

Original Paper

Business School Student Deception: Tracking and Learning from Actual Behavior

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Abstract

Business educators' mission is to help students develop knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills that will help them be successful once they graduate. This is certainly true of ethical issues, including the use of deception. This study reports on an assignment that can increase students' awareness of their own capacity for deceptiveness, self-reflection on what this means for them and the greater business world, and awareness of the different types of deceptiveness that can and do occur. Data is provided from 239 undergraduate/graduate students at two universities on three campuses who completed a five-day deception measurement exercise. Students measured and categorized their deception behavior and reflected upon the results. Results suggest the objectives were met regardless of school location, method of classroom delivery, level of instruction, or whether the assignment was mandatory or not. The fact that this exercise has been used at multiple universities under almost every class modality suggests it can be successfully replicated at other universities for many courses.

Keywords

deception, business school, exercise, lying, self-reflection

1. Introduction

Deception occurs when an individual makes statements and/or engages in behaviors which intentionally mislead another party (Gaspar et al., 2019). The definition implies that deception can be informational (e.g., telling a lie) or emotional (e.g., acting angry to achieve a desired reaction from the other party when one is in fact not angry), and that the object is always to intentionally mislead. By contrast, providing misinformation through error is not considered deception.

As educators, much of our mission is to help students develop knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills that will help them be successful once they graduate. This is certainly true of ethical issues, including the use of deception (Degen, 2018). There is evidence that college interventions, exercises, and experiences have an impact at various levels, including attitudes about ethics in future work situations (Luthar & Karri, 2005), skills in evaluating future work-related ethical issues (Carlson & Burke, 1998), and actual future ethical decisions in work settings (McCabe, 1996).

With regard to one's character, living without deception is often espoused as one of the most important traits in life and in business (Jacobs, 2012; Kujala, 2004; Schwepker, 2015; Tanner et al., 2015). Organizations value non-deception (Castleberry & Tanner, 2019), and many have created systems of rewarding it (Wang & Murnighan, 2017). Part of our role as educators is to help students develop a moral compass and live as ethical, non-deceptive business people (Natale & Doran, 2012).

Research has demonstrated that college students do engage in deception (e.g., Simkin & McLeod, 2010; Smith & Shen, 2013), and deceptive behaviors by college students can actually continue when they enter into the business world (Furutan, 2017). Shu and Gino (2012) found that engaging in some deception can lead a person to perform more acts of deception.

Employers have many sources of potential employees, and the pressure is on business schools to adapt to the needs and desires of the marketplace (Schlegelmilch, 2020). It is therefore concerning that employers are not always happy with deception found in the students universities are graduating (Moosmayer, 2012; Robles, 2012). Newly minted business school graduates and those entering the business world often engage in deception (Coyne & Bartram, 2000; Jaakson et al., 2017; Strategies & Tactics, 2020), regularly finding justification for their deceptions. One commonly cited justification is that "everyone is doing it", alluding that deceit is just one of many tools available for businesspeople to use (Chelliah & Swamy, 2018). At other times, non-deception is deemed just too hard to achieve, resulting in deception being seen as an acceptable alternative (Lee et al., 2019).

For many college students and businesspeople, deciding whether to engage in deception is a function of doing the math and seeing if the consequences of non-deception are worth it (Balasubramanian et al., 2017; Kamat & Kanekar, 1990; Tang et al., 2018; Tseng, 2019). For some, the situation itself helps determine whether to lie as well as the extent of the deception that is acceptable (Acke et al., 2011). For example, in one study, students viewed cheating as not only justified but honorable (McKay et al., 2019). Deception can also have cultural dimensions, as people from collectivist societies may view and act differently than those from individualist societies (Brodowsky et al., 2020). Finally, some people choose to be deceptive by delegating the deception; in essence, having others lie on their behalf (Gawn & Innes, 2019; Rottenburger et al., 2019).

How can we educate students about deception and prepare them for the business world where employers are hoping for more non-deceptive employees? There are a number of possibilities. As one example, students can reflect upon case studies based upon real world business decisions where

deception occurred. Another option is to use simulations which allow students to choose to deceive but then reap the consequences of that deception. And of course, guest speakers can share their experiences with deception and the resulting outcomes.

What is missing in these tools is an explicit way to incorporate students' explorations of their own personal deception practices. Do they know how much they actually engage in deception right now in their lives? How many students' deceptions are premeditated, as opposed to deceptions they choose to employ in the spur of the moment? Additionally, do students recognize that deception includes much more than simply lying? There are many aspects of being deceptive, including such factors as intentionality (being deceptive for the benefit of the self or for the benefit of society), the type of deceptive content (deceptive information, the use of deceptive emotions), and the type of activity (a deceptive act of omission, commission, or to act/talk insincerely or misleadingly) (Carson, 2001; Gaspar et al., 2019).

To answer these questions and provide students more information about their own capacity for deception, the following exercise was created and deployed.

2. Method

2.1 Objectives

The primary goal of the exercise is for students to identify the extent of their deception. While people no doubt remember some of the big lies they have told, many have never reflected upon the number of times overall they have deceived others. In other words, people might not realize the extent of their own deceptive behavior.

A secondary goal is to have students reflect upon what they have learned from completing the exercise. Do they deceive more often than they thought? Are there certain times of the day or certain situations in which they practice deception more often? Are there certain types of deception they seem more prone to commit? This self-reflection will likely be different for each student and can be influenced by culture, teachings they have received, what others have claimed about their deception in the past, and so forth.

A final goal is for students to become aware of the myriad ways by which they might be deceiving others. This will contribute to long-term growth in that, perhaps for the first time, students will become aware that deception can manifest itself in a variety of contexts and through a variety of ways in their own lives.

The purpose of the exercise and reporting on its use is to provide an easy-to-adopt tool that educators can utilize to help students achieve the stated goals. Educators need assignments that can be used across various modalities (online, live instruction, synchronous web instruction, and so forth), courses with varied content, as well as courses at various levels of education (undergraduate, graduate, executive education).

2.2 Administering the Exercise

To assess deception, students are asked to self-report all types of deception for a period of five days. Self-reporting has been used successfully in academic studies of lying (Ennis et al., 2008; Serota & Levine, 2015), although it is possible for students to deceive using this methodology. The use of a five-day period was chosen in an effort to provide enough time for students to potentially exhibit the various types of deception, while also trying to not make the exercise onerous.

Before recording their deceptions, students first carefully study the document “Examples of Deception” (Appendix). It lists the kinds of deceptive acts in which people often engage and is intended to broaden the students’ perspectives about what constitutes deception.

Students are told that the assignment will be turned in, but they are explicitly told not to identify themselves in any way when making their list of deceptions. The goal of this instruction is to increase the students’ willingness to share information about their deceptions without fear that the instructor might be able to identify them and, therefore, know their listed deceptions.

In addition to listing each and every time they deceive during the period of time, students are also required to code each deception using the following scale: (Type 1) = “Deliberate, premeditated statement that was not true (a lie). I planned ahead of time to lie in this situation”. (Type2) = “Deliberate lie, but I didn’t plan ahead of time. It just happened at the moment”. (Type 3) = “I deceived, but not by giving a false statement. I either didn’t give all the pertinent facts, or I displayed non-verbal cues or other means that led another to a false conclusion”. The purpose of having the three categories is to try to tweak out various forms of deception (Carson, 2001; Gaspar et al., 2019). Sometimes, one deceives by making a false statement, so one distinction is whether that is premeditated (Type 1 in our scale) or not premeditated (Type 2 in our scale). But other times, one deceives without actually giving a false statement (hence, Type 3 in our scale).

For each deception listed, students are asked to provide a reason why they engaged in the deception. They are to compile their results in a spreadsheet consisting of three columns (describe the deception, code assigned, reason why they engaged in the deception). For paper version administration of the exercise, the phrase, “Please attach another sheet of paper if you need more room to record entries”, is added to the bottom of the spreadsheet.

Administration of the exercise in paper copy is rather straightforward. Early in the semester students are handed a paper version of the spreadsheet and provided access to the “Examples of Deception” handout. Students are told to choose any five-day period before the assignment’s due date and record all deceptions. When the exercise is due, the instructor passes a 9” x 12” clasp envelope around the room, and students slide their anonymous completed spreadsheets into the envelope. Note that until this moment in the semester, students have not been told exactly how their work will be gathered. Use of the clasp envelope prevents students from seeing what others have written. After all assignments have been collected, a sheet of paper is passed around, and students are required to provide their written

name and their signature in order to get credit for doing the assignment. At the top of the sheet is this statement of certification: “I certify that I completed the Deception Exercise exactly as required and turned it in on time.” Finally, students are directed to complete an online, anonymous survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the exercise.

The exercise can also be administered completely online, via a Course Management System (CMS) like Blackboard or Canvas, in the following way. The students are provided an electronic version of the spreadsheet, directions on how to complete it, and the document “Examples of Deception” (Appendix) to study before beginning. After they have completed the exercise, they upload the completed spreadsheet anonymously to the instructor in the CMS. In a totally separate online assignment, due at the same time/date, students are instructed to indicate that they did complete the exercise, agreeing to the same certification statement described earlier. Students are then directed to complete an online, anonymous survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the exercise.

3. Results

3.1 Learner Objective #1: Identify the Extent of Their Own Deception

We report here the results of the exercise of 239 students by two professors at three different campuses across many classes, including undergraduate (Fundamentals of Selling, Advanced Selling, Principles of Advertising, Marketing Ethics) and MBA (Selling Ideas at Work, Business Ethics, Contemporary Issues in Advertising). Approximately 98% of students in classes where the assignment was mandatory successfully completed the assignment, and 32% did so when the exercise was offered purely as an extra credit opportunity. No students turned in blank forms or forms with gibberish. However, there were two instances where the number of students who claimed to complete the exercise (on the certification form) was one more than the actual number of exercises actually turned in.

The primary goal of the exercise is to help students identify and measure the extent of their deception. This goal was certainly met, as every student measured and reported their deceptions. The amount and extent of each type of deception can be found in Table 1. Type 2 deceptions, deliberate lies that were not planned in advance, were the most used, with an average of 3.24 times per student. Type 1 and Type 3 deceptions were used an average of 1.64 and 1.66 times, respectively, per student.

Table 1. Average Number of Deceptive Actions Per Student

Type of Deception	Deceptions Per Student (mean, sd, range)
Type 1: Deliberate, premeditated statement that was not true (a lie). I planned ahead of time to lie in this situation.	1.64 (1.35, 0-6)
Type 2: Deliberate lie, but I didn't plan ahead of time. It just happened at the moment.	3.24 (1.89, 0-12)
Type 3: I deceived, but not by giving a false statement. I either didn't give all the pertinent facts, or by non-verbal cues or other means, I led another to a false conclusion.	1.66 (1.32, 0-6)
All types combined.	6.54 (2.99, 0-17)

3.2 Learner Objective #2: Self Reflection

Another goal of the exercise is to have students reflect upon what they learned from completing the exercise. When asked “What did you learn about yourself?” answers suggest that students took the exercise seriously and that they engaged in appropriate self-reflection. Here are representative examples of the type of responses provided:

- It was disappointing in a way to learn how much lies and deception are involved in a day of life. It was a great exercise to kind of hold a mirror to our internal selves. No matter how introspective I thought I was, this showed that my subconscious self was almost hidden from my thought process, and it was making subtle deceptive decisions all the time.
- I learned that I am good at justifying lying to myself and the people I love.
- I learned that most of my lies are done for selfish reasons, like avoiding discomfort. This exercise also made me reflect on my past instances of lying to analyze why I decided to lie in those situations.
- The main thing that I have learned is to constantly be in check with myself and create some “me time”, that allows me to reflect on my actions.
- This exercise has been eye opening because it shows how much I alter my personality depending on the situation.
- After five days of recording this, I have realized that there is a lot of unintentional deceiving that I do on a daily basis. I consider myself an extremely upfront and honest person, so the deception [exercise] was a wakeup call.
- I learned that to be honest all the time is really hard. Most of the deception I made came naturally and from my subconscious.

- I learned that I deceive in ways that can easily be avoided. I've always been an honest person, and I'm pretty open with everything, but being straightforward in situations would help me be less deceiving. In all of my situations over these past five days, I realized I could've just changed one or two very little things, and I wouldn't have been lying at all.
- I found this to be an incredibly difficult assignment. I've been reflecting on it today. I think I found this assignment so challenging because my life is incredibly full of deception, and coming to that conclusion is very difficult. I slowly realized as the days passed that I was missing many deceptions; often these were deceptions to myself. I plan to continue this assignment on my own to try to be more open with myself about the deception in my life.

Overall, findings such as these demonstrate that students took time to learn about themselves through this exercise. This is especially important in that it has allowed students to learn about deceptive practices through real, personal examples.

3.3 Learner Objective #3: Learn the Myriad Ways by Which They are Deceptive

A final goal is for students to become aware of the myriad ways by which they might be deceiving others. As indicated earlier, results about the extent of each type of deception can be found in Table 1. To further evaluate this and other aspects of the exercise, students provided anonymous evaluations. Results (Table 2) suggest that the exercise achieved this objective, in addition to providing encouraging indications that the exercise is an effective tool to use in classes. Students took the exercise seriously, tried to record all of their deceptions, did not try to purposefully avoid deceiving others during the exercise, and found that the exercise helped them learn about how they deceive others. In terms of whether students found they deceived more than they realized, results were varied, but overall, students did learn this fact. Importantly, students expressed strong beliefs that others could benefit from completing the exercise, suggesting that the goal of advancing business education could be achieved if other instructors adopted this exercise. To further understand the results, a series of analyses was conducted to see if differences existed between various groups for each of the six assessment statements.

Table 2. Results from Post-Exercise Survey

Assessment Statement	Findings mean (sd)
The exercise helped me realize the many different ways that I might deceive others.	4.3 (.785)
I took the exercise seriously.	4.5 (.727)
I tried to be complete and record all of my deceptions.	4.4 (.734)
I found that I deceive others more often than I realized.	3.5 (1.239)
During the recording period, I purposefully tried to avoid deceiving others.	2.8 (1.225)
I believe others could benefit from doing this exercise.	4.5 (.707)

Note. *Each item used a 5-point scale, from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

3.4 Comparing Undergraduate vs. MBA students

While both groups (undergraduate and MBA students) felt that the exercise helped them realize the many different ways that they might deceive others, undergraduates felt this more strongly ($t = 2.751$, $df = 287$, $p = .006$). The only other significant difference ($t = 3.182$, $df = 287$, $p = .002$) was with regard to discovering that they deceived more than they realized, with MBA students feeling less strongly that this was the case (mean = 3.09) compared with undergraduates (mean = 3.63). Both of these results seem to suggest MBA students, who have more years of education and are often older in age than undergraduate students, might possess higher levels of self-awareness regarding deceptive practices.

3.5 Comparing Completely Online Classes vs. In-Person Classes

An assessment was also conducted to see whether holding the class in a completely online format affects the findings. The only significant difference ($t = -2.114$, $df = 287$, $p = .035$) of the six assessment questions was with regard to taking the exercise seriously, with online students feeling more strongly this was the case (mean = 4.56) compared with non-online students (mean = 4.37). This could be due to some students exhibiting greater self-motivation and independence, which is often required when purposely taking a course solely online (as opposed to having their course converted to online after the fact, as occurred when most courses were transferred to an online modality in some fashion during the COVID-19 pandemic). It is important to note that results indicate both sets of students did take the exercise seriously (overall mean = 4.5).

3.6 Comparing COVID-19 with non-COVID 19

The exercise was also used during the semester when COVID-19 caused regular live classes to move to a Zoom format with synchronous class meetings in a virtual space. It is important that exercises in business courses be robust, even with such disruptive experiences as the COVID-19 pandemic (Rayburn et al., 2020). The only significant difference ($t = -2.063$, $df = 287$, $p = .040$) of the six

assessment questions was with regard to students believing that others could benefit from completing this exercise, with Zoom-format students feeling more strongly this was the case (mean = 4.59) compared with non-Zoom-format students (mean = 4.41). However, both sets of students did feel that others could benefit from completing this exercise (overall mean = 4.5).

3.7 Comparing across Campuses

Using ANOVA, no significant differences were found in any of the three campuses for any of the six assessment questions

3.8 Comparing Required Assignment with Optional Extra-Credit Assignment

A series of t-tests were performed, and no significant differences were found for any of the six assessment questions depending upon if the exercise has been used as an extra-credit vehicle for students rather than a required, graded assignment.

4. Discussion

One of our roles as educators to ensure we develop a proper moral and ethical direction for students to prevent, or at least mitigate, the frequency with which deceptive behaviors occur (Natale & Doran, 2012), especially since deceptive behaviors can carry over into the real world (Furutan, 2017). As lying and deception are rarely researched broadly in the business or business school context (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017), finding ways to address these concerns is urgent and important. One method to achieve this goal is the exercise described herein, whereby students are made aware of their own capacity for deception through self-tracking and reflection.

Bacon (2016) encourages educational researchers to specify the types of learning being assessed. The data presented here includes both indirect assessments of perceived learning (for example, a student's ratings of whether the various assignment goals were met) as well as direct assessments of actual learning. Direct assessments include, for example, actual student work and performance that can be examined directly against stated learning outcomes (Elbeck & Bacon, 2015). For this exercise, students actually performed the identification of their deceptions and classified them into various categories. Additionally, the results across multiple distributions of the exercise demonstrate that both perceived and actual learning occurred in a variety of classroom settings. Thus, through both direct and indirect methods of assessments, several learning objectives have been met which contribute to the advancement of business education.

By tracking their deceptive behaviors over a brief period of time, students are made aware of their own, personal deceptive practices in a real and tangible way. At times, instances of business deception are presented in the classroom as abstract and highly obvious breaches of confidence, such as embezzlement or whistleblowing. While this approach has merits, its relevance is limited to hypothetical eventualities which may seem inapplicable to many students. Such high-profile ethical breaches also do not provide space for an understanding of the more nuanced or gray areas of deception.

This exercise allows students to reflect that, in addition to such high impact ethical violations, white lies and omissions of truth can also be harmful, and the continued practice of such behaviors, if left unchecked, will eventually lead to deceptions of greater consequence. The importance of this cannot be overstated, as this exercise moves beyond hypothetical scenarios to advance a more tangible focus on real learning outcomes.

Additionally, through this exercise, students are given the opportunity to reflect on their own character and capacity for deception. Rather than view the potential for moral crises through the lens of someone else, who is most always of worse moral fiber in the eyes of any student (see Spake et al., 2007), this exercise allows for students to create their own baseline for deception. Based on personal beliefs, family values, and other influential factors, many students are naturally more or less deceptive than others. This exercise reveals that, no matter their upbringing, all students are capable of deception on some level. As students reflect, they are able to understand this truth about themselves in a very personal way. This may even be the first occurrence where they realize certain behaviors and nonverbals are actually deceptive, and it can help lead to the realization that deception unfettered can grow into acts of greater consequence.

Finally, students learn through this exercise that there is more to deception than embezzlement and fraud. By classifying their deceptive behavior across the three provided categories, students are able to more clearly articulate the multifaceted nature of deception. Numerous students who were surveyed reported their surprise at how many deceptive behaviors were not premeditated, as well as the amount that were deceptive by simple omissions of the truth. Similar results were found in another study, in that it could be argued most lies were small (white) lies, rather than big lies (Serota & Levine, 2015). Through this exercise, students not only become more aware of their capacity for deceptive behaviors, but they clearly see the many ways these behaviors can manifest themselves in everyday life as well.

As business students are increasingly shown to engage in acts of deception (Simkin & McLeod, 2010), finding innovative ways to facilitate their understanding of this issue is of utmost importance. This exercise is extremely relevant to today's world of business, in which everyone has a voice on social media, and where individuals have more power and reach in using their voice than ever before. As educators, we must ensure the communication tactics we are teaching our students are grounded in non-deceptive behaviors. We must ensure they understand that a life of deception begins not in the embezzlements and whistleblowing of which they are often warned in business school, but in the gray areas of deception, the daily interactions they have with friends and family. And we must act toward promoting the discernment that a future life of deception can be halted, and perhaps even reversed, by working to advance a life of non-deception right now.

Deception practiced by business students is an issue which transcends far beyond the classroom. Educators must be diligent to begin making students aware of their own capacities for deceptive behavior now, as well as the long-term implications of the seemingly innocent behavior (the "white

lies”) in which they may be engaged. The exercise described in this manuscript is a valuable tool to make students aware of deceptive practices in personal and tangible ways, overcoming much of the hypothetical and unrelatable limitations of high-profile cases of deception often taught in classes.

Pedagogically, this exercise is relatively easy to implement, and the results indicate that students take deceptive behavior seriously and learn about themselves. Because issues of deception apply to all facets of business, this exercise can be used in any course. Furthermore, the results indicate that this exercise can be effective in many types and formats of class offerings, whether undergraduate, graduate, in-person, online, hybrid or synchronous (as in the case of COVID-19 class changes), and as extra-credit or required.

Future work with this exercise could extend its application in a variety of ways. It would be interesting to investigate the role of culture. Collectivist societies may have different ethical standards than individualist societies (Brodowsky et al., 2020). For some cultures, practices Americans perceive as deception, such as failing to report bribery, are tolerated more liberally. The role of culture further illustrates the need for students to develop their own personal self-awareness in terms of deceptive practices, as what is looked down upon or even punishable in one society may have little to no negative ramifications in another.

A follow up exercise would help to determine the influence that students’ newfound self-awareness may have on future business practices. After completing the exercise, for example, students could complete a case study involving an ethical dilemma to measure the extent to which their awareness of deceptive practices plays a role in decision making. A more robust activity could even provide a similar case study, if not the exact same one, at an earlier point in the class, thereby measuring the difference between pre- and post-deception exercise awareness. This would allow students to more readily connect their capacity for deception with its implementation in the business world.

This exercise provides educators one more way by which we can train and prepare students to be non-deceptive, ethical individuals as they prepare for the business world into which they will enter upon completing their college educations. Since deceptive practices turn exponentially into deceptive habits (Shu & Gino, 2012), working to change those deceptive behaviors brought to light by this exercise into honest, non-deceptive behaviors may slow, or even reverse, the development of the bad habits. Making deception personal by increasing students’ self-awareness of their own capacity for deception can have long-lasting impacts if they are able to take the lessons they learn and, if necessary, change their behaviors accordingly.

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Appendix Examples of Deception

1. Provide false information
2. Make a purposefully vague or unclear statement
3. Pretend that something is someone else's fault
4. Gossip, but do so by telling others that you're only telling them because they have a "need to know"
5. Relay information in such a way that you look better than you really should
6. Give someone a compliment that you don't actually believe
7. Leave out some important details to make yourself or your product or your company look better
8. Say something untrue or make an excuse to try and hide your failures
9. Provide untrue facts that you know can never be verified
10. Blame others for your behavior instead of accepting responsibility
11. Claim that others are deceiving instead of admitting that you are the one being deceptive
12. Tell yourself that this lie is an exception and you won't lie again
13. Tell a lie and believe the action is okay as long as you don't get caught doing it
14. If someone has done me wrong then it is okay for me to tell a lie about them
15. If you don't know the answer to a question, just make something up so you look smarter
16. Downplay the truth (for example, telling your parents it was a small party, when in fact it was a huge party)
17. Use nonverbals to purposefully mislead the person
18. If you are caught, act like the lie was just a joke, and you weren't really being serious
19. Pretend you have a memory about something, when you really do not
20. Convince yourself that everyone lies, so it must be okay to lie

21. Claim you can't do something when actually you just don't want to do it
22. Pretend to be sick so you don't have to do something or be somewhere
23. Say something different behind a person's back than what you actually said to them
24. Exaggerate facts or embellish things
25. Do not admit that you made a mistake or were guilty of something
26. Hide from the truth by avoiding situations or conversations that would bring the truth out
27. Pretend to give something as a gift, but actually expect to get something in return
28. Take credit for things that others have done
29. Pretend to be in pain to get sympathy
30. Pretend to not know something for which you actually have full knowledge.
31. Claim that your motives are pure even though your words are not honest

Sources: Adapted from examples provided from student assignments; Gupta, et al. (2013);

<http://www.geocities.com/changes1611/> as viewed Sept. 9, 2008.