

The Influence of Prosocial Lies on College Students' Peer Relationship

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Abstract. A pro-social lie is a kind of well-intentioned deceptive behavior that an individual engages in during interpersonal interactions for the purpose of preserving the feelings of others or promoting relational harmony. As a common social phenomenon among college students, pro-social lies have an important impact on the establishment and development of peer relationships. Through a systematic review of related literature, this study focuses on the dual-action mechanism of pro-social lies in the establishment of peer trust, the maintenance of group dynamics, and the efficacy of interpersonal communication from the perspective of social psychology. The results of this study show that the moderate use of pro-social lies can effectively regulate interpersonal conflicts, enhance emotional ties, and promote the positive development of peer relationships. However, the study also found that the long-term or excessive use of such lies may lead to the erosion of the foundation of trust and the inhibition of authentic communication. This thesis suggests that while recognizing the social functions of pro-social lies, we need to carefully consider their potential ethical controversies and sustainability issues.

Keywords: Pro-social lies, peer relationships, trust, college students, communication, emotional intelligence.

1. Introduction

In complex and diverse interpersonal interactions, language is not only a tool for information transfer but also a medium for emotional regulation and social relationship construction. Lies, as a special form of language, have long been considered the antithesis of morality and trust. However, research has shown that not all lies are negative. Pro-social lies have attracted a great deal of attention in social and educational psychology in recent years as “good lies” motivated by caring, protecting the feelings of others, or maintaining relational harmony. This contradictory ethical attribute makes it an important entry point for understanding college students' social behaviors - especially in the field of peer relationships, which combines emotional dependence and competitive tension, pro-social lies can be both a lubricant and a hidden crisis. The complexity lies in the fact that the boundaries between goodwill and truthfulness are often blurred with the flow of situations: a compliment to ease embarrassment may maintain harmony on the surface, but it also quietly dilutes the sincerity of in-depth exchanges; a concealment to protect self-esteem may consolidate the trust in the short term, but it may lay the groundwork for misunderstandings in the future. When college students frequently use such strategies in an academic competition, emotional support and group collaboration, their behaviour not only reflects the wisdom of individuals to avoid social risks but also reveals the deep game of “empathy” and “honesty” in modern interpersonal relationships! --How to maintain emotional ties while avoiding hypocritical performances has become the core proposition of contemporary youth social ethics. The pro-social lie is a kind of well-intentioned deceptive behaviour motivated by protecting others' emotions or promoting social harmony [1]. The university stage is a critical period for socialization development, and peer relationships not only affect psychological health (e.g., alleviating loneliness), but also directly shape an individual's social adaptability. However, the long-term interpersonal effects of college students' frequent use of pro-social lies in

scenarios such as academic competition and emotional support are controversial: although it may alleviate conflict in the short term, it may erode trust and authenticity [2].

Existing research reveals the double-edged sword effect of pro-social lies. On the positive side, well-intentioned lies can quickly establish a friendly atmosphere, e.g., by reducing team disagreements through “polite agreement” [3]; on the negative side, long-term reliance on such lies may lead to superficial relationships, and the loss of trust when lies are revealed is more pronounced, especially in close relationships [4]. The impact on lie acceptance has not been clarified. This study centers on the literature analysis method and focuses on three issues: 1) the types and scenarios of college students' pro-social lies; 2) their roles in the establishment and maintenance of peer relationships; and 3) the boundaries of advantages and disadvantages in different contexts. By integrating the social exchange theory and moral judgment model, this study aims to fill the theoretical gap and provide practical guidance for mental health education in colleges and universities. This study has important theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the study fills the gap of pro-social lies in the sample of the “youth population” in the study of interpersonal relationships and integrates the social exchange theory and moral judgment model to explore its psychological mechanism. On the practical level, college students are in a period of intensive development of interpersonal relationships, and they are particularly sensitive to the issue of how to deal with “truthfulness and goodwill” in relationships. This study not only focuses on the two-way influence of pro-social lies but also tries to clarify the boundaries of its application in specific cultural contexts so as to provide a basis for mental health education and interpersonal communication training in colleges and universities. At the same time, it has important theoretical and practical significance in the study of pro-social lie behavior of college students, specifically in filling the gap of the population, integrating cultural perspectives and exploring the dynamic mechanism. In summary, as a common but not yet fully recognized interpersonal communication strategy, pro-social lies have complex psychological and social effects on college students' peer interactions. This study will attempt to construct a functional boundary model of pro-social lies and clarify its mechanisms and influencing factors through literature review and theoretical integration, aiming to promote the in-depth development of interpersonal communication ethics and practice interventions.

2. Literature Review

Pro-social lies are unique lies that are altruistic and contain deception [2], the altruism in well-intentioned lies has a greater impact on interpersonal trust and interpersonal relationships than the deception in them [3], and they are usually lies that are used by individuals to maintain the stability of their peer relationships and benefit others, and such lies exist in all parts of our lives [5], with important social and economic effects [6]. Existing research typically parses the characteristics of pro-social lies along two key dimensions: altruistic motivations and strategic considerations. The altruistic dimension reflects individuals' well-intentioned deception purely out of caring for others, typically including comforting frustrated peers or motivating losers; the strategic dimension reflects individuals' skilful concealment to maintain good interpersonal relationships or optimize their social image, for example, selective expression of opinions to avoid conflicts in teamwork.

Social exchange theory, proposed by Blau, emphasizes that interpersonal relationships are based on a trade-off between rewards and costs [7]. Pro-social lies are seen as a strategy to reduce socialization costs and increase rewards. For example, out of a desire to avoid hurting other people's feelings or conflicts, goodwill lies can reduce friction and enhance emotional bonds while at the same time boosting others' goodwill and trust in the individual [8]. However, pro-social lies also have costs. Overuse may lead to distortion of information, reduce transparency, and affect long-term trust building [3]. Frequent lies may erode intergroup trust and lead to emotional alienation. Moderate use of pro-social lies can help protect the feelings of others, enhance interaction satisfaction, and increase group cohesion. Individuals are more likely to choose to use this strategy when its rewards outweigh its costs.

The current study has some limitations. Sample bias: Western studies are dominant, and there is insufficient data on the Chinese college student population. Lack of data on long-term effects: most studies focus on short-term effects and lack tracking beyond 1 year. Scarcity of comparative cultural studies: differences in moral judgments of lies between China and the West need to be systematically explored.

Although existing research has provided a solid foundation for understanding pro-social lies, there are still some obvious shortcomings. First, most scholars focus on intimate relationships or workplace scenarios, and there is still a relative lack of systematic research on college students' peer interactions. Second, most of the studies adopt quantitative experimental methods, with less qualitative analyses combining cultural situations and life-oriented contexts. Finally, the long-term effects of pro-social lies have not yet been systematically tracked in research, especially the potential role in trust structure change and emotional burnout still need to be explored in depth.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Types and Contexts of Pro-social Lies in College Students' Peer Interactions

Academic research has shown that pro-social lies are misrepresentations made by individuals based on altruistic motives [9]. This particular type of interpersonal communication has the important function of maintaining social bonds in real-life interactions. Compared to ordinary lies, their uniqueness lies in their ability to promote rather than destroy interpersonal relationships. Empirical studies have found that in group interactions, participants often tend to use modifying expressions to ease the tension, and such strategic communication can effectively prevent potential conflicts. Emma E. Levine confirmed through experimental studies that false expressions with altruistic attributes can significantly enhance interpersonal trust in goodwill [10], and existing studies further confirm the role of pro-social lies in interpersonal interactions. Role. Especially in college student groups, this type of expression can effectively build a more harmonious social atmosphere and reduce the conflict caused by too blunt words. Appropriate use of communication styles not only helps to prevent social conflicts but also enhances empathy among group members, thus promoting the formation of a more stable and harmonious interpersonal interaction pattern.

3.2. The Positive Impact of Pro-Social Lies

A strong peer relationship depends not only on good communication but also on emotional mutual support, which can play a positive role in communication. It is more appropriate and acceptable than a direct expression of the truth in a given situation [11]. Research has shown that moderate lies are often intended to take into account the emotions of others, especially in close relationships, and can reduce conflict [8]. In social settings, direct expression of true thoughts may lead to tension, while moderate pro-social lies can balance honesty with social needs. For example, teachers give encouraging evaluations to students to enhance their learning motivation, counsellors portray a positive outlook on recovery for visitors to reinvigorate their confidence, and news media moderately downplay negative details when reporting crisis events to avoid social panic [12]. Studies have shown that in some cases, well-intentioned lies can do better for the other person than the truth. Experiments have found that when people say something untrue out of good intentions, the other party tends to gain more financially than when they hear the truth. However, the exact effect is affected by the situation, the relationship between the two parties and the cultural context

3.3. Negative Effects of Pro-Social Lies

Pro-social lies are motivated by protecting the feelings or interests of others. Research has shown that the negativity of such lies not only stems from the ethical conflict at the outcome level, but is also closely related to the psychological mechanisms and situational factors behind the behaviour [13].

3.3.1. Imbalance in trust dynamics

The core conflict of pro-social lies lies in the value conflict between ‘good intentions and ‘honesty’. Despite the liar's intention to preserve the relationship, the recipient's assessment of the liar's trustworthiness decreases significantly when the lie is recognized [13]. This loss of trust is particularly pronounced in relationships with unequal power, for example, when healthcare professionals conceal medical conditions that may erode patients' long-term trust in the healthcare system [14]. Game experiments have demonstrated that even when both parties are aware of the altruistic properties of lies, repetitive ‘good faith deception’ still reduces the efficiency of cooperation, reflecting the limitations of trust repair mechanisms [15].

3.3.2. Psychological and Cognitive Costs

The inherent moral conflict of the liar is another key influence. Neuroscience studies have shown that pro-social lying activates the anterior cingulate cortex (associated with moral judgement) and triggers anxiety [16]. This burden is particularly significant in education: teachers' overuse of encouraging feedback may lead students to rely on external evaluations [17]. In addition, recipients who perceive that they have been deceived may become dependent as a result of misjudging their self-efficacy [18].

3.3.3. Progressive shifts in ethical norms

The normalization of pro-social lies may reshape individual ethical standards. Groups that chronically rationalize “good faith deception” have a significantly higher tolerance for self-serving lies, suggesting a slippage in moral judgement [19]. This shift is even more insidious in collectivist cultures: group pressure may prompt individuals to perceive pro-social lies as ‘necessary compromises’, thereby blurring ethical boundaries [20].

While current research focuses on individual decision-making mechanisms, the moderating effects of institutional environments (e.g., medical ethics codes) and cultural values on the negative effects of pro-social lies need to be further explored in the future. How to establish a dynamic balance between ethical norms and situational needs remains an important topic for interdisciplinary research.

3.4. Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Pro-Social Lies

The effectiveness of pro-social lies is influenced by a number of factors, including the mode of expression, relationship intimacy and cultural context, which determine the acceptability and usefulness of the lie. Research has shown that pro-social lies are more acceptable in close relationships, while they may decrease trust among strangers. According to social cognitive theory, individuals interpret the intent of a lie based on experience and cultural context [21]. When lies are perceived as well-intentioned, their negative impact is reduced; information distortion is more acceptable in high-trust relationships. Social exchange theory suggests that individuals weigh the rewards and costs of lies in social interaction, while self-presentation theory emphasizes that individuals adjust their expressions to maintain social relationships [7]. It is noted that even well-intentioned lies may lead to communication distortion. Studies have shown that pro-social lies are more acceptable and effective in reducing social conflict in cultures that have high-trust relationships and emphasize social harmony. In appropriate contexts, it promotes interpersonal stability and optimizes social interactions. Future research should further explore the mechanisms at work in different cultural contexts to deepen understanding.

3.5. Measures and Recommendations on Pro-social Lies

The rational use of pro-social lies in college students' peer interactions requires a comprehensive consideration of their positive and negative impacts to ensure that their effects are maximized and potential risks are reduced. First, cognitive education on pro-social lies should be strengthened to help students understand their scope of application and impact. Studies have shown that moderate pro-social lies can promote harmony in interpersonal relationships, but overuse may damage trust. Colleges and universities can guide students to seek a balance between honesty and goodwill through

mental health programs or communication skills training. Second, developing effective communication strategies enables individuals to maintain the truthfulness of their messages while avoiding hurting others' feelings. We should also encourage open and trusting communication environments that allow individuals to communicate with less reliance on pro-social lies. Research has shown that in highly trusting relationships, people are more inclined to receive constructive feedback rather than merely seeking comforting lies. By increasing understanding and inclusiveness among peers, the need for pro-social lies can be reduced, making communication more authentic and effective. Finally, there is a need to increase awareness of the negative effects of pro-social lies to avoid their abuse. Although pro-social lies can alleviate social conflicts in specific contexts, over-reliance on them may affect long-term relationship development. Therefore, when using pro-social lies, one should consider the specific situation, the interaction object and the long-term effects in order to realize effective communication and the healthy development of interpersonal relationships.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the dual effects of pro-social lies in college students' peer interactions. Findings revealed that such well-intentioned misrepresentations have both positive and negative effects on interpersonal relationships. On the positive side, well-intentioned lies can serve as emotional protection, helping to increase understanding and strengthen emotional connections among peers. Appropriate use of such expressions can avoid hurting others' feelings and maintain group harmony. However, research has also found that there can be negative consequences if this form of communication is used inappropriately or excessively. In the long run, too much reliance on goodwill lies may undermine mutual trust, reduce trust among peers, and ultimately be detrimental to the maintenance of good interpersonal relationships. Therefore, we suggest that sincere communication should be the mainstay of long-term peer relationships, cautiously supplemented by well-intentioned lies. College students need to develop the ability to make judgments and decide when complete honesty is required and when goodwill expressions can be used based on specific situations. It should be noted that this study is mainly based on literature analysis and lacks empirical data support. Follow-up studies can use questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and other methods to further examine the specific mechanisms of the role of well-intentioned lies in different cultural backgrounds and groups. Through more systematic empirical research, more targeted suggestions can be provided for college students' interpersonal interactions.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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