOVA test showed a significant effect of truthfulness and lying of the character depicted in the story $F(3, 74) = 3.48, p = .02$. Pillai's trace indicated a significant effect of the experimental manipulation on the evaluation of the character of the story $V = .12$.¹ There was no effect of gender ($p = .720$), nor was there any interaction effect of gender and experimental manipulation on the dependent variables ($p = .494$).

The follow-up univariate ANOVAs and mean comparison with with Bonferroni correction of the dependent variables revealed a significant effect of the experimental manipulation on the way participants perceived a character as a good friend depending on whether (s)he was lying or telling the truth $F(1,76) = 4.48, p = .038, \eta^2 = .06$. When the character in the story was lying to help a friend make a good impression in front of a potential date candidate, (s)he was perceived as being a worse friend than when (s)he was telling the truth (see Table 1 and Fig. 1).

Similarly, there was an effect of the experimental manipulation on the respect judgments, $F(1,76) = 7.32, p = .008, \eta^2 = .09$. When the character was telling the truth, (s)he was more respectable than when (s)he was lying (see Table 1 for details). However, there was no significant effect of the experimental manipulation on the perceived likeability of the character in the story $F(1,76) = .20, p = .659$.

Additionally, there was no relationship between the age of the participants and the dependent variables ($p > .20$). The evaluations of the character presented in the story were all positively correlated (see Table 2).

¹ When the analysis is conducted without gender, the relationships between the variables do not change with reference to the level of significance.

Table 1 Means for how much participants liked, respected and perceived the protagonist as a good friend

Truthfulness Condition	M	SD
How much the protagonist is liked		
Truth	3.58	.96
Lie	3.48	1.04
How much the protagonist is respected		
Truth	3.30(a)	.72
Lie	2.80(b)	.91
Perceived as a good friend		
Truth	4.05(c)	.60
Lie	3.68(d)	.94

Higher numbers indicate more liking and respect. Within each dependent variable, means with different subscripts differ at the $p < .05$ level by tests of simple effects

Discussion

Capitalizing on existing research by Wierzbicka (1994, 1999), we hypothesized that the Polish preoccupation with sincerity might result in rigid and negative judgments of any behavior that could be classified as deceit. Consequently, good intentions might not be enough to make the lying person likeable, as was the case in the Pontari and Schlenker (2006) study. The results of the American study showed that the main characters described in the stories were liked more if they lied in order to help their friends; however, they were respected more if they told the truth. We expected that, in Poland, lying would be generally condemned, regardless of intentions, so helpful liars would be significantly less liked and less respected than unhelpful truth tellers. They would also be perceived as worse friends.

Our results showed that when the protagonist was telling the truth and thus did not help his/her friend in achieving a goal, participants respected him/her more than in the lie condition. The results were similar to the results of the US study. However, contrary to expectations, the protagonist was not liked more when (s)he was telling the truth, and there were no differences between the lie and truth conditions. These results are also different from the ones reported by Pontari and Schlenker (2006). In comparison to the original US study, likeability did not differ between the conditions, indicating that, at least in Poland, helpful liars cannot benefit from being more liked by others. Additionally, we found that neither age nor gender was significantly related to the evaluation of the protagonist of the stories.

In the present study, we also asked participants if they perceived the protagonist as a good friend. The results show that in the truth condition the protagonist was perceived as a better friend than in the lie condition. That

Fig. 1 Judgments of a non-helpful truth teller and a helpful liar on three separate scales

judgment seems more global than the previous two, and may also be more idiosyncratic, because people may define what it really means to be a “good friend” differently. However, likeability would probably constitute a core component of such definitions. If so, it would be consistent with our predictions that in a culture that is highly preoccupied with sincerity, every act of lying (even for a good cause) could destroy a person’s credibility.

We think that this problem deserves further analysis. Recent findings show that people perceive prosocial lies as more ethical than telling a blunt truth (Levine and Schweitzer 2014). As Pontari and Schlenker put it: “Honesty and helpfulness often go together, and when they do, people are probably rated high on both respect and liking. However, in a moral dilemma, it can be impossible to satisfy all principles simultaneously. One principle can be followed only by violating another” (2006, p. 182). It seems important to include various cultural contexts to be able to test when benevolence takes over honesty. Perhaps Poles did not perceive this situation as having any “moral dilemma.” The helpful liar was perceived rather negatively: (s)he was neither respected, nor very much liked.

Table 2 Correlations between the evaluations of the character presented in the stories

Variable	Being a good friend	Likeability	Respect
Being a good friend	–		
Likeability	.50	–	
Respect	.52	.54	–

N = 80, all values are significant at $p < .001$

This study was not conducted without limitations. The sample was quite modest and, similarly like in Pontari and Schlenker (2006) study, all respondents were university undergraduates. It is possible that in the student population specific norms might apply, one might also point to the relative shortage of life experience of the young people. It is important to study other adult populations in order to determine the stability of the findings. Like the original Pontari and Schlenker (2006) study, our design relied on vignettes. Though using such study material gives high control over the experimental manipulation, future studies could benefit also from focusing on behavioral variables. When planning future research, we would also recommend a cross-cultural design, that is, studying several cultures at the same time. It would be very interesting to include at least one highly collectivistic culture, for instance, Chinese, Indonesian or Korean, where lies that are supportive of others might be seen as a tool that helps to maintain the social order.

In the introduction we pointed to the Polish preoccupation with sincerity, reflected in the Polish vocabulary and cultural norms. Our study documented that such cultural tradition might also shape everyday behavior. It should be noted, however, that we do not imply that Poland is particularly unique in this respect – there might be other cultures that also put very high pressure on sincerity. The main objective of the study was to show that culture might play an important role in the way people perceive an individual that uses deception to help a friend. We showed that helpful liars cannot benefit universally with higher likeability as a result of using other-oriented lies.

Acknowledgements This project was financed from the funds of the Polish National Science Center (NCN) allocated by the decision No. DEC-2011/01/B/HS6/04601.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Funding This study was funded by the National Science Center (DEC-2011/01/B/HS6/04601).

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Oral informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest Both authors declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

References

- Aune, R. K., & Waters, L. L. (1994). Cultural differences in deception: motivations to deceive in Samoans and North Americans. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 18, 159–172.
- Backbier, E., Hoogstraten, J., & Terwogt-Kouwenhoven, K. (1997). Situational determinants of the acceptability of telling lies. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 27, 1048–1062.
- Banerjee, K., Huebner, B., & Hauser, M. (2010). Intuitive moral judgments are robust across variation in gender, education, politics and religion: a large-scale web-based study. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 10, 253–281.
- Bok, S. (1978). *Lying: Moral choice in public and private life*. New York: Vintage.
- Buller, D., & Burgoon, J. (1996). Interpersonal deception theory. *Communication Theory*, 6(3), 201–242.
- DePaulo, B. M., Kashy, D. A., Kirkendol, S. E., Wyer, M. M., & Epstein, J. A. (1996). Lying in everyday life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(5), 979–995.
- Fu, G., Xu, F., Cameron, C. A., Heyman, G., & Lee, K. (2007). Cross-cultural differences in children's choices, categorizations, and evaluations of truths and lies. *Developmental Psychology*, 43(2), 278–293.
- Levine, E. F., & Schweitzer, M. (2014). Are liars ethical? On the tension between benevolence and honesty. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 53, 107–117.
- Mealy, M., Stephen, W., & Urrutia, C. I. (2007). The acceptability of lies: a comparison of Ecuadorians and Euro-Americans. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 31, 689–702.
- Ning, S. R., & Crossman, A. M. (2007). We believe in being honest: Examining subcultural differences in the acceptability of deception. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 37, 2130–2155.
- Pontari, B. A., & Schlenker, B. R. (2004). Providing and withholding impression a management support for romantic partners: gender of the audience matters. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40, 41–51.
- Pontari, B. A., & Schlenker, B. R. (2006). Helping friends manage impressions: we like helpful liars but respect nonhelpful truth tellers. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 28, 177–183.
- Schlenker, B. R., & Britt, T. W. (1999). Beneficial impression management: strategically controlling information to help friends. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 559–573.
- Schlenker, B. R., & Britt, T. W. (2001). Strategically controlling information to help friends: effects of empathy and friendship strength on beneficial impression management. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, 357–372.
- Schlenker, B. R., Lifka, A., & Wowra, S. A. (2004). Helping new acquaintances make the right impression: balancing image concerns of others and self. *Self and Identity*, 3, 191–206.
- Sims, R. L. (2009). Collective versus individualist national cultures. Comparing Taiwan and U.S. employee attitudes toward unethical business practices. *Business & Society*, 48, 39–59.
- Szarota, P., Cantarero, K., & Matsumoto, D. (2015). Emotional frankness and friendship in Polish culture. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 46, 181–185.
- TNS OBOP. (2008). *Przyjaźń po polsku* [Friendship in Poland]. Opinion poll conducted at the request of Wrocław City Promotion Office.
- Triandis, H. C., Carnevale, P., Gelfand, M., Robert, C., Arzu Wasti, S., Probst, T., Kashima, E. S., Dragonas, T., Chan, D., Ping Chen, X., Kim, U., de Dreu, C., van de Vliert, E., Iwao, S., Ohbuchi, K.-I., & Schmitz, P. (2001). Culture and deception in business negotiations: a multilevel analysis. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 1(1), 73–90.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1994). Emotion, language, and 'cultural scripts'. In S. Kitayama & H. Markus (Eds.), *Emotion and culture: Empirical studies of mutual influence* (pp. 130–196). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1999). *Emotions across languages and cultures: Diversity and universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.