

Lying, Deception

Recent Research into Deception and Lying Behaviour

Part I

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### Abstract

Attempts have been made to define what lying actually is and these definitions vary. On the whole they consist of the idea of a false communication that is to the benefit of the communicator. A number of reasons are given as to why people lie including to make a good impression, to avoid punitive action or for the purpose of gaining an advantage. The recent research into deception and lying has been divided into two articles. The present one considers the definition of lying and deception, the reasons for such a demeanour and the differences between individuals who practice deception.

The types of lying are of equal interest as well as why and how children attempt to deceive. Finally included are illustrations of good or 'white' lies, a type of deception that is seemingly harmless and is meant to improve rather than reduce social cohesiveness.

## Recent Research into Deception and Lying Behaviour

### Part I

#### *Introduction*

What follows will concern itself with the complex aspects of lying behaviour and most especially what are attributed to be the signs of lying. There are already some ideas or views as to how lies can be identified but many are flawed by individual or group differences. This review will attempt to look at:

- 1) Defining deception or lying.
- 2) Why and when do people deceive or lie?
- 3) What are some of the individual differences in lying?
- 4) What are the types of deception (lying)?
- 5) How and why do children practice deception?

#### *Deception and Lying Behaviour*

The phenomenon of lying is a complex notion. Frequently lying is a form of self deception as well its obvious use to deceive others. The effect of telling lies repeatedly on subsequent belief change has been noted such as in the case of Hitler and Nazi Germany. The German people were forced eventually to deceive themselves into viewing their future as coming under the direction of Adolph Hitler and the tremendous damage this caused to the world as well as to Germany itself (Erber, 2002). There is also the question of whether lying is always wrong and indeed it is not. Zeltzer (2003) emphasises the value of lying or not be totally honest in ones dealing with others as a form of lubrication of socialisation. Telling a white lie, or “therafibbing” can be of value. The positive aspect of lying reassures the individual who is being deceived, that there is some value in themselves and therefore help increases there own self esteem. If self deception occurs then paradoxically the deceived is also simultaneously the deceiver (Kirby, 2003).

People tend to overestimate their capacity to detect lying in others and to underestimate their own ability to tell lies. These biases were demonstrated in a sample of 60 Israeli police officers with a mean age of 32.47 years. In a lie detection task, the officers evaluated their accuracy as high and were over confident in their judgements. Their performance was, in fact, below chance level (Elaad, 2003). On a practical level, the tendency of police interrogators to

overestimate their ability to detect deception could change suspicion into certainty and increase the risk of a false confession. More will be considered on this later in the section dealing specifically with the police and their capacity to identify deception.

### *Defining Deception (Lies)*

A number of investigators have produced definitions of what constitutes lying. Mitchell (1986) defines it as “a false communication that tends to benefit the communicator.” According to Ekman (1992) the definition is “a deliberate choice to mislead a target without giving any indication to do so.” Vrij (2003) defines lying as “a successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another, a belief which the communicator considers an untruth.”

The distinction between misinformation and disinformation becomes especially important in political editorials, and advertising contexts where deliberate efforts are made to mislead, deceive, or confuse an audience in order to promote personal, religious, or ideological objectives. The difference consists in having an agenda. This bears comparison with lying because ‘lies’ are assertions that are false, that are known to be false, and that are used with the intention to mislead (Fetzer, 2004). They are also meant to confuse. As already mentioned earlier, deceiving oneself can also culminate into the fear of deception. Barnes (2004) indicates that the term ‘lie’ has a broad range of meaning; like many other recent writers on lying, not all forms of deception are lying and it is cited that a dictionary definition of a lie is but one component of what is the intention to deceive; the other component being a statement that the liar believes to be untrue.

### *Why and When Do People Deceive?*

The most common interpretation or answer to this question is that it is to make a good impression or to gain an advantage. Sometimes lies occur for the benefit of others rather than for oneself (De Paulo et al, 1996; De Paulo & Bell, 1996; Bell & De Paulo, 1996). Harvey (2004) attempts to answer the question as to when are lies most likely to occur. Lies are expected most often during war time and unsurprisingly in politics. Areas where they are less expected are in the area of judicial proceedings. The sole domain where truth is paramount is likely to be in science. Lying is most likely to occur in those who adopt what is termed the “Machiavellian approach to life,” i.e. being opportunistic and adapting any kind of behaviour necessary to get what one seeks.

Feldman et al (2002) examined the effects of self-presentation goals on the amount and type of verbal deception used by participants in same gender and mixed gender dyads. 121 pairs of undergraduate students were asked to engage in a conversation that was secretly videotaped. The self preservation goal was manipulated, where one member of the dyad (the self presenter) was told to either appear (a) likable, (b) competent, or (c) told simply to talk with his or her partner (control condition). After the conversation, self presenters were asked to review a video recording of the video interaction and identify the instances in which they had deceived the other person. Overall, participants told more lies when they had a goal to appear likable or competent compared to participants in the control condition.

De Paulo et al (2004) noticed that the most serious lies were told by or to participants closest in relationship to partners. Participants reported telling their serious lies to get what they wanted or to do what they thought they were entitled to do, or to avoid punishment. Lies also occurred to protect oneself from confrontation, in an attempt to appear to be the type of person they wish they were, to protect others, and to hurt others. The degree to which the liars and the targets felt distressed about the lies differed significantly across these different types of lies. Similar results were obtained by Groer (1997) in an earlier study indicating that self interest was the major reason for deception or lying.

#### *What Are the Individual Differences in Lying?*

A study by Krestan & Bepko (1993) discussed the multiple ways that denial shaped painful secrets in families with alcohol and drug addiction. There was a complex interplay of loyalty and betrayal in relationships, and effective clinical methods to work with such secrecy was needed. Bond & Atoum (2000) noted that lies were detectable across cultures. The cultures studied in this particular study were American, Jordanians and Indians and participants were asked to judge for deception from videotapes. It was also found that the participants judged 'foreigners' to be more truthful than compatriots.

Participants were studied in the form of undergraduates who were asked to recall a recent event in which he or she had engaged in sexual lying and then respond to several questions regarding the event. Results showed that those who recalled relatively risk relevant and self protective sexual lies, saw their lies as more serious and less acceptable. Moreover, those who told relatively risk irrelevant and other protective sexual lies reported less history of sexual lying or infidelity and more liking for the lie recipient in the event (Williams & Payne, 2002).

It is unfortunate that expert witnesses frequently practice lying in the testimony that they give in the courts. This is possibly due to the fact that they attach themselves to one side in the controversy rather than viewing matters independently (Milunsky, 2003).

There appeared to be individual differences by gender such as the fact where lies were communicated by women, these were more accurately detected than where lies were communicated by men (Forrest et al, 2004). This suggests that men may be better liars. Gender differences were also noted by Tyler & Feldman (2004). The study concerned men and women who were undergraduates at a university. Male and female participants were assigned to the same or opposite gender partner and give the expectation that they would not meet again, or that they would meet three additional times. Participants engaged in a 10 minute conversation that was videotaped covertly. Later, target participants evaluated the videotape identifying lies they told. During the conversation, 78 % of the participants lied, with females lying significantly more than males. Females, but not males, lied more when expecting future interaction than when expecting no future interaction. The nature of the lies also varied between women and men. Findings suggested that women and men differed in the use of deception as a self presentational tactic.

#### *What Are the Types of Deception and Lying?*

When we consider the types of deception we are equally considering the types of liars or those who deceive. They maybe divided into various types. The first is the 'exploitative type', who manipulate others for their own benefit (Kashy & De Paulo, 1996; Wilson et al, 1998). The second type, named 'pretenders' are those who deceive by means of pretence. Those individuals have good self control while they are lying about something which will be to their advantage (Vrij & Holland, 1999). The 'extrovert' manipulator or deceiver actually enjoys the prospect of lying. The opposite can be said of those who are 'introverted' who are much less likely to lie or deceive. The 'non-conformist' or 'non-confrontation' deceivers are those who avoid telling the truth and will often lie for fear of consequences. Such individuals are also often social liars in such a way that they don't want to offend others and deceive for that reason (Kashy & De Paulo, 1996; Vrij & Holland, 1999). Finally there are also those who lie for ethical reasons such as to alleviate suffering or to promote order. Sometimes lies are employed to do a legitimate job and to serve justice as well as to protect a righteous colleague. Lies even occur to thwart unethical conduct by officials and to ensure survival (Standing Bear, 1998).

Motivation appears to play a large part in lying type behaviour. Testimony often given within the court setting may be harmless or deceitful, depending on the motivation of the speaker (Stern & Stern, 1999a). Schweitzer et al (2002) distinguishes between two types of lies according to the relative value to the deceiver of being able to monitor the targets reaction to the lie. Deceivers telling monitoring dependent lies benefit significantly more from being able to monitor their targets than do deceivers telling monitoring independent lies. Lying may be in direct relation to judges withholding the truth. This is a necessary component of lying type of responses. Hence, lying may be conceptualised as involving the inhibition of an initial automatic response while an alternative response is generated. Farrow et al (2003) investigated response times to visually and auditory presented questions probing recent episodic memory when subjects answered questions truthfully or with lies. They also investigated whether the absolute response times or differences between times taken to tell the truth or lie was affected by the participants' sex or correlated with personality scores on the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (short scale). Here 61 participants answered the same 36 question five times. The first time involved answering all questions truthfully, which allowed a post-hoc analysis of whether the subjects had been consistent in their lying and truth telling on the following four occasions. These latter four occasions involved answering all the questions for both types of presentation. There was also a significant correlation for women between mean individual lie minus truth time to auditorially presented questions and the Eysenck 'Lie' scales. This preliminary data suggested that response times were systematically longer when telling a lie and that personality variable played a part in this process.

A study by Vrij et al (2003) revealed significant differences between the types of lies told to close friends and strangers and significant differences between types of lies told and attachment style. This research was based on 50 college students who completed a questionnaire regarding their attachment style and their frequency of lying to stranger or close friends. The lies varied with some being self-centred while others were other orientated or altruistic. Different types of lie telling was also noted by O'Sullivan (2003) who conducted a study which concluded that most people are unable to detect accurately, when other were lying. Many explanations for this inability were suggested but the cognitive heuristics involved in lie detection received little attention. Trait judgements of trustworthiness were highly correlated with state judgements of truthfulness, leading, as predicted, to a positive correlation with detection accuracy and negative correlations with deception detection accuracy.

An interesting question was asked by Ruane & Cerulo (2003) “Is honesty really our policy?” They noted that the conventional wisdom on honesty was strong, yet interestingly enough almost as early as the prohibition against lying was learned, that, there was also the capacity for rationalisation in telling lies. They thus concluded that despite conventional wisdom to the contrary, lying stood as a ubiquitous social practice. Hence sociologists distinguished between two types of lies: deviant lies and normal lies. They attempted to define these. Deviant lies were falsehood always judged to be wrong by a society. They represented a socially unaccepted practice, and devastated the trust that enabled interaction within a complex society of strangers. Normal lies on the other hand were identified as being socially acceptable linked to productive social outcomes. A lie’s relative deviancy or normalcy depended on who told it, when, where and why it was told and to whom it was told.

#### *How and Why Do Children Practice Deception*

Lying among children depends on the age as well as personality of the child. Children use other orientated lies early on as well as to avoid punishment (Lewis, 1993). Child truth telling is especially important when allegations of child sexual abuse have been made. Frequently it is necessary to look for the psychological causes in the child’s ideation or life and attempt to disentangle memory from fantasy (Stern & Stern, 1999b).

Gilli et al (2001) sought evidence regarding children ability to distinguish mistakes from lies. This study explored the extent to which this ability occurred in the context of other languages and cultures. Italian children aged 3, 4, and 5 years were presented with two situations. These were stories and four questions were asked requiring them to distinguish between lies and honest mistakes. As in previous research, the subject in all age groups displayed an incipient grasp of the lie/mistake distinction with regard to situations regarding falsehoods about the edibility of a substance that had been contaminated. Children of all ages often regarded incidences of both lies and mistakes as negative rather than restricting their moral judgement of naughtiness to the lying alone. Although there was no significant age difference in the responses of the total sample of children to any of the four questions, the pattern of responses across the various questions pointed to increases with age for the individual’s consistency in answering questions about the lie/mistake distinction.

Another study by Talwar & Lee (2002) concerned itself with examining the telling of ‘white lies’ (small seemingly harmless lies) in 3 -7 year olds. Before children took a photo of the

experimenter, the experimenter asked, “Do I look okay for the photo?” In the experimental condition, the experimenter’s nose had a visible mark; in the control condition it did not. Most of the children in the experimental condition told white lies. Undergraduates, who saw children’s videotaped responses, could not discriminate the white lie tellers from the control non liars. Analysis of the children expressive behaviour revealed that white lie tellers only differed from control non liars on three categories. Results suggested that children are not always candid truth tellers. They were able to use both verbal and nonverbal display rules and tell white lies in politeness situations.

Another study of children’s understanding about white lies was carried out by Broomfield et al (2002). Three experiments were conducted and concerned both male and female children. In experiment 1, responses suggesting falsely that a recipient liked a gift they were given were increasingly common over the age of 4 – 9 years. Children who suggested false responses judged that the giver would believe the gift was liked and would be happy following the falsehood. They also predicted that the giver would be unhappy had the truth been told and passed the test of second order false belief. Many children who suggested truthful responses also revealed a full understanding of the consequences of giving true and false responses and also passed second order false belief. In experiment 2, involving 6, 8 and 10 year olds, more children suggested false verbal than false facial responses. In experiment 3, giving children the pro-social reason for falsifying, increased the incidence of false responses. Many children apparently placed more weight on truth telling than on protecting the feelings of a gift giver.

Similar results were noted by Berthoud-Papandropoulou & Kilcher (2003). The results of this study showed that up to 6 years of age although correctly attributing a false belief, children systematically judged that false belief statements were lies, since it did not correspond to the ‘real world’ state of affairs. Older children succeeded in the lie judgement, invoking the false believer’s not knowing the ‘world’ state.

A study of types of lying was carried out by Taylor et al (2003). Four experiments were carried out to discover the capacity of children and adults to distinguish pretending from lying. Children aged 4 – 7 years heard a series of short narratives in which the main character made a factually incorrect statement, either because he or she was trying to deceive someone or because he or she was pretending. By five years of age, children were able to describe or give examples of both lying and pretending, and to comment on the difference between the two, but in many

cases they labelled statements that were intended to be pretend as lies. Children as young as four had no difficulty distinguishing pretend statements from lies.

Wilson et al (2003) noted that children used deception in a naturalistic setting. Goals included describing children's lying behaviour and parents reactions to lies, and comparing lies to other false statements. Lies were commonly told to avoid responsibility for transgressions, to falsely accuse siblings, and to gain control of another's behaviour. Lies were distinctly self-serving. Older siblings lied more often than younger ones, and parents who allowed older siblings to lie, lied more often.

A more recent study by Vrij et al (2004) examined children as well as undergraduates in both verbal and nonverbal deceptive behaviour and the extent to which their truth and lies could be correctly classified by paying attention to these responses. Although children and undergraduates demonstrated different behaviours, actual cues to deceive were remarkably similar across the age groups. For example both 5 and 6 year old as well as undergraduates obtained scores which indicated fewer movements while lying. A combination of verbal and non-verbal lie detection methods resulted in more correct classification of liars and truth tellers than the verbal and non-verbal lie detection methods, individually, with the combined methods obtaining a hit rate as high as 88 %.

An interesting study by Talwar et al (2004) considered children lie telling behaviour in whether they concealed the transgression of a parent. Two experiments resulted. In experiment 1 the parents broke a puppet and told their children of 3 – 11 years of age not to tell anyone. Children then answered questions about the event. The children's moral understanding of truth and lie telling was assessed by a second interviewer and the children then promised to tell the truth. Children were again questioned about what happened to the puppet. Regardless of whether the interview was conducted with their parents absent or present, most children told the truth about their parent's transgression. When the likelihood of the child being blamed for the transgression was reduced, significantly more children lied. It was found that there was a significant yet limited relationship between children's lie-telling behaviour and their moral understanding of lie or truth-telling. Further more after the children were questioned about issues concerning truth and lie telling and asked to promise to tell the truth, significantly more children told the truth about the parent's transgression. The second experiment replicated these findings. It was again found that children who were questioned about lies and who then

promised to tell the truth were more likely to tell truth in a second interview than children who did not participate in this procedure before questioning.

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