Malevolent personalities as behavioral mimics and parasites: Mimicry-Deception Theory

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Abstract

Much can be learned about patterns of human deception from animal behavior and parasitic infections. Nonhuman animals and parasitic infections utilize deceptive tactics that extract resources through two overarching strategies: (a) complex deception, slow resource extraction, heavy integration into a host or community, and low risk of detection, or (b) superficial deception, immediate resource extraction, little host or community specificity, and increased risk of detection. Malevolent human personalities may operate in analogous ways. Guided by analogies derived from the biological concepts of nonhuman animal mimicry (such as color or behavioral deception) and infection patterns in micro-organisms, a theoretical framework is developed to better understand deceptive and parasitic human behaviors, and the characteristics defining them. Although applicable to areas of dishonesty and deception, two specific traits (psychopathy and Machiavellianism) are highlighted that have dire consequences for financial fraud, interpersonal harm, and organizational malevolence.

Keywords: Cheating; fraud; Fraud; Machiavellianism; parasite; Psychopathy

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A nonhuman animal mimic is defined as an organism that, through various means of deception (e.g., behavioral, visual, chemical), appears to possess certain characteristics but actually possesses different characteristics (Holling, 1965). Thus, a *predatory mimic* (or *Mertensian Mimic*) is a nonhuman animal that uses such confusion for hunting prey. A common example is the evolved similarity between the Coral and King Snakes. Whereas the Coral Snake is venomous the King Snake is not, in spite of their similar appearance. However, the confusion between the two benefits the Coral Snake in hunting by creating hesitation and confusion in prey (Gilpin, 1975). Similarly, micro-organisms producing parasitic infections also use deception to gain an evolutionary advantage. For example, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) confuses a host's immune system by hiding within naturally occurring cells.

Parasitic and predatory behaviors via deception are not limited to nonhuman animals and micro-organisms; they are also pervasive in modern human society (Gambetta, 2005). Parasitic and predatory human deception spans from simple and immediate forms of fraud such as credit card fraud or identity theft (Pratkanis & Shadel, 2005) to elaborate and long-term White Collar Crimes (WCC) such as embezzlement or antitrust violations (Benson & Simpson, 2009). There are striking similarities in the long- vs. short-term deceptive approaches that micro-organisms, nonhuman animals, and humans take. In fact, there are four common elements of deception that differentiate long- vs. short-term forms of deception: Mimicry complexity, resource extraction rate, host integration, and risk of detection. Whereas long-term mimics use complex deception, engage in slow resource extraction, integrate into host communities, and have low risk of detection, short-term mimics display the opposite patterns.

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Identifying reliable patterns of long vs. short-term deception have important implications for understanding deception in modern business and society. To date, the psychological literature lacks a cohesive theoretical approach to understanding dispositional human deception, especially when it comes to the temporal focus (i.e., long- vs. short-term). Theory has suggested that Machiavellianism and psychopathy can be differentiated along long- vs. short-term strategies (respectively; Jones & Paulhus, 2011a). However, the empirical evidence is unclear. For example, although regression results indicate that only psychopathy has a unique association with impulsivity, both assessments have a moderate to high positive zero-order correlation with impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011b). These findings are problematic given that impulsivity was not conceptualized as part of the original Machiavellianism construct (Christie & Geis, 1970).

Classic research on these traits was conducted in separate areas of psychology, leading their literatures to be somewhat isolated (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998). This isolation may have blurred the definitional boundaries between the constructs (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Even if these traits were clearly defined within and across constructs, there are further problems surrounding disagreement over assessment (e.g., Hare & Neumann, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Skeem & Cooke, 2010). In fact (perhaps due to their isolated development), standard assessments of these two traits correlate quite highly (approximately .50; see O’Boyle et al., 2012). Further, Jones and Figueredo (2013) demonstrated that Hare’s Factor 1 (interpersonal manipulation and affective callousness; Hare, 2003) is central to both constructs. Thus, there may be aspects of human deception across a long- vs. short-term continuum that specific traits may miss because of constraints surrounding

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3 trait definitions, even though Machiavellianism and subclinical psychopathy are usually assessed
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5 on a continuum (LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006).
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8 An alternative would be to investigate the associated processes inherent in different
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10 temporal strategies, which may provide a better understanding of different types of deception.
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12 By examining theoretical differences among long- vs. short-term deceptive tendencies, and their
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14 associated characteristics, a new theoretical model emerges that provides a greater understanding
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16 of human deception. To this end, I provide examples from human, nonhuman animal, and
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18 parasitic micro-organism literatures to highlight parallels among long- vs. short-term deceptive
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20 strategies and tactics. Four characteristics emerged that consistently differentiated long- vs.
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22 short-term deception: deception complexity; resource extraction rate; host integration; and
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24 detectability. These four characteristics form the basis for *Mimicry-Deception Theory* (MDT),
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26 which is a theoretical approach designed to identify patterns of deception across a long vs. short-
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28 term continuum.
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34 MDT has the following advantages and contributions: (a) MDT is not constrained by trait
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36 definitions, (b) MDT generates clear hypotheses about the varied approaches different
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38 individuals will take in their deceptive behaviors, especially with respect to long- vs. short-term
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40 parameters, and (c) MDT may help to define and redefine characteristics associated with
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42 dispositional long- vs. short-term deception. MDT should serve as a starting point for
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44 discussions pertaining to the nuanced approaches of interpersonal deception that span a long- to
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46 short-term continuum. In sum, the fundamental premise of MDT is that human deceptive
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48 strategies can be conceptualized as existing on a broad temporal continuum, and there (at least)
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50 four characteristics (deception complexity, resource extraction rate, host integration, and ease of
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52 detection) that are associated with different sides of that continuum.
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The Defining features of MDT

Complexity of deception is defined by how detailed and thought out a deception tends to be. *Resource extraction rate* is defined as the rate at which the desired resource (e.g., food, money, power, and/or status) is extracted. *Host integration* is defined as how integrated one gets with others in the victim population. Finally, *ease of detection* is defined by how quickly individuals realize that they have been (or may have been) the victim of deception.

In micro-organisms, some infections such as the *Human Immunodeficiency Virus* (HIV; which attacks the human immune system) or *Meningitis* (which attacks the central nervous system or CNS) use complex forms of cell mimicry in order to integrate themselves into a host community of cells. The virus then extracts resources slowly over time. This type of virus is also complex in how it infects other hosts (requiring the exchange of blood, semen, vaginal secretions, or breast milk). Thus, HIV is not readily detectable within the host community of cells, and does not extract all possible resources at once. Such micro-organisms can be quite deadly (e.g., HIV), or non-lethal (e.g., Herpes).

By contrast, other micro-organisms infect a broad range of hosts indiscriminately through simple pathways (i.e., droplet infection through nasopharyngeal passages). However, such immediate infection often raises immune-system alarms, making them readily detectable. Examples of such viral infections are *Streptococcus pneumonia* (commonly referred to as “pneumonia”) and *Haemophilus influenza* (commonly referred to as “the flu”). These infections act quickly, extract all possible resources, raise immediate alarms, and use superficial deception of the immune system (Levin & Bull, 1994).

These long- to short-term parallels can be found in nonhuman animals as well. For example, biologists have argued that the venomous Coral Snake co-evolved with other non-

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venomous snakes (e.g., Milk Snake, King Snake) to the mutual beneficence of both (Malcolm, 1990; Matthews, 1977; Pfenning, Harcombe, & Pfenning, 2001; Speed, 1993). Mimicry enacted by Coral Snakes utilizes superficial (i.e., visual) deception. By mimicking prototypical color or appearance of an innocuous conspecific, the Coral Snake gains a competitive short-term predatory advantage. In addition to using superficial mimicry, the Coral Snake extracts all possible resources at once, does not integrate into a community, and (once encountered) is easily detected and avoided (along with non-venomous conspecifics; Pfenning et al., 2001; Speed, 1993).

By contrast, other mimics such as certain Australian jumping spiders (or *Aelurillus m-nigrum*, see Jackson & Pollard, 1996), integrate into prey communities through more sophisticated means of deception (Cushing, 2012). These spiders can mimic ants behaviorally and chemically, allowing them access to the ant community as prey (e.g., Dettner & Liepert, 1994; Lenoir, D'Ettorre, Errard, & Hefetz, 2001). Some of these spiders eat the ants with which they co-exist (Rix, 1999). Thus, the spider has a never-ending food source (Castanho & Oliveira, 1997), and (ironically) enjoys the protection of the ant colony upon which it feasts. They do not extract all possible resources at once, but instead co-exist among their prey (Cushing, 2012). Cushing notes that such mimicry is very difficult to execute, very community specific, and virtually impossible to detect when successful.

Mimicry in humans may also be used in a predatory fashion (Gambetta, 2005). One example discussed by Gambetta is how criminals may use harmless costumes (e.g., Santa Claus) while engaging in criminal behavior. However, with respect to financial deception, there are two types of mimicry (Benson & Simpson, 2009). In the long-term, there are financial deceptions that are more traditionally associated with “White Collar Crime” (WCC), such as embezzlement

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or antitrust violations. Such crimes involve slower-moving complex deception where money is extracted slowly over time. Such deception also requires integration into the business world and is infrequently detected or punished (Ivancevich, Duening, Gilbert, & Konopaske, 2003).

According to Benson and Simpson (2009), such crimes are also often associated with abuses of trust and power. Thus, one must first be integrated into a community before the crime can take place.

By contrast, other financial crimes are short-term in nature. These crimes (such as credit card fraud or advance fee swindles) are referred to as “Con Games” (Benson & Simpson, pg. 10). They take only moments to perpetuate and are not community specific; in fact, perpetrators span as many communities as possible. They use superficial deception such as using professional sounding messages, business pitches, or realistic sounding authority (see Pratkanis & Shadel, 2005) to temporarily confuse individuals and extract all possible immediate resources. Finally, such scams are readily detectable by many (Pratkanis & Shadel, 2005).

With respect to human personality, there are (at least) two traits related to human deception: Machiavellianism (e.g., Christie & Geis, 1970) and psychopathy (e.g., Cleckley, 1976). On the one hand, recent research has found that only psychopathy is associated with risk in the face of retribution (Jones, 2014a) and that individuals high in Machiavellianism do not engage in risky forms of cheating (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). Moreover, experimental work has also found that ego-depletion occurs only among individuals high in Machiavellianism, suggesting intact executive functioning (Jones, 2014b). Nevertheless, much of the research on the long-term nature of Machiavellianism relies on controlling for the overlap with psychopathy and null effects (Jones & Paulhus, 2011a). In addition, Machiavellianism is still negatively correlated with conscientiousness, which would presumably indicate short-term

behaviors (e.g., Jakobowitz & Egan, 2006). Thus, the inconclusive nature of Machiavellianism as a long-term deceptive trait makes MDT all the more important to psychology for two reasons. First, MDT may help profile styles of malevolent deceptive behavior that has been missed by traditional trait approaches. Second, since Machiavellianism is mixed in its relationship to long- vs. short-term misbehaviors, MDT may help capture dispositional variance on the long-term end of deception that is missed by traditional trait approaches.

Final Synthesis and Conclusion

Financial fraud costs our society approximately 680 billion dollars annually (Wells, 2007). It is critical to develop ways in which to estimate, predict, explain, and control these behaviors from a theoretically sound perspective. Parallels extracted from micro-organism, nonhuman animal, and human financial literatures suggests that there exists a continuum, spanning long- to short-term, of cohesive characteristics defining malevolent deception. MDT stands to greatly improve the state of debate across malevolent and deceptive personality traits in psychology. By providing a theoretical framework with which to define the boundaries and expectations of these parasitic traits, trait and construct definitions can be more clearly defined. In addition, MDT can be assessed on a continuum providing flexibility that rigid trait boundaries do not permit. Finally, MDT may be able to capture nuances in dispositional human deception that may fall between the cracks of previously defined psychological traits. Thus, MDT may be helpful not only in further understanding the differences between Machiavellianism and psychopathy, but human deception (especially financial deception) more broadly.

Future Directions

Future research may wish to extend the MDT analogy of viral infection to examining previous exposure with malevolent personalities. It may be the case that those who have been

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“scammed” or deceived in short-term ways may have been “inoculated” to future attempts. Rather than treating the continuum of MDT as traits, MDT should be thought of as more of a guiding framework for understanding resource extraction-related crimes. Investigations into WCC behaviors such as fraud, embezzlement, antitrust violations, and even petty financial crimes (i.e., scams) may be efficiently guided by the cohesive framework of MDT.

It should be noted that there are parasitic infections that use both short- and long-term infection strategies. For example, the chickenpox or Lyme disease has immediate effects, but can also go into latent or long-term stages (e.g., Craft, Fischer, Shimamoto, & Steere, 1986). Thus, it is important to note that (although rare) certain individuals may be capable of taking advantage of short- and long-term opportunities. Such dual-strategy individuals may occur under special circumstances (e.g., salient short-term opportunities) or among those high in cognitive ability or complexity.

Conclusion

The parallels among viral infections and non-human animal mimicry are likely to guide future research on human deception in meaningful ways. Should these analogies continue to hold up to empirical scrutiny, then long-term deceptive individuals should (a) engage in more complex forms of mimicry, (b) extract resources sustainably or slowly over time, (c) integrate themselves into host communities, and (d) be more difficult to detect. In this way, MDT can begin to address the nuanced deception strategies that exist in the modern world, and begin to combat them. In the end, when examining how to fight parasitic cheaters and mimics, it is always best to first look at organisms and micro-organisms that have mastered the trade through millions of years of evolution.

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