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### Responses to Deception in the Workplace: Perceptions of Credibility, Power, and Trustworthiness

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# Responses to Deception in the Workplace: Perceptions of Credibility, Power, and Trustworthiness

Katie Neary Dunleavy, Rebecca M. Chory,  
& Alan K. Goodboy

*This study examined full-time employees' perceptions of a coworker's credibility, power, and trustworthiness after the coworker engaged in organizational deception or truth-telling. Participants read one of three scenarios, each of which differed in the type of message (honest, withholding deceptive, distortion deceptive) the coworker communicated. Participants then evaluated the coworker's credibility, power, and trustworthiness. Results indicated that organizational members perceived the coworker as more competent, of high character, more powerful, and more trustworthy when the coworker told the truth versus deceived. Organizational members also considered the coworker to be higher in competence, character, expert power, and referent power when the coworker deceived through withholding versus distorting information. It appears that although honesty may be the best policy in the organization, all forms of deception are not equally destructive.*

*Keywords: Credibility; Deception; Leader Member Exchange; Power; Trust*

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Deception is a phenomenon that occurs in all communication contexts. For example, research has focused on the negative and positive effects of deception in the interpersonal context (e.g., O’Hair & Cody, 1994; Wilmot, 1995) and the impersonation of others and creation of fictional personas in the mediated context (Stone, 1991). A context that has recently received an increased amount of attention in regard to deception is the organization (Grover, 1997; Hubbell, Chory-Assad, & Medved, 2005; Mattson, Allen, Ryan, & Miller, 2000; Zhou & Dongsong, 2006). The present study continues this line of research by examining effects of different forms of organizational deception and honesty on perceptions of deceivers’ credibility, power, and trustworthiness in the workplace.

### *Deception*

*Deception* is defined as “the conscious attempt to create or perpetuate false impressions among other communicators” (O’Hair & Cody, 1994, p. 181). Although this definition was derived in the interpersonal context, deception in the organization may also be interpersonal in nature (Mattson et al., 2000). In the organizational context, three approaches to deception have emerged: information distortion (e.g., Fulk & Mani, 1986), strategic ambiguity (e.g., Eisenberg, 1984), and lies (e.g., Grover, 1993a). Information distortion involves altering information; however, this adjustment involves “minor omission, differential selection, and preferential placement” of information (O’Reilly & Roberts, 1974, p. 253). Strategic ambiguity occurs when someone “omits purposefully contextual clues and to allow multiple interpretations on the part of receivers” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 230). Lying is an antisocial behavior wherein the “perpetrator knows the information is false, wants to mislead another person, and engages in the behavior proactively” (Grover, 1997, p. 69).

Based on these perspectives, Hubbell and colleagues (2005) distinguished among the forms of organizational deception using Information Manipulation Theory (IMT; McCornack, 1992) as a guide. They validated four forms of organizational deception: withholding, distortions, ambiguity, and changing the subject (McCornack, 1992). *Withholding* involves the omission of critical information, such as mentioning that a coworker was using a computer, but failing to mention that the coworker was communicating in a social chat room. *Distortions* involve the alteration of critical information, such as mentioning that the same coworker was perusing pornographic Web sites when the coworker was, in fact, in a chat room. *Ambiguity* involves the delivery of vague messages that could have alternate meanings, such as mentioning that the coworker was using the computer in a questionable manner but failing to elaborate. Finally, *changing the subject* involves a topic reversal during the normal course of the conversation, such as mentioning a nonwork-related topic when asked about the coworker’s computer use.

Deception is relatively prevalent in organizations. For example, Lindsey, Dunbar, and Russell (2008) found that approximately 45% of employees reported using deception in the workplace. Subordinates’ most common reasons for deceiving their

superiors included to get time off (19.80%) and to protect others (11.10%) and themselves (9.90%).

Characteristics of the workplace may serve as an impetus for deception to occur more frequently in this context than in others. For instance, Steinel and De Dreu (2004) found that deception was more likely to occur when people were competitive versus cooperative with one another. It is not difficult to imagine a competitively driven workplace. For example, some individuals work extreme jobs, which can require upwards of 80 hours a week, in order to stay competitive (Hewlett & Luce, 2006).

Another factor influencing deception in the workplace is role conflict. Balancing the many roles one has in life, and potentially playing various roles in the workplace (Grover, 1997), can be difficult. In order to relieve the resulting strain and to appease coworkers, superiors, and subordinates who have competing demands for each role, individuals may use deception (Grover, 1993b; Grover & Hui, 1994). In the deception process, the employee typically completes the demands of the role that is perceived as more important and deceives about the unmet demands of the lesser role (Grover, 1993b, 1997).

Organizational deception has also been studied as a communicative response to others in the workplace. For example, Chory and Hubbell (2008) found that employees were more likely to deceive their superiors when they believed their superiors had given them unfair performance feedback. Chory and Hubbell suggested that subordinates may have responded to the feedback with deceptive communication in order to restore relational balance they felt was damaged via unfair feedback. Similarly, Horan and Chory (2009) found that employees reported communicating less honest and accurate self-disclosures to organizational peers dating superiors (versus other peers) and engaging in more deception with said peers.

Based on social norms, it may be assumed that a coworker who deceives would be frowned upon in the workplace. Research supports this contention in that both superiors and subordinates believed organizational deception was unacceptable (Lindsey et al., 2008). However, the extent to which people object to deception appears to depend, in part, on a number of factors. These factors include employees' cultural background, the type of relationship between the deceiver and target, and the motive for lying (Grover, 1993b; Kim, Kam, Sharkey, & Singelis, 2008; Park & Ahn, 2007; Seiter, Brusckhe, & Bai, 2002). For instance, those who are interdependent (which is usually influenced by culture) perceive outright distortion to be necessary in many contexts and do not experience the same guilt about deceiving as those who are independent (Kim et al., 2008).

The type of organizational deception that is utilized also affects perceptions of deception acceptability (Hubbell & Medved, 2000). For instance, in organizational contexts distortions are perceived as the least honest form of deception, and withholdings are perceived as the most honest (Hubbell & Medved, 2000). This suggests there is a difference between lies of commission (distortion) and lies of omission (withholding; O'Reilly & Roberts, 1974). Therefore, a coworker who uses withholding deception may not be judged as critically as a coworker utilizing distortion

messages. Of course the type of relationship and the discourse exchanged between coworkers may influence this perception of deception.

### *Organizational Discourse*

According to Sias (2005), “Workplace relationships are unique interpersonal relationships with important implications for the individuals in those relationships and the organizations in which the relationships exist and develop” (p. 377). There are two primary relationships examined in organizations: supervisor-subordinate and coworker relationships. Discourse is necessary for employees to receive the most useful information to make them successful in the workplace, and, according to Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory, discourse with the supervisor provides the best access to this information (Dansereau & Markham, 1987; Sias, 1996, 2005). LMX also purports that the discourse between supervisors and subordinates subsequently affects the communication (and relationships) of coworkers (Dansereau & Markam, 1987).

Coworker discourse is yet another outlet for employees to receive information; coworkers can provide one another with gossip and a “heads up” for negative information or organizational change (Sias, 2005). Coworker discourse can also be a source of tension release, as peers share stories and make small talk (Meyer, 1997; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). In addition, “By simply informing coworkers about an incident, members make them aware of events that may otherwise have escaped their notice” (Sias, 1996, p. 182). Coworkers can be great allies for one another in the workplace and the climate of the organization is improved when both these relationships and the superior-subordinate relationships are satisfactory (Dansereau & Markham, 1987; Jablin, 1987). However, what happens when the discourse involves deception? Are coworkers perceived as being loyal (or disloyal) to their peers, supervisors, or even the organization itself? The purpose of this study is to examine the perception of the coworker who uses deception in the workplace.

### *Source Credibility*

Ethos, or source credibility, is a tool often used by communicators during interpersonal interactions (McCroskey, 1971). Andersen and Clevenger (1963) defined ethos as the image held of a communicator at a given time by a receiver, by either one person or a group. The pervasiveness of source credibility is relevant across multiple contexts. For example, credibility has been examined in student-teacher interactions, in the development of media messages, and in the organizational setting (Freeman, 1988; Hubbell et al., 2005; Priester & Petty, 2003).

McCroskey and Teven (1999) conceptualize credibility as composed of three dimensions: competence, caring, and character. *Competence* concerns the ability of a person to engage in a certain behavior (McCroskey, 1971). *Caring* concerns how much an individual perceives another to be concerned about his or her welfare. *Character* concerns the trustworthiness of a source. Although researchers have

examined credibility's relation to various communication constructs (Myers & Martin, 2006; Priester & Petty, 2003; Wheelless, 1974), an area ripe with opportunity for study is that of deception in the organization.

It has been suggested that the perceived credibility of a person will diminish if deception is detected (Grover, 1997; Powers, 1993). Because the information and the source of the information are difficult to separate (McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2002), deceptive information may affect perceptions of the source's character. Additionally, flawed or falsified information may undermine the source's perceived competence and caring. A credible communicator should provide accurate information (i.e., honest communication) and information that has the receiver in mind (i.e., caring communication). Although it may be argued that white lies serve to protect the feelings of the receiver, thus perceived source caring, lying has generally been viewed as a negative phenomenon (Grover, 1997).

Hubbell and Medved (2000) identified withholding as the most acceptable and distorting as the least acceptable form of organizational deception. Additionally, Grover (1997) suggested there may be a relationship between flawed information and credibility. Thus, the first hypothesis was posited:

- H1: Organizational members will perceive their coworker as highest in source credibility when the coworker communicates honest messages, followed by withholding messages, and finally, distorted messages.

### *Power*

Power is considered to be an individual's potential to have an effect on people's behavior (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983). French and Raven (1959) conceptualized power as stemming from five bases: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert. The present study focuses on perceptions of power among coworkers, thus only the bases of power most relevant to peer relationships (referent and expert power) were examined. *Referent* power refers to one's capacity to influence another organizational member based on perceptions that the other can identify with the source and wants to please him/her. *Expert* power refers to a person's ability to influence another based on perceptions that the source is competent and knowledgeable within the organization. Currently, much of the research concerning organizational power examines the effects of power on colleagues or the ability to maintain power over colleagues (e.g., Campbell, White, & Durant, 2007; Pettit, Vaught, & Pulley, 1990; Richmond, McCroskey, & Davis, 1986). However, research is deficient in regard to the specific communication behaviors, such as deception, that may affect the perception of power within workplace.

Previous research regarding power has found positive relationships with prosocial organizational activities. Specifically, Paulsel, Chory-Assad, and Dunleavy (2005) examined power within the classroom. Referent and expert power were positively related to perceptions of classroom fairness. Not surprisingly, expert and referent power are also positively correlated with job satisfaction (Richmond, McCroskey,

Davis, & Koontz, 1980). Similarly, power has been found to relate to tactics of upward influence, including assertiveness and rationality (O'Neil, 2004).

According to Richmond et al. (1980), communication between a superior and a subordinate is most likely to be the most important factor in determining the superior's power and influence. While power in the workplace was previously examined (Richmond et al., 1986), deception and honesty in the workplace have yet to be investigated with regard to a person's perception of power. Grover (1997) linked deception with decreased informational quality, decreased cooperation, as well as decreased trust. Specifically, others were less likely to cooperate with those who used deception. It would be natural to presume that deception would negatively impact a person's organizational power in the same respect. Specifically, distortion deception should be associated with the least amount of power because most people do not identify with or trust blatantly false information. Conversely, people may not perceive withholding deception as negatively as distortion because it is more accepted (Hubbell & Medved, 2000). Withholding deception should be associated with more power than distortion deception. However, honest communication should be associated with the most power because people expect and value honesty in most interactions. Therefore, the second hypothesis was posited:

- H2: Organizational members will perceive their coworker as highest in power when the coworker communicates honest messages, followed by withholding messages and, finally, distorted messages.

### *Trust*

The most accepted definition of trust in the organizational literature (Gill, Boies, Finegan, & McNally, 2005) is "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). Consistent with the approach taken by Ellis and Shockley-Zalabak (2001) and Hubbell and Chory-Assad (2005), trust is considered here in terms of the likelihood that the individual will engage in trustworthy behaviors. These behaviors include telling the truth, keeping promises, communicating accurately and openly, behaving predictably, not hurting others, etc. (Hubbell & Medved, 2001; Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005). Trust, as conceptualized in the present study, is distinct from the character dimension of credibility previously discussed in that trust is developed based on prior relational history with the individual and includes expectations about the individual's behavior. Character judgments, on the other hand, may be made regarding a stranger and involve general evaluations versus evaluations of specific behaviors (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; McCroskey & Young, 1981).

Regardless of how trust is specifically defined, research indicates that trust is an important factor in organizational situations, as well as interpersonal relationships (e.g., Ambrose & Schminke, 2003; Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002; Cook & Wall,

1980; Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Mayer & Davis, 1999). Specifically, in the organizational context, trust has been examined in relation to: (a) work attitudes, organizational commitment, and personal need nonfulfillment (Cook & Wall, 1980); (b) betrayal from the perspective of the betrayer (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998); and (c) performance appraisals (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Mayer & Davis, 1999). Trust has also been studied as: (d) a mediator between organizational justice and work outcomes, such as turnover rate, commitment, work attitude, and antisocial behaviors (Aryee et al., 2002; Chory & Hubbell, 2008), and (e) as moderated by organizational structure (Ambrose & Schminke, 2003).

Although research examining trust appears extensive, the organizational arena is limited in the number of studies focused on deception's relationship with trust. Grover (1997) asserts that lying may negatively influence trust, and that too much lying will have harmful effects on the functioning of the organization. Chory and Hubbell (2008) found that subordinates' perceptions of a manager's trustworthiness and subordinates' tendency to engage in deception with the manager were negatively related. Trustworthiness is distinct from the character dimension of credibility in that trustworthiness is developed based on a prior history of a relationship with someone, and character can be perceived in a stranger without an established relationship (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; McCroskey & Young, 1981). Furthermore, as previously noted, Hubbell and Medved (2000) determined messages consistent with distortion (i.e., totally fabricated) are less positively received than messages consistent with withholding (i.e., truthful information relayed but not critical information). For these reasons, the third hypothesis was posited:

- H3: Organizational members will perceive their coworker as most trustworthy when the coworker communicates honest messages, followed by withholding messages, and, finally, distorted messages.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in the study were 253 employees (54% female, 46% male), with a mean age of 36.29 years ( $SD = 13.89$ , range = 18–94). The majority of participants reported their ethnicity as Caucasian (90%), followed by African American (4%), Hispanic (1%), Native American (1%), Asian American (1%), and a blend of ethnicities (1%). Two percent of the participants did not report their ethnicity. The majority of participants described their job field as managerial and professional (41%), followed by technical, sales, and administrative support (22%), service occupations (15%), precision production, craft and repair (6%), and operators, fabricators, and laborers (3%). The average annual income for these participants was \$36,210 ( $SD = \$25,260$ ), and they reported working at their current job for an average of 8.99 years ( $SD = 10.53$ , range = 1–55). On average, the participants worked 42.66 hours per week ( $SD = 8.95$ , range = 10–95). Participants were recruited using first a snowball and then a network sample. Students in communication courses at a large Mid-Atlantic



university in 2006 first contacted potential participants, and those individuals were also asked to aid in recruiting participants (Granovetter, 1976). Participation was voluntary; however, students earned minimal extra credit for recruiting participants.

### *Procedures*

Participants in the present study were randomly assigned to respond to one of the three scenarios that were adapted from Hubbell et al. (2005): truth/honesty ( $n = 87$ ), withholding ( $n = 80$ ), or distortion ( $n = 86$ ). The scenarios were identical except for the last line, which indicated whether the main character (Chris) was telling the truth (honesty), withholding the truth, or distorting the truth in response to his/her supervisor's question about another coworker. (See the Appendix for the complete scenario.) The withholding and distortion scenarios had previously been validated as plausible organizational deception scenarios by full-time employees (Hubbell et al., 2005) and the honesty scenario was derived from these validated ones. Participants in the Hubbell et al. (2005) study indicated the scenarios were both relevant to the organization and plausible. After reading the given scenario, participants were instructed to imagine that Chris (the scenario's main character) was their coworker and to rate Chris's source credibility, organizational power, and trustworthiness. Upon completion of the measures, participants returned the questionnaire to the student recruiter who delivered them to the investigators.

### *Instruments*

Participants rated Chris's (the scenario's main character) source credibility using McCroskey and Teven's (1999) 18-item Source Credibility measure. Six items represent each of the three credibility dimensions: competence, character, and caring. Participants responded to the items using 7-point semantic differential scales. Higher scores indicated higher perceptions of credibility. Sample items include: "intelligent/unintelligent" (competence), "cares about me/doesn't care about me" (caring), and "honest/dishonest" (character). The scale (including all three dimensions) has performed reliably in studies examining the organizational context (Stephens & Mottet, 2008; Cole & McCroskey, 2003). These studies represent a range of methodologies, from an experimental study of Web conference training (Stephens & Mottet, 2008) to a survey study of college professors (Semalk & Pearson, 2008). Construct validity of the scale was established in a study by McCroskey and Teven (1999). In the present study, the reliability for the competence dimension was rather low. Due to the low interitem correlation, the "inexpert/expert" item was removed from the scale. The reliability and descriptive statistics reflect the five remaining items. The reliabilities and descriptive statistics follow: competence ( $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ), character ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ), and caring ( $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ).

Participants rated Chris's (the scenario's main character) organizational power using the five-item Generalized Attitude Measure (see McCroskey, 2006). The measure's validity in assessing power has been demonstrated by McCroskey and

Richmond (1983) and Paulsel et al. (2005). Paulsel and colleagues used the scale to measure the power of instructors in the classroom. In the present study, the definition of each type of power (referent and expert) was provided, followed by the phrase "Chris has \_\_\_ power" (the given power type appeared in the blank). Immediately following this phrase, five 7-point semantic differential scales with the following anchors appeared: agree/disagree, false/true, incorrect/correct, wrong/right, and yes/no. Higher scores indicated higher perceptions of the power type. Paulsel et al. obtained Cronbach alpha reliabilities ranging from .86 (referent power) to .91 (expert power) for this scale. The reliabilities and descriptive statistics in the present study for each of the power types follow: referent ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) and expert ( $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) power.

Participants' perceptions of Chris's (the scenario's main character) trustworthiness were assessed using the 29-item Managerial Trustworthy Behaviors scale (MTB; Hubbell & Medved, 2001). The statement "I believe that Chris would . . ." preceded the items. Participants rated the items on a 7-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Higher scores indicated higher perceptions of a coworker's trustworthiness.

The MTB items represent behavioral consistency, behavioral integrity, manner and quality of information communicated, and demonstration of concern. Hubbell and Chory-Assad (2005) conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the scale, the results of which suggested the elimination of eight items. After these eight items were removed, results of a follow-up confirmatory factor analysis suggested that the remaining 21 items composed a unidimensional measure of managerial trust ( $\alpha = .95$ ). In the present study, all 29 of the original items were used and the measure's four-dimensional nature was retained. The reliabilities and descriptive statistics for each of these dimensions follow: behavioral consistency ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), behavioral integrity ( $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ), manner and quality of information communicated ( $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = .86$ ), and demonstration of concern ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ).

## Results

The first hypothesis predicted that organizational members would perceive a coworker as highest in source credibility when (s)he communicated honest messages, followed by withholding messages, and then distorted messages. Results of three one-way ANOVAs, one for each credibility dimension, indicate that perceptions of a coworker's competence,  $F(2, 241) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ , and character,  $F(2, 243) = 43.70$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ , differed, as hypothesized. However, perceptions of a coworker's caring did not,  $F(2, 244) = .007$ ,  $p > .05$ . Hypothesis one was partially supported. Table 1 contains the results for all the hypotheses.<sup>1</sup>

The second hypothesis posited that organizational members would perceive a coworker as highest in power when (s)he communicated honest messages, followed by withholding messages and then distorted messages. Results of two one-way ANOVAs, one for each power type, indicate that perceptions of a coworker's referent,

**Table 1** Results of ANOVAs: Differences in Perceptions by Message Type

	Honesty <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) <i>n</i> = 87	Withholding <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) <i>n</i> = 80	Distortion <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) <i>n</i> = 86	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	$\eta^2$
<b>Credibility</b>						
Competence	4.67 <sub>a</sub> (1.38)	4.02 <sub>b</sub> (1.35)	3.87 <sub>c</sub> (1.04)	4.20*	2, 241	.05
Character	5.01 <sub>a</sub> (1.45)	3.98 <sub>b</sub> (1.40)	3.06 <sub>c</sub> (1.17)	43.70**	2, 243	.18
Caring	4.21 (1.33)	4.43 (1.19)	4.12 (1.16)	1.31	2, 244	.05
<b>Power</b>						
Referent power	4.77 <sub>a</sub> (1.02)	4.51 <sub>a</sub> (1.18)	3.97 <sub>b</sub> (1.46)	9.39**	2, 248	.11
Expert power	4.51 <sub>a</sub> (1.17)	4.40 <sub>a</sub> (1.24)	3.76 <sub>b</sub> (1.50)	8.09**	2, 247	.02
<b>Trustworthiness</b>						
Behavioral consistency	4.70 <sub>a</sub> (1.10)	4.00 <sub>b</sub> (1.18)	4.08 <sub>b</sub> (1.08)	6.98*	2, 185	.07
Behavioral integrity	4.59 <sub>a</sub> (1.20)	3.73 <sub>b</sub> (1.33)	3.60 <sub>b</sub> (1.29)	11.26*	2, 186	.11
Manner and quality of com.	4.20 <sub>a</sub> (0.84)	3.76 <sub>b</sub> (0.86)	3.94 <sub>ab</sub> (0.85)	4.12*	2, 185	.04
Demonstration of concern	3.95 (1.10)	3.98 (1.19)	4.01 (0.99)	0.05	2, 185	.00

*Note.* Comparisons are horizontal only. Means with no subscripts in common differ at a statistically significant level according to Scheffé post hoc tests.

*N* = 192 for trustworthiness analyses.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .0001.

$F(2, 248) = 9.39, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .11$ , and expert,  $F(2, 247) = 8.09, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .02$ , powers were higher when the coworker communicated an honest or withholding message versus a distorted message. However, perceptions of a coworker's power did not differ when (s)he communicated an honest versus a withholding message. The second hypothesis was partially supported.

The third hypothesis predicted that organizational members would perceive a coworker as most trustworthy when (s)he communicated honest messages, followed by withholding messages and then distorted messages. Results of four one-way ANOVAs, one for each trust factor, indicate that individuals perceived a coworker as having more behavioral consistency,  $F(2, 185) = 6.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ , more behavioral integrity,  $F(2, 186) = 11.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ , and a more trustworthy communication manner and quality,  $F(2, 185) = 4.12, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$ , when (s)he communicated an honest message versus a deceptive message. However, individuals did not perceive any statistically significant differences in trustworthiness between coworkers who deceived through withholding versus distortion. The ANOVA for the remaining trust factor (demonstration of concern) was not statistically significant. The third hypothesis was partially supported.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the effects of organizational deception on organizational members' perceptions of the deceiver. Previous research has

indicated that employees perceive specific types of deceptive messages, i.e., withholding, as more acceptable than other types, i.e., distortions, in organizational settings (Hubbell & Medved, 2000). As such, organizational members were expected to perceive a coworker who told the truth as the most credible, powerful, and trustworthy, followed by coworkers who withheld information, and then coworkers who distorted information. Results indicated that organizational deception was shown to affect coworkers' perceptions of (a) source competence and character, (b) referent and expert power, and (c) trustworthiness.

### *General Discussion and Interpretation*

There are two major practical findings in this study. The first is that, generally, employees have a more positive perception of coworkers who are honest than of coworkers who deceive. Thus, in an organizational setting, honesty is associated with workers who possess knowledge, intelligence, and skill. These are people who are also considered more powerful and trustworthy. All of these qualities contribute to a positive image that any worker would want to possess.

The second major finding is that in most cases, individuals' perceptions of coworkers who withhold information and distort information differ, suggesting there is a difference between lies of omission (i.e., withholding) and commission (i.e., distorting). Those who fail to offer up information are seen as more competent, as possessing more character, and as having more referent and expert power than are those who distort information. Participants who withheld information were perceived as more acceptable, i.e., higher in character, than were those who distorted information altogether. These results are consistent with those of Kim et al. (2008) who found that in the United States lies of omission are considered more acceptable than lies of commission.

Honesty and lies of omission also lead to perceptions that a coworker is more powerful than do lies of commission. This may be due, in part, to the nature of the scenario presented. In the scenario, Chris was covering for his/her co-worker who took office supplies by withholding information from their supervisor. Perhaps the respondents thought that by covering for his/her coworker, Chris was identifying with him/her. This, in essence, is the definition of referent power, which may explain why significant differences in perceptions of coworkers were not observed between their use of honesty and withholding messages. A similar pattern was observed for expert power. Obviously, a person who tells the truth is knowledgeable, at least about the situation on which he or she reported. Perhaps withholding information is seen as a competent, i.e., expert, strategy for protecting a coworker without damaging one's own reputation through overt distortion.

Unlike the majority of the findings, perceptions of coworker trustworthiness did not differ between lies of commission and omission. It appears that in the organizational context any type of deception damages perceptions of trustworthiness among coworkers. Trust is vital to interpersonal relationships (Emmers-Sommer, 2003), and it continues to be important as coworker relationships develop within

the organization (Sias & Cahill, 1998). When an employee fails to develop close relationships with coworkers, the employee also loses out on access to information that could be beneficial to the occupation (Sias, 1996). Part of coworker relational development can be attributed to the supervisor, who has considerable influence on the climate and the perceptions on coworkers (Dansereau & Markham, 1987; Odden & Sias, 1997; Sias, 2005). In the scenario provided, Chris (the coworker) was communicating with the supervisor. Therefore, when Chris lies either by omission or commission, he/she is lying to the supervisor. Employees may find deception directed towards the supervisor problematic due to the influence of the supervisor, and this may be why perceptions of trustworthiness were lower for those who communicated any type of deception compared to those coworkers who were honest.

While both supervisors and employees assert the unacceptability of deception in the workplace (Lindsey et al., 2008), the present study contributes to the existing literature, which states there are numerous factors that influence the perception of deception in the workplace (Grover, 1993b; Kim et al., 2008; Park & Ahn, 2007; Seiter et al., 2002). In support of Information Manipulation Theory, the present study indicates there are varying degrees of deception. It may, therefore, be an overgeneralization to assume that deception is always frowned upon in the workplace. Instead, it is more appropriate to suggest distorting information is unacceptable, whereas omitting information may be perceived as a useful strategy in organizational discourse.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

The results described above and the failure to observe all the hypothesized differences may be explained by considering two possibilities. One reason the results may not have turned out as expected may be due to how individuals view deception. For example, Kagle (1998) concluded, "professionals should be aware that deception is . . . a common and socially accepted means of establishing boundaries and managing relationships" (p. 244). In other words, employees may choose to lie to supervisors in order to maintain positive relationships with coworkers. The reverse could also happen; employees may choose to tell supervisors the truth in order to maintain positive relationships with their supervisors.

A second consideration concerns the specific scenario used to manipulate deception. It is possible the results were not entirely consistent with the hypotheses because the coworker's behavior in the scenario (character engaged in deception in an effort to protect a coworker from getting into trouble) may have been viewed positively by participants. Although Hubbell and Medved (2000) demonstrated the plausibility of this organizational deception scenario, they did not assess specific reactions to the deceptive character. Future research should consider these reactions or perhaps modify the scenario to avoid these potential confounds.

There are three future directions for this research. First, this study should be replicated with a variety of scenarios. Although the results of the current study provide support for the hypotheses, only one scenario was used, and, as mentioned, its

portrayal of the deceiver as perhaps “covering for a coworker” may have influenced the results. Replicating this study with multiple scenarios would increase confidence that the patterns observed here were accurate representations of how deception functions in organizations.

Second, a more thorough examination of organizational deception following Information Manipulation Theory (IMT) is warranted. As previously mentioned, there are four forms of organizational deception; however only two were examined in the present study. These two were selected because they were considered extreme forms of deception. Now that differences in organizational members’ perceptions due to these two forms have been established, future research should attempt to examine differences among all forms of deception in organizations.

Finally, the long-term effects of these deception-affected perceptions should be examined. A current trend in organizations is to rely more on group work than before. It would be useful to know how group work is affected when perceptions of coworker credibility, power, and trustworthiness are damaged due to deception. Sias (1996) suggests sense-making is an interactive event, wherein several coworkers come together to reach a common agreement about something. It would be interesting to examine how the coworkers discuss the deception and make a determination as to how the deceiver will be communicated with in the future. It is possible this coworker sense-making discourse could even serve as a punishment for the deceiving coworker (Sias, 1996). Some specific factors that may be affected include the cohesion and consensus of the group within the organization. This research could blend the contexts of the organization and small group.

These future research recommendations could not only build organizational deception theory and research but could also help to explain some of the more confounding results of the present study. While the majority of the results supported previous research and logic, this study also demonstrated that deception may contribute to perceptions of coworkers that are positive (e.g., referent power). Future research may provide further results demonstrating the negative effects of deception, and potentially provide explanations for the positive effects of deception in the organization.

## Note

- [1] Initially age, sex, annual income, and length of employment were entered as covariates in all analyses. However, because these covariates did not produce statistically significant differences in perceptions they were removed from the final analyses and report of results.

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## Appendix

One afternoon when coming into the office after lunch, Chris ran into Jesse putting some office supplies into his car. Chris asked Jesse what he was doing and Jesse said, "I really need this stuff and I plan on replacing it after payday." Chris was upset by what Jesse had done and doubted that Jesse would buy new materials. But, Chris decided that it was really none of his business.

On Monday of the next week, Chris's manager asks if Chris knows why office supplies keep disappearing. The manager is very concerned about the disappearing office supplies and asks if Chris knows whether they are being taken by someone in the office. Chris looks at the manager and says:

*Honesty Response:* "Last week I saw Jesse putting some things into his car. He said he planned to replace them after payday."

*Withholding Response:* "You are right. I have noticed that some things are missing."

*Distortion Response:* "I am sorry. I haven't noticed anything missing at all. I don't know what could be happening."