Full Length Article

Fibbing friends: self and friend perceptions of honesty and honesty-adjacent characteristics

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Using round-robin data from 193 friendship quads, we investigated consensus and bias in honesty and honesty-related (i.e., honesty-humility) judgments among friends. Participants rated themselves and each friend on three direct honesty scales and the honesty-humility trait scale. Social Relations Model analyses showed low consensus for honesty and honesty-humility relative to the Big Five traits, indicating limited agreement among friends on who is honest. Perceiver and relationship variance explained most variance: perceiver variance (e.g., generally rating people as similarly [un]sincere) explained more of the honesty-humility ratings and relationship variance (originating from the dyad's unique relationships) explained more of the direct honesty measures. Self-other agreement was low across measures, whereas assumed similarity was high. Implications for honesty and friendship research are discussed.

1. Fibbing friends: Self and friend perceptions of honesty

"No legacy is so rich as honesty." − William Shakespeare[1]

Honesty is a valued characteristic, both by individuals and the people they surround themselves with (Miller, 2021). Indeed, people like to affiliate with honest people (Cooper et al., 2023; Miller, 2021), honest people receive better reputations and performance ratings in workplaces (Johnson et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2019), and are perceived as contributing to a fairer and cleaner society (Cooper et al., 2023; Punke, 1944). However, due to the highly socially desirable nature of honesty, honesty is not easily detectable. That is, people often lie about their honesty, and many dishonest people self-report themselves as being honest (DePaulo, 1994; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996).

But honesty, and other related traits, are also a *relational* phenomena (Cooper et al., 2023; Fritz, 2020). Part of what makes a person honest is their dealings with other people and some consensus from friends and society that someone is honest or dishonest. The same can be true for other, related characteristics that reflect virtues and might drive pro-social behavior, like how modest, greedy, sincere, or modest people are. Ultimately, these judgments can be inaccurate. Considering the relational and societal implications of one's honesty and honesty-related characteristics, unpacking where such judgments come from can be an

important step to conjecture about how these judgments can go wrong. For instance, are some people biased in that they think everyone is either honest or dishonest? How strong is the consensus around whether someone is honest or not? Or is there something special about the two people's shared history that contributes to judging others as more honest or not? How are sociodemographic characteristics like gender and friendship length associated with these judgments? Using 193 quartets of friends and the social relations model (Back & Kenny, 2010; Kenny & La Voie, 1984), the current study examined sources of variance in judgments of honesty and honesty-related characteristics (i.e., honesty-humility trait) across four different measures, alongside the Big Five personality measures as the reference group.

1.1. Honesty-related characteristics and why they matter

Honesty has been defined and investigated through various lenses based on fields embracing psychology, philosophy, behavioral economics, and management (C. B. Miller et al., 2021). For one, honesty has been studied heavily as a behavior in economics and behavioral psychology (Hilbig, 2022). Specifically, researchers measure dishonest acts (e.g., lying, cheating, stealing) in experimental paradigms, and participants can lie to a counterpart for a larger financial gain (for a review, see

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[1] The first author was involved in conceptualizing the study, analyzing the data, writing and revising the manuscript. The second author was also involved in writing and reviewing the manuscript. The last author was involved in conceptualizing the study, analyzing the data, writing, and reviewing the manuscript.

Gerlach et al., 2019). Alternatively, behavioral operationalizations of honesty include academic dishonesty (Davis et al., 1992), tax fraud (Alm et al., 2016), and white lies (Argo & Shiv, 2012). On the other hand, there is a groundswell of new approaches about honesty as a character trait that reflects people's motivations, thoughts, values, and emotions, on top of (dis)honest behaviors (for review, see Fleeson et al., 2022). Related, the introduction of the honesty-humility (HH) trait in the HEXACO model of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007) has sparked a wave of research studying honesty and honesty-adjacent traits as individual difference characteristics, linking their variation to individual and interpersonal behavior across the lifespan (O'Connor et al., 2022; Reinhardt & Reinhard, 2023). But the introduction of the HH component within a broader taxonomy of personality has not been without controversy. Despite concerns about HH's content validity such that it reflects general benevolence (Diebels et al., 2018; Fleeson et al., 2022 and partially captures honesty (e.g., fairness and no cheating; Fleeson et al., 2022), it remains the most widely investigated and empirically supported personality trait predictor of (dis)honest behavior within the HEXACO model and beyond (Heck et al., 2018; Thielmann et al., 2017; Hilbig, 2022). People high in HH are less likely to engage in immoral and dishonest behaviors, such as cheating. Further, people high in HH are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors (particularly in economic games) and have a higher sensitivity to moral norms (for review, see Thielmann et al., 2025; Zettler et al., 2020). Accordingly, scholars have viewed HH as providing strong evidence for a trait-like disposition that explains at least some variability in honesty-related behaviors across time, although some scholars have stressed the need for more targeted assessments of other aspects uncaptured from HH, such as truthfulness (e.g., being candid and telling the truth) (Furr et al., 2021).

Regardless of its precise operationalization, honesty and honesty-adjacent characteristics are also considered to be a universal virtue across people, societies, and cultures (Miller, 2021). Honesty has been cherished as an important quality that people revere in themselves and others (Abeler et al., 2019; Brambilla et al., 2021), and there are few contexts in which people ostensibly value *dishonesty* over honesty. For example, honesty has been ranked as one of the most important traits that people look for to like, respect, and get to know someone, among the 500+ person descriptive words, including competence and warmth (Anderson, 1968; Chandler, 2018; Hartley et al., 2016). In romantic contexts, honesty has also been rated the top desirable characteristic of the partner in a long-term relationship (Regan et al., 2000; Regan & Berscheid, 1997), and indeed, couples who express and perceive more honesty experience greater personal and relationship well-being (Le et al., 2024).

In a similar vein, honesty is cherished and integral at an organizational and societal level, creating a credible and reliable community to live in. For example, companies advocate for honesty as both a goal and a duty, highlighting it in their business ethics, mission statements, and codes of conduct (Blodgett et al., 2011; Gaumnitz & Lere, 2002). Reflected, honest and humble employees are found to receive high task performance and positive supervisor ratings (Johnson et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2019). Honesty is also considered crucial in negotiations, and although deception might bring short-term advantages, it eventually undermines the total payoff and has reputational costs over the long term (Boles et al., 2000; Lewicki & Polin, 2013; Shapiro & Bies, 1994). Likewise, individual-level behavioral dishonesty (e.g., dice game paradigm) was shown to be positively associated with country-level indicators of corruption in 10 different countries (Olsen et al., 2019), and a meta-analysis suggested that citizens committing to an honesty norm (e. g., signing honesty oath) are more likely to act honest to foster the honest society (Zickfeld et al., 2024).

Inherent in much of this research is the observation that honesty is often an *interpersonal* process—one that underlies most human interactions, no matter how minor (Cooper et al., 2023; Fritz, 2020). Romantic partners and friends assume they are honest brokers with each other. Buying nearly anything rests on the assumption that you are receiving fair value or at least an agreed-upon value in exchange for money. We generally expect people to be honest in their dealings and follow norms, laws, and rules. However, of course, not everyone is honest. We rely on our judgments of others in the world, and honesty—and the consequences of honesty—are no exception. One unfortunate consideration of honesty is that it is only occasionally observable in others. It might be relatively easy to tell if someone is extraverted—they likely talk and socialize more in social settings, which often is easily detectable in first impressions (Albright et al., 1988; Borkenau et al., 2009; Carney et al., 2007). However, honesty presents a unique case. We might see friends engage in honest behavior, but given the possibility of people offering socially desirable responses about a morally and socially valued characteristic (Fisher & Katz, 2000; Nancarrow et al., 2001), these observations might be overweighted as overrepresentative of who they actually are. How then do people make judgments about whether someone is honest? Are they able to accurately infer it at all?

1.2. Judgments of evaluative traits

A lot of social/personality psychology research is based on self-reports (Baumeister et al., 2007). For many questions, this is a largely reasonable approach to research. However, with highly evaluative traits, like honesty, it may be helpful to assess the veracity of these self-reports (C. B. Miller, 2021). One way to do this is to recruit those who know a person well. Doing so can provide additional insights because, presumably, observers are not as prone to self-enhancement biases (Funder & Colvin, 1988). Also, because honesty is at least partially relational, having information from people's social network seems crucial to evaluating relational phenomena. Research to date on self-insight, observer judgments, and accuracy/bias have suggested that this would be a worthwhile effort for the study of honesty.

Although individuals often think they know themselves better than others do (Pronin et al., 2001; Vazire & Mehl, 2008), self-perceptions are prone to biases that others may not be as influenced by (Andersen et al., 1998; Vazire, 2010). According to the Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry (i.e., SOKA) model, differences in judgement accuracy between self- and other- reports can be attributable to how observable and evaluative a particular trait is (Vazire, 2010). For instance, traits with high observability (i.e., visibility) but low evaluativeness (i.e., social desirability) exhibit high self-report accuracy (John & Robins, 1993; Vazire, 2010). This makes sense—if something is readily seen, but not particularly exalted or valued, people tend to have consensus about it. However, highly evaluative traits tend to exhibit greater inaccuracy in self-reports than in observer reports. This lower self-report accuracy may come from several places. For instance, it could be due to a lack, or overabundance, of self-knowledge such that individuals are unaware of, or have difficulty integrating, information about themselves necessary for accurate perceptions (Sande et al., 1988). Alternatively, individuals may be motivated to inaccurately perceive themselves on highly evaluative, desired traits to maintain or enhance their self-worth (Robins & John, 1997; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Thus, observers may be less biased for a few reasons: they are not overwhelmed by the whole breadth of knowledge of the person they are judging, are not as influenced by that person's internal self-enhancement motivations, and, as a result, they may be less likely to inflate ratings of how honest someone is. However, it is also possible that friends can be biased, albeit for different reasons. For example, individuals tend to perceive others as holding the same values they do (Murray et al., 2002). Thus, highly evaluative traits may be particularly susceptible to projection of the perceiver's values onto the target (Lee et al., 2009). There is also likely some self-enhancement occurring to their friends, such that people may be more likely to judge a friend as honest because that person is an extension of themselves (Aron et al., 1991).

But how do people make these judgments? Historically, researchers have tried to answer this question by examining the *sources* of interpersonal judgments. All told, interpersonal judgements vary across

different judges (i.e., perceivers), individuals being judged (i.e., targets), and the unique relationships between two people (beyond how observers perceive the world and how that target is generally seen—it depends on two people's shared history). Kenny and La Voie (1984) designed an analytic approach, the Social Relations Model (i.e., SRM), to identify the extent to which these sources (i.e., perceiver, target, and relationship variances) account for total variance in interpersonal judgements. Beyond attributing judgement variance to specific individuals and relationships, SRM analyses can also examine the degree to which interpersonal judgment is accurate and biased in association with self-reports (Back & Kenny, 2010). SRM and other related techniques (e.g., Truth and Bias modeling) have been used to examine these effects, accuracy, and biases, regarding many different traits and behaviors such as laughter (Wood et al., 2022), humor (Purol & Chopik, 2023), self-disclosure (L. C. Miller & Kenny, 1986), and personality (de Vries, 2010). Although *meta*-analyses and systematic reviews of SRM analyses are relatively rare, there is a general consensus that 10–20 % of variance in personality traits is attributable to perceiver and target, 20 % is attributable to unique relationship, and 45 % is attributable to error (i. e., measurement error; such that these effects sum to 100 %) (Kenny et al., 2020; Schönbrodt et al., 2012).

Honesty, as a highly evaluative but not always highly observable trait, may be particularly well-suited for a SRM analysis guided by the SOKA model (Vazire, 2010). To date, there is some ignorance about the degree of consensus regarding whether someone is honest (i.e., a target variance). Likewise, one underappreciated point is that judgments of honesty might be partially driven by people naively assuming that everyone is similarly honest (i.e., a perceiver variance). And finally, the assumption that honesty is a relational phenomenon can be tested by assessing how much of a judgment is explained by two people's shared experiences with one another (i.e., a relationship variance). However, when people provide judgments of both their own and their friends' honesty, even more insights can be gained. For example, researchers can quantify whether friends tend to agree with the self-reports provided by the individuals they judge. Individuals may misperceive their level of honesty or may lie to appear more honest than they are in order to present themselves as more moral (Choshen-Hillel et al., 2020). Indeed, several previous studies on HH provide some evidence for this idea. For example, prior studies on perceptions of HH have identified low to moderate self-other agreement (i.e., the extent to which self-reports and other-reports align), indicating similar but not identical perceptions of an individual's (trait-like) honesty relative to what others say about them (K. Lee et al., 2009; K. Lee & Ashton, 2013, 2017; Thielmann et al., 2017). However, there is also a sense that thinking you are honest or fair may guide how you perceive your friends' honesty and fairness as well. Specifically, the honesty-humility trait has also demonstrated high assumed similarity (i.e., the extent to which individuals perceive others to be similar to themselves), indicating a high level of *projection* of honesty-related characteristics (Ashton & Lee, 2010; de Vries, 2010; Lee et al., 2009; Thielmann et al., 2020). Taken together, the evaluative nature of honesty might lead people to embellish how honest they are or even extend/project their honesty onto their close others. This illustrates the need to understand where variance and potential inaccuracies in honesty perceptions are produced among friends.

In addition to honesty being more or less observable than other traits, the signal of how observable it is might vary based on how honesty is operationalized. For example, asking if your friend is *honest* seems like a straightforward enough question and a broad, evaluative judgment. Yet, it relies on you accessing and evaluating their history (or your shared history) of honest behavior. Likewise, the valence of the judgment might also matter. For example, would you describe a friend as guileful and manipulative? Those descriptors might involve a different type of assessment where, instead of searching your memory for how honest a friend is, or instances of them acting virtuously, you might instead search your memory for instances of unethical behavior (i.e., judgments of negative descriptors might be guided by a search of behaviors aligned

with those negative descriptors). In fact, there is some evidence that people tend to be more biased when evaluating close others when asked about positive descriptors than negative descriptors (LaBuda & Gere, 2023). But global, summary judgments of honesty might be more prone to bias compared to judgments of more specific, defined types of honest behavior (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005). Thus, if you were asked something more specific, like whether or not they would accept a bribe, it might cause you to think of a particular instance or behavior that your friend might do. In the current study, we extend previous research by examining whether components of honesty judgments differ depending on how honesty is assessed. In particular, beyond measuring honesty using the commonly used Honesty-Humility scale from the HEXACO model, we added three direct, more explicit and face-valid, Q-sort measures of honesty (i.e., honest, candid, guileful) as a first step to examine agreement on more content-valid assessments of honesty. We also compared these components of honesty judgments to more commonly measured characteristics in the interpersonal perceptions literature—the Big Five personality traits—to gauge if and how honesty judgments are unique from judgments of other psychological characteristics.

1.3. The current study

Honesty is a socially valued characteristic, is associated with important personal and societal outcomes, and is also inherently interpersonal. Because of its interpersonal and social nature, it might be subject to self-report biases, such that people might say that they are more honest than they are in line with social desirability. However, the magnitude of these biases might differ based on how honesty is judged and measured. The current study examined sources of judgments of honesty from friends and how these judgments vary by how honesty is measured. We applied a social relations model (SRM) to pairwise judgments in almost 200 groups of four friends. Specifically, we decomposed the sources of variance in honesty judgments from both direct measures and honesty-humility scale compared to more familiar psychological characteristics (i.e., the Big Five traits), and further correlated with self-reports to elucidate self-other disagreement and assumed similarity in interpersonal judgment of honesty.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 193 quads of friends (*N* = 772 individuals) from existing round-robin data that administered online questionnaires to friend groups.[2] Four friends joined a Zoom link synchronously, and they provided their ratings on their friends' honesty followed by self-ratings on a survey link. The participants maintained their microphone off to prevent discussion during completion. Once the whole four group members finished the survey, they were debriefed together. Compensation was given as a $20 gift card per participant.

On average, friends have known each other for 3.59 years (*SD* = 3.40 years; range: 1 month to 20 years). The sample was mainly women (76.5 % women, 21.9 % men, 1.6 % other, 0.6% missing), and mostly White (58.7 %) and Asian (17.4 %), followed by Black/African American (7.2 %), Multiracial (6.1 %), Hispanic/Latinx (5.7 %), and 4.9 % other races/ ethnicities.

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[2] There are several projects in development examining SRM variance decomposition of psychological characteristics (see OSF page for a full list of constructs). The honesty data collected in this study has not yet been reported or published (nor is it part of any other reports).

2.2. Measures

Participants were first asked to evaluate their three friends on measures of honesty before evaluating themselves. To measure friend-reports, we piped in the names of each of the three friends into the questions, with the order of names randomized, and the items revised slightly so that they assessed observer-reports (see below for examples). Self-reports were assessed using the traditional forms of the scales.

2.2.1. Honesty

Honesty was measured using multiple questionnaires: single-item indicators of whether someone is honest, candid, and guileful, and honesty-humility subscale of the HEXACO-60 inventory that was composed of four facets.

Honest. We used a single item of perceived honesty of friends. Respondents rated their agreement with the statement, "[Ringo] is an honest person," on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Afterward, the respondents answered the same question for self-reports (i.e., "I am an honest person") on the same 5-point Likert-type scale.

Candid. A single item was extracted from the California Q-sort (Block, 1961) to assess the degree to which a friend is perceived as candid. Respondents rated their agreement with the statement, "[Ringo] is straightforward, forthright, and candid in dealing with others," on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The self-reports on candidness were measured using the same measure (i.e., "I am straightforward, forthright, and candid in dealing with others") on the same 5-point Likert-type scale.

Guileful. Another single item was extracted from the California Q-sort (Block, 1961) to assess the degree a friend is perceived as guileful. Respondents rated their agreement with the statement, "[Ringo] is guileful and deceitful, manipulative, opportunistic. They exploit and take advantage of people and situations," on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Subsequently, the respondents answered the same question for self-reports (i.e., "I am guileful and deceitful, manipulative, opportunistic. I exploit and take advantage of people and situations") on the same 5-point Likert-type scale.

Honesty-Humility. Participants completed three observer-report versions (one for each friend) and a self-report of the 10-item Honesty-Humility (HH) subscale of the HEXACO-60 inventory (Ashton & Lee, 2007). This questionnaire asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). A mean composite was created for honesty-humility ($\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.74$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.72$), but four subscales—sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty—were also assessed (see below for number of items, sample items, and reliabilities).

Sincerity. Three questions were used to assess the target's sincerity (e.g., "[Ringo] wouldn't use flattery to get a raise or promotion at work, even if they thought it would succeed."). Responses were averaged to yield a composite of sincerity ($\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.52$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.59$).

Fairness. Three questions were used to assess the target's fairness (e.g., "[Ringo] would never accept a bribe, even if it were very large."). Responses were averaged to yield a composite of fairness ($\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.71$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.71$).

Greed Avoidance. Two questions were used to assess the target's greed avoidance (e.g., "[Ringo] would get a lot of pleasure from owning expensive luxury goods [reverse-coded]."). Responses were averaged to yield a composite of greed avoidance ($\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.40$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.44$).

Modesty. Two questions were used to assess the target's modesty (e.g., "[Ringo] thinks that they are entitled to more respect than the average person is [reverse-coded]."). Responses were averaged to yield a composite of modesty ($\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.68$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.70$).

2.2.2. Big Five personality traits

We assessed judgments of the Big Five personality traits to compare whether their sources of variance were similar to judgments of honesty. Specifically, we used a self- and observer-report version of the 15-item BFI-2-XS (Soto & John, 2017) to assess extraversion (e.g., "[Ringo] tends to be quiet [reverse-coded];" $\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.55$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.59$), agreeableness (e.g., "[Ringo] is compassionate, has a soft heart;" $\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.70$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.56$), conscientiousness (e.g., "[Ringo] tends to be disorganized [reverse-coded];" $\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.60$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.54$), neuroticism (e.g., "[Ringo] worries a lot"; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.69$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.72$), and openness to experience (e.g., "[Ringo] is fascinated by art, music, or literature;" $\alpha_{mean\ of\ friend\text{-}report} = 0.54$; $\alpha_{mean\ of\ self\text{-}report} = 0.48$) of three friends and oneself. Participants rated how much they agreed with each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and mean composites of each trait were calculated.

2.3. Analytic strategy

We conducted a social relations model analysis (SRM; Christensen et al., 2023; Kenny et al., 2021; Kenny & La Voie, 1984) using the TripleR package in *R* (Schönbrodt et al., 2012) to analyze the round-robin quad data.[3] The SRM framework allows us to estimate the variance in interpersonal perception ratings by attributing it to individual and relational factors (Kenny & La Voie, 1984). To illustrate, SRM decomposes rating variance into four components: perceiver, target, relationship, and error. In this study, we used a latent variable approach in which items were grouped into two parcels per scale (i.e., the two more highly correlated items were averaged to create one parcel; the third item was used as a second parcel), and they were used as indicators of a latent variable. Perceiver variance indicates *assimilation*, reflecting how consistently the perceiver rates others on a construct (e.g., the degree to which a perceiver rates others in a similar degree of honesty). Target variance represents *consensus*, indicating the extent to which all perceivers agree on a target's construct level (e.g., the degree to which a target is rated in a similar level of honesty by all perceivers). Relationship variance denotes *uniqueness*, measuring rating variability pertinent to the unique relationship between the two individuals within a dyad (e. g., the degree to which the perception of a person's honesty is unique to each friend pair/dyad). To determine the extent to which judgments' variance can be attributed to error requires multiple items per construct. In the case of single-item constructs (e.g., Guileful), error variance will be confounded with relationship variance.

We first ran SRMs to provide a descriptive account of where judgments of honesty and the Big Five personality traits come from to quantify how much variance could be attributable to perceiver, target, a friend pair's unique relationship, and error. Subsequently, self-reports were correlated with the friends' reports to examine two types of associations between friends' judgments and self-perceptions. First, we quantified *self-other agreement* (i.e., a correlation between a person's self-report of honesty and how their friends judge that person's honesty [i.e., the target effect]). Second, we quantified *assumed similarity* (i.e., a correlation between a person's self-report of honesty and how they generally perceive their friend's honesty [i.e., the perceiver effect]; Cronbach, 1955). This former association (i.e., self-other agreement) is often considered an indicator of "accuracy," and the latter association (i. e., assumed similarity) is often considered an indicator of "projection."

Lastly, auxiliary analyses were conducted to assess potential influences of factors such as relationship factors or demographics on the

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[3] We had several groups having missing values (i.e., not having 16 [12 perceiver-reports and four self-reports] reports per group, or some participants reporting only on several items). We used all available data, but to handle missing values, we used na.rm = TRUE argument in TripleR package. For further details about how this operates, please see Schönbrodt et al. (2012).

observed SRM effects on honesty. Specifically, we tested whether perceiver and target effects differed by age, gender, race/ethnicity (for both the judge and the target), and how long the friends have known each other. Multilevel models were employed to account for the nested structure of the data, in which individuals are nested within friend groups.

2.4. Transparency and Openness

The current study was not pre-registered. Data, analysis scripts, and study materials are openly available at https://osf.io/f7uxq/?view_only=d86da79a61334721a739b96f515cefbb.

3. Results

The means, standard deviations, and alpha reliability estimates for all measures are presented in Table 1. We first ran a series of univariate SRM analyses on multiple honesty and HH measures and the Big Five traits to decompose the variance of each of the ratings into four components: perceiver, target, relationship, and error.

3.1. Variance decomposition of honesty judgments

The variance partitioning of all the measures is presented in Table 2. Notably, the *target* variance was the smallest among all sources for explaining the variance across honesty judgments except for greed avoidance and candidness. This was smaller than what was seen for the Big Five personality traits, on average (21.8 %). Consistent with the idea that honesty might not always be the most observable characteristic, this pattern of results indicates that there was little consensus among friends on who is honest.

On the contrary, except for error variance, the sources of variance differed depending on how honesty and humility-related traits were measured. Perceiver variance accounted for the largest share of variance in ratings of most honesty-humility (HH) facets (i.e., sincerity, fairness, modesty) and the composite trait (i.e., 16.8 % for the HH composite), roughly double the average perceiver variance observed for the Big Five traits (8.0 %). Substantial perceiver variance indicates a tendency of perceivers to generally perceive others as similarly sincere, fair, and modest (or not). On the other hand, relationship variance was the largest variance explained for all single items more directly assessing honesty (i.e., honest, candid, guileful). Substantial relationship variance suggests that much of these ratings arise from the unique relationship between two people, consistent with honesty being a relational phenomenon. To note, relationship variance was larger for the single-item indicators. This is at least partially attributable to our inability to parse out relationship variance from error variance (which we were able to do with multi-item honesty-humility facets). All told, for both multi-item honesty/humility

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

	Self-reports			Friend-reports		
	M	SD	α	M	SD	α
Honest	4.17	0.73	–	4.19	0.79	–
Candid	3.81	0.97	–	3.75	1.03	–
Guileful	1.57	0.85	–	1.58	0.92	–
HH	3.24	0.64	0.72	3.22	0.65	0.74
HH Sincerity	3.11	0.95	0.59	3.13	0.87	0.52
HH Fairness	3.18	1.11	0.71	3.13	1.05	0.71
HH Greed Avoidance	2.74	0.95	0.44	2.90	0.90	0.40
HH Modesty	3.84	0.93	0.70	3.67	0.96	0.68
Extraversion	3.29	0.89	0.59	3.47	0.85	0.55
Agreeableness	3.86	0.70	0.56	3.89	0.76	0.70
Conscientiousness	3.34	0.89	0.54	3.60	0.87	0.60
Neuroticism	3.42	0.91	0.72	2.94	0.87	0.69
Openness	3.80	0.77	0.48	3.60	0.77	0.54

Note. HH = Honesty-Humility.

Table 2
Variance partitioning for honesty and the Big Five personality traits.

	Perceiver	Target	Relationship	Error
Honest	19.2 %	17.9 %	62.9 %	–
Candid	13.4 %	23.2 %	63.3 %	–
Guileful	35.4 %	11.1 %	53.4 %	–
HH	16.8 %	9.6 %	12.7 %	60.9 %
HH Sincerity	13.2 %	6.2 %	10.0 %	70.6 %
HH Fairness	27.8 %	9.6 %	16.9 %	45.7 %
HH Greed Avoidance	4.2 %	8.8 %	9.7 %	77.3 %
HH Modesty	22.0 %	13.6 %	14.3 %	50.1 %
Extraversion	1.2 %	29.6 %	10.1 %	59.1 %
Agreeableness	11.8 %	20.4 %	21.6 %	46.3 %
Conscientiousness	8.7 %	22.7 %	15.4 %	53.1 %
Neuroticism	8.1 %	23.0 %	11.7 %	57.3 %
Openness	10.3 %	13.2 %	12.1 %	64.4 %
Big Five (average)	8.0 %	21.8 %	14.2 %	56.0 %

Note. HH = honesty-humility. Big Five (average) is the average across all Big Five measures.

and the Big Five personality traits, a substantial part of the variance of the rating was attributable to error.[4] Taken together, the relatively large amount of perceiver or relationship variance versus target variance suggests the existence of perceiver bias, either based on the specific relationship with the target or from the perceiver's own tendency of rating others, in judging one's honesty.

3.2. Associations with self-reports

We then correlated self-reports of honesty with the SRM effects to quantify self-other agreement (Fig. 1) and assumed similarity (Fig. 2).

First, the correlation between self-reports and target effects (i.e., how a person is perceived as honest by others) was very small ($r_{average} = 0.15$), and considerably smaller than what was seen for the Big Five personality traits ($r_{average} = 0.45$). None of the correlation coefficients from honesty measurements surpassed that from the Big Five. This indicates that, although the self-reports and friends' reports of honesty are not completely different (i.e., non-significant or negatively associated), they share very little overlap, suggesting a substantial gap between those who self-report as honest versus those who are perceived by others as honest.

Second, in contrast, the correlations between self-reports and perceiver effects (i.e., how a person generally perceives the honesty of their friends) were considerably large. We found substantial assumed similarity for honesty across all measures ($r_{average} = 0.42$) except for candid, and this was generally larger than what was seen for the Big Five personality traits ($r_{average} = 0.22$). This suggests that people have a moderately strong tendency to project their self-reported honesty onto their evaluation of others (e.g., if I perceive I am honest, I think others are generally honest, too), more strongly than they do for the Big Five personality traits.

In sum, although people do not match in their judgments of honesty trait from others (i.e., a low self-other agreement), self-perceptions of

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[4] We were initially concerned that the large source of error variance might suggest that there was something systematically wrong with the data. However, examining other psychological characteristics in the data suggests that this pattern might be specific to honesty and Big Five personality trait ratings because the error variance was smaller for other things, like commitment readiness (17% error variance), attachment anxiety (33%), and attachment avoidance (44%). The large amount of error variance might be attributable to our use of short-form measures (which necessarily have greater measurement error). Nevertheless, from the current analysis, we can reasonably ascertain that the variance in honesty judgments largely stems from relationship sources and unmodeled (often considered measurement) errors and less so from systematic perceiver (assimilation) and target (consensus) processes.
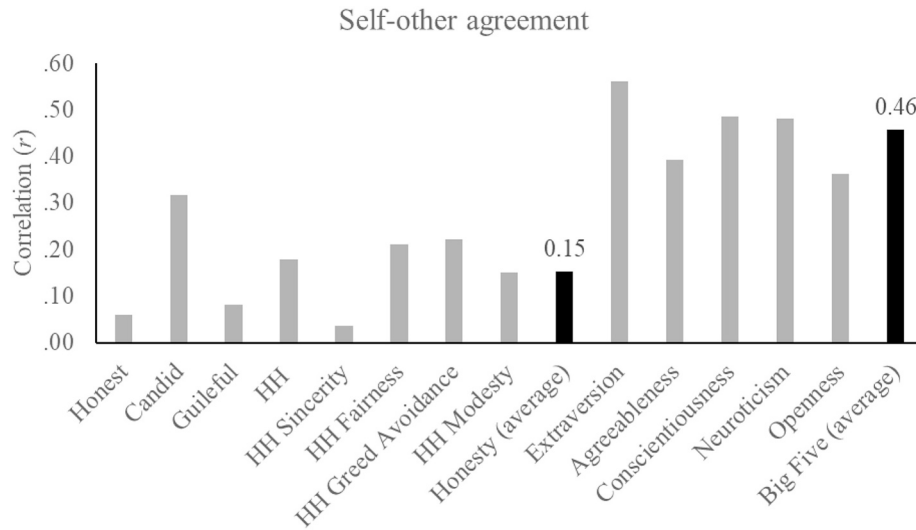
Fig. 1. Self-other agreement for honesty and Big Five personality traits.
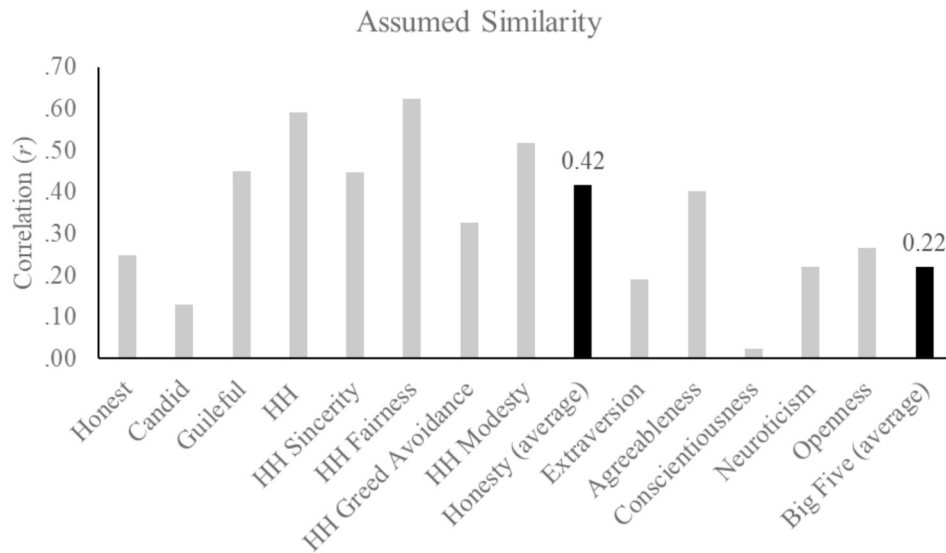

Fig. 2. Assumed similarity for honesty and Big Five personality traits.

honesty tend to guide how they judge the honesty of their friends (i.e., high assumed similarity).[5]

3.3. Auxiliary analysis with demographic and relationship factors

Lastly, we ran auxiliary analyses to examine if the SRM results of honesty were associated with friendship length or demographics (i.e.,

gender, age, race/ethnicity). Considering the interdependence in which individuals are nested within friend groups, we used multilevel modeling (MLM) approach to account for group membership. Gender and race/ethnicity were dummy coded to 0 and 1, with one indicating women and people of color, respectively.

For perceiver effects (i.e., higher perceiver effect indicating people tend to see others as generally honest), we found significant associations between perceiver effects of multiple honesty measures and friendship length and age, respectively. People judged their friends are more honest if they knew their friends longer and/or if the judges were young.

For target effects (i.e., higher target effect indicating people have high consensus that the target is honest), we found significant associations between target effects of honesty measures with gender and race/ethnicity. Specifically, targets who identified as women or people of color were perceived to be more honest. Unexpectedly, we also found a negative association between greed avoidance target effect and friendship length, such that people were perceived to avoid greed less if they were friends longer. (For full details, see Supplementary Table 2).

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[5] The *TripleR* package additionally provided reliability estimates calculated for each SRM effects. Reliability estimates reveal how consistently SRM effects hold across indicators of each latent variable and allows for more nuanced interpretation of correlations with self-reports. Higher reliability (e.g., Fairness perceiver effect at 0.63) suggests relatively stable findings across indicators whereas lower reliability (e.g., sincerity's target effect 0.29) suggests indicator dependence. Reliabilities mostly ranged from 0.36 to 0.63 for single-item measures and 0.26 to 0.59 for multi-item measures. Two exceptions—the reliability of the perceiver effects for greed avoidance e (0.16) and extraversion (0.07)—were particularly low, suggesting that assimilation on these characteristics using these indicators might be less reliable. See the Supplement Table 1 for full details of reliability estimates together with SRM effects.

4. Discussion

Given that honesty is a morally imbued and interpersonal character trait (Fleeson et al., 2022; Miller, 2021), measuring honesty using observer reports—with the context of social networks, specifically—could provide unique insights into how friends perceive each other's honesty, including whether they agree on who is honest and if they are biased in honesty judgments. To our knowledge, the current study is the first to employ the Social Relations Model (SRM; Back & Kenny, 2010; Kenny & La Voie, 1984) to examine friends' perceptions of honesty (although see de Vries, 2010 for an examination of HEXACO traits). Specifically, we used 193 friend quads to answer questions about honesty: Where do interpersonal ratings of honesty come from – the bias of a perceiver, the general agreement on a target, or the relationship dynamic between perceivers and targets? Do the results differ by honesty measures? How are friends' perceptions associated with their own perception of honesty? Are any demographic or relationship factors associated?

Using the SRM, we decomposed the variance in honesty judgments using direct adjective measures (i.e., honest, candid, guileful) as well as the broader honesty-humility trait scale. Collectively, using more face-valid measures of honesty, as well as honesty-related characteristics (like HH) gives the field a more comprehensive assessment of how people perceive each other. On the one hand, target variance explained the least variance for interpersonal honesty ratings. This indicated that there was little consensus among friends on who was more or less honest. The target variance was smaller than what was seen for the Big Five personality traits and was generally consistent across honesty measures. Moreover, by correlating the target effect with self-perceptions of honesty, we found relatively low self-other agreement in all honesty measures. These low self-other agreement correlations were notably smaller than what was seen for the Big Five personality traits. In other words, self-perceptions of honesty rarely overlapped with friends' perceptions of honesty, suggesting substantial rank-order inconsistency between how people perceive themselves and what their friends think of them regarding honesty. These findings align well with low to moderate self-other agreement in honesty seen in works on dyads (K. Lee et al., 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2013, 2017; Thielmann et al., 2017), as well as a seminal paper by Funder & Colvin (1988) that provided some of the first evidence for inter-judge variability in personality perceptions and their disagreement with self-reports. Importantly, our results corroborate some parts of the Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry Model (SOKA model; Vazire, 2010). Namely, highly evaluative traits (i. e., socially desirable traits) tend to exhibit greater incongruence between self- and observer-reports. Our low self-other agreement in honesty judgments—lower than what was seen among any of the Big Five traits—aligns with SOKA model predictions and highlights the uniqueness of honesty as a personality trait imbued with social desirability (and thus may be more difficult to find self-other agreement on). This also adds to the ongoing debate on the importance of incorporating (various) observer reports together with self-reports rather than relying exclusively on self-reports (Le et al., 2022; Miller, 2021).

On the other hand, relationship variance explained the most variance (except for error variance) in direct honesty ratings that employed the single-item indicators (i.e., honest, guileful, candid), which asked about the interpersonal attributes of the target. Relationship variance reflects how much honesty judgments are attributable to the perceiver's *unique relationship* with the target. Unique relationship sources accounting for the most amount of variance in direct honesty ratings provide support for the recent theoretical models positing honesty as a relational phenomenon. Specifically, honesty is considered an essential element of interpersonal processes of conveying truth and cultivating accurate and truthful understanding in others (Cooper et al., 2023; Fritz, 2020). Given the importance of relationship-specific contexts in honesty ratings, future research can benefit from incorporating a more diverse sample of perceivers (e.g., family, friends, romantic partners, coworkers, or strangers) and examining how honesty perceptions vary depending on the type of relationships. For instance, perceiving a romantic partner as honest, regardless of their actual honesty, may benefit or maintain relationship well-being (Regan et al., 2000). Coworkers, on the other hand, may prioritize accuracy over positivity in judging honesty due to workplace demands and a relative premium placed on performance (Johnson et al., 2011).

Furthermore, perceiver variance explained the largest amount across honesty-humility trait variance (except for the greed avoidance facet of the HH), which was larger compared to any of the Big Five traits. Perceiver variance reflects the tendency of the perceivers to rate others as generally (dis)honest, or precisely speaking, (in)sincere, (un)fair, or (im)modest. The substantial amount of perceiver variance explained, together with the low levels of consensus (i.e., target variance), suggests that a great deal of honesty-humility trait judgments can come from perceiver biases. That is, not only are people subject to the unique relationship dynamics they share with their friends, but they also tend to perceive the world in their own idiosyncratic ways, whether those ways are naïve (thinking everyone is honest and generous) or cynical (thinking everyone is dishonest). The assumed similarity analyses (in which self-perceptions are correlated with perceiver effect) suggested a great deal of projection across all honesty measures (encompassing both direct itemized measures and HH facets)—if people thought they were honest themselves, they assumed that everyone around them was also honest. And this projection was not as prominent for the Big Five personality traits, on average. This is in line with previous findings demonstrating high assumed similarity for honesty ratings, as assessed in dyads and family/work groups (Ashton & Lee, 2010; de Vries, 2010; Lee et al., 2009; Thielmann et al., 2020). The high assumed similarity provides one possible source of *how* perceivers are inclined to rate others in a homogenous way (i.e., they use their own self-perceptions to guide ratings of their friends). It is possible that due to the low *observability* of honesty (compared to other traits like extraversion; Vazire, 2010), the ambiguity in honesty judgments might lead perceivers to rely more on their own perceptions of honesty when judging others' honesty.

Lastly, our auxiliary analyses identified friendship length, age, gender, and race/ethnicity as significant factors associated with perceiver and target effects, providing further insights into the potential factors that could shape between-rater differences. Relatively young participants and long-term friends perceived others as generally more honest. On the other hand, women and people of color were perceived as more honest by others. These findings, in part, align with Funder & Colvin's findings (1988) that identified acquaintanceship length as a key characteristic that contributes to variance in interpersonal judgments. The extension provided by this study to examine sociodemographic predictors of SRM effects might shed some light on where honesty judgments come from as well. For example, the fact that women are perceived as more honest (i.e., high target effect) provide one illustration of the gendered ways that men and women navigate social worlds differently (e.g., Haselhuhn et al., 2015). The same can be said for acquaintanceship length. For instance, longer friendships may foster psychological closeness between perceivers and targets. This, in turn, could lead the perceivers to have positive biases about their friends, such that they consider them positive extensions of themselves (e.g., Agnew et al., 1998; Aron et al., 1991) and share in their accomplishments (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976). As a result, people likely engage in some degree of enhancement of their friends and their positive characteristics.

5. Limitations and future directions

The current study had many strengths. We examined different sources of variance from a large number of observer (i.e., friend) reports of honesty, used multiple measures (i.e., direct adjective items and honesty-humility facets), were able to link SRM components to self-reports, and provided comparison analyses to the Big Five personality traits to see whether honesty judgments differed from broader

personality judgments (which they did).

However, there are at least three limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the data we relied on was from a single session, and this cross-sectional feature prevents us from examining how these judgments develop and emerge over time. For example, perceptions of narcissists' popularity, as assessed by peers, tend to decline over time (Back et al., 2010; Carlson & DesJardins, 2015; Leckelt et al., 2020). Given that some researchers find that narcissism is associated with higher liking at zero acquaintance, this suggests that people's evaluation of other psychological characteristics (like honesty) might also change over time as people get to know each other. We found that people thought their friends were more honest (and were considered more honest) if they knew each other longer. However, the time course of how honesty judgments form and its implications for relational outcomes are a bit unclear. For example, how quickly do we judge someone as honest? Do judgments of honesty wax and wane over time? If two people think they are honest, are they more likely to continue a friendship? Given a delicate balance in which honesty may help or hurt well-being, particularly in the context of close relationships (Le et al., 2022), future research will require multiple assessments of interpersonal judgments and measures of relationship outcomes. Also, in that the majority of participants were women and in their 20 s, the generalizability of the findings to other groups of people may be limited. It would also behoove future research to collect honesty perceptions from a broader array of judges (e.g., romantic partners, strangers, family, and friends) with a wider range of age, gender, and sociodemographic factors to see if these honesty perceptions and their consequences vary across relational contexts.

Second, although we had a broader array of honesty measures than what has been seen in previous research (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2007), plenty of other honesty measurements, scales, and paradigms exist. For example, there are also behavioral measures of honesty, which include tasks offering chances to lie, omit information, cheat, or act altruistically in interpersonal situations or economic games, though only some are ostensibly related to honesty (Barends et al., 2022; Heck et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2024; Levine & Munguia Gomez, 2021). Moving forward, future studies can more deliberately integrate these methods into small-group designs. For instance, some of these measures can be used as "criterion" measures to see if perceptions and self-reports of honesty are associated with an individual's honest behavior (Barends et al., 2022; Hilbig et al., 2024). However, they can also be integrated in other ways too, such as having people guess their friends' (dis)honest behavior in different scenarios to provide an alternative way to assess accuracy and bias than what is presented here.

Finally, another related limitation is that error was a significant source of variance in our SRM analyses. The large amount of error could stem from multiple reasons, including both methodological (e.g., the use of short-form measures) and substantive (e.g., maybe honesty judgments are more prone to error than other psychological characteristics [which we found some evidence for], or friends may be poorer judges than others). We found that perceptions of honesty varied even when using relatively similar self-report measures, which one might expect to show similar sources of variance. Ultimately, this limitation makes it even more urgent for future research to include a broader array of honesty measures to see if perceptions vary based on how honesty is operationalized.

6. Conclusion

Honesty and honesty-related characteristics are universally valued and morally imbued characteristics. These evaluative aspects of honesty create unique challenges of measuring it with accuracy using self-reports and a narrow breadth of items. We recruited friend quads to collect self- and friend-ratings of (multiple measures of) honesty in a round-robin design. Using the social relations model, we found that friends' consensus on who is honest or high on honesty-related characteristics (i.

e., target variance) was relatively low compared to Big Five personality traits. Instead, perceptions of honesty were modestly shaped by people's tendencies to rate their friends as similarly honest (i.e., perceiver variance) and were substantially shaped by the unique relationship dynamics between perceivers and targets (i.e., relationship variance). Although self-other overlap was relatively small, people tended to project their self-perceptions of honesty and honesty-related traits onto their evaluations of friends. These findings shed light on discrepancies between self- and friend-perceptions of honesty and underscore the relational contexts that shape honesty judgments.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Hyewon Yang: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Aislinn E. Low:** Writing – review & editing. **William J. Chopik:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgement

Appendix A. Supplementary material

All supplementary materials and analysis scripts can be accessed in the OSF repository (https://osf.io/f7uxq/?view_only=d86da79a61334721a739b96f515cefbb). Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2025.104612.

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