The acceptability of lies: A comparison of Ecuadorians and Euro-Americans

Marisa Mealy\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*}, Walter Stephan\textsuperscript{b}, I. Carolina Urrutia\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Central Connecticut State University, USA
\textsuperscript{b}Carolina Urrutia, New Mexico State University, USA

Abstract

This study examined differences between Ecuadorian and Euro-American college students in the perceived acceptability of lies. Six different lie domains were examined: flattery, impression management, conflict avoidance, enhancement of others’ self-esteem, self-aggrandizement, and instrumental lies. Overall, Euro-Americans rated lies as more acceptable than Ecuadorians. In both cultures, lies motivated by a desire to benefit others were considered to be more acceptable than lies that primarily benefited the self. Additionally, lying to the outgroup was perceived as being more acceptable than lying to the ingroup. These results were interpreted in light of the findings that Ecuadorians scored higher on measures of uncertainty avoidance and power distance, whereas Euro-Americans scored higher on levels of independence. The implications of these findings for intercultural relations and future directions for research are discussed.

\copyright 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Lies; Deception; Culture; Cross-cultural; Latin America

1. Introduction

Lies and other forms of deception are pervasive in our daily lives. They are often used as a device to avoid or handle uncomfortable situations. Politicians tell partial truths to make themselves appear to be better candidates. The media often provide biased coverage of current events. Magazines become famous by exaggerating stories beyond recognition.

\*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mealymar@mail.ccsu.edu (M. Mealy).
Children, and adults, escape punishment by lying. In the business world, deception is an all too common practice. In fact, lies and deception are so common that one expert has written that “one cannot adequately understand history, nature, personality, and society without also understanding the nature and functions of deception” (Rue, 1994, p. 4).

One definition of deception states that it is an “act that is intended to foster in another person a belief or understanding which the deceiver considers false” (Zuckerman, Depaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981, p. 3). One specific type of deception is lying. A lie is “an untrue statement made with the intent to deceive” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1994). In other words, a lie is a verbal form of deception.

Western intellectuals have long argued that lying is immoral and has devastating consequences for interpersonal relations (e.g. Bok, 1978; Kant, 1964; Sartre, 1956). These consequences may be very profound, not only for the person deceived, but also for the deceiver. They may include, but are not limited to: ruined relationships, broken business deals, hostility and aggression, and such costs as the hiring of incompetent people who claim to be competent. Judgments of dishonesty may even trigger warfare (Triandis, 1994). Perhaps it is for these reasons that researchers have shown an enduring concern with determining the best way to detect deceit (Depaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985; Ekman, 1992; Ekman, O’Sullivan, Friesen, & Scherer, 1991; Forrest & Feldman, 2000; Vrij, Edward, Roberts, & Bull, 2000; Zuckerman, Spiegel, Depaulo, & Rosenthal, 1982).

Yet, some philosophers have gone so far as to defend lying. The highly regarded English ethicist Henry Sidgwick indicated that lies which create a hedonistic satisfaction for both the self and others may be generally beneficial. Plato went so far as to defend “the noble lie.” According to Plato “the noble lie” referred to calibers of metal in the blood determined one’s rank in life, by stating that it was necessary to maintain the social structure. And Nietzsche confronted traditional moral attitudes towards deception by asking, “Why must we have truth at any cost anyway?” (Solomon, 1998, pp. 1–2). In fact, the more pragmatic philosophers maintain that lying is only wrong when the lie causes more harm than good (Solomon, 1998). Lies may even be considered an essential, even valuable, part of daily life and social interactions (Solomon, 1998; Zuckerman et al., 1981).

In fact, despite the pervasive disapproval of lying, people indicate that they lie frequently and do not feel a great deal of remorse about doing so (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). Why do people lie so easily and so often? Researchers have found that there are a number of factors that motivate people to lie (Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984; Hample, 1980; Turner, Edgley, & Olmstead, 1975). These motivations include saving face, avoiding conflict, obtaining power, influencing social interactions, controlling levels of intimacy (Turner et al., 1975), defending one’s actions (Hample, 1980), and protecting self-esteem (Camden et al., 1984). People also lie to obtain something that they want and to flatter others. Thus, the question we pose in this study is, are some types of lies more acceptable than others and, if so, do the types of lies that are acceptable vary across cultures?

1.1. Cultural differences

Hofstede (1991) has identified five primary cultural dimensions along which cultures differ: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and long/short term time orientation. Of these variables, it seems most likely
that individualism/collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance would directly affect the perceived acceptability of lies.

1.1.1. Individualism/collectivism

Individualistic cultures define people in terms of what they are, do, and have as individuals. The term individualism is applied to cultures where the bonds between individuals are loose: each person is expected to take care of himself or herself and his or her immediate family (Hofstede, 1991). In collectivistic societies, people are defined in terms of their identification with a group and their contribution to the welfare of that group. Collectivists are often concerned about the effect of their behavior on members of their ingroup; they also share resources with them, and feel involved in their lives (Hui & Triandis, 1986). People in collectivistic cultures may also feel that some types of lies are acceptable because of the importance placed upon maintaining harmony in interpersonal relationships. In fact, there are times when deception may not be considered a vice, but rather a social virtue. Countries, such as Japan and Western Samoa, that place a high value on social harmony, may consider lies that are supportive of others to be an essential part of the social order (Solomon, 1998). On the other hand, individualistic cultures may be more accepting of lies that promote one’s own well-being. In support of these ideas, Seiter, Bruschke, and Chunsheng (2002) found that Chinese participants rated lies as significantly more acceptable, in general, than their American counterparts. The authors argue that the collectivistic (China) and individualistic (America) tendencies of the cultures included in the study may have been responsible for the cultural differences.

Because the social ties to outgroups are weaker than those to ingroups, it is likely that people in general feel less compunction about lying to ingroup members than to outgroup members. Here, too, culture may play a role. Triandis (1994) has suggested that collectivists also make a greater distinction between ingroups and outgroups than do individualists. Thus, people in collectivistic cultures might be expected to lie to outgroup vs. ingroup members to a greater degree than people in individualistic cultures do.

One important aspect of individualism/collectivism that may be particularly relevant to lying is independence/interdependence, which taps self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals in societies that are high on individualism are more likely to hold independent self-construals, whereas individuals in societies that are high on collectivism are more likely to hold interdependent self-construals. Those with independent self-construals emphasize asserting their unique identity, appreciating differences between the self and others, and taking care of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). People with interdependent self-construals emphasize harmonious relationships with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For these reasons, it is likely that people in cultures that value independence would find lies that are designed to benefit the self to be more acceptable than would people in cultures that value interdependence. In contrast, people in cultures that value interdependence should find lies that benefit others to be more acceptable than people in independent cultures.

1.1.2. Uncertainty avoidance

Another cultural variable that may influence the acceptability of lies is uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance may be defined as the extent to which uncertain or unknown situations are perceived to be threatening (Hofstede, 1991). In cultures that are low on uncertainty avoidance, deviant behavior is not experienced as threatening. On the
other hand, cultures that score high on uncertainty avoidance perceive divergence from societal norms to be dangerous (Hofstede, 1991). Lies, in general, could be interpreted as increasing the uncertainty of verbal statements. Lying also betrays the trust upon which stable social relations are based. Thus, individuals in cultures that find uncertainty to be anxiety provoking would be likely to rate lies as less acceptable than individuals in cultures that are more comfortable with uncertainty.

1.1.3. Power distance

Power distance concerns the extent to which power-related hierarchies are considered to be legitimate in a given culture (Hofstede, 1991). High power distance influences how social roles are enacted, as well as the display of status symbols and language use (Albert, 1996). Lying may be perceived as a sign of lack of respect in high power distance cultures, especially in situations where the recipient of the lie is in a higher position in the hierarchy than the person telling the lie. Thus, it seems probable that people in cultures that are high on power distance would be more likely to rate lies as less acceptable than people in cultures that score low on power distance.

1.2. Domains of lies

It appears that there are two basic lie domains: those that directly benefit the liar and those that are intended to benefit others. It is likely that lies benefiting others are considered to be more acceptable than lies benefiting the self because they take the needs and views of others into consideration and, thereby, produce less harm to others. In this study, we examine six different lie domains: three that are oriented towards benefiting others and three that are oriented toward benefiting the self. The three other-benefiting lie domains are: flattery, enhancing the other’s self-esteem, and conflict avoidance. The three types of self-benefiting lies are: impression management, self-aggrandizement, and instrumental lies.

1.2.1. Flattery

In order to achieve their goals, people may “butter up” others who can assist them in achieving their desires. This might occur in situations where students want to obtain better grades or when people attempt to get a better position at work.

1.2.2. Enhancing others’ self-esteem

People sometimes wish to make others feel better about themselves or they may wish to avoid making others look bad. Helping others to have a positive self-image promotes positive relations with them. In some instances, doing so may entail being less than truthful.

1.2.3. Conflict avoidance

One reason for lying is to avoid interpersonal conflict (Cole, 2001; Turner et al., 1975). People often weigh honesty against the other person’s potential reaction to unwelcome information. As the perceived negative consequences of telling the truth increase, people are more likely to deceive others (Cole, 2001). This idea was supported in the study by Seiter et al. (2002), which found that conflict avoidance was one of the motivations for lying considered to be most acceptable.
1.2.4. Impression management

People report lying to protect themselves from humiliation, loss of face, or emotional pain (Depaulo et al., 1996). They may also seek to protect their self-image, as well as the way they are viewed by others. Thus, lies for the purpose of impression management are done to create or maintain a desired impression. Although, this impression may be positive in nature, it may also be negative or neutral. For example, some individuals may want to create the impression of being tough.

1.2.5. Self-aggrandizement

People may try to make themselves appear to be better than they really are in order to obtain what they desire. For example, people might be inclined to lie in order to make friends or attract dates (Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1999). Self-aggrandizement refers to attempts to create an exaggeratedly positive image of oneself in the eyes of others.

1.2.6. Instrumental

Lies can sometimes make people’s goals more attainable. For instance, people may lie about the value of something they are selling when they are trying to get a high price for it. Instrumental lies commonly involve trying to get something from others, often by taking advantage of them.

1.3. Hypotheses

Most of the research on lies and deception has been done in the United States (Bond & Atoum, 2000). Yet, there is considerable evidence in the cross-cultural literature to suggest that different cultures may view lying differently. In this study, we will explore differences in the acceptability of lies in Euro-American and Latino (specifically Ecuadorian) culture. These cultures were selected because they have been found to differ in individualism/collectivism, independence/interdependence of the self, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mealy, Stephan, & Abalakina, 2006). We anticipate that in both cultures, people will perceive lies that benefit others to be more acceptable than lies that benefit the self. However, we expect cultural differences within this general pattern. Specifically, we hypothesize that Ecuadorians will regard lies that are intended to benefit others as more acceptable than Euro-Americans because they help to maintain harmony in interpersonal relationships and facilitate relationships with those in power. In contrast, we expect that self-benefiting lies will be regarded as more acceptable in Euro-American culture than in Ecuadorian culture because Euro-American culture emphasizes independence and is relatively less concerned about uncertainty avoidance.

We also anticipate that people in both cultures will regard lies to outgroup members as more acceptable than lies to the ingroup members. Again, we expect that there will be cultural differences within this general pattern. In this case, we expect Ecuadorians to make a greater distinction between lying to ingroups and outgroups than do Euro-Americans, because Ecuadorians are considered to be more collectivistic than Euro-Americans.
2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants consisted of 153 undergraduate psychology students from the Universidad Estatal de Guayaquil in Ecuador (52 males, 101 females) and 130 Euro-American undergraduate psychology students from New Mexico State University (43 males, 87 females). Ethnicity was determined by self-identification. All participants who did not identify themselves as Euro-American or Ecuadorian were excluded from the analyses. In both samples, the students’ ages ranged from 17 to 40+. The mean for the Euro-American sample was 20–22 years old, and for the Ecuadorian sample 23–25 years old. The majority of the participants were between the ages of 17 and 25 (82%). In the Ecuadorian sample, 96% of the participants rated themselves as being middle class. Similarly, in the Euro-American sample 98% of the students rated themselves as middle class. The majority of Euro-American students were gathered from the introductory psychology pool and, hence, had a range of majors. The students in Ecuador were enrolled in psychology courses, due to the nature of Ecuadorian curriculum, nearly all of them were psychology majors.

It is worth noting that most Ecuadorian students have been influenced by Euro-American culture to some degree, through factors related to globalization and the mass media, as well as the emigration of friends and family members. However, for economic reasons few have traveled to the United States. Likewise, few have had extensive personal contacts with North Americans. Thus, it is possible that by employing student samples, this study may underestimate the magnitude of the cultural differences that might appear in studies of broader samples of Ecuadorians and Euro-Americans.

2.2. Measures

All students completed a questionnaire containing five measures: Lie acceptability, Independence/interdependence, Power distance, Uncertainty avoidance, and Demographics. All measures were translated into Spanish by an Ecuadorian and back translated by an American. Before the administration of the questionnaire, the first author compared both translations for accuracy of the constructs, and made adjustments where problems were found.

2.2.1. Lie acceptability

Participants were first provided with vignettes in which a person told a lie. There were 36 such vignettes, which the participants could rate using a 6-point scale that ran from “completely unacceptable” to “completely acceptable.” The vignettes covered six domains of lies including: flattery, enhancement of others’ self-esteem, conflict avoidance, impression management, self-aggrandizement, and instrumental. Examples of the vignettes are as follows: “A person tells a professor that the person thinks the professor’s new book is very impressive, but the person really hasn’t even read it.” (flattery, \( \alpha = .83 \)), “A person runs into a teacher from 10 years ago. The teacher has lost a lot of weight and does not look very healthy. The person tells the teacher that it is really good to see her and that she looks great.” (enhancement of others’ self-esteem, \( \alpha = .80 \)), “On Monday, some new classmates invite a person to a party on Friday. The person doesn’t want to go, but she
says that she is eager and that the party sounds great. The person plans not to go on Friday.” (conflict avoidance, $\alpha = .58$), “A person studies very hard for a chemistry exam, yet does very poorly on it. When comparing grades with some other students in the class, the person says she had no time to study, so the other students won’t think badly of her.” (impression management, $\alpha = .76$), “A person dropped out of college in the middle of her second year, but at a party with a lot of people that the person doesn’t know, the person says that she has a college degree.” (self-aggrandizement, $\alpha = .75$) “A person has worked at a gas station for several years as an attendant. The person has done a lot of different things at the gas station and knows a lot about it, but was never promoted. Later when the person decides to apply for a job as a gas station manager at another location, the person writes on his resume that he has worked as a supervisor.” (instrumental, $\alpha = .69$).

Summary indices of self-benefiting lies (impression management, self-aggrandizing, instrumental) and other-benefiting lies (flattery, enhancing the other’s self-esteem, and conflict avoidance) were created from the measures of the six domains of lies. The Cronbach alpha for the summary index of self-benefiting lies was .87, while the Cronbach alpha for the other-benefiting lies was .90. The same set of questions was asked with respect to ingroup and outgroup members. The Cronbach alpha across all 36 vignettes was .93.

2.2.2. Independence/interdependence
The independence/interdependence scale developed by Gudykunst et al. (1996) was employed in this study. Participants were provided with 29 statements with which they could agree or disagree on a 6-point scale. The scale was composed of two subscales, independence and interdependence. The independence subscale statements included: “My personal identity is very important to me” and “I prefer to be self-reliant than to depend on others.” The interdependence subscale statements included: “I respect decisions made by my group” and “It is important to consult close friends and get their ideas before making a decision.” The statements were balanced and reverse scored as necessary. This measure was analyzed according to its subscales. One item was removed from the interdependent subscale due to a negative correlation with the whole index (interdependent $\alpha = .74$ and independent $\alpha = .74$).

2.2.3. Uncertainty avoidance
An uncertainty avoidance scale developed by Mealy, Stephan, and Abalakina (2006) was used. This scale provided participants with 10 statements with which they could agree or disagree on a 6-point scale. Statements included: “I wish I had more control over the future,” “I think all societies should have clear rules and guidelines for social behavior,” and “I prefer social situations where everyone knows what is expected of them” ($\alpha = .66$).

2.2.4. Power distance
A power distance scale was designed for this study that provided participants with eight statements with which they could agree or disagree on a 6-point scale. Statements included: “Some people deserve more respect than others,” “The older a person is, the more their opinion should be respected,” and “The more education a person has the better they are.” Two items were removed from the scale because of low correlations with the whole index ($\alpha = .48$).
2.2.5. Demographics

This section included questions regarding age, ethnicity, sex, country of birth, and religion.

After the participants completed the questionnaire, they were debriefed and thanked.

3. Results

3.1. Cross-cultural comparisons

First, a Hotelling’s $T^2$ was run to examine differences on the three cultural dimensions included in this study (independence/interdependence, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance). It revealed that there were significant differences between nationalities on these dimensions, $F(1, 266) = 24.52, p < .001$. Follow-up analyses indicated that power distance was significantly higher in the Ecuadorian sample than in the Euro-American sample, $F(1, 266) = 61.57, p < .005$. Uncertainty avoidance was also significantly higher in the Ecuadorian sample than in the Euro-American sample, $F(1, 266) = 5.45, p < .02$. The independence subscale was significantly higher in the Euro-American sample $F(1, 266) = 29.01, p < .001$ than in the Ecuadorian sample. However, there was no difference between cultures for the interdependence measure, $F(1, 266) = .46$, ns. (Table 1).

Next, a 2 (self- vs. other-benefiting lies) × 2 (ingroup vs. outgroup) × 2 (nationality) mixed design ANOVA was employed in this study. Nationality and ingroup vs. outgroup were between-subjects factors, while the comparison between self- vs. other-benefiting lies was a within subjects factor. As predicted, it was found that in both cultures other-benefiting lies were rated as being more acceptable than self-benefiting lies, $F(1, 272) = 217.32, p < .001$ (Table 2). A paired samples $t$-test conducted independently for each culture revealed that there was a main effect for self- vs. other-benefiting lies in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Cross-cultural comparisons for the cultural dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuadorians</td>
<td>3.63 (.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-Americans</td>
<td>4.00 (.54)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

**p < .01.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Cross-cultural comparisons for self-benefiting vs. other-benefiting lies to ingroup vs. outgroup members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-benefiting lies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ingroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuadorians</td>
<td>1.41 (.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-Americans</td>
<td>1.95 (.59)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
both cultures: Ecuadorian, $t(1, 147) = 9.15, p < .001$, and Euro-American, $t(1, 127) = 11.58, p < .001$.

Although there was a significant main effect for nationality, $F(1, 272) = 78.84, p < .001$ showing that overall, the Euro-Americans found lying to be more acceptable than the Ecuadorians. On the $2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed design ANOVA the effect was qualified somewhat by a significant interaction between nationality and ratings of self vs. other-benefiting lies, $F(1, 272) = 5.46, p < .05$.

An interaction between nationality and self vs. other-benefiting lies had been predicted, but the interaction that was obtained did not take the predicted form (Tables 3). In contrast to the hypothesis, the ANOVA revealed that Euro-Americans regarded other-benefiting lies as being considerably more acceptable than did Ecuadorians, $F(1, 280) = 75.69, p < .001$. Euro-Americans also rated self-benefiting lies as being more acceptable $F(1, 277) = 61.55, p < .001$. This result is consistent with the hypothesis that Euro-Americans would regard self-benefiting lies as being more acceptable than did Ecuadorians.

As expected, lies to outgroup members were perceived to be significantly more acceptable than lies to ingroup members, $F(1, 272) = 4.91, p < .05$, but the Ecuadorians did not make a greater distinction between the ingroup and the outgroup than did Euro-Americans.

A $6 \times 2$ mixed design ANOVA was also run to examine the pattern of results for the six different lie domains. Again, it was found that Euro-Americans rated lies as being significantly more acceptable than Ecuadorians, $F(1, 274) = 78.00, p < .001$, which was qualified by a significant nationality $\times$ lie domain interaction $F(5, 270) = 29.50, p < .001$ (Fig. 1).

A second Hotelling’s $T^2$ revealed a significant difference among lie domains across cultures, $F(1, 275) = 34.33, p < .001$. Tests of between-subjects effects demonstrated that the Euro-Americans rated 5 out of 6 domains of lies as more acceptable than the Ecuadorians ($p$’s < .05). The size of the difference between the two countries in rated acceptability varied by domain. The largest difference between the two countries was found on impression management (.96). Flattery proved to have the second largest difference in rated acceptability of lies between countries (.93), followed by enhancement of others’ self-esteem (.71), conflict avoidance (.46) and self-aggrandizement (.22). Ecuadorians and the Euro-Americans agreed in their ratings on the instrumental subscale (.04).

It is also worth noting that the two cultures differed somewhat in the domains of lies they considered to be the most or least acceptable. Both cultures agree that enhancement of others’ self-esteem and flattery are the most acceptable. However, Ecuadorians rated conflict avoidance as being among the most acceptable lies, whereas Euro-Americans rated impression management as being among the most acceptable lie domains. There was also

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-benefiting</th>
<th>Other-benefiting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecuadorians</td>
<td>1.47 (.59)</td>
<td>1.80 (.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-Americans</td>
<td>2.04 (.63)</td>
<td>2.50 (.69)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Cross-cultural comparisons for self-benefiting vs. other-benefiting lies
an interesting difference in the lies that were found least acceptable in these two cultures. Euro-Americans rated instrumental lies as the least acceptable, and Ecuadorians rated self-aggrandizement as the least acceptable.

4. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that Euro-Americans consider lies to be more acceptable than Ecuadorians. These results fit nicely with the findings that Ecuadorians scored higher on uncertainty avoidance and power distance. Lies create uncertainty and imperil cultures that favor hierarchical social structures, so it should not be surprising that Ecuadorians so strongly disapprove of lying.

It was also found that lying to the outgroup was considered to be more acceptable than lying to the ingroup. It had been anticipated that both cultures would make this distinction because lying to people with whom one has long-term, close relationships typically has more negative consequences than lying to people with whom one has more distant relationships. Based on the idea that Latinos are higher in collectivism than Euro-Americans, it had been anticipated that Ecuadorians would make a stronger distinction between ingroup and outgroup members than Euro-Americans, but they did not. Perhaps this was because the Ecuadorians in this study did not place a high value on interdependence as had been anticipated: the two cultures were not significantly different on the measure of interdependence employed in this study (see also Mealy et al., 2006).
In addition, the results indicated that other-benefiting lies were considered to be more acceptable than self-benefiting lies in both cultures. In essence, this may be due to the fact that self-benefiting lies create problems for interpersonal relations and transactions, while other-benefiting lies generally promote smooth interpersonal relations. Because Latino culture is strongly oriented toward interpersonal relations (Albert, 1996), it had been expected that the Ecuadorians would have more lenient attitudes toward other-benefiting lies than the Americans, but the exact opposite was found. The failure to find this difference may also be associated with the finding that the Ecuadorians did not score as high on interdependence as had been anticipated.

As predicted, Euro-Americans had more lenient attitudes toward self-serving lies than Ecuadorians. This finding is consistent with the results for the cultural dimension of independence where Euro-Americans scored higher than the Ecuadorians. Valuing independence may be associated with a greater acceptance of self-serving lies because they are often used to present the self in a favorable light and thereby make favorable distinctions between the self and others (e.g., through impression management and self-aggrandizement).

It is important to note that our questions did not ask people about how often they actually engaged in these types of lies. An interesting question for future research is whether Euro-Americans engage in more self-serving lies than Ecuadorians. Likewise, it would useful to know if people from both cultures actually engage in more other-benefiting than self-benefiting lies.

There were some interesting differences in the levels of acceptability for different domains of lies in the two cultures. In Ecuador, lies for the purposes of flattery, enhancement of others’ self-esteem, and conflict avoidance were among those that were the most acceptable. Self-aggrandizing lies were the least acceptable. This suggests that Ecuadorians place great value on their relationships with others, seek to make others feel positively about themselves, and find lies that maintain harmony with others to be relatively acceptable. Ecuadorians most strongly disapproved of lies that display pride or lying to make the self appear better than it actually is. These results confirm the observations made by others that modesty and humility are highly valued in Latin American cultures, such as Ecuador (Aguilar, 1982; Flores-Ortiz, 1994).

Among Euro-Americans, lies for the purposes of flattery and the enhancement of others’ self-esteem were also the most acceptable domains of lies. For Euro-Americans, lying to create a favorable impression was also considered to be quite acceptable. Euro-Americans find lies that involve taking advantage of others (instrumental lies) to be the least acceptable of lies. This pattern of results suggests that Euro-Americans are most comfortable with lies that make others feel good and that lead others to have a favorable impression of them, but they do not approve of lies that involve taking unfair advantage of others. Thus, Ecuadorians and Euro-Americans appear to find it acceptable to lie to maintain positive relations with others, but Euro-Americans also find it acceptable to lie in order to lead others to think well of them.

The findings from the Seiter et al. (2002) study were supported in a number of ways. In both studies, lies that benefited others were found to be more acceptable overall than lies that were solely self-serving. Additionally, both studies suggested that different domains of lies were not perceived as equally acceptable. However, there is one area in which these two studies differed dramatically. In our study, Euro-Americans rated lies as significantly more acceptable than Ecuadorians, whereas in the Seiter et al. (2002) study, the Chinese rated
lies as being more acceptable than the Americans. Yet, both China and Ecuador are considered to be collectivist cultures in the existing literature (Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1995). This apparent discrepancy between Ecuador and China leads us to the conclusion that other cultural variables may have a more significant impact on ratings of the acceptability of lies than collectivism.

One factor that could account for this discrepancy is that Ecuador scores considerably higher on uncertainty avoidance than China (Hofstede, 1991). As a result, Ecuadorians may find lies, which often create uncertainty, to be more anxiety provoking than the Chinese. Another possibility concerns time orientation. China scores extremely high on long-term time orientation (Hofstede, 1991). The long-term time orientation of the Chinese may lead them to regard relatively innocent lies as being of no great import in the long run. It seems likely that Ecuadorians would have a more short-term time orientation which might lead them to focus on the short-term negative consequences of lying. Another factor that may be important in understanding this difference between Ecuador and China is religion. Ecuador is greatly impacted by the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. As a result, dichotomous good/bad judgments are the norm. China, on the other hand, is officially an atheist country, although it is strongly influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, as well as the teachings of Confucius. In China, beliefs tend to be multifaceted, often encompassing opposites such as yin and yang. Thus, the Chinese may be less moralistic in their judgments of the acceptability of lies than the Ecuadorians.

5. Implications

This study has important implications for cross-cultural interactions. Euro-Americans who are visiting Ecuador or working with Ecuadorians might assume that it is okay to tell “white lies,” or assume that a “white lie,” if discovered, will have few to no consequences for their relationships with their Ecuadorian associates. Yet, there is the possibility that such lies, if discovered, could undermine levels of trust. In particular, Euro-Americans who exaggerate their positive qualities may encounter more difficulties than expected if these lies are discovered because such lies are not considered acceptable in Ecuador. Euro-Americans are also likely to find that they disagree with Ecuadorians with regard to the severity of lies involving impression management and flattery.

Ecuadorians may also encounter problems when interacting with Euro-Americans. Most of the domains of lies included in this study were deemed to be more acceptable by Euro-Americans than by Ecuadorians. By telling the truth, Ecuadorians may find that they offend Euro-Americans, for instance, by not providing flattering compliments when they are expected. In addition, because Euro-Americans tend to perceive lies that lead others to view them favorably as among the most acceptable of lies, when Ecuadorians react negatively to such lies they may find that they make Euro-Americans feel uncomfortable.

This study indicates that culture, the domain of the lie, and the relationship between the liar and lie recipient influence the perception of the acceptability of lies. Future research could profitably examine all of these areas in greater depth. A larger variety of cultures could be incorporated into the research as it has become evident that a clear distinction cannot be drawn between individualistic and collectivistic cultures with regard to the perceived acceptability of lies. There is also a need for further examination of the other cultural dimensions that might be involved in lying. In addition, it would be of interest to examine additional domains of lies that could vary across cultures, particularly more
severe lies than the relatively innocent ones examined in this study. The perceived acceptability of lies in specific types of relationships should be examined across a variety of cultures in order to determine which lies are considered acceptable or unacceptable in specific contexts. Finally, these issues could be examined with respect to the respondents’ telling lies themselves as opposed to evaluating the acceptability of lies as was done in this study.

It seems clear that lying is one of those subtle behaviors where people are unlikely to intuit the existence of cross-cultural differences, which makes the contextual exploration of such differences both fascinating and important.

References


