

Deceptive Communication from Collectivistic and Individualistic Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the differences in norms that specify socially appropriate and inappropriate deceptive communication among members of collectivistic and individualistic cultures. This analysis focuses specifically on explaining why members of different cultures are likely to expect or reject certain forms of deceptive communication. The Strategic Choice Model, the norm of reciprocity, and literature on motives are employed to explain these different normative thresholds of deceptive communication in collectivistic and individualistic cultures. The implications of this analysis for deceptive intercultural communication are also discussed.

Researchers interested in deceptive communication have examined a wide variety of variables related to the production, transmission, and detection of deceptive messages (Cody, Marston, & Foster, 1984; deTurck & Miller, 1985; McCornack & Levine, 1990; Stiff, Kim, & Ramesh, 1992; Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981; Zuckerman & Driver, 1985). Most of this research has studied deceptive communication from an individualistic perspective (i.e., North American culture). This perspective is evident in the assumption that social actors construct and deliver deceptive messages in a highly intentional, mindful, and strategic manner. Like Seibold, Cantrill, and Meyers' (1985) conceptualization of the Strategic Choice Model, much of the literature on deceptive communication assumes that:

- (1) messages emanate from persons' intentions to communicate something about themselves, others, and the world they experience; (2) communication is instrumental in that sense, and may be functionally organized by the conscious and unconscious purpose it serves for each actor; and, (3) actors' communication behaviors in many encounters reflect intentionally directed and deliberately organized efforts to accomplish specific, personally meaningful interactional goals (p. 554).

The implications and relevance of these assumptions to other cultural groups that operate under different cultural norms (i.e., collectivistic) are unclear. Equally important, little is known about the differences that may exist between cultures in terms of the production, transmission, and

responses to deceptive messages. For example, the literature is unclear about how differing cross-cultural expectations associated with the exchange of resources may contributed to qualitatively different motives for deception in collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Understanding these qualitative differences in intent are important for predicting deceptive messages and producing parsimonious theoretical models.

The general purpose of this paper is to isolate the strategic and social exchange processes associated with deceptive communication in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to present a framework for understanding the normative differences that are likely to exist between members of collectivistic and individualistic cultures in terms of the motives, social costs, and benefits associated with deceptive communication. To this end, a formal definition of deceptive communication will be introduced. Next, three motives for deceptive communication will be discussed in connection with the concepts of individualism and collectivism. The norm of reciprocity, the Strategic Choice Model, and the concept of motives will then be synthesized and used to explicate the different ideological and social constraints associated with deceptive communication in collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Lastly, the implications of these social models to the study of deceptive communication in collectivistic and individualistic cultures will be explained. The following overview of the existing literature provides direction for the present analysis.

Conceptualizing Deceptive Communication

According to Miller (1983), deceptive communication may be defined as: *"message distortion resulting from deliberate falsification or omission of information by a communicator with the intent of stimulating in another, or others, a belief that the communicator himself or herself does not believe"* (pp. 92-93, italics in original). Miller also argues that *"deceptive communication strives for persuasive ends; or, stated more precisely, deceptive communication is a general persuasive strategy that aims at influencing the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of others by means of deliberate message distortion"* (pp. 99, italics in original). Thus, deceptive communication is viewed as a strategic choice that social actors make to secure some social goal. This particular conceptualization is consistent with an individualistic social orientation because individual choice is a central concept. That is, individuals choose to deceive others primarily to serve their self-interests. From a collectivistic orientation, however, one would include social obligation as a central concept. In other words, deceptive communication in collectivistic cultures is driven primarily by an implicit social need to reduce a sense of indebtedness so that equity may be re-established with other group members. For example, one may deceive another to repay that person for previous "face-giving" behaviors. In this specific example, deceptive communication is likely to be driven by a feeling of obligation and not individual choice. To clarify this extension to the definition of deceptive communication, the motives for deception along with the concepts of individualism and collectivism are discussed further.

Individual and Other-Centered Motives for Deceptive Communication

According to Buller and Burgoon (1994), there are three primary motives for deceptive communication. These motives stem from the work of R. A. Clark (1984), R. A. Clark and Delia (1979), and O'Keefe and Delia (1982). These researchers argue that *instrumental objectives* focus

on securing a particular outcome, attitude, or behavior change that a communicator wants. For instance, Metts and Chronis (1986) report that persons deceive others because they want to protect the resources that they have or because they would like to receive a particular reward. *Interpersonal objectives* relate to goals associated with the creation and maintenance of personal relationships. For example, Metts and Chronis (1986) demonstrate that deception is used to avoid conflict with relational partners. Lastly, *identity objectives* deal with personal image or identity features that a communicator projects. These image features may include issues of credibility, power, and status. For instance, Metts and Chronis (1986) show that persons deceive others because they want to protect or enhance their own as well as other's public image.

These motives vary in terms of their voluntary (individualistic) and obligatory (collectivistic) orientation. That is, instrumental objectives can be characterized as more individual-centered than interpersonal and identity objectives. In other words, instrumental objectives focus is on securing resources for the communicator. Conversely, interpersonal and identity objectives tend to focus (at least partially) on relational needs, social obligation, or other-centered outcomes. This distinction between individual and other-centered motives is consistent with the normative differences that are found in individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

Individualism, Collectivism, and Social Norms

According to Triandis (1986), members of collectivistic cultures focus on the needs and welfare of in-group members. According to Hirokawa & Miyahara, (1986) collectivistic cultures are characterized by their homogeneity. These cultures value harmony and have rigid rules that govern appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Boldt & Roberts, 1979). In collectivistic cultures, indirect or implicit communication is valued and direct communication is often viewed as rude. Collectivistic cultures dominate in South America, Asia, and Africa.

Members of individualistic cultures focus on the idiosyncratic needs, desires, and goals of individuals. Individualistic cultures are known for their heterogeneity. Diversity and deviance are tolerated. Equally important, explicit or direct communication is valued. Individualistic cultures dominate in North America, Northern and Western Europe, and Australia. The distinction between collectivism and individualism is clarified further by isolating the norms of social exchange that operate under each cultural orientation.

The obligation to return a favor or resource is termed the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Gouldner (1960) argues that the norm of reciprocity makes two demands: "(1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them" (p. 170). The literature on compliance gaining characterizes the strategic use of this norm as *pregiving*. Marwell and Schmitt (1967) define *pregiving* as a compliance gaining strategy in which social actors provide a target with a benefit, or favor, before requesting compliance directly. For instance, Regan (1971) demonstrates that the relationship between *pregiving* and compliance is "mediated ... by normative pressure to reciprocate" (p. 627). Specifically, he argues that one experiences a sense of indenture or obligation when another provides a favor, so that one is more likely to comply with subsequent requests from that other (Regan, 1971). In this way, targets reestablish equity with the other who provided the favor or resource. Consistent with Regan's findings, Boster, Rodríguez, Cruz, and Marshall (1995) found that obligation mediated the relationship between *pregiving* and compliance. This obligation extends to individualistic and

collectivistic cultures. There is, however, a qualitative difference in the form of reciprocity that is deemed desirable in these cultural groups. Individualistic cultures follow a voluntary norm of reciprocity, and collectivistic cultures an obligatory norm.

According to Ting-Toomey (1986), obligatory reciprocity refers to the exchange of resources based on the desire to meet the needs of group members. Voluntary reciprocity is based on the notion that one is free to exchange or withhold resources. In other words, voluntary reciprocity focuses on the right of the individual to exert her or his free will when exchanging resources. Conversely, obligatory reciprocity stresses the need to put aside individualistic tendencies and focus on the welfare of the group. This normative concern for the welfare of others is also apparent in politeness norms and face saving tactics.

According to Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), the concept of “face” refers to the self-claimed external image a person has for herself or himself. Similarly, Brown & Levinson (1978) argue that, “face” is “the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for himself/herself” (p. 66). Members of collectivistic cultures engage in “face-giving” and “face-repaying” behaviors more than members of individualistic cultures because of their increased sensitivity to implicit social obligation. That is, there is extensive support for the identity or self-image of others, and a desire to avoid self-embarrassment and shame (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Deceptive Intercultural Communication: Social Exchange or Strategic Choice?

Given the distinction between individualism and collectivism, deceptive intercultural communication is likely driven by distinct motives. Members of individualistic cultures are more likely to pursue instrumental objectives than members of collectivistic cultures. Conversely, members of collectivistic cultures are more likely to pursue interpersonal and identity objectives than members of individualistic cultures. It is important to note that members of both cultures can deceive to secure any of the objectives discussed previously. For example, it is possible for a member of an individualistic culture to deceive because he or she is attempting to secure an interpersonal or identity objective. In a similar way, it is possible for a member of a collectivistic culture to deceive because she or he is attempting to secure some instrumental object. There is, however, a greater probability that a member of a collectivistic culture will deceive as a consequence of a motive that is most consistent with the values of his or her culture, and the interpersonal and identity motives are most consistent with collectivistic values.

Social Exchange. Consistent with the conceptual extension of deceptive communication advanced earlier, the discussion of motives would suggest that members of collectivistic cultures would use deception to meet a social obligation. Therefore, the patterns of deceptive communication that are observed in collectivistic cultures may be explained best using a social exchange model with obligation as the central concept. In other words, when asked to explain why persons from collectivistic cultures deceive others, the primary answer would be obligation. That is, the obligatory nature of politeness and face saving norms can be applied to interactions involving deception because it is these social standards that would compel someone to deceive. For example, a person from a collectivistic culture may say that they understand just to be polite. They may, in fact, not understand the issue in question, but saying, “No, I don’t understand” would be rude. Thus, they create a message that is inconsistent with how they actually feel to meet

their social duty. Notice that deception in these cases is not a choice. Instead, deception is expected and highly predictable. The truth in these cases would be socially inappropriate, and choosing to tell the truth would be a major social violation.

Strategic Choice. Choosing to tell the truth is an more acceptable option in individualistic cultures. Consistent with Miller's (1983) original definition of deceptive communication, the discussion of motives would suggest that members of individualistic cultures would use deception to secure their individual goals. Thus, the patterns of deceptive communication that are observed in individualistic cultures may be explained best using the Strategic Choice Model with choice or free will as the central concept. In other words, when asked to explain why persons from individualistic culture deceive others, the primary answer would be to achieve individual goals. Put another way, members of individualistic cultures are compelled to deceive when such communication is in their own self-interests. For instance, a person from an individualistic cultures may or may not say that they understand just to be polite. Because choice is valued and deviancy is acceptable, members of individualistic cultures are more likely to say exactly how they feel than members of collectivistic cultures. Members of individualistic cultures are more likely to say, "No, I don't understand" than their collectivistic counterparts because such statements are not considered rude. In fact, such statements may be seen as assertive, which has positive connotations in individualistic cultures. Deception from the individualistic orientation is a choice. Therefore, deception is not expected. Instead, individuals are expected to "speak their mind," "tell it like it is," "be direct." Individuals may choose to regard or disregard the welfare of others. This level of choice makes deception unpredictable because it is not governed by strict social constraints.

Implications

This analysis has implications, both for the study of deceptive and intercultural communication. In terms of the literature on deceptive communication, Buller and Burgoon (1994) suggest that there is a need to examine the motives of potential deceivers empirically. The arguments presented here are consistent with that position. Understanding why social actors deceive others is central to the study of deceptive communication because intent is often viewed as an antecedent to action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Understanding of why persons deceive may be a first step toward predicting the types of deceptive messages that are likely to occur in a given situation. The use of motives in the present analysis has lead to distinct predictions in situations involving members of collectivistic and individualistic cultures.

From the viewpoint of the study of intercultural communication, Ting-Toomey (1986) argued that individualistic and collectivistic cultures are driven by distinct norms of obligation. The present analysis argues that these norms are linked to individual and other-centered ideologies that are central to understanding the motives that drive deceptive intercultural communication. For members of collectivists cultures, the interpersonal and identity objectives are consistent with the rigid pattern of obligation predicted by the norm of reciprocity. In individualistic cultures, however, a focus on instrumental objectives suggests that perhaps the norm of reciprocity does not govern behavior as rigidly as previously thought. That is, since individuals are "free" to choose their communicative options, they are less likely to conform to social obligations. This distinction is important for understanding the utility and limitations of the norm of reciprocity in

collectivistic and individualistic cultures. The challenge for future research is to isolate these limitations empirically, and then devise a theoretical model with appropriate boundary conditions.

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