



Task-related Spontaneous Thought: A Novel Direction in the Study of True and False Intentions[☆]



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The topic of true and false intentions remains an understudied area of deception research. We examined a novel approach to this topic based on the finding that future tasks generate task-related spontaneous thought. We argued that those with a true intention would experience task-related spontaneous thought to a greater extent than those with a false intention, since only true intentions refer to genuine future tasks. In three experiments participants were either given a future task or told to lie about their intention to perform the task. As predicted, truth tellers reported experiencing task-related spontaneous thought to a greater degree than liars (Experiment 1 and 2). However, these differences in subjective reports did not result in diagnostic cues to deceit during an interview (Experiment 2 and 3). The results nonetheless highlight how social-cognitive research can provide important insights and future research directions on the topic of true and false intentions.

General Audience Summary

We often experience situations when thoughts about some future task suddenly and inexplicably grab our conscious awareness. Consider how thoughts of tomorrow's public presentation, trip, or dentist visit, ensnare the mind in the quiet minutes before sleep. These examples show how future tasks breed spontaneous thoughts. Our goal was to examine how this ubiquitous phenomenon could form the basis of a novel approach to distinguish between true and false statements of intended future actions, that is, to distinguish between true and false intentions. We predicted that people stating a true intention would experience spontaneous thoughts related to their stated intention to a greater extent than people stating a false intention (a stated future task that is not genuinely meant to be performed). In other words, we predicted that future tasks would breed spontaneous thoughts, but *claimed* future tasks would not. The results of the studies support the predictions—people with a genuine future task honestly reported experiencing more task related spontaneous thought compared to people who were only claiming to have a future task. However, these differences in honest subjective ratings did not result in measureable differences when those with a false intention were allowed fabricate their answers. This raises potential problems since lie detection tools, for obvious reasons, cannot rely on interviewees providing honest subjective ratings. Nonetheless, at a theoretical level, the findings once again highlight how basic psychological research can provide unique insights into the topic of true and false intentions.

Keywords: Deception, True and false intentions, Spontaneous thought

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Introduction

We often experience situations when thoughts about some future task suddenly and inexplicably grab our conscious awareness. Consider how thoughts of tomorrow's public presentation, trip, or dentist visit, ensnare the mind in the quiet minutes before sleep. The main goal of the current study was to examine how this ubiquitous phenomenon could form the basis of a novel approach to distinguish between true and false statements of intended future actions. An ability to distinguish between true and false intent is of great societal value as it provides a potential means for crime prevention (Granhag, 2010; Granhag & Mac Giolla, 2014). Specifically, we sought to examine whether those who intend to engage in a future task (i.e., truth tellers) experience more task-related spontaneous thought than those who claim, but do not genuinely intend, to engage in the task (i.e., liars). Many researchers have highlighted adaptive functions of spontaneous thought—such as how they aid in the planning of future tasks (Baird, Smallwood, & Schooler, 2011). Since liars do not have a genuine future task, these adaptive functions should be superfluous. Hence, we propose that liars should experience fewer task-related spontaneous thoughts than truth tellers.

Social Cognitive Approaches to True and False Intent

Deception detection research has primarily focused on true and false statements concerning past events (Vrij, 2008). However, in recent years researchers have turned to the topic of true and false intent, that is, how to distinguish between true and false statements about intended future actions (Granhag & Mac Giolla, 2014). Granhag (2010) argued that central to this topic is a clearer understanding of the behavior of those with a true intention. Using an analogy of counterfeit money, Granhag explains that one cannot recognize a fake coin until one can recognize a genuine coin. In other words, before it is possible to recognize the behavior of someone who utters a false intention, it is first necessary to more fully understand the behavior of someone with a true intention. To paint this more nuanced picture of a truth teller, researchers have availed of work within social cognition, drawing on the psychological literature of intent (Malle & Knobe, 2001) and related fields such as planning (Mumford, Schultz, & Van Doorn, 2001), future thinking (Szpunar, 2010), and goals (Förster, Liberman, & Friedman, 2007). In brief, this research highlights regular and predictable concomitants of intended future actions. Deception researchers have in turn examined whether these concomitants are more pronounced in the behavior of truth tellers compared to liars, since only the statements of truth tellers refer to intended future actions.

For example, intentions are inherently goal directed and activate a behavioral goal (Malle & Knobe, 2001). Hence, typical effects of goal directed behavior should be present for those with a true intention. In contrast, stated false intentions do not activate a behavioral goal related to the stated intention. Hence, the typical effects of goal directed behavior may be less pronounced for those with a stated false intention. This idea received support in a study by Ask, Granhag, Juhlin, and Vrij (2013). Based on the finding that goals produce implicit positive evaluations of goal facilitative objects (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004), it was

demonstrated that participants with a true intention showed a positive implicit evaluation of intention-facilitative stimuli, while participants with a false intention showed a neutral evaluation of the same stimuli.

Another example comes from the research of Knieps and colleagues (Granhag & Knieps, 2011; Knieps, Granhag, & Vrij, 2013a, 2013b, 2014) who focused on the concept of Episodic Future Thought (EFT; Szpunar, 2010). EFT refers to the vivid mental images that are associated with the pre-experiencing of a future action one plans to perform. Hence, people often experience EFTs when thinking about or planning their intentions. Based on this knowledge, Knieps and colleagues proposed that those with a stated true intention (truth tellers) would experience EFTs related to their stated intention to a greater extent than those with a stated false intention (liars), since false intentions do not represent a future action one plans to perform. In their series of studies truth tellers planned a neutral task (e.g., to go shopping), whereas Liars planned a mock-crime. Liars were also asked to prepare a cover-story, which was thematically similar to the task the truth tellers were to perform, to be used in case they were apprehended. The cover story was thus the liars' stated false intention. Results across four studies showed that truth tellers experienced EFTs related to their stated intention to a greater extent compared to liars (Granhag & Knieps, 2011; Knieps et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2014). The goal of the current study was to further this line of research by examining the related concept of spontaneous thought.

Spontaneous Thought

Spontaneous thoughts are characterized by a distinct lack of volition and can be contrasted with more deliberate goal-directed thought (Christoff, 2012). While countless names and definitions of such cognitions have been suggested (e.g., daydreaming, thought intrusions, offline thought, undirected thought etc.; Christoff, 2012; McMillan, Kaufman, & Singer, 2013), they all rely on the same basic idea of thoughts occurring spontaneously and bearing no direct relation to the task at hand (Christoff, Ream, & Gabrieli, 2004). An example is mindlessly thinking of what to have for dinner when driving home from work. In other words, they are thoughts that 'simply happen', that grab your attention 'out of the blue'. Though often associated with negative connotations, including failures of cognitive control (McVay & Kane, 2010) and obsessive intrusive thoughts (Clark & Purdon, 1995), many researchers point out the positive and adaptive functions of spontaneous thoughts (McMillan et al., 2013; Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013). These researchers highlight, among other things, how spontaneous thoughts can aid in problem solving (Christoff, Gordon, & Smith, 2011) and the anticipation and planning of future goals (Baird et al., 2011). For example, mindlessly thinking of what to have for dinner when driving home from work may remind you to stop at the shop because the fridge is nearly empty.

Many advocates of the beneficial aspects of spontaneous thoughts adhere to the notion of unconscious goal pursuit. In other words, that unfinished goals stay cognitively active even when they are not the focus of conscious thought (Bargh &

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