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Opinion

Can Ordinary People Detect Deception After All?

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The tipping point framework of lie detection posits that people can, and do, accurately detect deception. This framework pinpoints three circumstances that aid accuracy: (i) using methods of measurement that circumvent controlled, conscious cognition; (ii) when individual differences or situational factors portend potent risks to lie detection failure, such as in high-stakes or threatening settings; and (iii) when factors diminish concern over the relationship or reputation costs of asserting that someone has lied. We thus depict a psychological system that registers lie detection consistently in nonconscious reactions (e.g., brain based, bodily, indirect social evaluations) and that allows information into consciousness to inform overt assessments of lies when the costs of failing to detect deception exceed those of signaling distrust.

Detecting Lies: Accuracy and Social Costs

People communicate to cooperate, persuade, solve problems, and socially bond, as well as to compete, exploit, and deceive. To create lasting bonds and achieve collective goals, people's communications should be honest, faithful, and worthy of trust. Honest communications are paramount when people are motivated to benefit the group, whereas self-interest motives can stimulate the desire to misrepresent reality to benefit the self above others. From an evolutionary perspective, the presence of deceit should give rise to the ability to detect deceit due to the need to determine whom and what to trust [1,2]. Despite the importance of detecting lies, people consistently fall short of being able to accurately detect deception [3].

This Opinion article offers a fresh look at an old question: can people detect lies? By lies, we mean intentional attempts to convince others of information that the communicator believes to be untrue (i.e., lies of commission [4]). Hundreds of investigations have asked people to make an explicit assessment of veracity in response to the question 'Is that person lying or telling the truth?' Meta-analyses put average accuracy at 54% [3,5]. For a dichotomous outcome, this rate is statistically, although not impressively, greater than chance. What is more, overall accuracy is driven by better-than-chance accuracy for detecting truths (61%), but not lies (48%) [3]. Accuracy rates are consistent with the truth bias [6–8], which is the tendency to report that people are more likely to be telling the truth than lying. The truth bias is pervasive and likely to be due to the propensity to trust communications from others and to signal that trust [9–11]. As we argue next, the truth bias also is consistent with the notion that there are social costs to claiming to have witnessed a lie.

Consider the typical paradigm used in lie detection studies. People witness others' statements and then explicitly report whether what they heard was a lie. Now consider the same situation outside the context of a laboratory experiment. Immediate assertions of having witnessed a lie, particularly if mistaken, could be costly to the declarer. First, there are potential reputation costs. Catching someone in a lie often takes time and the possession of third-party information or objective evidence [12], which means that claiming to have witnessed a lie in the immediate

Trends

When explicitly asked whether a speaker is lying or telling the truth, people perform poorly. Any above-chance accuracy is generally attributable to correct detection of truths, not lies, thus showing a truth bias.

Implicit and indirect methods suggest that the nonconscious mind may accurately detect deception.

Emerging research highlights contexts that improve explicit lie detection accuracy. These conditions center on increasing the cost of being deceived – often by implied threats to perceivers' safety or well-being – and social conditions that license lie detection, which decrease the cost of signaling distrust.

The tipping point framework of lie detection suggests that nonconscious (accurate) information about having witnessed a lie can enter into consciousness when the costs of being deceived outweigh the cost of signaling distrust.

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aftermath of hearing it entails the risk of being wrong. Claims to have seen someone tell a lie are tantamount to branding the person a liar [13] and hastily made moral judgments are seen as especially strong reflections of the judge's moral character [14]. Taken together, these ideas raise the possibility that quick declarations that someone has lied (viz., is a liar) could lead the perceiver to be labeled as someone who impulsively impugns others' moral character and therefore is not to be trusted.

Second, there are potential costs to the communicator–receiver's relationship to asserting that the communicator has lied. Claiming that one has been lied to intimates suspicion and a lack of trust. Trust is an integral component of both exchange and communal relationships and conveying a lack of trust in one's partner can damage relationship quality or dissolve the relationship altogether [15–17].

The potential costs of accusing someone of having lied are set against the evolutionary importance of spotting lies. Being on the receiving end of a lie is a tacit sign of disrespect. Lies rob the receiver of the chance to act to achieve personally optimal outcomes. Acting on lies can threaten receivers' health, safety, and well-being and accordingly should incite responses consistent with a threat response [18]. As mentioned, the risks of acting on a lie are great enough that the psychological system should have developed sensitivities to deception cues [1].

We therefore posit that there are two competing forces at work when there is the chance of having been lied to: the danger of believing and acting on lies, which should have produced an ability to detect lies, versus the social harms that can follow from claiming to have witnessed a lie, which should have produced hesitation to overtly declare someone a liar. We propose that the psychological system dealt with these forces by allowing the nonconscious system to detect deception through activating threat responses when cues to deception are present and perceptible (e.g., lack of detail, vocal uncertainty, equivocal language, lip presses, perceived uncooperativeness, inappropriate emotional expression [19–21]) while largely keeping that information out of consciousness until the costs of claiming that one has been deceived outweigh the cost of signaling distrust.

Such a system would have several advantages. First, nonconscious processes can change behavior without having to go through consciousness [22]. Hence, nonconscious processes could steer people away from liars and toward truth-tellers, which would help protect people from the dangers of following lies and liars while minimizing harm to perceivers' reputations and relationships.

Second, if cues to deception enter into consciousness, they could impel the perceiver to confront the liar since one of the key functions of consciousness is to facilitate verbal communication [23]. Even correct assertions of having witnessed a lie are likely to incite negative reactions or angry denials by the accused, which may explain why people wait for further evidence to support their suspicion before claiming they witnessed a lie [12]. Hence, registering lies in nonconsciousness – in neurological responses, physiological reactions, and social evaluations – while keeping that information largely out of explicit, conscious awareness (unless or until the costs of being deceived are high) would have the advantage of avoiding future contact with the liar as well as offsetting potential blowback to the perceiver.

The Tipping Point Framework of Lie Detection

We propose the tipping point framework of lie detection, which contends that people can and do accurately detect deception at nonconscious levels, and sometimes consciously. Lie detection is revealed in implicit, nonconscious patterns and in explicit judgments when the costs of failing to detect deception ($\varepsilon_{failed.detection}$) are higher than the costs of asserting having seen a lie ($\varepsilon_{social.cost}$),