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Review

Gender similarities and differences in dishonesty

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Abstract

We review the evidence linking gender to dishonesty and conclude that men are often more dishonest than women, especially in competitive settings where lies advance self-interest. However, gender differences in dishonesty are often small and mutable across situations. We propose that attending to self-regulatory constructs such as moral identity might help researchers move beyond the evolutionary-cultural debates over the origin of gender differences toward identifying factors that promote honesty from both genders.

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Gender differences, Sex differences, Dishonesty, Honesty, Truth, Morality, Ethics.

Across fourteen nations, “always being honest” is among the top 15 status-boosting criteria for men and women alike, suggesting strong social pressures for the genders to converge on honesty [1]. Men’s and women’s education levels, labor force participation rates, and stereotypes about their competence are converging too, as the meaning of biological sex has changed dramatically over the last 50 years [2]. For both reasons, we might expect to see few gender differences in levels of (dis)honesty.

In fact, in a classic diary study of lying in everyday life [3], college women told fewer self-centered lies and more other-benefiting lies than men did. Since then, meta-analyses consistently reveal men to be more

dishonest than women. First, in a meta-analysis of 8728 observations, men told more lies that benefit themselves at the expense of other people than women did (64% of men vs. 56% of women lied) [4]. Men also told more lies that benefit other people at the liar’s expense (24% of men vs. 17% of women lied). No gender difference emerged for lies that made both parties better off (74% of men vs. 71% of women lied). Second, in a meta-analysis of 44,050 decisions using a wider variety of tasks (e.g., sender-receiver, coin flip, matrix, and die roll), men lied more than women [5]. The researchers used the metric of a “standardized report” ranging from –100% (indicating all participants claimed the lowest possible reward) to 100% (indicating all participants lied to the maximal degree). The difference between men and women was 4%. Third, in a meta-analysis of 87,771 lying decisions in group settings where lies benefit at least one other group member, groups with more men lied more than groups comprised of more women [6]. The standardized report was 8% higher for all-male versus all-female groups. This pattern extends even to domains of self-deception, where men are more narcissistic than women, especially along the exploitation and entitlement subfactor, meaning they feel special and entitled to privileges [7]. Overall, the data suggest men lie more than women do.

Practical significance of the gender difference

Is a gender difference in dishonesty important? Often, in laboratory settings, the effect size is small, in line with the idea that the genders are more similar than different [8]. However, the effect size is often equivalent to approximately 15 years of age difference and substantial differences in incentive size [5,6]. To evaluate its importance, we looked beyond the mere effect size to both the type of laboratory behavior measured and for differences in real-world settings. Two types of laboratory behavior stood out. First, men were more likely than women to claim the maximum reward from a die roll without even rolling the die [9]. Second, men endorsed three dishonest negotiating strategies—misrepresentation, false promises, and feigning negative emotions—more than women did [10,11] and morally disengaged more than women in negotiations [12]. Next, examining real-world outcomes, we found three studies of interest. One study found that firms with women as Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) had a lower likelihood of financial misreporting than

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comparable firms with men as CFOs, especially when corporate governance mechanisms were weak [13]. A second study exploring behavior in romantic relationships [14] found that 71% of men reported at least one instance of exaggerating the depth of their feelings to have sex with a woman, whereas 39% of women reported doing so. Finally, a meta-analysis found that men reported more academic dishonesty than women [15]. Together, these findings suggest that gender differences in dishonesty might not be as trivial as the meta-analyses' effect sizes suggest. Many of the behaviors in question, such as blatant lies, financial misreporting, emotional manipulation, unethical negotiating tactics, and cheating in academic contexts have potentially serious consequences for peers and interaction partners because most, if not all, of these contexts enable some form of upward social mobility.

Dishonesty also has significant intrapersonal consequences for the deceiver. Studying relational consequences, we have found that negotiating deceptively reduces negotiators' satisfaction with their deals, even when deception goes undetected and produces economic gains [16]. Similarly, another study manipulated whether participants could lie for a better financial outcome and measured relational outcomes. When participants could lie (and they often did), they showed less empathy for others' emotions and defined themselves less in terms of their relationships [17,18], patterns which could unleash a vicious cycle of deception and disconnection [19,20]. Studying health consequences, ten Brinke et al. [21] review evidence suggesting that chronic dishonesty worsens health over time by depleting cognitive resources, elevating heart rate, raising blood pressure, and increasing cortisol reactivity, a concerning issue given men's already-lower life expectancy [22] and typically greater health risks [23].

Why do gender differences in dishonesty emerge?

A long-standing question is whether gender differences reflect evolutionary or cultural factors. Evolutionary explanations for gender differences describe how a trait such as dishonesty could assist the genders differently in sexual selection processes (which enable the success of one sex) or natural selection processes (which help species adapt to their environments). Focused on sexual selection, Buss [14] suggests that men historically benefit from misleading women to secure short-term sexual access whereas women benefit from longer-term commitments. Similarly, Lee et al. [24] found that activating mating motivation led men but not women to engage in more unethical negotiating behaviors, especially when intrasex competitors were physically attractive. These studies support the notion that men historically faced stronger incentives and fewer costs for deceptive behavior.

The dominant cultural explanation has historically come from social role theory [25], which suggests that gender differences arise from the distribution of labor in society. In line with this account, gender differences in ethical views converge over time with greater work experience [26]. Among politicians and lawyers — professions where deception might be perceived to signal competence [27] — men and women lie to similar degrees [28,29]. Similarly, women compete more than men in matrilineal societies but less than men in patriarchal societies [30]. Because both evolutionary and cultural accounts of gender differences have received some empirical support, researchers might benefit from moving beyond nature-nurture debates about the origin of gender differences toward identifying the intrapsychic mechanisms that enable gender differences to emerge under some but not other conditions. After all, evolutionary theorists expect women and men to differ only in domains where they have faced different problems [31].

Moderating gender differences via self-regulatory mechanisms

Whether caused by nature, nurture, or both, many intrapsychic characteristics vary by gender that could explain differential tendencies to lie. Identifying these characteristics could unpack the “black box” of gender better than nature-nurture debates without reifying gender stereotypes. We suggest that researchers focus on discovering intrapsychic constructs that underlie gender differences and then identify situations that either amplify or suppress expression of these characteristics or modify the characteristics themselves.

We suggest focusing on intrapsychic characteristics that affect self-regulation, the process of guiding one's behavior to conform to internal standards [32]. As de Waal [33] notes, even in the animal kingdom, few behaviors are purely instinctual instead of practiced, and people can control their habits and practices. Intrapyschic characteristics that promote self-regulation are those that enable people to understand their situation (i.e., find truth) and manage it (i.e., exert control) in line with their internal standards [34]. This type of characteristic could predict when the genders express different instincts versus override them by electing other behavior.

Under baseline conditions, several gender differences emerge for psychological constructs that could help to explain the small but significant gender difference in dishonesty. First, women more strongly internalize moral traits in their identities than men do [12]. Second, women exhibit greater guilt-proneness, meaning they are more inclined to experience emotional distress for behaving in a way that falls short of their moral standards [35]. Guilt-proneness, along with moral identity internalization, predicts disapproval of deceptive negotiation

tactics [12,35,36], suggesting both factors explain gender differences in dishonesty. Generally, women score higher across measures of moral character capturing consideration of others' needs, ability to regulate behavior to avoid short-term gains at long-term cost, and the value placed on moral traits [37]. In Cohen et al.'s work [37], men comprised 64–71% of the class of individuals categorized as having low moral character and 37–44% of those categorized as having high moral character. In those studies, moral character negatively predicted approval of unethical negotiating tactics such as misrepresentation and making false promises. Third, men, are often higher on the dimension of competitiveness, which mediated willingness to lie in negotiation contexts [38]. Pointing to the causal importance of this construct, a recent study [39] found that inducing either competitive or empathic feelings toward a negotiation counterpart mitigated gender differences in dishonesty. Finally, Levine et al. [40] found that women reported more trustworthy intentions (i.e., greater intent to meet others' positive expectations) and a stronger sense of interpersonal responsibility for others' outcomes than men. Collectively, the results suggest that women exhibit a variety of emotional, cognitive, and relational traits that could explain why meta-analyses show gender differences in dishonesty. These mechanisms can be activated and deactivated by habit or by situations. Each characteristic affects how a situation is understood (e.g., moral identity) or how motivated the person is to control their behavior in line with their own standards (e.g., guilt proneness).

When do gender differences in dishonesty emerge?

Increasing attention to moderators can help researchers understand gender differences. For dishonesty, one moderating factor is national culture. Ma [41] found that Chinese women did not endorse misrepresentation in negotiation less than men did, whereas the gender difference held for a Canadian sample. Another moderating factor is whether people are lying for their own or others' benefit. Kouchaki and Kray [42] found that women's deceptive behavior in negotiations rose to men's levels when they were advocating for someone else. Identity threats promote dishonesty as well. Consistent with precarious manhood theories, gender threats led men but not women to lie more, whereas no gender difference existed under baseline conditions [43]. In an archival study of Fortune 1000 rankings, Haselhuhn and Kray [44] used a regression discontinuity design to demonstrate that male-led firms that ranked just below a firm led by a female CEO, a naturalistic masculinity threat, were more likely to intentionally misstate their reported earnings compared to firms that did not rank just below a female-led firm. When financial incentives are sufficient, gender differences in lying often disappear by raising women's rate of

lying up to men's [12,45]. The fact that even studies based on evolutionary theory moderate the gender differences in ethics [24] demonstrates how situations activate and deactivate these gender differences, even if they are evolved tendencies, with gender differences more malleable than fixed.

Future directions for researchers

One promising emergent explanation for gender differences in dishonesty points to the desire for high levels of social rank, which can promote unethical behavior [46–48]. Generally, women desire status-based rank more than men, whereas men desire power-based rank [49,50], an important difference given the divergent ethical outcomes produced by status versus power. For instance, Blader and Chen [51] found that holding status promotes fair treatment of others, but holding power has negative effects on fairness. Similarly, Kennedy and Anderson [52] found in a supplementary study that holding power reduced principled dissent against an unethical practice, whereas holding status promoted dissent. Equalizing the types and levels of rank desired by men and women could mitigate gender differences in dishonesty. Still, individual differences such as exchange orientation and moral identity strength [53] — two types of self-regulatory mechanisms — moderate the effects of holding power and highlight the importance of attending to underlying psychological states. Conceptions of power as coercive versus collaborative might also contribute to gender differences in dishonesty [54].

Similarly, self-efficacy predicts greater deceptiveness among negotiators [55]. If men's and women's relative self-efficacy in a specific domain differs, then self-efficacy might offer another explanation for why the genders diverge in dishonest behavior, at least in the absence of factors that restrain use of deception against counterparts.

A less examined but important question is when and why gender influences who is lied *to*. In one study, low-performing writers were told more “white lies” about the quality of their work when they were believed to be a woman versus a man, potentially protecting women's feelings at a cost of identifying developmental opportunities [56]. Similarly, when negotiating with women compared to men, both men and women were more likely to blatantly lie to their negotiating counterparts [57], an important pattern because pessimistic expectations about others' ethics positively predict negotiators' dishonesty [58]. If people know women are more honest than men, in line with the evidence we cite, then it could correct fear-generated dishonesty.

Conclusion

While studying gender differences has long been controversial [59], doing so could magnify the

opportunity for gender differences to self-negate. With this possibility in mind, we note that men are currently more dishonest than women, on average, and researchers are beginning to uncover important moderating factors that shape this small, mutable gender gap. We suggest researchers focus on self-regulatory mechanisms that can help to explain when and why the genders choose to diverge. Often, habits and situations override gender differences, but notably, women never exceed men in selfish dishonesty by the empirical evidence available today.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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