The physiology of (dis)honesty: does it impact health?
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Research suggests that dishonest acts may be embodied. That is, when a person anticipates or acts dishonestly, the choice or behavior is not only reflected in the mind but also in the brain and body. While recent summaries of virtuous acts suggest that truth, altruism, and fairness confer a suite of psychological and health benefits to the benefactor, we suggest that lying, cheating, and stealing may do the opposite. We review research literatures on the neuroscience, psychophysiology, and endocrinology of dishonesty and suggest that, over time, dishonest behavior may be bad for our health.

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Emerging research is demonstrating that dishonest acts are accompanied by distinct physiological signatures. In fact, evidence suggests that before, during, and after a dishonest act, there are physiological residues evident in the brain, body, and biology. These data suggest that dishonest acts can get under our skin and are thus embodied. When a human experience is embodied, it typically exerts deeper effects on both short and long term health. Here, we draw links among the existing literature on the physiology of (dis)honesty and make the argument that dishonesty is bad for our health. We start by summarizing both canonical and newer work demonstrating the ways in which dishonest acts affect brain, body and biology. We then go beyond the perpetrators of dishonesty and describe emerging work on the physiological impact of perceiving dishonest acts. In summary, data suggests that engaging in and observing dishonesty is bad for your health (see Figure 1 for a summary of evidence connecting dishonesty and negative health consequences).

The physiological experience of engaging in (dis)honesty

Some people live virtuous lives. They donate their precious time to charity, tell the truth, remain loyal to friends, faithful to spouses, and pay their taxes as expected. Other people live very different lives — they take charity when they do not need or deserve it, they lie, cheat, exploit, and steal. While there are some ‘bad apples’ in the world, what modern science tells us is that the road to dishonesty boils down to features of the situation and features of the decision [1,2**]. The structural aspects of our physical and cultural environments that promote dishonesty need to be understood so that we can prevent these forces from encouraging dishonesty. A thorough review with prescriptive advice can be found in [2**]. However, this paper is concerned with the latter feature — the decision moment. At that crossroads, a number of psychological and physiological inputs are rapidly considered including cues from the context, episodic memory, ethics, and feelings — both consciously experienced and labeled emotional states [3] and physiological signals pulsing beneath the skin, which, may or may not be consciously experienced [4]. In this short review, we focus on measurable biomarkers harvested from the brain (e.g., functional MRI differences), body (e.g., heart rate, cardiac efficiency) and biology (e.g., cortisol) along a temporal continuum from anticipation of a dishonest act to retrospective recall of a misdeed (see Table 1 for a list of key terms and definitions). These biomarkers are generally associated with ill health, as illustrated by links to the health literature.

(Dis)honesty in the brain

Recent advancements in technology have allowed researchers to measure activity in the brain when it is engaging in a dishonest act. Along the temporal continuum from anticipation to retrospective memory, evidence suggests there are some functional MRI differences between the brains of dishonest versus honest actors. For example, as a lie is just starting to take shape and before it is uttered, the anterior cingulate cortex tends to be active [5,6*]. During the dishonest act, areas associated with executive control are engaged; the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and posterior parietal cortex inhibit truthful responses and provide working memory resources, while the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, anterior insula, and the anterior cingulate cortex tend to subserve executive control functions [7–9]. Interestingly, the neural regions recruited appear to be moderated by lie-type. For example, spontaneous-isolated lies disproportionately recruit regions such as the anterior cingulate, extending into the left premotor cortex, the left precentral gyrus, the right precentral/postcentral gyrus, and the right cuneus. By contrast, memorized-scenario lies recruit only the right anterior middle frontal gyrus [10]. After a dishonest act occurs, electroencephalography (EEG) recordings can
indicate the recollection of lie-relevant stimuli [11]. Specifically, researchers used a paradigm in which participants lie or tell the truth about having been previously exposed to a stimulus, finding that the P300 component of the event-related potential in EEG brain waves revealed when a participant had actually seen a stimulus previously — even when they insisted they did not [12*,13]. In general, however, not a great deal of research has investigated links between dishonesty and the brain. For a thorough review and description of good future directions, see Sip and colleagues [14].

While the study of dishonesty and the brain requires additional attention, a synthesis of the results to date make it clear that executive control regions tend to be engaged and taxed when telling lies. Generally speaking, depleting precious cognitive resources debilitates the ability to effectively use cognitive resources for other purposes including the down-regulation of stress and up-regulation of other healthy, homeostasis-preserving parasympathetic responses — especially after a lifetime of chronic attempts at regulation [15]. In addition, suppression of these regions has been associated with decreases in empathic responding [16**].

(Dish)honesty in the body
Acts of (dish)honesty also leave their mark on the way in which our bodies and internal physiology work. Deep links between virtuous behavior and the human mind and body suggest that acts of (dish)honesty are embodied. That is, when a person anticipates or engages in a moral or dishonest act, it is reflected in embodied ways such as changes in heart rate, respiration rate, and skin conductance. Changes in these physiological markers can directly impact health. For example, when we engage in small acts of honesty or virtue, our positive emotions surge [17] which can serve to down-regulate disorders of hyperarousal such as anxiety [18]. Such acts can also lead directly to health benefits such as lower blood pressure and increased longevity [19,20,21**,22**]. Brown and colleagues [23] suggest that the release of the hormone oxytocin (OT) may be one mechanism through which acts of virtue promote health by reducing levels of corticosteroids and blood pressure [24*].

In contrast with acts of virtue, dishonesty is generally associated with negative physiological changes. Early scientific explorations of how physiology could reveal a liar were focused on the ‘polygraph’ — a combination of physiological measures, usually including skin conductance, blood pressure, and respiration rate, during a structured deception interview. Popular question techniques include the Comparison Question Technique (CQT) [25**] and the Guilty Knowledge Test (GKT) [26]. Both compare physiological reactivity to crucial questions about the transgressions as compared to reactivity to baseline arousal. Generally, telling lies is associated with heightened arousal, resulting in increased skin conductance and slower skin conductance recovery, increased blood pressure, heart rate acceleration, respiration rate, and pupil dilation [27–29]. Chronically elevated heart rate and blood pressure can lead to higher C-Active Protein, thyroid disorder, diabetes and other indices of metabolic syndrome [30].
(Dis)honesty in biology

Links between the neuroendocrine system and (dis)honesty are just beginning to emerge. One neuroendocrine hormone, testosterone, appears to be linked to a number of behaviors directly or indirectly related to (dis)honesty. Testosterone is an anabolic, or ‘cell building’ hormone that is present in both of the sexes. Generally speaking, research in behavioral endocrinology suggests that freely available testosterone is associated with diminished sensitivity to the affective signals which facilitate pursuit of empathic behaviors and choices [31**,32*,33*]. Carney and Mason [34*] showed that MBA students higher on daily levels of testosterone were more likely to endorse murdering someone directly (with their bare hands) or indirectly as long as it would save other lives. Other research shows that testosterone is linked to a higher tolerance for risk [35] and an insensitivity to punishment [36**] which could further encourage dishonest acts. In fact, testosterone has also been found to encourage pursuit of antisocial strategies such as rule violations and antisocial behavior [37**].

Another kind of testosterone — the kind that is present as a baby is developing in the womb — is linked to a number of dishonest behaviors. Specifically, high levels of testosterone exposure in utero, mediated by hyper-masculine facial features, predicts sexual infidelity [38], aggression [39], exploitation [40], and cheating and deception [41*].

Cortisol too, has links to dishonesty. Cortisol is a catabolic (i.e., cell ‘breaking-down’) hormone with links to chronic stress, systemic inflammation, increase in CRP, cellular death and generally poor primate (human and non-human) health [42,43]. While cortisol is part of an adaptive system supporting mobilization — especially in the face of a threat — chronically elevated or poorly regulated cortisol is detrimental to health. Dishonest acts such as deception are linked to increases in cortisol. Specifically, liars experience stronger cortisol reactivity than truth-tellers when verbally recounting a potential transgression [44,45]. Also, cortisol mediated the relationship between experimentally manipulated unfairness and unethical behavior, with higher levels of cortisol associated with greater likelihood of retaliatory, unethical behavior [46**].

On the basis of accumulating evidence that links freely available hormones to dishonesty, a recent study has also examined whether testosterone and cortisol can jointly
influence one’s likelihood of engaging in dishonest acts [47**]. The endocrine profile that maximizes the likelihood of dishonesty was a combination of high testosterone coupled with high cortisol.

The detrimental physiological effect of merely observing (dish)honesty

It is easy to imagine that dishonest acts can leave an unhealthy mark on one’s brain, body, and biology. But our dishonest acts do not happen in a vacuum — others around us see us cheat and steal. Are merely passive observers victimized by our dishonest actions? Emerging research suggests the answer to that question is ‘yes.’ ten Brinke et al. [48**] demonstrate that merely viewing someone lying about not having committed a murder (versus telling the truth) causes two distinct physiological changes: increases in arousal as evidenced by upward shifts in electrodermal activity (EDA) and decreases in cardiac efficiency as evidenced by blood flowing away from the periphery in a threat-like reaction. The adaptive utility of such a reaction is to send the blood to the heart and other vital organs because these physiological responses signal to the observer there is a danger in the environment. Both increases in EDA and vasoconstriction are associated directly and indirectly to negative health outcomes as described previously. More generally, the negative physiological reaction occurring in the (dish)honest actor may be contagious to observers. Indeed, recent research suggests that physiological stress responses are contagious also [49†]. As such, the negative health effects of a dishonest actor may extend far beyond his or her own body.

Conclusion: dishonesty (acting and perceiving) is bad for your health

On one hand, telling the truth, being altruistic, acting fairly and being generally other-oriented are virtues directly linked to a suite of positive health outcomes such as: better health and physical wellness, lower stress, decreased cellular aging, increased psychological well-being and longevity of life. On the other hand, lying, being selfish, cheating, and engaging in infidelity are associated with a suite of negative health outcomes such as elevated heart rate, increased blood pressure, vasoconstriction, elevated cortisol, and a significant depletion of the brain regions needed for appropriate emotional and physiological regulation. The direct downstream consequences from dishonesty on long-term damage to brain, body, and biology is unknown; however, a great deal of research exists already suggesting strongly that events causing bio-insult in the short term inevitably result in longer-term damage. We invite future research that directly examines the long-term effects of dishonesty on health.

Conflict of interest

None of the authors have a conflict of interest with any of the research described in this review paper nor with this paper more generally.

References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest


The authors propose two approaches to mitigating unethical behavior — values-oriented (by reminding individuals of their moral values) and structure-oriented (by reshaping the structure of the incentive, decision, or task). They call for integrative strategies to combine the strengths of both approaches.


In a review of the extant research, Langleben writes in favor of a future for fMRI-based lie detection. In general, research implicates prefronto-parietal brain regions in deception. However, caution is warranted in the practical implication of these results to individual cases since invalid interpretation of the data, or successful countermeasures may contribute to miscarriages of justice.


Utilizing electrodes attached to the scalp, the amplitude of P300 brainwaves can be measured; these waves are generally associated with recognition of meaningful stimuli. The authors use this technology to correctly identify whether participants had been previously exposed to stimuli (i.e., number strings). Even when instructed to deny having seen the stimuli in the past, P300 waves in response to previously viewed number strings revealed liars 87% of the time.


This paper reviews the links between altruistic emotions and behavior and positive health outcomes. Research suggests that people who experience compassion and help others (e.g., by volunteering) report improved well-being, health, and longevity. In this paper, we posit the opposite— • that dishonesty negatively affects health, through some of the same mechanisms by which altruism improves health.


The authors provide a meta-analysis of the accuracy of electrodetection responses to guilty knowledge testing. The average effect size was large (d = 1.55), but there was considerable variation across studies and several moderating variables were identified. For example, the type of lie (e.g., denying personal information versus involvement in a mock crime) and the subject’s motivation (high versus low), both affect accuracy.


35. Coates JM, Herbert J: Endogenous steroids and financial risk • taking on a London trading floor. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A 2008, 105:6167-6172 http://dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0704025105. This study tracked 17 male traders’ steroid hormones over eight working days. On days of higher morning testosterone, traders made greater financial returns for the rest of the day, as compared to lower testosterone days. Trading losses and the volatility of the market predicted a trader’s cortisol rises.


Using physical traits linked to in utero testosterone exposure, such as the facial width-to-height ratio, this research showed that men with wider faces are more likely to deceive their counterparts in a negotiation, and are more likely to cheat for financial gains.


Across three studies that measured cortisol reactivity, the authors provide new evidence that having psychological power leads to a reduction in the stress response, as reflected in the increase in cortisol levels. In a study
that manipulated both a sense of power (high-power versus low-power) and the veracity of statement (telling lies versus truth), they found that liars had a greater cortisol reactivity than truth-tellers, and this cortisol reactivity was more pronounced for low-power individuals than high-power individuals.

45. ten Brinke LKP, Carney DR: Telling lies in scarce environments. 2015 http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.02.001: (under review).


