

The truth about lying

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Summary: Deception is rampant—and sometimes we tell the biggest lies to those we love most.

If, as the cliché has it, the 1980s was the decade of greed, then the quintessential sin of the 1990s might just have been lying. After all, think of the accusations of deceit leveled at politicians like Bob Packwood, Marion Barry, Dan Rostenkowski, Newt Gingrich, and Bill Clinton.

And consider the top-level Texaco executives who initially denied making racist comments at board meetings; the young monk who falsely accused Cardinal Bernardin of molestation; Susan Smith, the white woman who killed her young boys and blamed a black man for it; and Joe Klein, the Newsweek columnist who adamantly swore for months that he had nothing to do with his anonymously-published novel *Primary Colors*. Even Hollywood noticed our apparent deception obsession: witness films like *Quiz Show*, *True Lies*, *The Crucible*, *Secrets & Lies*, and *Liar, Liar*.

Leonard Saxe, Ph.D., a polygraph expert and professor of psychology at Brandeis University, says, “Lying has long been a part of everyday life. We couldn’t get through the day without being deceptive.” Yet until recently lying was almost entirely ignored by psychologists, leaving serious discussion of the topic in the hands of ethicists and theologians. Freud wrote next to nothing about deception; even the 1500-page *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, published in 1984, mentions lies only in a brief entry on detecting them. But as psychologists delve deeper into the details of deception, they’re finding that lying is a surprisingly common and complex phenomenon.

For starters, the work by Bella DePaulo, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Virginia, confirms Nietzsche’s assertion that the lie is a condition of life. In a 1996 study, DePaulo and her colleagues had 147 people between the ages of 18 and 71 keep a diary of all the falsehoods they told over the course of a week. Most people, she found, lie once or twice a day—almost as often as they snack from the refrigerator or brush their teeth. Both men and women lie in approximately a fifth of their social exchanges lasting 10 or more minutes; over the course of a week they deceive about 30 percent of those with whom they interact one-on-one. Furthermore, some types of relationships, such as those between parents and teens, are virtual magnets for deception: “College students lie to their mothers in one out of two conversations,” reports DePaulo. (Incidentally, when researchers refer to lying, they don’t include the mindless pleasantries or polite equivocations we offer each other in passing, such as “I’m fine, thanks” or “No trouble at all.” An “official” lie actually misleads, deliberately conveying a false impression. So complimenting a friend’s awful haircut or telling a creditor that the check is in the mail both qualify.)

Saxe points out that most of us receive conflicting messages about lying. Although we’re socialized from the time we can speak to believe that it’s always better to tell the truth, in reality society often encourages and even rewards deception. Show up late for an early morning meeting at work and it’s best not to admit that you overslept. “You’re punished far more than you would be if you lie and say you were stuck in traffic,” Saxe notes.

Moreover, lying is integral to many occupations. Think how often we see lawyers constructing far-fetched theories on behalf of their clients or reporters misrepresenting themselves in order to gain access to good stories.

Of Course I Love You

Dishonesty also pervades our romantic relationships, as you might expect from the titles of books like *101 Lies Men Tell Women* (Harper Collins), by Missouri psychologist Dory Hollander, Ph.D. (Hollander's nomination for the #1 spot: "I'll call you.") Eighty-five percent of the couples interviewed in a 1990 study of college students reported that one or both partners had lied about past relationships or recent indiscretions. And DePaulo finds that dating couples lie to each other in about a third of their interactions—perhaps even more often than they deceive other people.

Fortunately, marriage seems to offer some protection against deception: Spouses lie to each other in "only" about 10 percent of their major conversations. The bad news? That 10 percent just refers to the typically minor lies of everyday life. DePaulo recently began looking at the less frequent "big" lies that involve deep betrayals of trust, and she's finding that the vast majority of them occur between people in intimate relationships. "You save your really big lies," she says, "for the person that you're closest to."

Sweet Little Lies

Though some lies produce interpersonal friction, others may actually serve as a kind of harmless social lubricant. "They make it easier for people to get along," says DePaulo, noting that in the diary study one in every four of the participants' lies were told solely for the benefit of another person. In fact, "fake positive" lies—those in which people pretend to like someone or something more than they actually do ("Your muffins are the best ever")--are about 10 to 20 times more common than "false negative" lies in which people pretend to like someone or something less ("That two-faced rat will never get my vote").

Certain cultures may place special importance on these "kind" lies. A survey of residents at 31 senior citizen centers in Los Angeles recently revealed that only about half of elderly Korean Americans believe that patients diagnosed with life-threatening metastatic cancer should be told the truth about their condition. In contrast, nearly 90 percent of Americans of European or African descent felt that the terminally ill should be confronted with the truth.

Not surprisingly, research also confirms that the closer we are to someone, the more likely it is that the lies we tell him or her will be altruistic ones. This is particularly true of women: Although the sexes lie with equal frequency, women are especially likely to stretch the truth in order to protect someone else's feelings, DePaulo reports. Men, on the other hand, are more prone to lying about themselves—the typical conversation between two guys contains about eight times as many self-oriented lies as it does falsehoods about other people.

Men and women may also differ in their ability to deceive their friends. In a University of Virginia study, psychologists asked pairs of same-sex friends to try to detect lies told by the other person. Six months later the researchers repeated the experiment with the same

participants. While women had become slightly better at detecting their friend's lies over time, men didn't show any improvement—evidence, perhaps, that women are particularly good at learning to read their friends more accurately as a relationship deepens.

Who Lies?

Saxe believes that anyone under enough pressure, or given enough incentive, will lie. But in a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, DePaulo and Deborah A. Kashy, Ph.D., of Texas A&M University, report that frequent liars tend to be manipulative and Machiavellian, not to mention overly concerned with the impression they make on others. Still, DePaulo warns that liars “don't always fit the stereotype of caring only about themselves. Further research reveals that extroverted, sociable people are slightly more likely to lie, and that some personality and physical traits—notably self-confidence and physical attractiveness—have been linked to an individual's skill at lying when under pressure.

On the other hand, the people least likely to lie are those who score high on psychological scales of responsibility and those with meaningful same-sex friendships. In his book *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!! The Psychology of Deceit* (American Psychiatric Press, Inc.), psychiatrist Charles Ford, M.D., adds depressed people to that list. He suggests that individuals in the throes of depression seldom deceive others—or are deceived themselves—because they seem to perceive and describe reality with greater accuracy than others. Several studies show that depressed people delude themselves far less than their non-depressed peers about the amount of control they have over situations, and also about the effect they have on other people. Researchers such as UCLA psychologist Shelley Taylor, Ph.D., have even cited such findings as evidence that a certain amount of self-delusion—basically, lying to yourself—is essential to good mental health. (Many playwrights, including Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill, seem to share the same view about truth telling. In *Death of a Salesman* and *The Iceman Cometh*, for example, lies are life sustaining: The heroes become tragic figures when their lies are stripped away.)

Detecting Lies

Anyone who has played cards with a poker-faced opponent can appreciate how difficult it is to detect a liar. Surprisingly, technology doesn't help very much. Few experts display much confidence in the deception-detecting abilities of the polygraph, or lie detector. Geoffrey C. Bunn, Ph.D., a psychologist and polygraph historian at Canada's York University, goes so far as to describe the lie detector as “an entertainment device” rather than a scientific instrument. Created around 1921 during one of the first collaborations between scientists and police, the device was quickly popularized by enthusiastic newspaper headlines and by the element of drama it bestowed in movies and novels.

But mass appeal doesn't confer legitimacy. The problem with the polygraph, say experts like Bunn, is that it detects fear, not lying; the physiological responses that it measures—most often heart rate, skin conductivity, and rate of respiration—don't necessarily accompany dishonesty.

“The premise of a lie detector is that a smoke alarm goes off in the brain when we lie because we're doing something wrong,” explains Saxe. “But sometimes we're

completely comfortable with our lies.” Thus a criminal’s lie can easily go undetected if he has no fear of telling it. Similarly, a true statement by an innocent individual could be misinterpreted if the person is sufficiently afraid of the examination circumstances. According to Saxe, the best-controlled research suggests that lie detectors err at a rate anywhere from 25 to 75 percent. Perhaps this is why most state and federal courts won’t allow polygraph “evidence.”

Some studies suggest that lies can be detected by means other than a polygraph—by tracking speech hesitations or changes in vocal pitch, for example, or by identifying various nervous adaptive habits like scratching, blinking, or fidgeting. But most psychologists agree that lie detection is destined to be imperfect. Still, researchers continue to investigate new ways of picking up lies. While studying how language patterns are associated with improvements in physical health, James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Southern Methodist University, also began to explore whether a person’s choice of words was a sign of deception. Examining data gathered from a text analysis program, Pennebaker and SMU colleague Diane Berry, Ph.D., determined that there are certain language patterns that predict when someone is being less than honest. For example, liars tend to use fewer first person words like I or my in both speech and writing. They are also less apt to use emotional words, such as hurt or angry, cognitive words, like understand or realize, and so-called exclusive words, such as but or without, that distinguish between what is and isn’t in a category.

Not Guilty

While the picture of lying that has emerged in recent years is far more favorable than that suggested by its biblical “thou shalt not” status, most liars remain at least somewhat conflicted about their behavior. In DePaulo’s studies, participants described conversations in which they lied as less intimate and pleasant than truthful encounters, suggesting that people are not entirely at ease with their deceptions. That may explain why falsehoods are more likely to be told over the telephone, which provides more anonymity than a face-to-face conversation. In most cases, however, any mental distress that results from telling an everyday lie quickly dissipates. Those who took part in the diary study said they would tell about 75 percent of their lies again if given a second chance—a position no doubt bolstered by their generally high success rate. Only about a fifth of their falsehoods were discovered during the one-week study period.

Certainly anyone who insists on condemning all lies should ponder what would happen if we could reliably tell when our family, friends, colleagues, and government leaders were deceiving us. It’s tempting to think that the world would become a better place when purged of the deceptions that seem to interfere with our attempts at genuine communication or intimacy. On the other hand, perhaps our social lives would collapse under the weight of relentless honesty, with unveiled truths destroying our ability to connect with others. The ubiquity of lying is clearly a problem, but would we want to will away all of our lies? Let’s be honest.

Publication: Psychology Today Publication Date: May/June 97