The Effect of Self-Target Comparison in Perspective Taking on Judgment of Dishonesty

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Four studies demonstrate convergent evidence that self-target contrast (vs. assimilation) in perspective taking elicits more negative judgments toward a target seller when the seller’s act of dishonesty is ambiguous. The contrast effect is in part driven by perspective-takers’ self-anchoring of acting honestly (vs. not) in the seller’s situation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The act of lying occurs when people provide others with false information (Burgoon et al. 1999), which, at times, involves self- or other-benefiting dishonesty (Argo and Shiv 2012). Recent research suggests that people in general, consumers, and marketers alike, lie without deeming themselves dishonest, as long as the lie is small enough (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely 2008). People assume that small lies are perceived inconsequential and sometimes unintentional; thus, they can distance themselves from otherwise severe condemnations (Shu, Gino, and Bazerman 2011). In effect, people can then manage or maintain an honest self-concept despite having told a lie. In the present research, we examine an intriguing question through the lens of “perspective taking.” If consumers and marketers both lie, how do consumers judge marketers’ act of lying? More specifically, do consumers apply the rule of reciprocity and tolerate dishonesty to some extent? Or do they dissociate themselves from marketers regardless of potentially similar acts of dishonesty?

In four studies, we explore the effects of self-target assimilation and contrast in perspective taking and their effects on social judgments of a dishonest target. Study 1 used a measurement-of-media approach to investigate the effects of self-target assimilation and contrast on observers or buyers’ attitudes toward a dishonest seller. Study 2 manipulated assimilation and contrast directly and categorized a car salesperson’s dishonesty as ambiguous (vs. blatant). Study 3 replicated the differential effects of assimilation and contrast in a different context (i.e., covert marketing). Finally, study 4 revealed the role of self-anchoring in self-target contrast by measuring the degree of perspective-takers’ vicarious honesty.

The findings contribute to the literature in three ways. Foremost, this research introduces a novel concept, self-target comparison, to the perspective taking literature; and empirically demonstrates the differential effects of two distinct underlying mechanisms: self-target assimilation and contrast. Ku, Wang, and Galinsky (2015) conclude that previous studies mainly rely on “self-other overlap” to explain the perspective taking effects under circumstances where perceivers’ self-concepts are accessible (e.g., Ames, Jenkins, Banaji, and Mitchell 2008; Davis, Conklin, Smith, and Luce 1996). The present research suggests that perspective-takers project themselves acting similarly (e.g., lie) or differently (e.g., do not lie) when compared to a dishonest seller in marketplace exchanges. We conceptualize this mechanism with parsimonious terms of assimilation and contrast. Both concepts refer to perspective-takers’ cognitive activities to consider resembling or diverging from the dishonest target’s actions. In particular, we argue that “self-other overlap” is a metaphorical term describing perspective takers’ mental processes of associating with the target’s prototypical traits (e.g., race, age, profession) at a subconscious level. By contrast, we argue that self-target assimilation or contrast is a context-specific mental projection of how the perspective taker would consciously act given a particular situation. Acknowledging that perspective-takers do not necessarily “merge” self-descriptive traits (positive or negative) with the target’s, will open up new avenues of research.

Another important implication is that we distinguish “elaborative” from “intuitive” perspective taking. We noticed that the perspective taking manipulations in some study designs encourage participants to engage in an automatic, less thoughtful, and pro-target process. A classic example is when researchers ask participants to take the perspective of another person by asking them to “put yourself in his or her shoes.” We argue that while these instructions encourage participants to take the target’s perspective, the semantics of such instructions may prime perspective-takers to align their stances with the target’s (i.e., assimilation) intuitively. By contrast, when the perspective taking manipulation encourages participants to engage in more elaborate thinking, new findings may emerge. For instance, Trötschel et al. (2011, p. 775) asked participants during personal negotiations to “focus on other party’s perspective, such as the other party’s intention and interests in the negotiation.” Perspective-takers were more likely to exchange concessions on low- vs. high-preference issues by identifying the potential of integrative gains (i.e., mutually-beneficial).

In line with these recent findings, this work provides further evidence of the effects that result with more elaborative reasoning, when participants were asked to think about acting similarly or differently compared to the dishonest target (study 2). In particular, study 3 shows that when the degree of taking the target’s perspective was held constant, contrast and assimilation caused different attitudinal responses towards the dishonest seller. In study 4, when perspective takers thought of a particular dollar amount to tell the buyer, those who indicated they would act dishonestly (vs. honestly) appeared to have a more positive attitude towards the seller. In essence, these results together suggest that perspective taking may involve a deeper, more effortful, and more deliberate type of processing. We argue that this process in perspective-taking is different from favoring the target based on easy-to-access heuristics, which appears to be largely influenced by research designs in the literature (see more examples in Hoever, Knippenberg, van Ginkel, and Barkema 2012). Last, this research provides an unconventional approach to examining how consumers react to marketplace dishonesty. Most studies in the literature suggest that consumers naturally guard themselves against deceptive practices in the market (e.g., Darke and Ritchie 2007). The present research shows a less intuitive type of response - when consumers consider acting similar to (vs. dissimilar to) a dishonest seller, they are more inclined to react less negatively. However, this effect appears to be salient only when the sellers’ dishonesty is ambiguous (vs. blatant). Further, if primed to think about honesty, perspective-takers are more likely to experience the contrast effect. As a result, they apply a harsher evaluative standard when judging a dishonest seller. Together, the results from four studies suggest that consumers tend to follow the rule of reciprocity and tolerate dishonesty, but only to a limited extent.

REFERENCES


