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$Course number$

15 October 2023

# Interview On Deception in Teaching

# 1. INTRODUCTION

My choices for this interview were Mark and Nancy Misage, reachable at [mnmisage@gmail.com](mailto:mnmisage@gmail.com). They are both now retired, but throughout their career they were both science teachers - due to their retirement they do not have a professional phone number I can give, but the email address is active and they check it regularly. They taught two separate versions of AP physics, calculus based and algebra based versions respectively. I thought that they, as teachers, would be able to provide insight into the seedy underbelly of deception at a high school, particularly with regard to when high schoolers are placed under the stress of a notoriously difficult class. Their experience with students - good and bad - shaped how they viewed a different number of types of deception. The constant stream of “dog ate my homework” style blatant lies left them with a keen eye for detecting deception, and a strict moral compass for deciding how they felt about the deception. I focused the majority of my interview on how they would react to a plethora of different types of deception to focus on that moral compass, then I asked a few questions to gather concrete examples of when they came face to face with deception in their lives. This interview occurred over zoom at 4:15pm on the 26th of September, 2023.

# 2. NARRATIVE

The Misages are both kind hearted people who refrained from deception, especially that of a malicious nature. But they underwent a very human journey from their childhoods to their retirements that shaped who they are today, and the moral principles they use to analyze the actions of their students were not always set in stone. Throughout their careers as teachers, many students tried to cheat on the occasional exam. Nancy in particular remembers several occasions with students cheating. Their identities and specific methods were omitted for privacy reasons, but she elaborated on the aftermath.

Nancy studied these students’ behavior throughout the time she shared with them, and so she “always knew [when something was off]'' with a student during a stressful test. She intentionally refrained from making a scene - her conscience told her that everyone makes mistakes and that one test in high school does not a person make. She simply called the student to her room outside of class, and told them very plainly that she knew they cheated, and that the assistant principals would be notified as well as the student’s parents. What’s important here is the decision to only involve the absolutely necessary parties. It’s not uncommon for a high school teacher to take cheating as a slight from the student against their own intelligence, but Nancy believed most of her students to be good people and thus wanted to offer the best path to rehabilitation - not punishment. To her, this meant making sure that others only knew should the student in question choose to share their shame, but they would be saved if they wanted to suffer in silence.

# 3. PREPARATION

The Misages both operated on an “I trust you until I don’t” rule. They’d seen all the facets of cheating in high school, but they wouldn’t look at every homework with the goal of finding some borrowed answers. It was after the first offense of deception - cheating on an exam, or perhaps blatantly copying several homeworks - that they turned their watchful eye more intently, and even more importantly they learned more about the deceiver.

After 20 years of teaching it became second nature, by sheer volume of experience, they had met so many different students with unique personalities and unique styles of taking an exam, as well as the vague correlation between the two. The misages trained their eyes to detect the deception, but more importantly they trained their head and their hearts. By the time of the first test, they had been with their students for at least a month, so they knew who would struggle and who would not. But the nature of the struggle was important. Some students would honestly struggle with the exam just like they struggled with the homework prior. Other, more mischievous students would have struggled on the homework but almost inexplicably completed the exam with ease, or with more attention to their surroundings than their paper…. These actions are weighed against past experience of students with a similar story, which the Misages used to make a decision on whether a student glancing away from their paper was coincidence or deception.

The details change from year to year, but the idea was always the same. The cheaters were always trying to evade detection while smuggling in information in the form of notes, or answers, or something else. By necessity, this meant they were hyper aware of where the teacher is, and where they aren’t. But the eyes move quickly, and see more than we think they can. So the cheaters would be noticed. The Misages took a mental note, but would save the confrontation until later. Sparing a scene was how the Misages both felt they could simultaneously express compassion for a young adult in a stressful situation while also doing their job and doing it well. Furthermore, by applying all they had learned from cheaters who came before, they only got better at their detection, meaning they could trust themselves to keep students honest with their teachers, but the Misages saw it as keeping students honest with themselves.

# 4. ANALYSIS

As teachers, the Misages were primarily lie detectors. Students would try to lie, and the Misages would almost always catch them in that lie. Students choosing to cheat often make false rationalizations to subconsciously cope with the cognitive dissonance created by lying [Knapp, 175]. Some of these rationalizations include being extremely pressed for time by factors outside of their control, that this is their first and only time to steal the homework answers from a friend, or that students lie and deceive commonly so it isn’t that bad if they do it too. The last excuse is an example of role morality [3], but all of them combine to create an effect of ethical fading [1]. These types of excuses serve to lessen the moral importance of absolute integrity in their mind, and the Misages are keenly aware of this. They focused heavily on their relationship with the student in the past to aid them in their lie detection, showing an implicit understanding of how a relationship changes dynamics in lying and lie detection. Knapp argues that lie detection in a close relationship is significantly different from lie detection between strangers [Knapp, 334]. Both Mark and Nancy repeatedly stressed the value of the past relationship with a student when it comes to the detection of deceptive behavior. While Knapp focused on the aspects of an intimate relationship, where both parties share a goal of a positive and happy relationship, the Misages focused on their professional relationship with the students, where the student may not care if their relationship is tarnished by lies or deception. The Misages argued that behavioral trends led them to be more keenly aware of deceptive attempts, placing a more watchful eye on students who share traits with others who have been tricksters in the past. This is not dissimilar to Knapps ideas of truth bias [Knapp 335] and lie bias [Knapp 336]. The “trust you until we don’t” rule the Misages talked about implies a self-aware and intentional truth bias that shifts into a lie bias as the semester progresses. In a situation where the deceptive actors are students, a population commonly lacking an exceptional deceptive talent, these biases serve to increase the Misages’ lie detection accuracy in stark contrast to a more general situation like the ones Knapp analyzes where these biases lower accuracy.

The Misages also talked about how specifically they chose to respond to situations wherein they detected they were being deceived. By choosing to react to lies with discretion both Nancy and Mark seem keenly aware of a potential conflict of interest [2]. There were several conflicting interests when a student cheated on an exam, or a similar issue arose. Firstly, the Misages had a primary interest in doing their job - teaching the students. Due to their position of power over all students in their class and the continued relationship they will have for the duration of the school year, a drastic response to such a common form of lying and deception might tarnish their relationship with these students and hurt their ability to effectively teach them in the future. Secondly, the students have a primary interest in passing the class. Often, these goals align - the students who dedicate themselves to learning will often pass the class with high marks and no issues. When these goals don’t align a student will cheat, a common source for deception in adolescence [Knapp 140], and introduce a new perspective - a perceived personal slight on the teacher that was lied to. The Misages were clear in their interview that they did not take any instance of deception personally, children make mistakes when they’re growing up after all, but the fact they needed to mention it implies that they and their colleagues could easily interpret the cheating as a personal attack on their character. Should they interpret the deception in this way, there is now a new interest in defending their character which would likely lead to more public punishment in the pursuit of embarrassment as a form of punishment. By avoiding this kind of confrontation, the Misages were able to effectively separate themselves and their emotions from their responsibility as teachers and created a better environment for themselves and their students as a result.

In conclusion, the Misages displayed a keen but subconscious awareness of several concepts about lying and deception which often agreed with Knapp and the *Ethics Unwrapped* series, but their unique position as teachers led to new heuristics which departed from the aforementioned sources in how they viewed biases in lie detection. Their careful and intentional methods for dealing with deception when it occurred were strongly motivated by their moral code which ultimately led to a more friendly learning environment by being aware of the emotional dynamics of when they were lied to, both from their own perspective and the students’ and acting in a way to minimize shame and maximize opportunity for rehabilitation. In this way, the Misages showed the great importance of emotional maturity and understanding in navigating a complex, non-intimate, extended relationship which is rife with opportunities for deception.

# 5. REFERENCES AND FORMAT

1. Prentice, Robert. “Ethical Fading.” *Ethics Unwrapped,* <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/ethical-fading>
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4. al, Knapp E. *Lying and Deception in Human Interaction*. Available from: VitalSource Bookshelf, (3rd Edition). Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2019.