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Is a Humorous Excuse better than Lying?

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We investigated how cognitive and emotional responses to an excuse affect tolerance of a friend's failure. A total of 277 college students read three scenarios in which a friend gave an excuse for arriving late to an appointment. The excuses included an incredible lie, a credible lie, and a humorous excuse. Participants then rated the perceived humor, credibility, tolerance for the friend's failure, and the emotions associated with each excuse. The results revealed that, compared to the two lies, participants felt more negative emotions and less tolerance for a friend's failure when paired with a *humorous* excuse with a low degree of perceived humor. These results suggested that although humorous excuses are less acceptable than lies, *truly humorous* excuses may in fact be more acceptable, as the degree of perceived humor is positively correlated with tolerance for a friend's failure.

Key words: humor, deception, communication, emotion regulation

Introduction

Generally, people consider lying to be unacceptable behavior (Backbier, Hoogstaten, & Terwogt-Kouwenhoven, 1997; Lindskold & Walter, 1983; Ning & Grossman, 2007) because it violates moral and social norms (Bok, 1978). Despite this view, several studies have found that lying is a part of everyday life rather than an extraordinary event (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Esptein, 1996; Murai, 2000). Though people probably try to avoid lying as much as possible, they may sometimes tell lies. For example, people may tell lies in order to avoid unnecessary conflict with partners, friends, or family members. In fact, people frequently deceive others to avoid conflict in such relationships (e.g., Buller & Burgoon, 1994; Knapp, 2007; Miller & Stiff, 1993). Thus, some lies serve a social function to facilitate interpersonal communication (Saxe, 1991).

Kikuchi, Sato, Abe, and Nihei (2008) found that people are more tolerant to the failure of an acquaintance when the acquaintance uses an incredible lie (i.e., a lie invoking an unlikely

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event) as an excuse as compared to when the acquaintance uses a credible lie (i.e., a lie invoking a likely event), even though people generally consider credible lies to be more believable than incredible lies. The authors also found a strong positive correlation between intolerance for failure and anger. These results suggest that a lie is an acceptable excuse if it suppresses the receiver's negative emotions (e.g., anger). Thus, using a lie as an excuse may involve the process of regulating negative emotions.

Humor has a positive effect on facilitating interpersonal communication (Martin, 2007). Humor also serves to regulate negative emotions (e.g., Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008; Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977) and often evokes pleasant and positive emotions (Martin, 2007). Shiota, Campos, Keltner, and Hertenstein (2004) proposed that positive emotions may play an important role in the regulation of interpersonal relationships. These previous studies suggest that humor may be better than lies in facilitating interpersonal relationships because humor regulates both negative and positive emotions.

In the present study, we examined cognitive and emotional responses to deceptive and humorous excuses and clarified how each affects tolerance for a friend's failure.

Methods

Participants

Participants comprised 277 college students (72 males and 205 females). Their average age was 20.28 ($SD = 0.95$) years old.

Questionnaire

We used a questionnaire that consisted of three scenarios in which a friend provided an excuse for arriving late to an appointment. In these scenarios, the excuses given for arriving late included a credible lie (a lie invoking a plausible event as an excuse), an incredible lie (a lie invoking an unlikely event as an excuse), and a humorous excuse (a lie invoking a humorous event as an excuse). Thus, the independent variable was the type of excuse (credible lie, incredible lie, or humorous excuse). This variable was the within-subjects factor.

Participants were asked to rate a total of 12 dependent variables that addressed cognitive responses (humor and credibility), emotional responses (negative and positive emotions) and tolerance for the friend's failure (forgiveness and punishment). Three closed-ended items were used to assess cognitive responses. One item was designed to measure variables pertaining to the degree of perceived humor on a 6-point scale from 0 (not humorous) to 5 (humorous). Two items were designed to measure variables pertaining to the degree of message credibility on a 6-point scale from 0 (untruthfulness) to 5 (truthfulness) and 0 (not deceptive) to 5 (deceptive). Four closed-ended items were used to assess emotional responses. Two items were designed to measure variables pertaining to negative emotions on a 6-point scale from 0 (not angry) to 5 (angry) and 0 (not uncomfortable) to 5 (uncomfortable). Two items were designed to measure variables pertaining to positive emotions on a 6-point scale from 0 (not pleasant) to 5 (pleasant) and 0 (not amusing) to 5 (amusing). Five closed-ended items were used to assess tolerance

for being late. Two items were designed to measure variables pertaining to forgiveness of being late on a 6-point scale from 0 (unforgivable) to 5 (forgivable) and 0 (unacceptable) to 5 (acceptable). Three items were designed to measure variables pertaining to punishment of being late on a 6-point scale from 0 (no blame for being late) to 5 (blame for being late), 0 (no expression of disgust) to 5 (expression of disgust), and 0 (displays unpleasant nonverbal behavior) to 5 (does not display unpleasant nonverbal behavior).

Procedure

Participants were asked to read a scenario in which a friend provided an excuse for arriving late to an appointment; then, they rated the 12 dependent variables associated with each excuse. They read the remaining two scenarios and rated the 12 dependent variables in the same manner. The presentation order of the three scenarios was counterbalanced and randomized across the participants.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 summarizes the means and standard deviations of dependent variables associated with each excuse (credible lie, incredible lie, and humorous excuse). To test all dependent variables for each excuse, we conducted a within-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the type of excuses (incredible lie, credible lie, and humorous excuse) as an independent variable.

Reliability of dependent variables

Indices of cognitive responses, emotional responses, and tolerance for being late showed good reliability: credibility, $\alpha = .72 \sim .86$; negative emotions, $\alpha = .82 \sim .85$; positive emotions, $\alpha = .74 \sim .95$; forgiveness for being late, $\alpha = .78 \sim .85$; punishment for being late, $\alpha = .83 \sim .86$. These indices were computed by averaging the ratings (range from 0 to 5).

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of dependent variables for each type of excuse

Dependent variables	Type of excuse		
	Credible lie	Incredible lie	Humorous excuse
Perceived humor	0.34 (0.73) ^a	0.64 (1.19) ^b	1.63 (1.66) ^c
Credibility	3.43 (1.04) ^c	2.68 (1.41) ^b	1.34 (1.59) ^a
Negative emotions	1.99 (1.23) ^b	1.37 (1.25) ^a	3.75 (1.18) ^c
Positive emotions	0.23 (0.56) ^a	0.33 (0.81) ^a	1.31 (1.54) ^b
Forgiveness	3.48 (0.99) ^b	3.57 (1.16) ^b	1.90 (1.34) ^a
Punishment	1.36 (1.15) ^b	0.86 (1.07) ^a	2.85 (1.34) ^c

Note. All dependent variables were measured on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 to 5. Means in the same row with a different superscript differ significantly at $p < .01$ using Bonferroni's multiple comparison ($a < b < c$).

Effects of excuse type on cognitive responses

In terms of degree of perceived humor, the results revealed a significant main effect for the type of excuse ($F(2,552) = 111.44, p < .001$). A *post hoc* analysis using Bonferroni's method for the type of excuse revealed that humorous excuse ranked highest, the incredible lie received a moderate ranking, and the credible lie received the lowest ranking ($ps < .01$). These results indicated that humorous excuse was the most amusing excuse. However, average ratings were very low ($M = 1.63, SD = 1.66$). Thus, many participants did not consider the humorous excuse to be *truly humorous*. Martin (2007) indicated that there are individual differences in humor appreciation. This suggests that there is no event or stimulus regarded as humorous by anyone at anytime.

In terms of the credibility rating of each excuse, the results revealed a significant main effect for the type of excuse ($F(2,552) = 173.43, p < .001$). A *post hoc* analysis revealed that the credible lie ranked highest, the incredible lie received a moderate ranking, and the humorous excuse received the lowest ranking ($ps < .01$). Except for the low ranking of humorous excuse, these results are consistent with a previous study (Kikuchi et al., 2008). It appears that message credibility is positively correlated with the possibility of occurrence for message content. These results suggest that there is a positive correlation between possibility of occurrence and credibility as a reproducible result.

Effects of excuse type on emotional responses

In terms of negative emotion rating for each excuse, the results revealed a significant main effect for the type of excuse ($F(2,552) = 391.91, p < .001$). A *post hoc* analysis revealed that the humorous excuse ranked highest, the credible lie received a moderate ranking, and incredible lie received the lowest ranking ($ps < .01$).

In terms of the positive emotion rating of each excuse, the results revealed a significant main effect for the type of excuse ($F(2,552) = 117.97, p < .001$). A *post hoc* analysis revealed that the humorous excuse ranked highest ($p < .01$). These results indicated that humor can regulate positive emotions, but not negative emotions. These results were inconsistent with previous studies (Campbell et al., 2008; Kane et al., 1977). In this study, however, participants might have thought that the humor excuse was not actually humorous. It is possible that a truly humorous excuse could regulate negative emotions.

Effects of excuse type on the tolerance of being late

In terms of the forgiveness rating of each excuse, the results revealed a significant main effect for the type of excuse ($F(2,552) = 234.45, p < .001$). A *post hoc* analysis revealed that the incredible lie ranked highest, the credible lie received a moderate ranking, and the humorous excuse received the lowest ranking ($ps < .01$).

In terms of punishment rating for each excuse, the results revealed a significant main effect for the type of excuse ($F(2,552) = 383.50, p < .001$). A *post hoc* analysis revealed that the humorous excuse ranked highest, the credible lie received a moderate ranking, and incredible

Table 2 Means and standard deviations of the dependent variables for the level of perceived humor

Dependent variables	Degree of perceived humor on humorous excuse	
	Low	High
Credibility	1.43 (1.65)	1.17 (1.46)
Negative emotions	4.16 (0.94) ^b	3.01 (1.20) ^a
Positive emotions	0.49 (0.81) ^a	2.85 (1.38) ^b
Forgiveness	1.52 (1.21) ^a	2.65 (1.28) ^b
Punishment	3.13 (1.33) ^b	2.34 (1.20) ^a

Note. All dependent variables were measured on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 to 5. Means in the same row with a different superscript differ significantly at $p < .01$ ($a < b$).

lie received the lowest ranking ($ps < .01$).

These results indicated that a humorous excuse is viewed as the worst type of excuse. In this study, however, participants might have thought the humor stimulus was not humorous. It is possible that a truly humorous stimulus would be accepted as a good excuse. We conducted supplemental analyses to examine how the degree of perceived humor affects credibility, emotional responses, and tolerance for being late.

Supplemental Analyses and Conclusion

To clarify effect of the degree of perceived humor on credibility, emotional responses and the tolerance for being late, we divided the participants into two groups based on the degree of perceived humor for the humor stimulus. The low perceived humor group consisted of those who had rated 0 to 2 for the degree of perceived humor. The high perceived humor group consisted of those who rated 3 to 5 for the degree of perceived humor. Thus, the independent variable was the level of perceived humor. This variable was the between-subjects factor. A total of 170 participants were assigned to the low perceived humor group ($M = 0.54$, $SD = 0.77$), and 97 participants were assigned to the high perceived humor group ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.69$). Table 2 summarizes the means and standard deviations of dependent variables for each group. To test all of the dependent variables of each group, we conducted a between model ANOVA using the level of perceived humor (low and high group) as the independent variable.

In terms of the negative emotion rating of the humorous excuse, the results revealed a significant main effect for the level of perceived humor ($F(1,275) = 77.01$, $p < .001$). The high perceived humor group felt less negative emotion than the low perceived humor group. In terms of the positive emotion rating of the humor stimulus, the results revealed a significant main effect for the level of perceived humor ($F(1,275) = 322.16$, $p < .001$). The high perceived humor group felt more positive emotion than the low perceived humor group.

In terms of the forgiveness rating for the humor stimulus, the results revealed a significant main effect for the level of perceived humor ($F(1,275) = 50.31$, $p < .001$). The high perceived

humor group was more forgiving of a friend's failure than the low perceived humor group. In terms of the punishment rating for the humorous excuse, the results revealed a significant main effect for the degree of perceived humor ($F(1,275) = 23.61, p < .001$). The high perceived humor group punished their friend more severely than the low perceived humor group.

These results indicated that humor has a positive effect for a friend's failure when the receiver perceives a *truly humorous* event or stimulus. However, humor has a negative effect when the receiver perceives the stimulus as humorless event or stimulus.

To summarize the results, it is possible that the use of humor is better than lying if the receiver considers the stimulus to be truly humorous. However, humor has a negative effect when the receiver does not find the excuse humorous.

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