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Review

Professions, honesty, and income

Kelly A. Nault¹ and Stefan Thau²**Abstract**

Professional choices influence valued outcomes such as income, life satisfaction, and social status. However, public opinion polls consistently illustrate that an individual's profession also influences how honest one is perceived to be, and people are motivated to see themselves as honest for many reasons. Why would people choose professions that do not confer them with the benefits of honesty? Survey data reveals honesty perceptions to positively correlate with a profession's conferred prestige (i.e., perceived value to society) and negatively correlate with a profession's annual income. The tradeoff between income and honesty perceptions suggests a wage differential mechanism—employees may maintain a positive self-concept through increased income which compensates for costs incurred by working in a profession characterized by low honesty.

Addresses¹ IE Business School, Spain² INSEAD, SingaporeCorresponding author: Nault, Kelly A. (kelly.nault@ie.edu)**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2022, 47:101403This review comes from a themed issue on **Honesty and Deception**Edited by **Maurice E. Schweitzer** and **Emma Levine**For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

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Keywords

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The choice of a profession, “a vocation or career, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification” [1], is perhaps one of the most consequential choices adults make in their lives. Professions influence highly valued outcomes such as income, life satisfaction, power, and social status [2,3], with higher-paid professions generally leading to better outcomes and lower-paid professions to poorer ones [4,5]. Most research in organizational and social psychology has focused on the negative experiences of some professions that are generally poorly paid, such as greater rates of

burnout and stress amongst teachers and nurses [6,7]. Research has also highlighted the positive experiences of higher-paid professions such as business executives who are seen as highly capable of achieving desired goals [8], and who enjoy greater status [9] and well-being [10]. Collectively, this research suggests that high- (versus low-) income professions are invariably superior in their ability to confer benefits onto their members.

For decades, public opinion polls (e.g., Gallup, Ipsos, Pew Research) have suggested that a person's choice of profession leads others to perceive them as more or less honest. For example, in 2021, eight in ten Americans (81%) rated nurses to be highly honest, with only one in ten (9%) rating members of Congress to be equally honest. Honesty, defined as “truthfulness, sincerity, or frankness” [11], is fundamental to maintaining a positive self-concept [12–14]. People want to think of themselves as honest because honesty is strongly valued in society; honest behavior gets rewarded, and dishonesty punished. In addition, being seen as honest can have far-reaching effects on individuals' social and economic outcomes because honest people are seen as trustworthy [15]. Therefore, maintaining an appearance of honesty is critical for both how individuals see themselves, as well as how others view them.

Studies have begun to acknowledge differences in honesty perceptions based on membership in a particular profession, yet little is known about how members of low-honesty professions cope with this disadvantage [e.g., 16]. In this paper we provide an overview of the role honesty plays in society, highlight unanswered puzzles present in the current literature, and review relationships between different professions and the levels of honesty, income, and prestige afforded to them. We conclude by identifying promising avenues for future research.

Honesty in society

Honesty is a universally valued moral virtue [17,18]. Parents teach their children to “tell the truth,” religions teach their members that they should not lie, and laws punish dishonest citizens with fines and jail time for crimes such as perjury and fraud [19,20]. The ubiquity of honesty as a value in society makes it important for people to see themselves as honest [12,13]. Individuals actively work to maintain beliefs of themselves as honest because it is fundamental to viewing oneself as a “good”

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person [13,21–23]. Thus, perceiving oneself as honest provides psychological benefits to individuals.

In addition, honesty leads to positive social consequences. Honesty signals trustworthiness [24–26], which helps reduce transaction costs [27,28] as well as increase cooperative behavior and deference to authority [29–32]. Trust also influences key outcomes for individuals because it is an avenue by which individuals can increase the quality and types of relationships and networks, or their social capital [33]. High social capital is positively correlated with personal well-being and economic development [34]. Notably, trust differences between people of high versus low socioeconomic status are reported to lead to economic inequality [35]. This suggests that, via trust, perceptions of honesty lead to both social and economic benefits.

Profession-based honesty differences are critical to identify and understand because they can influence how individuals view themselves, as well as predict how the public interacts with and responds to members of these professions. Professions are a key trait by which we identify ourselves [36], and the profession to which one belongs is frequently shared in social interactions [37]. Therefore, one's profession becomes a salient characteristic by which observers make inferences about an individual's honesty.

Existing puzzles in the literature

The knowledge that membership in different professions influences perceived honesty begs two key questions. First, what leads certain professions to be seen as highly honest and others not? Past research claims that those with a higher income are stereotyped as less honest [38–40]. However, unacknowledged in previous literature is that high-earning professionals such as medical doctors and pharmacists repeatedly garner high honesty perceptions, while lower earning professions such as state officeholders are rated as very dishonest [41]. What explains this variance? Why don't all low-income employees similarly enjoy high honesty perceptions and high-income employees low honesty perceptions?

Second, given that dishonesty can lead to negative consequences such as low trust, as well as decreased help and increased anger and frustration from others [42–45], why do individuals in professions such as those of politician and advertising practitioner continue to enter and remain in dishonest professions when their skills and level of education should provide them the freedom to choose an alternative? Following this, do individuals engage in tradeoffs between the benefits and detriments of specific professions? Research on “dirty” and “high-risk” jobs suggests that undesirable working conditions are buffered by benefits like positive work-group cultures and higher incomes [46,47]. Similarly,

high-responsibility jobs, which can lead to increased stress levels [48], often merit greater occupational prestige [49], a measure that reflects an occupation's perceived status in and value to society. These tradeoffs might create a market equilibrium that ensures a supply of workers into these jobs [47]. Given this, how are members of low honesty professional groups compensated so that they remain within the profession? Specifically, do individuals in low honesty professions benefit from greater annual income or prestige?

Determinants of category-based honesty perceptions

To answer these questions, we begin by examining how honesty perceptions are formed. Individuals are motivated to evaluate the honesty of others. Honesty is used as a signal of a person's underlying moral character, and therefore helps to determine whether someone is a “good” or a “bad” person [50–52]. Various sources of information are used to determine another's honesty. For example, congruency between a target's perceived attitude and emotions [53] and a target's nonverbal gestures (e.g., hand over heart, smile) [54,55] affect honesty perceptions. These characteristics, however, require personal knowledge about individuals which is not always available. Thus, observers must rely on alternative information when forming impressions of unknown others.

In such low-information instances, people rely on social categories and roles to determine the character of unknown others quickly and efficiently [56]. Specifically, knowledge about individuals' superficial characteristics (e.g., gender, race, profession) help observers categorize these individuals. Stereotypes about such groups subsequently shape perceptions and evaluations of target individuals [57–59]. For example, Gunia and Levine [60] find that observers make inferences about individuals' selling orientation, their likelihood of engaging in deception to benefit themselves, based on their occupational membership. In addition, knowledge about barriers to entry into specific groups and roles help shape our perceptions of others. When considering group membership in different professions, the educational and administrative requirements associated with for example, becoming and maintaining one's status as a doctor, lawyer, or politician may influence the characteristics we confer on members of these professions [57]. Thus, individuals are likely to rely on membership in a profession when making inferences about unknown others.

Profession-based differences in honesty perceptions

Honesty is particularly pertinent when interacting with professionals because it can help reduce exploitation in contexts of asymmetrical information [61] and reduce

monitoring costs associated with distrust in dishonest individuals [62]. Because we often engage with professionals specifically because of their relative expertise (e.g., their superior knowledge of medical or legal systems), believing that these professions are passing along honest information is central to creating productive interactions between professionals and consumers.

Past studies examining dishonesty in professions provide compelling evidence for our use of this categorization in characterizing unknown individuals. Specifically, experimental research [60] suggests that professions perceived to have high “selling-orientations,” whereby members prioritize their own outcomes over customers’ outcomes, are associated with perceptions of deception. This is because individuals in these professions are believed to communicate inaccurate information to their customers to obtain better outcomes for themselves. Members of these professions are therefore seen as trading off between helping themselves and being honest—the more “selling-oriented” a profession is, the less honest members of the profession are perceived to be. Selling-orientation is attributed not only to salespeople, but also to a wide variety of professions such as advertisers and investment bankers, whereas doctors, engineers, and professors are perceived to be low on this dimension.

In addition, providing evidence for the personal ramifications of profession-based honesty stereotypes, Pitesa et al. [16] examine the consequences of salespeople’s self-perceived honesty. Across multiple studies, they observe that these professionals view themselves to be dishonest due to their need to communicate insincere information. Low honesty perceptions of themselves lead them to see others as less trustworthy. This finding suggests that membership in a low honesty profession can affect one’s own self-concept and have behavioral consequences for social interactions.

Given these findings, it is likely that profession-based honesty perceptions are at least partly due to diverging perceptions of whether individuals will prioritize their own outcomes over others’. This adds complexity to previous views of honesty that suggest professions that grant similar salaries (e.g., doctor, politician), or those that require comparable educational or administrative merits (e.g., teacher, advertising executive), would be conferred similar levels of honesty. Instead, reported honesty perceptions are observed to be high for professions such as nurse, medical doctor, and teacher. These are categorized as helping professions [63], and thus in their nature is an assumption that others’ needs will be put above one’s own. Conversely, positions in advertising, banking, and politics are stereotyped as requiring persuading others to progress one’s own self-interest. Our review of the literature thus suggests that individuals consider the

likelihood of professionals’ self-prioritization when determining the honesty of these individuals.

Compensating for low honesty perceptions

As aforementioned, negative consequences can stem from perceptions of low honesty such as a negative self-concept and low trust [13,24–26], and dishonest individuals are observed to, in turn, trust others less [16]. Therefore, the question remains regarding why highly skilled and educated professionals choose to enter and remain in professions perceived to be dishonest, given the negative effects of doing so. A review of U.S. survey data between the years of 1997 and 2021 allowed us to explore whether tradeoffs between honesty, income, and occupational prestige help explain why low honesty professions remain desirable. (See Supplemental Material for more information on these data sources as well as data and syntax files used for analyses.) We focus on income and occupational prestige, the perceived social status of an occupation, because of their role in providing tangible benefits to individuals, such as greater happiness and health [4,5,64,65]. Higher income represents a resource with which individuals can directly gain access to desired outcomes (e.g., better medical care). Higher prestige gives individuals social status and reflects a job’s value to society [66], which can lead to higher self-esteem and more favorable social interactions [67,68]. Thus, these benefits may compensate for the detriments of being a member of a dishonest profession.

The data reveal key relationships between honesty, income, and prestige. We observe income and trust to be negatively related ($\beta = -.28$), and prestige and trust to be positively related ($\beta = .48$). These associations are similar in magnitude to correlations found in secondary data surveying U.S. and international respondents between, for example, education and income ($\beta = .33$) and being of male gender and income ($\beta = .29$), as well as associations between social capital, a strong correlate of honesty, and well-being (β ’s between .27 and .85) [69–71]. The positive relationship between prestige and honesty is consistent with past research citing positive effects of prestige on social capital [72], and positive correlations between the perceived competence and warmth of members of different professions, which encompass the traits of prestige and honesty, respectively [73]. In addition, consistent with past research on the negative association between personal income and honesty perceptions [38–40], professions with higher median wages garner lower honesty perceptions.

In addition, the data suggest that the tradeoff between honesty and income is somewhat larger for individuals in low versus high prestige positions. A one unit decrease in the percentage of people who believe a given profession is honest leads to an estimated \$335.10 increase

in annual income. For example, between 1998 and 2018, stockbrokers (a low prestige, low honesty profession) earned on average \$82,939.33 annually, whereas chiropractors (a similarly low prestige, yet high honesty profession) earned only \$65,103.33 annually. Additionally, those in high prestige/low honesty professions are observed to earn more than those in high prestige/high honesty professions; a one unit decrease in the percentage of people who believe a given profession is honest leads to an estimated \$173.67 increase in annual income. This is evident when taking a high prestige/low honesty profession such as that of business executive (\$56,744.29 average annual wage) and comparing it to the high prestige/high honesty profession of high school teacher (\$52,148.33 average annual wage).

These data are suggestive of a phenomenon by which professionals trade off honesty for income, especially in low-prestige professions. Increased income may be beneficial for two reasons. First, individuals may use greater income to compensate for the inconveniences of working in a profession believed to be dishonest, for example, the increased transaction and monitoring costs needed to effectively conduct business [27,28,62]. Second, individuals may consider their relatively high income level as evidence to maintain a positive self-concept. Research on contingent self-worth [74–76] suggests that successes and failures within a specific domain influence one's self-esteem to the extent that an individual believes that domain to be indicative of worth. Thus, for those viewing salary as a signal of personal value, higher incomes may be used as evidence of self-worth, offsetting any negative feedback stemming from membership in a profession characterized by low honesty.

Clearly, these data are correlational and are focused on only a small subset of all professions. We consider them suggestive of a trade-off mechanism enabling people to maintain a positive self-concept, but future research employing experimental designs to examine this effect is needed to test this possibility in a causal manner. We acknowledge the difficulty of doing so, given the structural dissimilarity between making choices in the lab versus those naturally occurring.

Future research directions

This review highlights the differences in honesty attributed to members of varied professions and reveals a potential wage differential process by which people maintain their positive self-concept within professions characterized by low honesty. These findings pave the way for future research on the relationships between honesty, prestige, and income. First, given the observed negative relationship between income and honesty, future studies examining who suffers the consequences of low honesty (e.g., employees, consumers) as well as

how employees maintain positive self-concepts in professions characterized by dishonesty would be helpful to better understand members' experiences. Research suggests that individuals engage in varied self-protection strategies (e.g., self-affirmation, reframing work actions more positively, overreporting competence) to restore positive self-evaluations when experiencing threat [77–79]. Identifying whether and when professionals develop and employ coping mechanisms to manage perceptions of low honesty would shed further light.

Additionally, research examining whether individuals entering low versus high honesty professions accurately estimate the level of honesty for their profession and if not, identifying the bases of these inaccuracies (e.g., lack of knowledge, belief in one's ability to change the status quo) could help explain why individuals continue to be attracted to low honesty professions. Lastly, given that those in dishonest professions may lack the opportunity to prove their honesty, identifying if and how individuals are able to overcome stereotypes of dishonesty and foster trust between themselves and their clients could provide information for how to interrupt cycles that work to perpetuate negative beliefs.

Conclusion

In sum, professions provide a categorical system by which people infer the honesty of member individuals. Distinct characteristics of professions, namely prestige and income, show strong positive and negative relationships, respectively, with perceived honesty. The inverse relationship between honesty and income suggests that individuals may trade off one for the other, welcoming increased compensation to maintain a positive self-concept when working in a profession characterized by low honesty.

Declaration of competing interest

Nothing declared.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101403>.

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