

# Study suggests hiding personal information judged the worst by others

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Credit: Charles Rondeau/public domain

(Phys.org)—A trio of researchers with Harvard University has conducted a series of experiments with different groups of volunteers with the goal of learning whether people do better by revealing unpleasant facts about themselves under certain interview type situations, than if they lie or try to hide it. In their paper published in

*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Leslie John, Kate Barasz and Michael Norton describe the experiments they conducted and the conclusions they drew from their observations.

Most people are well aware that some fudging goes on when people fill out job applications, or [personal profiles](#) on dating sites—but what is not clear is how it comes off to those that learn of the deceit, and whether it is better in the end to come clean in the beginning or to bend or hide the truth.

To find out, the researchers conducted seven different kinds of experiments, all of which involved giving questionnaires to [volunteers](#) who were asked to fill them out. One such scenario involved asking volunteers to fill out a dating profile, where questions were posed inquiring as to whether they had ever neglected to tell a prospective intimate partner about an STD they had. In another exercise, volunteers were asked on a simulated job application about the lowest grade they ever received in school. The second part of each exercise involved other volunteers interpreting the answers given on the questionnaires.

In looking at the results of the questionnaires, the researchers found that those assessing the answers tended to prefer dealing with people that divulged less than flattering facts about themselves than those that outright lied, or hid indiscretions by opting to not answer them at all (by checking boxes labeled 'Choose not to answer,' for example). In some instances they even found that some prospective employers preferred to hire people that divulged that they had used drugs, to those that refused to answer such questions.

The researchers suggest that their findings indicate that [people](#) would seem to do better by answering honestly when faced with situations where others are looking to judge their character because, hiding unsavory information was deemed worse in many cases than admitting to

mistakes. The caveat in the experiments was, of course, that the findings only applied if the person hiding information was either judged to be lying by an interviewer or was actually caught lying or hiding information.

**More information:** Leslie K. John et al. Hiding personal information reveals the worst, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1516868113](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1516868113)

### **Abstract**

Seven experiments explore people's decisions to share or withhold personal information, and the wisdom of such decisions. When people choose not to reveal information—to be "hidiers"—they are judged negatively by others (experiment 1). These negative judgments emerge when hiding is volitional (experiments 2A and 2B) and are driven by decreases in trustworthiness engendered by decisions to hide (experiments 3A and 3B). Moreover, hidiers do not intuit these negative consequences: given the choice to withhold or reveal unsavory information, people often choose to withhold, but observers rate those who reveal even questionable behavior more positively (experiments 4A and 4B). The negative impact of hiding holds whether opting not to disclose unflattering (drug use, poor grades, and sexually transmitted diseases) or flattering (blood donations) information, and across decisions ranging from whom to date to whom to hire. When faced with decisions about disclosure, decision-makers should be aware not just of the risk of revealing, but of what hiding reveals.

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