

Information Manipulation Theory and Perceptions of Deception in Hong Kong

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This study tests McCornack's (1992) Information Manipulation Theory (IMT) in Hong Kong. IMT views deception as arising from covert violations of one or more of Grice's four maxims (quality, quantity, relevance, and manner). Previous studies conducted in the United States have found that messages violating one or more of the four maxims are rated as less honest than messages that do not violate the maxims. Based upon cultural differences in expectations and social roles, we predicted that only violations of quality (i.e., outright falsification) would be seen as universally deceptive. To test this prediction, McCornack, Levine, Solowczuk, Torres and Campbell's (1992) original study was replicated in Hong Kong ($N = 310$). The results indicated that violations of quality (falsification) and relevance (evasion) were rated as deceptive in Hong Kong. However, message ratings along all four dimensions were significantly correlated with deception ratings, suggesting that perhaps the results stem from differences in what counts as a covert violation rather than more fundamental differences in the appropriateness of the maxims.

■ The prevalence of deception in everyday conversation is well documented (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Turner, Edgley, & Olmstead, 1975), as are the potentially negative consequences stemming from the discovery of deception (e.g., McCornack & Levine, 1990). Although research on deception processes has long flourished, researchers have traditionally focused on the falsification of information to the exclusion of more subtle forms of deceptive messages (McCornack, 1992). Lies (i.e., presenting false information), however, represent only one of many ways to deceive another (Bowers, Elliott, & Desmond, 1977; Ekman, 1985; Hopper & Bell, 1984; Turner et al., 1975). By limiting deception only to those acts involving the falsification of information, many verbal acts that are functionally deceptive (e.g., *equivocation*: Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990; *evasion*: Galasinski, 1994; Turner et al. 1975) are excluded.

While investigations of deceptive message design are currently in vogue (e.g., Bavelas et al., 1990; Burgoon, Buller, Guerrero, Afifi, & Feldman, 1996; Jacobs, Dawson, & Brashers, 1996; Galasinski, 1994; McCornack, Levine, Solowczuk, Torres, & Campbell, 1992), this research has characteristically been concerned only with deception in Western cultures. This cultural myopia is unfortunate. Because of cultural differences related to the individualism-collectivism distinction, what counts as deception most likely differs across cultures. With intercultural interactions becoming increasingly

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frequent due to advances in communication technology and increases in mobility, differing views of deception may increase the potential for misunderstanding, mistrust, and ill will. It would seem, then, that a cross-cultural examination of deceptive message design is needed.

The current study examines the generalizability of Information Manipulation Theory (IMT; McCornack, 1992) by attempting to replicate McCornack et al.'s (1992) seminal work in Hong Kong. This investigation begins with a review of research on information manipulation.

INFORMATION MANIPULATION THEORY

IMT offers a multidimensional approach to deceptive messages, integrating Grice's (1989) theory of conversational implicature with research on deception as information control (e.g., Bavelas et al., 1990; Bowers et al., 1977; Metts, 1989; Turner et al., 1975). Specifically, IMT uses Grice's (1989) Cooperation Principle (CP) and its maxims as a framework for describing a variety of deceptive message forms. IMT views deception as arising from covert violations of one or more of Grice's four maxims (quality, quantity, relevance, and manner). Covert violations of quality involve the falsification of information. Covert violations of quantity can result in "lies of omission." Deception by evasion involves covert violations of relevance, and deception by equivocation results from the covert violation of manner.

IMT also offers a pragmatic explanation for why deceptive messages deceive. As McCornack (1992) wrote:

It is the principal claim of Information Manipulation Theory that messages that are commonly thought of as deceptive derive from covert violations of the conversational maxims... Because the violation is not made apparent to the listener, the listener is misled by her/his assumption that the speaker is adhering to the CP and its maxims. (p. 5-6)

Thus, covert violations of one or more of Grice's conversational maxims (quality, quantity, relevance, and manner) are believed to result in messages that are functionally deceptive.

To date, there have been three tests of IMT: McCornack et al.'s (1992) original study and replications by Jacobs et al., (1996) and Lapinski (1995). Each of the studies provided subjects with a hypothetical situation and one of five message forms. Subjects were asked to rate the messages in terms of honesty. The messages either violated one of Grice's maxims (quality, quantity, relevance, and manner) or were baseline messages designed to be honest (i.e., accurate, informative, clear, and relevant). In each of the three studies, the baseline message was rated as significantly more honest than the four messages violating one of the maxims. That is, each of these three studies found that messages violating one or more of the four maxims are seen as more deceptive than are messages that adhere to Grice's maxims.

Research on Culture and Deception

At a very general level, the concept of deception may be universal. Saarni and Lewis (1993), for example, argued that deception that is centered around

clandestine affairs, protecting one's possessions from a competitor, and feigning emotion occur in most if not all cultures. Similarly, Buss and Schmitt (1993) implied that deceptive sexual selection strategies might be cross-cultural.

The few cross-cultural studies of deception that exist, however, tend to focus on cultural differences. O'Hair, Cody, Wang, and Choa (1990) investigated vocal stress in the truthful and deceptive messages of Chinese immigrants. Chinese had higher levels of vocal stress when revealing negative emotions. Aune and Waters (1994) found that the more collectivistic American Samoan participants indicated they would be more likely to deceive another on an issue related to family or other ingroup concerns. U.S. Americans, in contrast, were motivated to deceive when they felt an issue was private or when they wanted to protect the target person's feelings.

Nishiyama (1994) discussed deception in a cultural framework from a business perspective. Nishiyama suggested that there are a number of strategies and behaviors that are considered everyday business practices in Japan that may be interpreted as deceptive by U.S. American businesspeople. Commonly misunderstood messages include official statements of policy (*Tatema*), which are different from true intentions (*Honne*), and certain nonverbal behaviors that non-Japanese people find difficult to distinguish.

Finally, Lapinski (1995) investigated the relationships between honesty ratings of the four information manipulation dimensions and self-reported cultural orientations. Relevance violations were seen as significantly less deceptive by those with a more collectivistic orientation.

China-U.S. Cultural Differences and Deception

The individualism-collectivism dimension (Hofstede, 1980) is perhaps the most common way of distinguishing between cultures. Collectivism emphasizes the goals of the ingroup over those of the individual. Asia, Africa, South America, and the Pacific Islands have generally been considered to be the locales of collectivistic cultures. Conversely, personal goals are emphasized in individualistic cultures. Those cultures that are characterized by individualism include many of those located in Australia, northern and western Europe, and the United States.

Several studies offer empirical support for the Chinese collectivist orientation (e.g., Bond and Kwang-kuo, 1986). There are five reasons why the Chinese collectivist orientation should result in views of deception that diverge from those of Westerners.

The first reason involves cultural differences in role expectations. The Chinese have a strong tendency to act according to what is expected of them by others. The Chinese concept of *ren*, "ren," is said to be "based on the individual's transactions with his fellow human beings" (Bond & Kwang-kuo, 1986, p.220). With this expectation comes a greater concern for the feelings of others in social interactions and a greater stress on the obligations

demanded by the social role. Thus, in interacting with others, Chinese tend to give responses that fulfill the social expectations of others, even if those responses are considered deceptive by Western standards.

Second, cultural differences exist in conflict avoidance. There is both theoretical and empirical support for the Chinese tendency to avoid conflict, compared with Westerners (Tang & Kirkbride, 1986). Because deception is an easy means of conflict avoidance, deceptive messages serving this purpose may be more common among Chinese than Westerners.

Third, moral orientations differ between cultures. Chinese tend to base their moral decisions on what they think is acceptable to their reference group (Yang, 1986, p. 133). In contrast, Westerners more often form moral judgments according to independently-held principles. Instead of being universally applicable like Western moral principles, Chinese moral judgments are related to particular roles and are therefore situational (Chiu, 1991). It appears that role expectation is a predominant criterion among Chinese in forming such judgments (Chiu, 1990). For example, sometimes the need to act according to role expectation and concern for the other's feelings, on the one hand, and the moral responsibility to be honest, on the other, are in conflict. Manipulating message features by giving ambiguous or partial information would appear to be a compromise to prevent the eventuality of being a total liar.

Fourth, the concept of "face" is especially salient in the Chinese culture (Chang & Holt, 1994). To the Chinese, the concept of face incorporates two different notions: "lien" and "mianzi" (Hu, 1944). "Lien" refers to the integrity of a person's moral character. "Mianzi," however, is the personal prestige and reputation that comes with the person's achievement and success in society. Both are essential for the operation of the Chinese as a social being. Being socially skilled involves knowing how to do facework (e.g., giving face, enhancing face, saving face, restoring face, etc.). Many Chinese message strategies are motivated by the wish to do facework. To Westerners, such message strategies may appear unnecessarily indirect. For example, Chinese have a preference for refraining from criticism, especially in public (Bond & Lee, 1981). Jokes and hints are commonly used for broaching unfavorable information to the hearer (Du, 1995). Refusals to invitations are used only rhetorically for sounding out the sincerity of the inviter as well as avoiding being presumptuous by accepting invitations too readily (Gu, 1990). Such indirect message strategies can also be considered as violations of the conversational maxims and thus be construed as "deceptive."

Finally, the Chinese use of ritualistic message strategies may appear to be deceptive in the eyes of Westerners. For example, initial refusals to invitations are not meant to be, and are in fact not taken as, flat denials in the Chinese context. But they may be interpreted literally by Westerners, thus leading to cases of cross-cultural misunderstanding (Kasper & Zhang, 1995). Similarly, the ritualistic strategy of exaggeration is often used among Chinese in doing facework. For example, exaggerated statements to praise the accomplish-

ments of the other and to denigrate the achievements of oneself are frequently used in playing the face game.

Hypotheses

The integration of the theoretical distinctions between Chinese and Western communicative styles with the research on cross-cultural deception leads to predictions regarding perceptions of information manipulation among Chinese in Hong Kong. We anticipate that blatant violations of quality (i.e., outright intentional falsification) will be universally seen as deceptive.

Falsification is the most direct and blatant form of deception and is therefore the most likely to be universally seen as deceptive. Differences should exist, however, in the perceptions of more subtle forms of deception (i.e., violations of quantity, relevance, and manner). Omission, equivocation, and evasion involve indirectness, which may be typical of normal, honest communication in Asian cultures. Further, because violations of these maxims are required to fulfill expectations and social roles, these should not be seen as particularly deceptive in Hong Kong. Hence, we hypothesize that *there will be a main effect for violation type such that violations of quality will be seen as significantly more deceptive than other message forms, and violations of quantity, relevance and manner will not differ from the baseline honest message.*

If the data are consistent with our hypothesis, two explanations for these findings will be possible. First, IMT may simply not hold in collectivist cultures because violations of quantity, relevance and manner are not seen as constituting deception. Consistent with this speculation, Yum (1988) argued that the maxim of manner is not the norm in East Asia. However, an alternative explanation for the expected results is also possible. It may be that covert violations of these dimensions are seen as deceptive, but what counts as a violation differs with culture. That is, if a message that violates a given maxim in North America is not seen as deceptive in Hong Kong, it could be because either that maxim does not apply, or because the message in question is not perceived as a covert violation of that maxim. For this reason, we will also investigate the relationship between message ratings of the four dimensions and perceptions of honesty.

METHOD

Participants

Three hundred and ten undergraduate students in Hong Kong completed a survey very similar to that used by McCornack et al. (1992). Of these, 139 (44.5%) were male, 169 (54.5%) were female, and 2 (0.6%) failed to answer the sex question. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 25 ($M = 21.22$, $SD = 7.70$). Differences between the current method and that of McCornack et al. (1992) are noted below.

Design and Procedures

A 1×5 independent groups design was used. As in previous IMT studies (Jacobs et al., 1996; Lapinski, 1995; McCornack et al., 1992), subjects were presented with a hypothetical situation and one of five messages: a baseline honest message (no violation), a false message (quality violation), a message omitting crucial information (quantity violation), an evasive message (relevance violation), or an equivocal message (manner violation). The situation and messages were taken from the "Committed Chris" situation used by McCornack et al. (1992). Participants read the situations and then rated the message on a 3-item honesty scale ($\alpha = .86$). Manipulation check items for each violation type were also completed (*quality*: $\alpha = .84$; *quantity*: $\alpha = .76$; *relevance*: $\alpha = .78$; *manner*: $\alpha = .85$). All items were taken from McCornack et al. (1992), but they used 4 items. The results of a confirmatory factors analysis were consistent with the validity of the measures. The scales were second-order unidimensional, replicating McCornack et al.'s (1996) re-analyses of McCornack et al. (1992) and Jacobs et al. (1996).

The questionnaire was completed in English. As English was the medium of instruction in their college, the respondents were thought to have had a sufficient level of proficiency in English. Nevertheless, a glossary of key terms was provided and additional verbal explanations were given in order to ensure that the participants had a complete understanding of the questionnaire. They were also given a chance to ask for further clarifications of any points they did not understand.

RESULTS

The manipulation checks were successful. The message violating quantity ($M = 3.77$) was rated as significantly less disclosive ($t_{125} = 2.92$; $p < .004$; $r = .25$) than the baseline message ($M = 4.50$). The message violating quality ($M = 3.39$) was rated as less accurate ($t_{123} = 7.47$; $p < .001$; $r = .56$) than the baseline message ($M = 4.90$). Scores on the relevance violation condition ($M = 3.50$) were rated significantly lower ($t_{121} = 5.94$; $p < .001$; $r = .48$) than the baseline condition ($M = 4.80$). Finally, violations of manner ($M = 3.90$) were rated as less clear ($t_{122} = 3.42$; $p < .001$; $r = .30$) than the baseline message ($M = 4.85$).

The violation manipulation produced a statistically significant and large main effect ($F_{4,305} = 22.54$; $p < .0001$; $\eta^2 = .23$). Scheffe tests showed that violations of quality and relevance were rated as significantly more deceptive than the baseline message, while violations of quantity and manner were not rated as any more deceptive than the baseline message. No differences were found between the baseline message, the quantity violation, and the manner violation. Similarly, quality violations did not differ from violations of

TABLE 1
*Cell Means for the Current Study, Jacobs et al. (1996), Lapinski (1995)
 and McCornack et al. (1992)*

	Baseline	Violation Type			Rel.
		Quality	Quantity	Manner	
Hong Kong	4.94	3.34	4.90	4.61	3.50
Arizona	5.41	1.82	4.51	3.92	3.25
Hawaii	5.46	2.13	3.85	3.67	3.43
Michigan	5.47	1.74	4.20	3.43	2.93

Note: All scores were averaged on a scale of 1 to 7, where higher scores reflect higher honesty ratings.

relation. Statistical power for $r > .20$ was .70 and was .95 for $r > .30$. Means are presented in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

This study tested McCornack's (1992) Information Manipulation Theory (IMT) in Hong Kong. Only violations of quality (falsification) and relevance (evasion) were rated as more deceptive than the baseline message in Hong Kong. Messages violating quantity (omission) and manner (equivocation) did not differ from the completely honest message in deception ratings. Simply put, false and evasive messages were rated as deceptive but omissions and equivocation were not.

These results differ dramatically from those obtained in the United States. Comparing the current results to the findings of previous studies conducted in the U.S. (*Michigan*: McCornack et al., 1992; *Arizona*: Jacobs et al., 1996; *Hawaii*: Lapinski, 1995), the Hong Kong students appear to rate each of the message types differently than their U.S. American counterparts (see Table 1). When statistically compared to McCornack et al.'s (1992) original results, the means in each condition differed significantly. The current respondents rated violations of quality ($t_{267} = 10.67$; $p < .01$; $r = .55$), quantity ($t_{279} = 3.26$; $p < .01$; $r = .19$), manner ($t_{274} = 5.51$; $p < .01$; $r = .32$), and relevance ($t_{271} = 3.06$; $p < .01$; $r = .18$) as less deceptive than did McCornack et al.'s (1992) subjects. Alternatively, the honest baseline message was rated as more deceptive by the Hong Kong sample than the U.S. sample, ($t_{278} = -3.33$; $p < .01$; $r = .20$). Simply put, what is seen as truthful and deceptive appears to vary substantially across cultures.

As mentioned previously, there are at least two general explanations for the results. First, the fundamental expectations that guide conversational understanding (i.e., Grice's Maxims) in Western cultures may not generalize to Hong Kong. This explanation holds that violations of quantity and manner are not seen as deceptive in Hong Kong because the Chinese do not expect

TABLE 2
Correlations Between Ratings of Violation Type and Message Honesty

Quality	Quantity	Manner	Rel.
.67	.43	.52	.53

Note: All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .0001$, $df = 308$.

others to adhere to the maxims of clarity and disclosure. If the maxims do not apply, one should not be expected to follow them.

An alternative explanation is that each of the maxims holds in Hong Kong, but what counts as a violation differs between Hong Kong and the United States. That is, the differences lie not in the fundamental assumptions that guide conversations but in what is required to fulfill each maxim.

To explore these two explanations, message honesty ratings were correlated with ratings of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner. As the correlations in Table 2 show, messages that were rated as violations also tended to be rated as dishonest ($r = .43$ to $.67$). So, for example, although the message involving omission was not rated as any more deceptive than the baseline message, the more messages were perceived as omitting information, the less honest they were rated. This suggests that violations of the four maxims may be seen as deceptive in Hong Kong, but that what counts as a violation differs from the U.S.

To the extent that this second explanation is valid, IMT may have some validity in non-Western cultures, or at least in Hong Kong. While differences clearly exist in the ratings of specific messages, perceived violations are associated with perceived deception. In other words, Hong Kong Chinese may not have the same strict standards as U.S. Americans do for absolute clarity and full information disclosure in the messages received.

It should be noted, however, that the correlations between violation ratings and honesty rating were generally lower than those obtained in the U.S. The same correlations in McCornack et al. (1992) were generally larger ($r = .57$ to $.79$). When tested for significant differences with r to z transformations, the correlations for the quantity ($r = .67$ vs. $.43$; $z = 5.42$), quality ($r = .79$ vs. $.67$; $z = 4.00$), and manner ($r = .62$ vs. $.52$; $z = 2.27$) were significantly larger in the McCornack et al. (1992) data than in the current data. No differences were evident in the relevance correlations ($r = .57$ and $.54$; $z = 0.69$).

The dishonesty ratings of the evasive message were rather surprising and inconsistent with our predictions. At least two explanations are plausible. First, the relevance findings might stem from the particular situation used in the questionnaire. In an intimate relationship, the role expectation might require a direct address of the critical issue when a question is raised about one's fidelity and commitment to a relationship. An irrelevant answer tends to

be interpreted as having something to hide, thus leading to an interpretation of dishonesty. In other words, the perceptions of deception by Hong Kong Chinese about the irrelevant message might not generalize to other situations.

Second, the finding might not be an artifact, and Hong Kong Chinese might have less tolerance for relevance violations than quantity or manner violations. Two findings seem consistent with this account. Previous IMT studies (cf., Lapinski, 1995; McCornack et al., 1992) have found little situational variation in deceptive message ratings. Also, in the current study, the manipulation check indicated stronger manipulations of relevance and quality than quantity or manner. Together, these findings might indicate that Hong Kong Chinese are more sensitive to violations of relevance and quality than they are to violations of quantity or manner, and these difference are not a mere function of situational idiosyncrasies. A further study incorporating different situations would be necessary to test this reasoning.

In general, the results of the present study indicate that there are different cultural expectations regarding violations of conversational maxims leading to perceptions of deceptive messages. Such differences in expectations may lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings. Apparently, Hong Kong Chinese have a higher threshold of tolerance for violations of conversational maxims as compared with U.S. Americans. Hong Kong Chinese should not be seen as more deceptive than U.S. Americans. Instead, they may use message manipulation strategies to avoid hurting the other's feelings or to fulfill to social obligations and expectations. Such violations may not be intended to be covert. For example, they often leave certain things unsaid, expecting the others to read between the lines. To U.S. Americans, such violations of the conversational maxims would be seen as covert and thus would constitute an act of dishonesty. Under such circumstances, the U.S. Americans would take the partial or ambiguous messages coming from the Chinese as intentionally deceptive. The Chinese, on the other hand, may be upset and embarrassed by the U.S. American style of directness, as the U.S. Americans do not seem to give due consideration to face. This may explain why the Hong Kong Chinese rated the baseline message as less honest than did those in the U.S.

While this study was designed from the perspective of IMT, other research might legitimately study deception from a more culture specific framework. For example, the current study might have been grounded in the culture of Hong Kong Chinese. Such an approach would likely yield additional important insights, and would be more ideally suited to the study of the nuisances of deceptive discourse in Hong Kong.

Further research on cultural differences in deception is of course needed. This study only examined deception in one situation, with one set of message examples, in just one culture, and from the perspective of IMT. English speaking Hong Kong Chinese may be more Westernized than some other Asian populations, and a dating situation might have reduced applicability.

Nevertheless, this study provides some preliminary insights into cultural differences in the perceptions of message honesty.

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