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What is This?

Easy Lies

Jake Harwood[1]

Abstract
The article discusses a distinction between easy, small lies versus difficult, big lies. It suggests some different processes underlying the production of these different types of lies, suggesting that certain discursive challenges facing liars only manifest for difficult lies that have to be produced unexpectedly. The article also explores the strengths of the two articles at the center of this special issue, focusing on them as examples of theory building in the discipline of communication.

Keywords
deception, theory, theory building, communication, lying

The article has two largely unrelated chunks. The first is focused on lying issues specifically. I briefly discuss the distinction between easy, small lies versus big lies. I discuss "easy lies" as lies where deception is predictable and planning time is available, and/or where the behavior is not encoded as a lie by the "liar," and/or where the lie (or its discovery) is low stakes. Clearly those scenarios are radically different on many dimensions; what they all have in common is that lies are relatively easy to produce for the "liar." In the second section, I explore the strengths of Levine (2014) and McCornack et al.'s (2014) work as examples of theory building in the discipline of communication. I begin with the brief disclaimer that I am not a deception researcher and hence may be re-treading long-resolved issues for deception experts.

> *Daughter:* "Did I play well in my violin recital, dad?"
> *Dad:* [with a bright smile] "It was beautiful, sweetie."

So what is a lie? McCornack et al. offer the suggestion that deception is a covert violation of a conversational maxim (which contrasts nicely with Grice, 1975, who sees

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maxim violation as *overt* and intended to trigger implicature). Levine describes deception as "intentionally, knowingly, and/or purposely misleading another person," and says that lies are "a subtype of deception that involves deceiving through saying information known to be false." By either definition, the dad in our example is a liar. He has violated Grice's maxim of quality: The dad found the violin playing to be cringe-inducingly awful. Clearly, unless said with a knowing wink and an ironic tone, the statement is a covert violation, and certainly, the dad's comment is intentional, knowing, and designed to mislead.

Why does this matter in the present context? First, consider studies of lying frequency that typically rely on self-reports. For instance, Serota, Levine, and Boster (2008) asked people to estimate how often they lied in the past 24 hours. They laid out many different types of lies for their respondents and made clear that even lies told for good reason or to protect others are included. But the word "lie" probably remains hard to get around for some respondents; if the dad in the example did not view this as a lie when he first told it, it seems unlikely that he will retrospectively recategorize it as a lie based on the researcher's definition. It is an "easy lie" because it is never encoded as a lie by the liar; it is a well-rehearsed socially normative response for anybody except a sociopath. If reports of lying are biased by people's original awareness that they are lying, then certain ironic effects might accrue. For instance, the most honest might overreport lying due to a guilt-ridden hyperawareness of the most trivial untruth. Those reporting lower levels of lying might be more oblivious rather than more honest.

Related, the actual telling of the lie is unlikely to follow McCornack's hypothesized process if it is not being encoded as a lie. In some cases, "lies" may be preencoded in the situation. DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, and Epstein (1996) report someone lying that another person's muffins are the "best ever." Imagine this lie occurring at a group potluck dinner. From the moment the liar bites into the muffin and discovers that it is less than delectable, decorum will control her nonverbal behaviors so as not to disclose her disgust (she will not spit the muffin out or gag). Hence, the fact of telling the "lie" is preformed well before any challenge to produce the linguistic output. Put differently, in some situations the challenge to produce the linguistic lie is separate from the truth–lie decision point.

More broadly, the definitions that categorize the dad's comment as a lie seem to move research away from what outsiders might see as the central focus of deception research: big lies told with deceptive intent to protect the self and/or harm others: Bill Clinton's "I'm going to say this again. I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time—never. These allegations are false"; Nixon's "I can say categorically that . . . no one in the White House staff, no one in this Administration, presently employed, was involved in this very bizarre incident"; A husband's "It's over; I haven't seen her in months"; A student's "My grandma died so I need to reschedule my final." These are probably what people believe researchers are studying when they hear we are studying lying. Communicatively, the processes behind "little" lies and "big" lies are probably very different, in terms of things like self- versus other face-management, cognitive effort and planning, anxiety,

and detection processes; I'm not entirely convinced that a theory of small lies applies to big lies, and vice versa. As noted by DePaulo et al. (1996), many "lies" are "light" to the extent that they do not cause distress, are not seen as serious, are not regretted, are more pleasant than the truth for all parties involved, and that the liar would not really care if the lie was discovered (see also DePaulo et al.'s, 2003, discussion of high stakes and low stakes lying).

The two articles currently under discussion appeared to approach this issue a little differently from one another: Levine seems comfortable with a very broad definition of deception; McCornack et al.'s definition seems to include little lies, but the writing sometimes focuses on "big" lies (e.g., near the end of the article where they parenthetically exclude "light forms of 'politeness' deception" from a specific discussion).

> *Husband:* "Why is $30,000 missing from our checking account, honey?"
> *Wife:* "Ummmm . . . I . . . I . . . I have no idea." [Awkward smile]

We lie for reasons and only some (perhaps a minority) of the lies we tell are about things that we could not have anticipated needing to lie about. Both the target articles make this clear, most explicitly with Levine's truth bias, but also with McCornack et al.'s discussions of efficiency: We are designed to tell the truth most of the time, and most of the time telling the truth is easier than telling a lie (especially a big, hard lie). We lie when we have done something we don't want others to know about, received information in confidence and promised not to share it, or when we need to conceal a previous deception.

Often, we can make reasonable predictions about (a) the likelihood of needing to lie, (b) to whom we might be called on to lie, (c) the context in which that might happen, and (d) the likely success of a lie. If I scrape the driver's side of my wife's new car (and assuming I decide not to come clean with her), I can anticipate that needing to lie is a virtual certainty, that I will need to lie *to* my wife, and that it will happen tomorrow morning (about 30 seconds after she leaves for work) when she returns to the kitchen and says, "What the fuck happened to my car?" On the other hand, if I harbor a secret crush on the Dean of my university's College of Agriculture, I could reasonably predict that nobody is ever going to require me to lie about that. I'm hoping.

McCornack et al.'s model largely deals with situations in which planning is not possible: An individual is placed in a difficult discursive situation and has to generate an immediate (but deceptive) response. This is no doubt an interesting communicative challenge, one that is worthy of study, and one that reflects *some* (not all) real lies. I see at least two areas in which it does not necessarily reflect deceptive reality.

First, as described above, we often have plenty of opportunity to plan our lies. From the first moment I scrape the car, I have time to think about whether I am going to lie, and if I decide to lie, I might have hours (or in other situations weeks or years) to prepare the lie. I can mentally rehearse it and visualize its successful execution. When the moment comes I am unlikely to be shuffling through "the first available information units within activated, associated memory chunks" in a real-time panic to generate a

response. Instead, I will be producing a smooth, slick, and detailed story that fully exonerates me from car-scraping liability. This is an "easy lie" because I know it's coming. The preplanning of a lie exists along a continuum, with the degree of preplanning depending on perceived likelihood of having to produce the lie, and the perceived stakes of being found out, among other things (Van Swol, personal communication, December 18, 2013).

Second, I hypothesize that the unexpected call to lie is a fairly rare event (of course, this is an empirical question . . .). I suspect we are pretty good at knowing what aspects of our lives we might need to lie about, and at judging the likely *success* of our lies. If we anticipate our lies being unsuccessful, we probably won't bother. If we do decide to lie, we will plan. Only on rare occasions will the lie challenge come out of the blue. For the wife in the example at the outset of this section, perhaps she manages the family's money, pays all the bills, and has noticed that the husband is entirely uninterested in such matters. She might be very confident that she can siphon $30,000 out of the account to loan to a family member, without ever having to explain to her husband. If he is paying more attention to the money than she is aware of, then McCornack-like processes might indeed kick in when he challenges her.

A broader point here is that reflection on lying may often underlie other behavioral decisions in interesting ways. To the extent that intentional, controlled behaviors precipitate some lying, the lies can be anticipated prior to even performing the behaviors. Before skipping an exam to go out drinking, Mike will weigh information about his instructor (she's a hard ass, she's a pushover), his personal relationship with her (she likes me, she hates me), and other relevant information (my friend missed a previous exam, said he had flu, and she let him retake without any documentation). This calculus will be aimed at determining whether the future lie ("I was so sick, I couldn't get out of bed!") is likely to work. Planning the execution of the lie may occur even prior to the behavior that necessitates the deception.

Lying Theories and Communication Theory

Beyond specifics concerning deception, these two articles present some striking examples of what good communication theory should include. Both theories make what I would describe as strong predictions. That is, some of their predictions are both non-obvious and quite specific. IM4 in the McCornack et al. article, for instance, suggests a specific ordering of different forms of maxim violations in terms of frequency. As the article notes, this is empirically testable and subject to fairly clear falsification. This level of detail in predictions is often lacking in our field.

The articles also stimulate new thinking (at least for me) concerning the underlying causes of lying; in particular, McCornack et al. close with an intriguing suggestion that particular life choices (e.g., deciding to become a politician) can commit one to a certain degree of prevarication on a daily basis. Put simply, if you are in politics you have to lie, and if you don't lie you won't be in politics for long. One of the reasons that we judge lying harshly is that we see it as being under individual control. People don't just

lie, they *are* **liars** (see Semin & Fiedler, 1988, for implications of using the verb vs. the adjective). Understanding lying as a situationally determined activity changes our perception of the act and the people who do it.

In addition, both theories are sufficiently broad to be interesting to a wider audience of scholars, not merely people studying one specific aspect of deception. In the case of Levine's article, instead of seeing deception detection as a one-off judgment made by an observer-listener, it considers the role that skilled questioning can play in detecting deception. This has implications not only for detecting lies but also in extracting other information (e.g., traumatic information that is being withheld out of embarrassment or denial). McCornack et al.'s article could easily be reconceptualized as a theoretical approach to difficult communication situations. A lot of what they write would be (perhaps with a few tweaks) applicable to most situations in which we are discursively challenged to respond. Scholars interested in questions and disclosures might read this article and be stimulated to think about how people respond when disclosures or questions appear to be inappropriately intimate or negative (see Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood's, 1988, discussion of accommodative dilemmas).

Both theories also rely on, and make specific predictions about, concrete descriptive aspects of communication. Most good science focuses on relationships between variables, as do large parts of these articles, and that is as it should be. However, good science also requires extensive descriptive data about the phenomena we are examining—Darwin would not have got very far without observing finches' beaks. Communication scholars often skip over the basic descriptive work and move straight to hypothesis testing. Levine's (and others') descriptive work on how much we lie is a great example of how something like a nonnormal distribution can be much more than just a statistical assumption that we ignore (or try to transform into normality). In this case, knowing that the distribution of lying is nonnormal is critical for understanding and theorizing the phenomenon. Other communication behaviors are nonnormally distributed, probably in very interesting ways, and we rarely attend to that fact.

Finally, both theories are the product of substantial empirical programs of research. Social scientists are sometimes quick to rush to theory based on very limited data. It is refreshing and informative to see the depth and breadth of theorizing based on a research program rather than a research study. In particular, I find the depth of data in Levine's program of research (and related work, of course) quite exciting in terms of thinking about human variability. Not only are there a small number of extreme liars but there are also a small number of very transparent liars. There is variability on the extent to which we appear to be honest (which has little to do with how honest we actually are), and therefore there are small numbers of people who are undeservedly perceived to be untrustworthy. And there are small numbers of people who are exceptionally good at diagnosing deception via expert questioning. Much in the same way we ignore nonnormal distributions, we often pay excessive attention to averages and ignore standard deviations. It is illuminating to see work that considers different processes across the span of human variability rather than merely focusing on the peak of the normal distribution.

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