Difficulty in Generating Truthful and Deceptive Messages : a Case Study of Polish and English

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Abstract

In this study the intricacy involved in producing truthful and deceptive messages in response to a hypothetical infidelity scenario is analyzed. This research aims at exploring McCornack's claim (1997) that from a message production perspective, it is more cognitively taxing to create truthful messages in response to a multiple goal scenario than it is to create deceptive messages since the truth ought to be "packaged" to address face and relational concerns. A sample of 100 responded to a hypothetical infidelity scenario in which they were told they had contracted an STD from cheating with a earlier partner and currently their goal was to get their recent partner to get tested for the STD. They were prompted either to be as honest as possible, to be less than honest if they had to, or they received no prompt concerning honesty. Results revealed that deceptive messages were easier to create than honest messages in response to this scenario.

Keywords: truth, deception, intercultural communication, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Turner, Edgley and Olmstead (1975) disputed the statement that "honesty is the best policy" by signifying that society as one knows it would crumble if people essentially were to adhere to this idea.

Based on the results of their study, they implied that as opposed to revealing the "whole truth", people take part in both information concealment and distortions to protect their relationships, their feelings and the feelings of others.

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While a wealth of deception literature has since expanded upon Turner et al.'s original work (cf. Buller & Burgoon, 1991, 1996; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; McCornack, 1992; Metts and Chronis, 1986), a basic understanding of the ways in which individuals weave the cognitive threads to craft deceptive messages remains vague. On one side are the deception scholars who propose that the act of deception is more cognitively taxing than truth-telling (Greene, O'Hair, Cody & Yen, 1985, Vrij, Semin & Bull, 1996, Zuckerman & Driver, 1985), involving a strategic dance of moves and countermoves (Buller & Burgoon, 1996). On the other side are those who imply that deception is a relatively simple cognitive solution to solve the   problems of conveying information and maintaining relationships and feelings (McCornack, 1997). This study seeks to repair this tear by beginning an exploration of the cognitive demands involved in the generation of truthful and deceptive messages.

As McCornack states in his chapter on deceptive message production (1997), "rather than generating theories that attempt to account for all of interpersonal deception (and end up explaining little), theorists should focus on parsing out particular facets of the deception process, and developing parsimonious, coherent explanatory accounts for these facts" (p. 123). We respond to this call by conducting an exploratory study to parse out the ease with which people report that they generate message responses to a hypothetical scenario.

2. Message Creation

Communication scholars long have been captivated by the intricacies concerned by message production, and have created models of message production that attempt to   account for the simultaneously routine yet creative aspects of communication (cf. Greene, 1984, for a   complete discussion). On the other hand, Kellerman justifies the routine yet flexible aspects of communication by signifying a system of memory organization packets (MOPS) that organize behavioral sequence routines (cf. Kellerman, Broetzmann,   Lim & Kitao, 1989; Kellerman, 1991, Kellerman, 1995).

Berger's work on planning proposes that "a plan specifies the actions that are necessary for the attainment of a goal or several goals" (1995, p. 144) and further specifies that while plans store general knowledge, they are "considerably more flexible" than scripts (see Berger & Bell, 1988; Berger & diBattista, 1992, Berger, 1995). Finally, Wyer and Gruenfeld's (1995) develop information processing offers a cognitive structure of "content-addressable storage bins" that contain information stored according to different levels of specificity. They further state that "not all aspects of a given conversation are likely to be stored in the same place" (p. 33).

Although these scholars offer different models and systems of message production and information processing, they converge on the idea of some cognitive type of memory or information storage unit. Therefore, with the purpose of producing a message, this stored information ought to be accessed and assembled in some form. From a simple information storage and retrieval perspective, it appears reasonable to recommend that longer messages should involve more effort than shorter messages. Particularly, it should require more cognitive effort to access and assemble more pieces of information compared to fewer pieces of information. Therefore, one means of assessing the cognitive effort concerned in message production is to study the actual length of the message.

3. Politeness in Communication

Rules of politeness state that communicators must take into consideration the face needs and wants of the people with whom they communicate (see Brown and Levinson for a detailed discussion, 1978). Subsequently, as Wyer and Gruenfeld noted (1995), when communicators are faced with the problem of whether to be accurate or polite "there are many times when a communicator who wishes to avoid offending the recipient will construct a message that he or she feels is not entirely accurate" (p. 18). Definitely Turner et al.'s (1975) work showed the degree to which individuals are aware of these issues of face and politeness. Particularly, their work indicated that individuals prioritized face and relational concerns over honesty rules such that there was no example of a completely honest conversation. This manipulation of accurate message information frequently involves wrapping it within polite contextualizing phrases, such as disclaimers, hedges and apologies (see Brown and Levinson, 1978; McCornack, 1997).

One alternative to creating a truthful message is to genretae a message that is less than truthful. Previous deception literature has analyzed the various types of messages   that deceivers employ, including concealment (i.e., keeping certain information hidden from another), equivocation (i.e., being ambiguous rather than clear), and distortion (i.e., over- or under-emphasizing). In terms of message length, certain types of deception should yield shorter messages compared to truthful messages, such as messages in which an individual comes to a decision to conceal certain pieces of information. In terms of cognitive demand, it should be easier to manufacture a less than honest message that does not threaten another person's face or feelings compared to creating an equivalently non-face- threatening truthful message.

The person who decided to be honest would have to do some fancy packaging of the truth within appropriate face-maintaining clauses and phrases, which for this example, may prove to be quite cognitively challenging. This example shows how,   in accordance with McCornack (1997), "truth-telling faces more constraints in terms of how it can be formulated," while "one can creatively deceive in any number of ways so as to meet contextual demands" (p. 110). Thus, in terms of generating truthful versus deceptive messages in response to a challenging situation it can be hypothesized that:

H1: Individuals will produce longer messages in response to a hypothetical scenario in a primed honest condition compared to a primed less than honest condition or a no prime condition,

H2: When asked what the "easiest thing to say" is in response to a hypothetical scenario,   individuals will create messages that are shorter and rated as less honest than their original responses,

H3: Individuals will rate deceptive messages as easier to construct compared to honest messages,

H4: When asked why the "easiest thing to say" is easy, people will be more prone to report that it is easier to be deceptive than to be honest.

4. Method

4.1   Participants

The sample consisted of 100 Poles and American. The sample was 58.6% female, and 41.4% male (American) and 64.7 % female and 33.3 % male (Polish). The mean age of the participants was 20.4, with a range of 18 – 44.

4.2 Procedure

The respondents completed a self-report survey in which they provided response to a hypothetical infidelity scenario in which an STD was acquired (described below) by writing what they would say to their partner. If they were not sexually active they were given an alternative scenario to answer. This study reports the results from only participants who declared they were sexually active. All respondents were given the same goal, which stated "your goal is to get your partner to get tested for this STD."

Moreover, respondents then arbitrarily received one of three different prompts. The first prompt instructed respondents that they were "to say whatever it takes, even if you have to be less than honest." The second prompt instructed respondents that they were   "to be as honest as possible." The final prompt gave respondents no instructions concerning honesty. Therefore, respondents were either primed to be honest, primed that they could be less than honest, or not primed at all concerning honesty. After recording what they would say to their partner, they were asked to consider what they MIGHT have said, and particularly consider what the EASIEST thing to say in this situation might have been. With that in mind they were asked to rate their message in terms of how hard it was to create, and compare it to what "the easiest thing to say in this situation would have been." Respondents rated the easiness of message creation on a five item semantic differential scale, ranging from 1-7 and including effortful/effortless, challenging to think of/not challenging, demanding to create/not demanding, simple to think up/hard, and difficult to come up with/easy as the endpoints. Reliability of this five item scale was found to be adequate (Cronbach's alpha = .81 (American), =. 73 (Polish)).

Respondents were then asked to record what the "easiest thing to say" in this scenario would have been. Respondents were also asked to describe why this would have been the easiest thing to say, and completed demographic information.

4.3 Hypothetical Scenario

The hypothetical scenario asked participants to place themselves in the following situation, "even if you disagree with it or feel that it would never happen to you." The situation described how the participant was involved in an intimate dating relationship that recently had become sexually intimate. One night you are out at the bar with friends and your ex-partner (Chris/ Tomek; Jane/Marta) is there too. Chris/Tomek has been trying to get back together with you ever since you broke-up three months ago. Chris/Tomek/ Jane/Marta continues to flirt heavily with you and you have too much to drink. You leave the bar with Chris/Tomek/ Jane/Marta and end up having unprotected sexual intercourse that night. The next day you tell Chris/Tomek/ Jane/Marta that this was a mistake and will never happen again, and you make the decision not to tell your present partner. Two weeks later you discover that Chris/Tomek/ Jane/Marta has given you a sexually transmitted disease. You make the decision to tell your partner. Your goal is to get your partner to get tested for STDs. What do you say to your partner?

4.4 Results

Unitizing and Coding

The messages were first unitized for separate thoughts, or pieces of information, in relation to the hypothetical scenario. for instance, if a participant stated that they would tell their partner "I cheated on you and had sex with Chris/Tomek/ Jane/Marta," this would be broken into three separate thought units of relevant information; a) I cheated on you, b) and had sex, c) with Chris/Tomek/ Jane/Marta. Two trained coders unitized the messages and intercoder consistency was verified by calculating the simple percentage of agreement between the two coders. Intercoder dependability for unitizing was found to be acceptable, at 91% agreement.

Next the message units were coded for the actual content of information that was transmitted. Three coders each studied and discussed 26 different surveys to verify the category structure that the data revealed, and this was done twice to determine a thorough category structure to explain the messages. The first message feature was labeled "truthful information" and describes information that derived from the hypothetical scenario they were given. This included seventeen diverse categories, such as "I was really drunk", "I cheated on you", and "I got an STD." The second message feature was labeled "verbal disclaimers" and describes contextualizing politeness phrases employed to attend to partner's face needs. This comprised four diverse categories, such as appeals for suspended judgments (i.e., "just hear me out,") and sin licenses (i.e., "you're not going to like this but…"). The third message feature was labeled "general politeness" and comprised four different categories such as apologies and empathy (i.e., "I'll understand if you hate me,"). The final message feature was labeled "bald –faced imported information" and explains information that was not supplied in the original scenario. Examples of this feature comprised "mystery STD", for example "I just found out I have an STD and I don't know where I got it from".

Two trained coders coded the message units in accordance with these features, and any disagreements were resolved by discussion. Intercoder reliability was determined by calculating simple percentage of agreement, and was found to be suitable at 85% agreement.

The final information that was coded was the reasons offered by the participants for why their second message was easier to create. Parallel to the previous coding mentioned above, the reasons were unitized and a category structure was determined from the data. Nine different categories of reasons were revealed, including "it's easier to tell the truth," "it's easier to lie,", "it's easier to shift the blame." Intercoder consistency was calculated by simple percentage of agreement and was found to be suitable at 95% agreement.

4.5 Word counts and truth ratings

Message length was determined by counting the entire number of words written for each message. Words that were hyphenated (such as "ex-boyfriend") counted as one word, and STD counted as one word.

Finally, a gestalt "truth rating" was calculated for the second message in which participants had been instructed to verify what the "easiest thing to say in this situation would have been." This rating was determined by contrasting the second message to the first message the participants had recorded and comparing the amount of truthful message   information revealed. A simple three-tiered ranking was employed to rate the second message as less honest, the same, or more honest than the first message. For instance, if a second message mentioned "I cheated on you - and have an STD" and the first message said "I was really drunk- and cheated on you- with Chris/Tomek/ Jane/Marta, - and Chris/Tomek/ Jane/Marta gave me an STD" the second message would be rated as less honest than the first because the first message reveals four truthful pieces of information while the second message only reveals two, as noted by the hyphens in the statements . This choice pursues procedures that are consistent with both Turner et al.'s (1975) work offering that total honesty is equivalent to revealing ALL message information, and McCornack's deception coding outlined in his Information Manipulation Theory (see McCornack, 1992).

Hypothesis One

This hypothesis suggested that individuals would generate longer messages in response to the primed honest condition contrasted to the primed less than honest or no prime condition. This hypothesis was tested by a one-way ANOVA with word count as the dependent variable and primed condition as the independent variable. Results indicated an important effect for condition on length of message ($F_{(2,213)}$ = 14.61, p = .000, eta squared = .12/ $F_{(2,122)}$ = 13.63, p = .000, eta squared = .11). Scheffe's multiple comparison test revealed that the mean message length in the primed honest condition (M = 68.86, SD = 24.51/ M = 64.36, SD = 23.47) was considerably greater than both the other conditions (M = 58.49, SD = 26.48, no prompt; M = 46.44, SD = 19.52, less than honest/ M = 53.38, SD = 24.35, no prompt; M = 42.41, SD = 18.53, less than honest), which also considerably differed. Thus, the data were consistent with hypothesis one.

Hypothesis Two

This hypothesis recommended that individuals would create shorter messages in response to the "easiest thing to say" condition compared to the primed conditions, and that these messages would be rate das less honest. This hypothesis was tested in two ways. First, a paired samples T-test was uemployed to examine the length of the messages.

Results showed that respondents generated shorter messages in response to the easiest thing to say condition (M = 31.91, SD = 23.25/ M = 31.91, SD = 23.25) than they did in the primed conditions (M = 58.64, SD = 25.48)(t (1,213) = 13.19, p = .000/ M = 53.62, SD = 23.38)(t (1,124) = 12.18, p = .000). Moreover, the frequencies of the gestalt truth ratings (described above) were studied. The frequency data showed that 134 (62%) of the "easiest thing to say" were rated as less honest, while 46 (21.3%) were rated as the identical in terms of honesty and 27 (12.5%) were rated as more honest.

Hypothesis Three

This hypothesis recommended that individuals will rate deceptive messages as easier to create, compared to honest messages. This hypothesis was tested with a one-way ANOVA, with ratings of ease of message production as the dependent variable and primed condition as the independent variable. Results revealed that when respondents compared their messages to what the easiest thing to say would have been, it was more complicated for them to create an honest message (M = 3.89, sd = 1.26/ M = 3.57, sd = 1.36) than a deceptive message (M = 4.58,sd = 1.49), (F 4.85, p = .007, eta squared = .03/ M = 4.54,sd = 1.42), (F 4.76, p = .007, eta squared = .03). Scheffe's multiple comparison test showed that the only important difference was between the primed honest condition and the less than honest condition.

Hypothesis Four

This hypothesis stated that when asked why the "easiest thing to say" is easy, individuals will be more probable to report that it is easier to be deceptive than to be honest.

This hypothesis also was explored by analyzing frequencies. The categories of reasons signify the range of different responses. It was not uncommon for respondents to list more than one reason in their responses (thus the percentages that follow do not count to 100%). The data revealed nine various categories, three that designate honesty is easier, four that show that deception is easier, one that offers it is easier to be blunt, and one miscellaneous category. The first category was that it was "easier to tell the truth" and 11.5% of respondents indicated this reason. The second category was that it was easier to tell the truth since it was "ethically or morally the right thing" to do since another person's health and safety was involved. Twenty-nine respondents (13.9%) indicated this reason. An additional five respondents (2.4%) showed that it was easier to be honest since it was harder to "remember and stick to a lie" over time. The five categories that approved the reason that it is easier to be deceptive were that it is "easier to lie" (10.5%); that it is easier "to say nothing" (3.3%); that it is easier to "shift the blame" (20.6%) to either their ex-partner, their present partner, or the alcohol consumption; and that it is easier "not to admit the cheating" (28.2%).

Finally, 65 respondents (31.1%) indicated that it was easier "to be blunt and less sensitive," while 15 (6.9%) reported reasons that were categorized in the miscellaneous category. To take a conservative approach, while the "blunt" category was more probable to fit into the easier to be deceptive category (because the messages revealed fewer pieces of honest information); this category will not be added to that total since the respondents did not purposely state anything about deception. Consequently, by tallying the percentages for each category the data show that 27.8% of the respondents created reasons that propose honesty is easier, while 62.6% of the respondents generated reasons that imply that deception is easier.

5. Discussion

This study was created to initiate an exploration of the reported difficulty of generating truthful and deceptive messages. Multiple indicators were exploited to assess cognitive demand. First, from a message production perspective it can be argued that the length of a message is a reasonable indicator of cognitive difficulty. Moreover, respondents self-reported reasons connected to the simplicity of message production and rated the easiness of coming up with a message with a semantic differential scale.

Lastly, a gestalt truth rating was employed to evaluate the veracity of the messages. The data were in agreement with the hypotheses, and disclose several issues for discussion.

First, the data revelaed that deception was an easier choice compared to honesty, when faced with a hypothetical infidelity scenario. The messages created in response to the primed "less than honest" condition were shorter than the no prime condition and the primed "honest" condition. Respondents rated deceptive messages as easier to genrate than honest messages. Furthermore, when asked what the "easiest thing to say" was, respondents reported shorter messages that were rated by a gestalt truth rating as less honest than those produced in the primed conditions. Finally, a total of 30.8% of the respondents generated reasons for the "easiest thing to say" condition that endorsed the   easiness of honesty, while a total of 64.6% of the respondents revealed reasons that endorsed the ease of deception.

Generally, these data suggest support for the concept that when tackled with a complex situation, it is easier to be less than honest than it is to tell the whole truth. These findings sustain McCornack's (1997) contention that "deception is a potentially efficient means for achieving desired end-states" (p. 111). Analyzing the reasons people reported for why the "easiest thing to say" was easy sheds some light on the thought processes concerned. For instance, some respondents stated that "it is always easier to say nothing" compared to the truth. In a few ironic instances respondents mentioned that "it is always easier to be truthful" since "the truth shall set you free," regardless of the fact that the messages they wrote were less than honest, excluding several pieces of information.

It is also vital to note a few limitations to this study. First, this study had respondents react to a hypothetical scenario. The aim of this project was to create a situation where it would be significant (if not critical) to be truthful with the intention of exploring the range of potential message variation. Therefore an infidelity scenario was constructed that concerned a sexually transmitted disease. It was apparent that a majority of the respondents did not have any trouble putting themselves into this scenario, through their inclusion of partner names in their messages, descriptions of "much crying and hugging would happen now" or "this is where she would slap me", in addition to one respondent admitting that she had had to have a conversation like this with her partner.

Yet, to further the understanding of the cognitive demands concerned deceiving and truth-telling it will be significant for future researchers to utilize different types of scenarios that may vary in terms of importance, face-threat, and personal dependability. Moreover, this study reports on self-reported message generation. While this definitely has been a popular method of choice among deception scholars, it will be essential for future research to investigate other ways of assessing cognitive demand, including timed face-to face encounters in a lab setting.

6. Conculsion

Regardless of some limitations, this study seems to offer one piece of evidence in support of the argument that deception is less cognitively demanding than truth-telling. As McCornack (1997) noticed, "deception can be considered a particular communicative class of problem-solving activities" (p. 111), and "no single explanatory framework likely will account for the entire process" (p. 123). This, perhaps, helps define how best one ought to continue with research in this area. Specifically, to continue to investigate and apply other frameworks with the realization that at its center, deceptive message production entails the finesse of goals, persuasion, politeness and face negotiations to resolve problems in a comparatively simple way.

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