When the Truth Helps and When it Hurts: How Honesty Shapes Well-Being

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Abstract

Despite honesty being valued in many settings, there is some ambiguity regarding the conditions under which it is beneficial or harmful for individual and relational well-being. We review and evaluate current work linking honesty to well-being. Specifically, we highlight and distinguish associations between honesty and different types of well-being within people, between people, and among broader groups, organizations, and societies. Importantly, we provide additional context that explains why honesty is not universally associated with greater well-being—and how it may even be costly for individuals. We provide suggestions for future directions for moving toward a more holistic understanding of honesty and the ways in which honesty can be used to understand individual and relational functioning.

Keywords: honesty, truth, well-being

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Honesty is a virtue that is valued in many societies. An important component of moral character entails being truthful in one's expressions and communication with others. Further, in interpersonal relationships, we value honest disclosures and feel betrayed when we have been lied to or deceived. Much discussion to date on honesty has focused on its individual components, its philosophical origins, and its contribution to a virtuous life. Yet, despite honesty's central role in our lives, not much is known about the causes and consequences of honesty from an empirical perspective. An individual's honest expression—as well as a target's perception and reception of that honesty—may shape personal well-being and the quality of our relationships in important ways. Thus, understanding how honesty develops over time and impacts our outcomes is crucial. In the current paper, we review the existing literature on the costs and benefits of honesty for well-being. We further propose promising avenues for new research on the effects of honesty on well-being.

The Building Blocks of Honesty

Honesty is characterized by expressing one's truthful thoughts and feelings and ensuring these truths are effectively communicated[1]. Honesty includes truthful and forthright communication as well as exuding trustworthiness to others, such as keeping promises[2]. Higher levels of honesty are characterized by sharing truthful information, not distorting facts, and not withholding factual information. In contrast, lower levels of honesty are characterized by a lack of truthfulness through the omission of information (i.e., lack of honesty) or outright deception or lying (i.e., dishonesty) [3].

Honesty and its components have been conceptualized in several ways. First, honesty can be seen as arising from an individual's disposition, which in turn shapes their honest thoughts,

feelings, and behaviors[2,4]. However, honest thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can arise independent of one's dispositional honesty, such as when an honest person tells a white lie or a dishonest person shares their true opinion. Thus, honesty can arise at a dispositional level but can also vary depending on the situation.

Inherent in honesty is its social nature. Recent models of honesty acknowledge both actors and targets of honest acts and statements. For example, honesty has been conceptualized as having a tripartite structure, including belief-speaking (i.e., communicating what one believes to be accurate information), truth-seeking (seeking accurate information and incorporating it into one's beliefs), and fostering understanding (i.e., promoting accurate information in others)[5]. The tripartite model of honesty acknowledges our influence in instilling truthful information in others. Rarely are we being honest for the mere sake of being honest. Rather, we might do so to make amends, give valuable feedback, connect authentically with others, or be socially valued in some way. Indeed, *holistic* honesty is more than reporting accurate information; it further includes sensitivity to others and the context in which truthful expressions occur (i.e., culture, the nature of a relationship)[6].

Honesty has also been found to be shaped by different factors across the lifespan. Recent research suggests that having a mature set of values—marked by self-transcendence and empathy—predicts honesty in adulthood[7]. Additionally, theoretical accounts privilege social maturity and responsible interactions with others as explanations for how people successfully navigate age-graded social roles. More specifically, the onset of social roles and cultural norms are thought to provide incentives toward social maturity across the lifespan—rewarding authentic behavior, like honesty, in personal and professional settings[8]. Not surprisingly, being sincere, honest, truthful, and trustworthy are among the top most-valued characteristics we like

in other people—suggesting both norms and social rewards to those who embody these traits (as one might expect, being phony, dishonest, deceitful, and insincere are among the least liked traits in people)[9]. Consistent with this explanation that honesty is increasingly expected and valued across life are reports of honesty being higher among older adults and lower among younger adults[10,11]. But few studies exist documenting normative, longitudinal changes in honesty or even studies that explain the origins of individual differences in honesty. For just one example, honesty has also been found to be borne from being secure in relationships[12,13]. Thus, while much is to be uncovered about how honesty develops, it is clear that honesty is valued. But the exact contexts in which honesty is beneficial are unclear—there are likely times when honesty is beneficial and other times when honesty is detrimental for well-being.

The Benefits of Honesty for Well-Being

The emerging empirical literature on honesty[1] has documented several personal benefits to well-being. For example, honest individuals tend to have stronger intrinsic aspirations—including self-acceptance, affiliation, and communal feelings—relative to those who are less honest[14]. Additionally, individuals higher in honesty report greater eudaimonic well-being—including mastery, positive relations with others, personal growth, and meaning in life. However, honesty is often unassociated with hedonic well-being (e.g., life satisfaction and happiness) [15–17]. This work suggests that, while honesty may not promote momentary feelings of happiness or satisfaction, the psychological benefits of honesty may arise through promoting meaning and virtue rather than personal pleasure.

Honesty has also been linked to important health benefits. In a recent four-year longitudinal study of older adults, those who were higher in honesty displayed health benefits including a lower risk of depression, a lower risk of lung cancer, less difficulty with mobility,

and less difficulty engaging in instrumental activities of daily life[18]. These authors and others[19] suggest several behavioral (e.g., less substance abuse) and biological (e.g., stress reactivity) mechanisms that could link honesty to greater health and longevity. Thus, through promoting fewer problematic behaviors and more positive health behaviors, honesty may have a protective effect on physical health in later life.

Research has also indicated that there are several *interpersonal* benefits to being truthful. Honesty is a characteristic that is highly desired in a relationship partner and in relationships[20–22], and honest individuals tend to be more likeable[23] and rewarded[24]. Honest individuals are more socially mindful than dishonest individuals[25], a characteristic that attunes them to people in their environment. Additionally, honest disclosure in relationships can be pleasurable and socially connecting[26]. Honest expressions may prompt a partner to feel trusted and motivated to reciprocate with honest expressions, bringing individuals closer and strengthening intimacy, communication, and understanding[1,6]. Thus, honesty is desired, affiliative, and strengthens relationship quality.

At a larger scale, honesty has been linked to positive outcomes in broader ecological systems, including in communities, organizations, and nations. Within communities, children who perceive greater honesty in their neighbors experience lower levels of psychopathology[27]. Honesty functions in organizations to promote well-being, commitment, and citizenship behavior; further, honesty lowers counterproductive work behavior[28,29]. Within healthcare settings, honesty from care providers about the implications of different forms of care can promote patient trust[30]. And at a national level, being honest in interactions with state institutions (i.e., compliant on taxes and in claiming government benefits) is associated with greater happiness and life satisfaction, with this being particularly true in countries where civic

virtues are valued (i.e., greater punishment of free riders and higher disapproval of ethically questionable behaviors) [31]. Thus, this body of research suggests that honesty may have the potential to promote positive well-being outcomes at the larger societal level within communities, organizations, and nations.

The Costs of Honesty for Well-Being

While honesty has been shown to be associated with improved personal and interpersonal well-being, telling the truth can, at times, have costs. As with many psychological traits that promote positive outcomes, contextual factors may dictate when honesty may undermine well-being[32]. While honestly sharing information may at times may foster closeness, disclosing truthful information can also be difficult, stressful, or induce negative feelings. Indeed, individuals may avoid disclosing honest information to avoid negative evaluations and maintain their self-image and reputation[33]. Additional personal costs may be incurred when being honest about information others do not want shared or do not want to hear. For example, whistleblowers—organization members who report unethical acts to third parties—often face backlash for their honest disclosures and are seen as threatening group harmony and loyalty[34]. As a result, whistleblowers may suffer personal consequences such as harassment, career disruptions, and lower health and well-being[35].

Honestly sharing truthful information may also strain social relationships. For example, unfettered honesty and disclosure can be hurtful to a relationship partner[36]. This may be especially true when disclosing threatening or hurtful information. It is then perhaps unsurprising that lying is common in relationships, with people being motivated to lie to appear kind, to avoid hurting a partner's feelings, to avoid relational trauma, or to avoid punishment[3,12,37,38]. Additionally, the way individuals communicate honest information can incur costs. For example,

honest expressions are received poorly when communicated bluntly rather than sensitively or benevolently[1,6]. Indeed, when people are honest *and* kind they tend to experience greater well-being[17]. Finally, with *whom* we share truthful information can affect our relationships. For instance, honestly disclosing one person's secret to another may foster closeness in one relationship but betray another's trust and elicit gossip[33]. Thus, honesty confers costs when truthful information is shared insensitively, hurts a partner, or betrays partner or organizational trust.

Future Directions

In our review, we provided a description of the current landscape with respect to how honesty is related to well-being. It is important to note that most of the research we reviewed on honesty is correlational (and often cross-sectional) in nature. Thus, an important future direction entails identifying the causal role of honesty on well-being outcomes, through mapping out causal inference processes[39] and relying on a variety of different study designs[40–42].

Importantly, we also noted several contexts in which honesty might incur costs and operate differently across contexts. Moving forward, future research should adopt a more contextual approach to understanding the effects of honesty, including how it changes over time and across situations, as well as the mechanisms that link honesty to different forms of health and well-being[19]. On average, there is some evidence to suggest that people might become more honest over time (at least based on self-reports). However, the average trajectory in honesty over time might not be telling the whole story—some people may never become more honest; some may arrive at honesty later in life; others may become more honest early in life and be honest the rest of their lives. In this way, modeling individual differences in changes in honesty over time can answer the question of whether becoming an honest person earlier in life reaps individual,

relational, and professional benefits later in life, in line with models of social investment[8]. The accumulation of honest behaviors over longer periods of time should, in theory, translate to additional benefits; but this possibility has not been tested in the literature to date. Knowing some of these basic descriptive processes on the consequences of honesty can help provide some practical guidelines for individuals struggling to enact honest behavior in their lives or benefit from more honest relationships.

Examining honesty as a social phenomenon is another promising avenue for research. Much of the research on honesty focuses on the individual engaging in honest expressions. However, recent models of honesty emphasize the *dyadic* or *group*-level nature of honesty in its structure[5] and as a form of communication[6]. Thus, understanding how honesty shapes the well-being of both actors and partners is an important avenue of consideration. For instance, understanding how (in)accuracy and (mis)perceptions of honesty shape well-being could shed light on the relational costs and benefits of honesty. Studies of dyadic social interactions, for example, could help us disentangle the unique actor (i.e., if an individual is honest), partner (i.e., if their partner is honest), and dyadic effects (i.e., if both partners are honest or if their relationship has a lot of honesty) of honesty for well-being. Do the benefits of honesty emerge through honest expressions by actors alone? Likewise, sometimes the perceptions we have about our partners may be more influential than the reality of our relationship. In other words, does merely perceiving an interaction partner as honest enhance personal and relational well-being? Should honest expressions or the mere perception of honesty benefit well-being in relationships, this would suggest that interpersonal accuracy may not be necessary for the benefits of well-being to arise. Or, perhaps, *honest connections*—matches between an actor's honesty and a target's perception of that honesty—may be necessary to promote well-being. That is, accuracy

or shared perceptions of honesty may be necessary to enhance personal and relationship well-being.

Finally, understanding how honesty may be fostered and spread at a group level would be a valuable future direction and have many practical implications for how larger groups operate (e.g., teams, friends, governments, countries). For example, it may be the case that honesty spreads through a social network, whereby fostering honesty in an individual has the potential to spread to each subsequent connection and the group at large. One speculation may be that norms of reciprocity could kindle this contagion as it has been found to be present in deception already[12]. An honest individual may be more likely to be the recipient of honesty as well. Therefore, it is important to study honesty beyond dyads as engendering honesty in an individual has the potential to spread beyond to a community. Relatedly, a promising future direction would be to examine how relational ties may promote accountability for being honest. Given that honesty is valued and group success often relies on reputations, it would be valuable to understand when and how honesty may help or hurt one's reputation within groups.

Conclusion

Honesty is a virtue that is valued—individuals, relationships, and societies seek to encourage and cultivate honesty. While there are real costs associated with engaging in honest expressions—including the stress of sharing sensitive information, the risk of compromising one's social standing, or potentially hurting someone we care about—the current review indicates that there are also many benefits to being honest.

While the empirical literature on honesty is still evolving, findings from the current literature point to a few broad ways that honesty may shape our well-being. First, the current research suggests that honesty is by and large beneficial to our well-being, particularly for our

subjective experiences of meaning and virtue as well as for our physical health. Additionally, honesty is affiliative, promotes relational connection, and creates intimacy and trust in relationships and organizations. Although often positive overall, the drawbacks of honesty occur when truthful information that is shared is hurtful, communicated in a harsh way, or divulges information others desire to be protected. Thus, even when relational partners are telling the truth, exactly what they disclose and the ways they do so might undermine well-being and relationships. The benefits of honesty arise most clearly when people share truthful information in kind and sensitive ways; however, certain circumstances in which the truth may hurt others, or others' interests, may inevitably undermine personal and relationship well-being. Thus, honesty can shape our well-being, for better and for worse. Importantly, the context and ways in which we are honest within our social worlds can dictate when honesty helps and hurts well-being.

Footnote

[1]Much of the research on honesty uses self-report measures. In other words, we often rely on people telling us if they are honest (a questionable assumption, especially for the dishonest among us). A number of studies reviewed in the current paper assess honesty-humility as measured by the HEXACO taxonomy, although not exclusively; other measures also exist. Creating and validating measures of honesty, including self-report and objective measures that distinctly capture honesty, is of the utmost importance in this research. Emerging efforts have proven promising in this regard (see the Truthful Communication Scale (TCS)[43]).

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