

Encyclopedia of Deception

Lying as Norm in Social Interactions

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Deception

Chapter Title: "Lying as Norm in Social Interactions"

Pub. Date: 2014

Access Date: May 16, 2014

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781452258775

Online ISBN: 9781483306902

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483306902.n236>

Print pages: 627-631

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The acceptability of lying has been, and remains, an intensely debated philosophical and moral issue; however, there is nonetheless a growing body of research supporting the idea that lying is indeed a part of everyday life and social [p. 627 ↓] interactions. Deception prevalence studies with college student and community member participants have reported that people lie about one to two times a day. Lying is like other communication behaviors in that it is often goal-oriented, and people lie in everyday life for many reasons and to achieve various goals. One prevalent reason lying is a norm in North American society is because politeness is generally an upheld value. Thus, people are even encouraged to lie in certain situations in order to protect others' feelings and to be polite. Although some may view any and all lies as immoral, others argue that telling only the truth, and nothing but the truth, can incur great harm to oneself and others.

One might ask, "Is deception really a norm in social interactions?" One way to answer this question is to determine how often people lie during social interactions in daily life. The most-cited deception prevalence study was conducted by Bella DePaulo and her colleagues and was first published in 1996. In this study, 77 college students and 70 people recruited from the community completed a diary entry every time they lied to another person. Overall, the study found that college students lied about twice a day, which was about once in every three social interactions. The community members lied about once a day, which was about once in every five social interactions.

Since this hallmark study, social scientific studies regarding the prevalence of deception in social life typically also ask participants to complete diary entries in a small book or electronic device every time they lie to another person. The participants are also usually asked to include details regarding the context of the lie, such as to whom the lie was told, the nature of the relationship, the topic of the lie, and/or their motive for telling the lie. Numerous other studies have addressed the prevalence of lying in social interaction and have generally found similar results. However, Kim B. Serota, Timothy R. Levine, and Franklin J. Boster's reanalysis of numerous deception studies found that on average, people tend to lie one to two times a day, but most people tell few or no lies a day and a few people tell more lies per day. Accordingly, while individual differences affect rates of lying per day, deception does appear to be a part of social interaction.

Motives for Lying

While many value honesty as personal and relational attributes, people may nevertheless lie when they feel that lying will serve their goals better than honesty. Lying, like many communication behaviors, is often used to fulfill some type of goal. If one can achieve a certain goal through honesty, the person will more than likely be honest in that situation. Conversely, if a person believes that complete honesty will not achieve a goal, then he or she may lie in order to achieve that goal. As in many other “honest” social interactions, people may lie in order to make a good impression, regulate conversations, support others, or persuade.

There are many other reasons people lie, such as to entertain, protect their privacy, protect others' feelings, or excuse their own behavior. Accordingly, some scholars categorize lies by “high-stakes” lies versus “low-stakes” lies. High-stakes lies, such as perjury or fraud, have greater personal, social, and/or legal repercussions than low-stakes lies. Generally, white lies, or lies with low stakes, are more acceptable than high-stakes lies because the consequences of the lie or of the truth being revealed are not as severe.

In addition, scholars further categorize lies based on motives—whether the lie was told to serve the liar's interest or to serve the interest of the person who was told the lie. Generally, altruistic lies, or lies that benefit another, are more acceptable than self-serving lies because the goal of the liar is to somehow benefit the other person. However, identifying motives for one's behavior can be difficult; even if a liar believes the lie was meant to benefit another, the person who was lied to may not agree.

Lying as a Social Lubricant

Regardless, some white lies may be considered permissible in North American society, and white lies are even encouraged in some situations. The value of politeness plays a large role in the acceptability of white lies. For example, many parents teach their children that lying is even the right thing to do in some circumstances. Before birthdays or holiday events, parents may tell their children that they should thank someone for a

gift and tell the giver they like the gift even if they do not because it is the polite thing [p. 628 ↓] to do. Children are also socialized to censor their opinions because true statements could cause awkward situations or hurt a person's feelings. In other words, children are taught that telling the truth can be rude or hurtful and should be avoided in some situations; thus, lying is sometimes the right thing to do in order to protect others' feelings.

As adults, people also frequently use deception in order to be polite to others. If a close friend is seeking comfort after an unfortunate haircut, a person may lie to the friend in order to give them reassurance and support. To complicate the issue, the friend may not even want to hear the truth: "Yes, that haircut looks horrible, but there is nothing you can do about it now except let it grow back." In these cases, is it a societal norm to even expect to be lied to in some circumstances? For some, a lie may be far more comforting than the truth. Truth can sometimes be a bitter pill to swallow so, as a society, people are socialized to lie in some cases because it may be considered the right thing to do.

These types of lies act as a type of social lubricant because lying helps one avoid awkward situations, hurt feelings, insult, or conflict. Lies may even protect a person's need for privacy in some matters. For example, if a person hears terrible news from a family member on the phone and then immediately crosses paths with a coworker who asks, "Are you okay?" an expected response may be to lie in order to maintain a sense of privacy. An acquaintance who asks, "How are you?" might even find a truthful response of "Awful" to be inappropriate and unwarranted. Again, although honesty is generally an upheld value, lying can function as an expected and acceptable part of everyday interactions, even if the truth of this statement is unsettling. People may not want to view themselves as liars, but complete and incessant honesty could lead to various negative personal, relational, and social consequences.

For example, A. J. Jacobs, an editor at *Esquire* magazine and author of three *New York Times* bestsellers, decided to try living a life of "radical honesty" as part of a book project that placed him in various life "experiments." Jacobs tried to be completely honest for a one-month period. He did not succeed at being completely honest and even wrote in his book, *The Guinea Pig Diaries*, that the experiment to practice radical honesty was "probably the worst month of my life." He wrote that his experience was fraught with the ups and downs of complete honesty—from the exhilaration of

authenticity and having others reciprocate to the embarrassment, conflict, and even borderline sexual harassment that ensued from telling the whole truth. Jacobs wrote that if he had indeed been brutally honest about what he was thinking and feeling all the time, he would probably have “gotten beaten up, fired, and divorced.”

Lying for Protection

Another reason lying could be considered a norm in society is that sometimes the information covered by the lie may be more damaging than the lie itself. If an employee is late to work because she overslept, she might tell her boss she was stuck in traffic. If a friend asks another friend out for dinner but he would rather not go because he finds the friend to be boring, he might say he has another engagement. If a sibling asks her brother if he likes her new painting, he may say he does even if he does not. In these cases, one might argue that the truth may be more damaging to the relationships than lying would be. The employee is excused from being late while the friend and sibling are saved from having their feelings hurt. Conversely, others might argue that people should take responsibility for their actions, be honest about their feelings, or that it might even be compassionate to give honest, yet potentially hurtful feedback to others in order to better help them. Regardless, these types of lies are common in society because sometimes it is simply easier to lie than to face the repercussions of the truth.

Some philosophers and writers, such as Sissela Bok, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Immanuel Kant, believe that lying is immoral and has devastating consequences for the liar, the ones being lied to, and perhaps even society. Conversely, others might argue that lying is only immoral when it causes more harm than good. Others, such as DePaulo, argue that telling the complete truth all the time may not even be possible, and if it were, it may not be the desirable choice for those involved. Others argue that lying is a necessary [p. 629 ↓] part of life or even the moral thing to do in some circumstances. Regardless of one's attitudes about lying, it is indeed a norm in everyday interactions.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483306902.n236>

See Also:

- [Bok, Sissela](#)
- [Communication](#)
- [Daily Life, Lying in](#)
- [Deception, Attitudes Toward](#)
- [Deception in Different Contexts](#)
- [Deception Motives](#)
- [DePaulo, Bella](#)
- [Honesty](#)
- [Lie Acceptability](#)
- [Lying, Prevalence of](#)
- [Morals and Ethics](#)
- [Relationships: Family](#)
- [Relationships: Friends](#)
- [White Lies](#)

Further Readings

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