

The Influence of Role Conflict and Self-Interest on Lying in Organizations

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ABSTRACT. The self-interest paradigm predicts that unethical behavior occurs when such behavior benefits the actor. A recent model of lying behavior, however, predicts that lying behavior results from an individual's inability to meet conflicting role demands. The need to reconcile the self-interest and role conflict theories prompted the present study, which orthogonally manipulated the benefit from lying and the conflicting role demands. A model integrating the two theories predicts the results, which showed that both elements — self benefit and role conflict — influenced lying, separately and interactively. Additionally, the relative strength of the roles in conflict affected their level of influence. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Factors influencing lying in organizations: a comparison of role conflict and self-benefit theories

A recent review of the business ethics literature revealed that much of that literature either had no apparent theory or did not clearly explicate the behavior under observation (Randall and Gibson, 1990). The business ethics literature predominantly

discusses amorphous “unethical behavior” as some universally understood action or construct, concentrating on grossly unethical behaviors that are clearly illegal or have great negative impact on humans. There is a current shift, however, toward developing theory about and analyzing the common ethical dilemmas that members of organizations face on a daily basis (Guy, 1990; Shepard and Hartenian, 1991; Victor and Cullen, 1988), and of analyzing specific behaviors in this realm (Grover, in press-a, in press-b; Trevino and Victor, 1992; Trevino and Youngblood, 1990).

Advancing our understanding of ethical behavior in organizations will require analyzing specific behaviors with a theory driven approach, and since the range of unethical behaviors do not have identical characteristics, particular behaviors must be examined individually. Lying, cheating, and stealing were the key unethical behaviors Shepard and Hartenian (1991) identified when they developed an unethical behavior measurement instrument. This study examines lying behavior, which has garnered little attention from the social science community.

Theorists who have grappled with the determinants of lying behavior have generally relied on the self-interest notion: People will lie when doing so benefits them. Lewicki (1983) wrote that negotiators lie during negotiations to the extent that lying benefits them; Trevino (1986) cited behavioral reinforcement theory to determine when people engaged in unethical behavior; and agency theorists note that employees (agents) lie to employers when employees have more information than the employers (therefore have the opportunity to lie) and lying benefits the employee (Eisenhardt, 1989; Holstrom, 1979; Jensen and Meckling, 1976). Trevino and Youngblood (1990) found empirical support for the self-interest theory by manipulating level of reward or

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punishment for unethical actions in an in-basket exercise.

In contrast to the self-benefit paradigm, recent theoretical development uses role theory to help explain and predict lying in organizations (Grover, in press-b). The role theory based model states that (a) people hold a variety of roles that have behavioral demands or expectations attached to them, (b) these roles sometimes conflict, and (c) one way of resolving or reducing the conflict is to fulfill one role expectation and lie about having fulfilled the other role expectation. One study supported the central part of the theory, finding that registered professional nurses faced with a conflict between professional and organizational expectations (professional role conflict) were significantly more likely to lie than were those nurses who were faced with congruent (non-conflicting) role demands (Grover, in press-a).

Self-interest and role conflict theories both stand on firm theoretical footing and both have garnered empirical support (Trevino and Youngblood, 1990; Grover, in press-a). Therefore, at this stage of theory development behavioral ethics researchers are compelled to address the question of how these models interrelate.

Etzioni (1988) criticized self-benefit theories on the grounds that they ignore values developed through group consensus. In his theory of socio-economics, Etzioni claims people are members of groups that define norms for behavior, and such norms affect behavior beyond external reinforcement contingencies. This problem is particularly noteworthy when self-benefit theories are used to explain *ethical* behavior because there are norms about behaving ethically that may be internalized to a degree not readily influenced by sanctions or rewards. For example, most people have ample opportunity to steal desirable goods while remaining undetected, but do not steal due to values against the behavior. But the self-benefit theories clearly predict behavior under certain conditions. A central question about self-benefit theories, therefore, asks under what conditions the reward or reinforcement generates behavior and under what conditions peoples' behavior is guided by group norms. The role theory based model of lying may offer insight into this problem for lying behavior by addressing the environmental factors that influence people to violate

norms against unethical acts. The essence of the role conflict model is its description of allegiance to *conflicting* group norms, and it identifies situations in which some behavioral norm will be violated, and shows how lying in some cases may be the chosen norm to violate. People often belong to more than one group and the expectations from the different groups, or roles, may conflict, leading a person to lie to members of one of the groups holding conflicting norms.

Previous research on the role theory based model has not separated role conflict from reinforcement/reward. Grover (in press-a) examined the conflict that registered nurses experience between the demands of the nursing profession and the demands of the employing hospital. That study found that nurses were more likely to lie in charts and to other people when they were faced with conflicting role demands. Self-benefit theories might explain the finding by showing that nurses benefitted in some way, perhaps psychologically or vicariously, by lying, or punished for telling the truth. Also, the role sender who was not deceived may simply have had greater reinforcing power than the role sender who was deceived. A demand from a boss, for example, is salient because of the superior-subordinate relationship, but also because a boss presumably administers valued resources. Because some roles, or role demands, may be confounded with benefits, it is imperative that they be dealt with simultaneously in order to tease out differential effects. The primary hypotheses drawn from the self-benefit and role conflict theories are the following.

Hypothesis₁: People are more likely to lie in the presence versus absence of role conflict.

Hypothesis₂: People are more likely to lie when rewarded for doing so, relative to not being rewarded.

The more important question and purpose of this study is to examine how the two potential causes of lying inter-relate. Role conflict should be much more likely to lead to lying when the actor will also benefit from lying, and self-benefit will lead to greater lying when some role conflict is present. We expect the reward to *increase* the effect of role conflict because a person confronted with two demands that cannot both be met simultaneously

may consider several options for resolving the conflict, but people in some instances will choose to fulfill one role demand and lie to the sender of the other role demand about the role having been fulfilled. Those instances in which people are more likely to lie are those that have some reward attached to the lie. The reward contingencies may be chronic, but much more likely to lead to lying when an acute role conflict prompts it. So we expect that role demands are more likely to result in lying when there additionally is some benefit or reward attached to the lie. We therefore predict that role conflict and reward will combine interactively to promote lying.

Hypothesis₃: The multiplicative interaction of role conflict and lying will result in greater level of lying than that generated by either role conflict or reward alone.

The role theory based model of lying also makes predictions about the choice of audience for a lie when two roles conflict (Grover, in press-b). The strength, or power, of a role has an impact on whether and to whom one lies. Grover (in press-b) theorizes that the two roles must be sufficiently strong (above some threshold) to even tempt a person to lie; if either of the roles were extremely weak, then the actor would have no difficulty violating the role demand. When both roles are strong and in conflict, the individual who chooses to lie in order to resolve the conflict is expected to lie to the sender of the *weaker* of the two roles.

The sender's influence may come from any of French and Raven's (1959) bases of power. The role senders may have either reward or coercive power, controlling resources valued by the actor, including tangibles such as merit pay and promotion, and intangibles such as work assignments and granting of favors or privileges. Legitimate power may vary among role senders, and the degree to which the actor believes the sender has a legitimate *right* to the demand may influence the outcome. Moreover, when individuals use lying to resolve role conflict, the more legitimate role demand is the one likely to be met behaviorally, and the less legitimate role sender more likely to be deceived. Referent power, attraction or identification with the role sender, may also reduce the likelihood of deception to that role sender, and expert power may have some influence

when the role demand takes the form of a technical directive and the sender has the knowledge or expertise to make the directive credible.

Role strength is related to benefit/reward because reward and coercive power are elements that role senders may have. We therefore examine reward and role strength simultaneously by manipulating the two variables orthogonally. We manipulated the reward for lying and the values identification portion of role strength in order to examine and correct for potential confounds and give a full test of Grover's (in press-b) theory.

Hypothesis₄: People will lie more to agents of the organization when they have little, as compared to great, commitment to the organization.

We tested the hypotheses using an experimental method because "where social scientific theory development remains at an early stage, carefully developed laboratory experiments provide an important vehicle for determining whether predicted relationships can be empirically supported" (Trevino, 1992, p. 133).

Summary

The present study seeks to integrate the self-benefit and role conflict theories of lying behavior. Three elements — potential benefit from the lie, conflicting role demands, and the role strength of one of the roles — were manipulated in a scenario design study. In order to heighten ecological validity for this student sample, the two roles articulated in the scenarios are of a student who also has a part-time job.

Method

Subjects

Two-hundred-forty-eight undergraduate students enrolled in a junior level introductory organizational behavior course in a large midwestern university participated in the experiment as a class exercise. Participation was voluntary and no remuneration

was offered. 42.2% of the participants were female and the median as well as modal age was 20 years.

Materials

A scenario role play method was used in which subjects read one of eight scenarios and then answered questions concerning their behavior as if they were the person portrayed in the scenario. The scenarios were identical except for the orthogonal manipulation of role conflict, reward, and role commitment. The target person described in all stimulus materials was portrayed as having two roles: (1) the role of a student (enrolled in a business school operations course); and (2) the role of a part-time worker (a part-time shift supervisor for a delivery company).

Independent variables

The potential for role conflict was set up in all conditions with the following explanation:

The course instructor has a policy of awarding bonus points for attendance to specific class meetings during which small group discussions are held. The instructor firmly believes that the most effective form of learning is through group discussion. It is through such group discussions that the course materials can be applied to real life issues. Dates on which these group discussions will be held are announced on the first day of class. . . .

Role conflict. Role conflict was manipulated by the following unavoidable schedule conflict between class attendance and the work schedule:

Joe has been informed by his supervisor that he is scheduled to work on one of the group discussion days, and the time of work overlaps with the group discussion time. Joe is scheduled to begin working shortly after the group discussion starts, and Joe will be able to stay for the first 5 minutes of discussion and still arrive to work as scheduled. This work schedule change is rather unexpected, and is of a somewhat emergency nature. Joe cannot find any substitutes to take the shift. In fact, Joe is the last person sought by his supervisor to take the shift.

In the No Conflict condition, there was no schedule conflict so both demands could not be met, which was stated in the following manner:

Joe has been informed by his supervisor that he is scheduled to work on one of the group discussion days, and the time of work follows the group discussion time. Joe is scheduled to begin working shortly after the group discussion, and Joe will be able to stay for the entire discussion and still arrive to work as scheduled.

Reward. The reward condition included an extrinsic benefit for attending class, while the No Reward condition included no external reward. Specifically, the reward condition stated ". . . the instructor accepts absolutely no excuse for absence. He has a reputation for not giving any bonus credit to students absent for even one group discussion. The importance of attending the class meetings cannot be understated: Presence at these class meetings can add 5% to the final grade. This additional 5% represents the difference a full letter grade."

The No Reward condition stated, ". . . the instructor expects attendance to be voluntary. The instructor has a reputation for not penalizing absence in group discussions. Attending these group discussions adds nothing to the final grade, which is based on examinations covering materials from the textbook and lecture."

Role strength. Role strength was operationalized as identification with the job role, specifically as the degree of commitment to the job role. As part of the description of the job role, participants in the strong role strength condition read:

Joe is highly committed to this organization, as indicated by the "Job Commitment Inventory" he took shortly after the promotion. The "Job Commitment Inventory" is a scale that measures employees' commitment to the organization. Joe scores very high on the commitment scale. For example, Joe strongly agreed with items such as "I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful"; "I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for this organization"; "This organization really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance"; and "I really care about the fate of this organization". Most other employees would only slightly agree with these statements.

The Low Commitment condition described the commitment scale in the same way, but stated that "Joe is *not* really committed to this organization . . .," and "Joe scores very low on the commitment

scale." Strength of the student role was held constant and at a high level for all conditions by stating "Joe is a highly committed student. . . ."

Dependent variables

We were interested in measuring ways in which a person might lie in the situation provided. One way of lying in this situation would be to call in sick to work and another would be to sign the class attendance sheet, but leave early. So we asked people "How likely are you to call in sick to work in order to attend class?" and "How likely are you to sign-in for the entire group discussion and then leave for work?", both of which are potential lying behaviors. Both questions were answered on a seven point Likert response scale labelled "very, somewhat, and slightly unlikely" and "very, somewhat, and slightly likely", and a midpoint labelled "Neither likely nor unlikely." It should be emphasized that participants were asked the likelihood of engaging in these behaviors; they did not have to choose between the behaviors, nor did the options preclude actually engaging in alternative behaviors.

Manipulation checks

The internal validity of the independent variables was assessed with a series of manipulation check items. The manipulation of conflict was assessed by the question: "How much conflict did Joe experience between the requirements of his job and the requirements of the course?". A seven point rating scale was used, with 1 labelled "No Conflict", 4 labelled "Moderate Conflict", and 7 labelled "A great deal of Conflict".

The manipulation of reward was assessed by the question: "How much benefit would Joe receive from attending all group discussions? A seven point rating scale was used, with 1 labelled "No Benefit", 4 labelled "Moderate Benefit, and 7 labelled "A great deal of benefit."

The role strength manipulation was assessed with the question "How committed to the job was Joe?", with the seven point response scale anchored at "not very committed", "moderately committed", and "very committed."

Results

Analysis of variance on the manipulation check items indicated that the independent variables were perceived as intended for Role strength, $F(1, 247) = 575.79, p < 0.001$ (M 's = 2.44 and 6.37), Role Conflict, $F(1, 246) = 41.17, p < 0.001$ (M 's = 3.46 and 4.69), and Reward $F(1, 247) = 39.23, p < 0.0001$ (M 's = 4.94 and 5.94).

Subjects' propensity to lie to the supervisor was analyzed with Conflict \times Reward \times Role Strength ($2 \times 2 \times 2$) analysis of variance in a full factorial design. The analysis of variance results are shown in Table I and the corresponding means and post hoc comparisons shown in Table II. As expected, the Role Conflict main effect was significant and showed that participants were more likely to lie in the presence, versus absence, of role conflict, (M 's = 3.13 and 2.57), supporting the role conflict hypothesis. The anticipated Reward effect was also significant, showing that people were more likely to call in sick to the supervisor when there was a significant reward for doing so (M 's = 2.54 and 3.16), supporting the self-benefit hypothesis. The two factors also combined multiplicatively, as indicated by the significant Role Conflict \times Reward interaction effect. The nature of this interaction is illustrated by the means in Table II and, as inspection of the means and Newman-Keuls comparisons demonstrate, both Reward and Role Conflict were

TABLE I
Analysis of variance results for lying to the supervisor and the instructor by role conflict, reward, and role strength.

Variable	Audience of the Lie	
	Supervisor F	Instructor F
1. Role conflict	4.47**	5.45**
2. Reward	6.47**	ns
3. Role strength	11.97***	ns
1 \times 2	3.07*	5.40**
2 \times 3	ns	ns
1 \times 3	ns	ns
1 \times 2 \times 3	ns	ns

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$

TABLE II
Lying to the supervisor means by role conflict and reward.

	Reward	No reward	Total
Role conflict	3.55 ^a (1.94)	2.61 ^b (1.71)	3.13 (1.82)
No role conflict	2.69 ^b (1.94)	2.47 ^b (1.70)	2.57 (1.81)
Total	3.12 (1.94)	2.54 (1.70)	

Note: Standard deviations shown in parentheses. Different superscripts denote statistically significant mean differences at 0.05 level using Newman-Keuls comparisons. Total column and row refer to collapsed Reward and Role conflict conditions, respectively.

necessary in order to have an impact on likelihood of lying to the supervisor in this case. That is, Newman-Keuls comparisons show that the participants exposed to the condition including *both* role conflict *and* a reward for lying were more likely to lie to the supervisor than any of the other conditions, all of which were nonsignificantly different from one another (Table II). The Role Strength main effect was also significant, supporting the prediction that people are more likely to lie to a weak versus strong role sender: People holding a strong commitment to the job were less likely to lie to a supervisor than were those weakly committed to the job (M 's = 2.45 and 3.26).

The analogous analysis was performed with lying to the instructor as the dependent variable, and these results are also shown in Table I. Again, the role conflict effect was significant, and people were more likely to lie to the instructor in the presence versus absence of role conflict (M 's = 4.99 and 4.42). The reward and role strength effects were not significant; however, their combination produced a significant role strength \times reward interaction effect that is consistent with the predictions. The means in Table III show that the role strength simple effect was significant in the Reward, but not the No Reward, condition. That is, the person who is strongly committed to the job when there is reward for attending class is more likely to lie to the instructor

TABLE III
Lying to the instructor means by role strength and reward.

	Role strength	
	Strong	Weak
Reward	5.09 ^a (1.77)	4.15 ^b (1.97)
No reward	4.67 ^a (2.11)	4.87 ^a (1.87)

Note: Standard deviations shown in parentheses. Different superscripts denote statistically significant mean differences at 0.05 level using Newman-Keuls comparisons.

about attending than any other combination of reward and commitment.

Discussion

The results suggest that (a) people are more likely to lie when faced with role conflict, (b) especially when a reward for lying is combined with the conflict, and (c) people are unlikely to lie to the sender of a role to which they are highly committed.

Explanations and theoretical implications

The results supported the hypotheses, while enriching and broadening the model and our understanding of lying in organizations. As predicted by the role conflict hypothesis, people were more likely to lie to one of the role senders when facing conflicting role demands. The role conflict model explains the finding in the following manner: By virtue of holding both the roles of student and worker the participants encountered two sets of expectations. In the role conflict conditions, these expectations conflicted, making it impossible to serve both roles. In response to this conflict, some participants fulfilled one role by attending either class or work and then lied to the sender of the other role by either calling in sick to work or by signing the class attendance sheet and then leaving. The reward effects supported the self-benefit hypothesis. The reward effect was significant

for lying to the supervisor, which was expected; that is, participants were rewarded for attending class and not going to work.

The central purpose of this paper was to test hypotheses comparing the self-interest and role conflict models of lying. At the outset we identified these two explanations of lying behavior as separate, but not necessarily competing, theories. The data indicated that in fact both self-interest and role conflict influenced lying behavior and that people were most likely to lie when both role conflict and some reward for lying were present. It seems prudent at this point to consider the interrelation of these theories.

Conflicting role expectations may set the stage for, or provide the opportunity, for lying: A person is confronted with two expectations that can in no way both be met. According to role theory, this situation will provide or create some internal distress that can be resolved by choice, avoidance, compromise (Kahn *et al.*, 1964) or lying (Grover, *in press-b*). Reward may enter the picture by forcing a person to evaluate these different alternatives. When the reward, or benefit, for lying is great, people are more likely to respond to role conflict by lying, hence the role conflict \times reward interaction. In contrast, if one were faced with role conflict and there were no benefits (or even costs) to lying, then one may resolve the conflict in some other fashion.

Now consider reward with no role conflict. Role conflict may serve as an impetus for lying. It provides the spark, the opportunity, or the circumstances that might motivate a person to seek a solution such as lying. The role conflict model may be premised on some implicit self-benefit: If we hold conflicting roles, it must benefit us in some way to meet the demands of the roles. Such rewards may be negative reinforcement in the form of keeping one's job, not being yelled at, or not losing self-esteem. Therefore, the two models contribute complementary elements to a uniform model of dishonesty in organizations. Moreover, our understanding of the motives for lying have been enriched by juxtaposing the self-benefit and role conflict elements. Future research should draw on a hybrid model of lying that involves self-interest but requires an environmental element like role conflict to ignite the lying behavior.

The data also supported the role strength hy-

pothesis. When the worker role was especially strong, people were less likely to call in sick to work, and, when there was a benefit for doing so, more likely to lie to the instructor on the attendance sheet. The data therefore support Grover's (*in press-b*) hypothesis that people are most likely to lie when there is some difference in the perceived strength of the different role demands. People are simply more likely to follow a stronger, more salient, expectation.

Practical implications

People at all levels of organizations are interested in the honesty of one another: managers in subordinates, subordinates in managers, and coworkers with each other. Truthful communication is generally preferred because it is easier to interpret. Conversely, the presence of untruthful communication makes information processing difficult because one must attempt to differentiate truthful from untruthful communications. The present study accordingly has practical significance to organization participants.

The message from this study is first to validate the well known notion that people will behave, even lie, to benefit themselves. However, what is more importantly learned from this study concerns the combination of role conflict with self-benefit.

The coupling of the two theories provides useful insight for organization participants. Most organizational situations provide at least occasional opportunities for self-profiting dishonesty, and some people are going to lie when they stand to profit from doing so. However, managers may be able to affect the occurrence of role conflict, which has been shown here to exacerbate lying. The practical suggestion for managers therefore is to minimize role conflict for subordinates. Organizations may be able to minimize role conflict structurally. Some role conflict may occur by making people responsible for more than one person's demands, a type of conflict readily reduced. People also experience conflict with their extra-organization roles such as spouse, parent, or child roles. Organizations can minimize these conflicts by recognizing roles held outside the organization and providing reasonable programs to facilitate their integration with the work role.

Limitations

The design of this study involved certain limitations. First, the participants in this study reported their hypothetical behavior, which may differ from actual behavior (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). The experimental design and theory driven approach of this study, however, diminished the importance of the distinction between real and hypothetical behavior: We have reported significant differences between participants randomly assigned to manipulated conditions, and therefore these differences should be due to the manipulations, which supports and illuminates the model. Furthermore, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, 1981) have suggested that the intention to behave in a particular way (as reflected in subjects' report of their hypothetical behavior) may be the most important predictor of actual behavior. As it has been established in the present study that reward and role conflict lead to increased propensity to lie, future studies clearly need to replicate these findings and further test the models of lying by observing and measuring actual behavior.

The second major limitation of the present study concerns the laboratory methodology. This methodology did in fact allow the experimental design to explore the causes of behavior. The trouble with this method is that the participants may not have experienced the situation cognitively and emotionally the same as they would real situations in their lives. However, two factors point to the external validity of the findings. First, this study used roles (student and part-time worker) with which the student-participants could easily identify, and strong cognitive and emotional identification with the scenarios presumably enhanced the ecological validity. Student subjects should have no difficulty readily putting themselves in the situation they are asked to assess. We asked students to assume they were students, and therefore the design does not encounter the difficulties of laboratory designs asking students to behave as professional managers. Second, the social desirability bias that may influence responses about lying would only serve to diminish the magnitude of the results. If the bias operates at all, people should tend to state that they will behave honestly. When we look at two conditions of an independent variable, the people will report behaving honestly in both conditions, which would result in no effect.

Therefore, the significant effect reported here are conservative tests of the hypotheses.

Conclusion

This study extends the role conflict theory of lying by analyzing a new type of role conflict. Grover's (in press-a) study examined the impact of professional role conflict on lying, finding that it may lead to dishonesty. The present study assessed an inter-role conflict, replicating the link between role conflict and lying. The extension to inter-role conflict is important because it bolsters the power of the role conflict model, and nearly all workers face some sort of inter-role conflict.

This study has contributed to the small but growing behavioral study of ethics in organizations. Randall and Gibson (1991) declared that few studies in business ethics were explicit about the behavior being studied. However, there is some literature that has been explicit and this may be a trend. Hegarty and Sims (1978) found that career pressure and explicit reward influenced kickback behavior. Trevino has tested her interactionist model of ethical behavior (Trevino, 1986) by analyzing kickback behavior and propensity to inform customers of safety defects (Trevino and Youngblood, 1990). Wimbush (1992) has investigated the influence of ethical climates on lying, cheating, and stealing, using Shepard and Hartenian's (1991) measure. And the present data contribute a weaving of self-benefit and role conflict theories in the continuing study of lying behavior. In sum, we are moving closer to an understanding of the various situation and person variables that contribute to prediction of specific ethical and unethical behavior.

Future directions

Two directions for business ethics research in this behavioral domain are implied by this paper. First, we have not answered the questions about lying. We need to learn more about the occurrence of lying in business organizations. Since previous research has shown that it does occur (Grover, in press-a) and the present data suggest some causes of lying, future research should investigate more closely the fre-

quency of lying in various actual field settings. The second direction for research suggested by the paradigm of this study is the further investigation of the other types of unethical behaviors (e.g., cheating and stealing). Like lying, these behaviors have received little theoretical or empirical attention, and giving these behavior such attention would strengthen the nomological net of the growing sub-field of behavioral business ethics.

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