



Differentiating everyday lies: A typology of lies based on beneficiary and motivation



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ABSTRACT

We propose a typology of lies that distinguishes six kinds of these in terms of beneficiary (self, Pareto, other) and motivation (protective vs beneficial). We gathered data from a daily diary study ($N = 81$). Distinct individual differences were related to specific types of lies, showcasing the importance of distinguishing between types of lies. Low self-esteem, high anxiety, and high Machiavellianism involved frequent use of beneficial lies. Conversely, protective lies were negatively related to Machiavellianism and positively to empathy. Self-oriented beneficial lies were related positively to Machiavellianism in particular. Empathy was related to the use of other-oriented protective lies. These results give new insight into the processes that trigger lies and help to integrate and structure research on lying.

1. Introduction

Are self-oriented lies a homogeneous type of deception? Consider the example of a man saying that he doesn't mind staying late at work and doing extra hours when in fact he is very tired and simply does it not to lose his job; and then consider another man that claims he possesses the qualities necessary to get a promotion, though in reality he lacks them. The beneficiary of the lie in both cases is the liar, yet the motivation to lie fundamentally differs.

We propose that everyday lies are considerably heterogeneous. In particular, we advance and test conceptual distinctions between lies on the basis of (a) their beneficiary and (b) their motivational underpinnings. The typology of lies initially draws on promotion and prevention dimensions in self-regulation (Higgins, 1997, 1998) and existing research of lie differentiation (e.g., DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Erat & Gneezy, 2011). Our model effectively distinguishes between protective and beneficial lies, and between lies that serve the self, others, or the collective. By extension, our proposed model makes connections between lying behavior, self-regulatory processes, individual differences, and the negotiation of social relations. This contributes to a better and more nuanced understanding of the psychological and social functions of this frequent yet controversial behavior. We first review literature that provides a basis and

demonstrate the need for our typology of lies.

1.1. The psychology of lying

Lying is a particular form of dishonesty where people “intentionally try to mislead someone” (DePaulo et al., 1996, p. 981; Ekman, 1991). The act of lying typically serves as an instrument to achieve a goal that seems difficult to achieve otherwise (Miller & Stiff, 1993). Although lying is common (DePaulo et al., 1996), people normatively disapprove of it (Erat & Gneezy, 2011; Lundquist, Ellingsen, Gribbe, & Johannesson, 2009) and tend to avoid situations that enable dishonesty (Shalvi, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011). The result of this social and internalized disapproval of lying is that doing so is psychologically costly to people. For example, a discovered lie is a serious interpersonal trust violation that is notoriously difficult to restore (Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006), and liars risk failure to live up to their ideal selves (e.g., perceiving oneself as a decent person; Mazar & Ariely, 2006). Nonetheless, people are tempted to lie when doing so offers benefits that could not be achieved by truthful means. Essentially, people weight the costs and benefits of lying to decide whether or not to do so (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008).

Important individual differences exist in people's inclinations to lie (Halevy, Shalvi, & Verschuere, 2014; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010).

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For example, those who are more manipulative, sociable, and concerned with their self-presentation tend to lie more often (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996). Likewise, Machiavellianism is positively related to the frequency of lying (Giammarco, Atkinson, Baughman, Veselka, & Vernon, 2013; Porter, ten Brinke, Baker, & Wallace, 2011), whereas psychopathy and narcissism predict a perceived greater ability to lie effectively (Giammarco et al., 2013). Attachment-related anxiety is related to telling more everyday lies to strangers and best friends, whereas people with an avoidance attachment style (Giammarco et al., 2013) lie more often to their romantic partners (Ennis, Vrij, & Chance, 2008). Clearly, lying behavior greatly varies from person to person.

1.2. Towards a typology of lies

Individual differences exist in general lying propensity. Furthermore, the relationships between individual differences and lying behavior also vary across contexts (e.g. Baughman, Jonason, Lyons, & Vernon, 2014; Jonason, Lyons, Baughman, & Vernon, 2014; McLeod & Genereux, 2008). For example, the probability of lying is strongly related to psychopathy in the mating context, whereas Machiavellianism plays this role in the academic context (Baughman et al., 2014). The reason why certain individual differences involve more lying in one context but not in another is rooted in the existence of different types of lies. For example, Machiavellianism is associated with telling white lies (Jonason et al., 2014) and, together with narcissism, increases self-centered lying (lying strictly for one's own benefit). On the other hand, Machiavellianism does not correlate with telling lies that serve other people (Jonason et al., 2014; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996).

Clearly, the relation between individual differences and lying is not homogeneous, as there are different underlying motives for lying. These vary as a function of the characteristics of lies, indicating that distinguishing between types of lies is important in understanding their psychological significance. Although researchers have proposed a select range of lie types (e.g., Cantarero, Szarota, Stamkou, Navas, & Dominguez Espinosa, 2018; DePaulo et al., 1996), a comprehensive model that organizes types of lies is lacking. However, there is precedent for characterizing lies according to their underlying motivations and beneficiary (Arcimowicz, Cantarero, & Soroko, 2015; Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984). For example, the desire to acquire gains and the unwillingness to face a loss are argued to be factors that can tempt people to lie (e.g., Arcimowicz et al., 2015; Ekman, 1997). Likewise, lies that serve the self are viewed differently than lies that serve others (Lindsay & Walters, 1983). Yet, a formal typology of lies that incorporates different beneficiaries and motivations has not been developed and tested.

1.2.1. Differentiation by beneficiary

There are different ways to conceptualize types of lies, and perhaps the most useful criterion is to use the beneficiary of the lie as a distinguishing characteristic. DePaulo et al. (1996) distinguish self-oriented from other-oriented lies, where the interests of either the liar or other(s) are taken into consideration. To be more precise: self-oriented lies are “told to protect or enhance the liars psychologically or to advantage or protect the liars interests” (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996, p. 1042). Other-oriented lies serve instead to benefit not the liar but another person. Erat and Gneezy (2011) describe a third type of lie termed Pareto lies. These lies are aimed at helping both the liar and others. These lies are found to be used more often than altruistic lies, at least among children (Glatzle-Rutzler & Lergetporer, 2015).

The majority of lies benefit the self (Camden et al., 1984). Self-centered lies less often involve faking positive feelings than other-oriented lies (DePaulo et al., 1996). These other-oriented lies have an intriguing biological foundation: an increase in oxytocin – a hormone implicated in social bonding (Panksepp, 1992) – is related to more dishonesty for the benefit of a group (Shalvi & De Dreu, 2014). People are willing to engage in telling a Pareto lie to a lesser extent than telling

a lie that benefits another person while being unfavorable for the liar (Erat & Gneezy, 2011). Interestingly, research by Lindsay and Walters (1983) is aligned with this distinction; they showed that people find lies aimed at protecting others to be the most acceptable, while lies that bring benefits to the liar while hurting another person are the least acceptable. In the same vein, research by Wiltermuth (2011) showed that because other-oriented dishonesty is seen as far more acceptable, cheating increases when people have a chance to indicate bringing benefits to others as a factor that influences their dishonesty. Furthermore, Weisel and Shalvi (2015) showed that collaboration, especially when the profits are similar to both parties, leads to higher levels of dishonesty. Overall, these findings suggest that the decision of whether to be honest or not is influenced by the person (or people) to whom the lie is supposed to bring benefits, among others.

1.2.2. Differentiation by motivation

Besides differentiating lies in terms of their beneficiary, we propose a second important distinction: lying to obtain a desirable outcome versus lying to prevent an undesirable outcome. This novel proposal draws from regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) and applies it to the context of lying behavior; there are good reasons to anticipate that such a distinction further qualifies lying behavior.

According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998), the pursuit of goals as part of self-regulation processes can be characterized by two motivational approaches: a *promotion focus* involves the pursuit of positive outcomes (e.g., obtaining gains); a *prevention focus* involves attempting to thwart negative outcomes (e.g., preventing losses). The foci discussed by Higgins (1997) include two end-state reference points, one for each regulatory focus. The desired end-state reference point for promotion focus is *accomplishment*, while for prevention focus it is *safety*. *Danger* is the undesired end-state point of reference for prevention focus and *unfulfillment* for the promotion focus. These foci vary both as a function of personality as well as context (Crowe & Higgins, 1997) and exert a profound influence on self-regulation behavior across domains (Higgins & Spiegel, 2004).

Why would regulatory focus be an important characteristic of lies? First of all, the social norms governing lying acceptance appear to vary between lies that could be labelled protective lies (prevention focused) and beneficial lies (promotion focused). Specifically, people find lies aimed at protection from harm more acceptable than lies that are aimed at gaining benefits (Lindsay & Walters, 1983). Consequently, the cost/benefit analysis that governs the decision to lie likely varies between protective and beneficial lies, with the former being associated with fewer personal and interpersonal costs. Second, researchers have found tentative evidence of a prevention/promotion distinction in lie types. Importantly, framing effects were found on dishonesty: people are more prone to cheat when the outcome is perceived as a loss than when it is framed in the gain domain (Folmer & De Cremer, 2012; Grolleau, Kocher, & Sutan, 2016). Additionally, Cole (2001) concluded that lying in romantic relationship is, among other reasons, related to avoiding punishment. Ekman (1997) also pointed out that the motivation to avoid punishment is mentioned most frequently as the motive for lying. Ekman argued that lies can in part be characterized as motivated by loss aversion (including protection of the status quo). This suggests that a promotion versus prevention focus can be a fundamental basis for differentiating lying behavior.

Applying these orientations to telling the truth and lying shows how the decision whether to lie or tell the truth can be driven by different motivations (Table 1). Reaching the desired end-states is possible by using both truthful means and deception. Should reaching these points be impossible by truthful means, people can then resort to lying to achieve them.

Beneficial lies are aimed at providing gains at least in a short-term. That is, telling such lies is plausible when a liar perceives them as an opportunity to acquire additional profits, material or psychological. Should a person refrain from such a lie, they may view their situation as

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