

# Behavior Dynamics Journal

A bi-monthly publication focusing on the Operational Application of Behavior

Issue 19

## Definition of Lying

Before discussing the act of lying and the issues related to detecting deceit, it is useful to consider what is meant by deception. There are a number of competing definitions of deception; but perhaps the most useful is: *"A successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue."* 1. Vrij, A. (2008). *Detecting Lies and Deceit: Pitfalls and Opportunities*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Wiley. A number of key points emerge from this definition. Firstly, to be considered deception (at least for the purposes of this guidance), the deceit must be committed knowingly or deliberately. Linked to this, the communication should be intended to create a belief in the recipient that the liar considers to be untrue; incorrect accounts based on false memories or knowledge is therefore not considered here to be deceptive. Secondly, deception should not contain or be associated with any warning, and so magic tricks would not fall under the scope of this discussion. Finally, the lie needs to be directed at another person - self-deception is not considered here. Research indicates that people lie regularly. Lying is not necessarily negative; indeed some lies can have positive consequences such as the 'little white lies' that are told to protect others' feelings. As such, lying is almost a part of the social fabric that makes our interactions with one another more effective.

An individual might lie for a number of reasons which could fall into three areas:

1. Self-oriented (for own benefit) or other-oriented (benefit of others).
2. Gain advantage or avoid negative consequences.
3. Materialistic or psychological reasons (such as increasing prestige).

Whatever the reason, there are a number of different types of lies that can be told:

**Lying outright** – the information conveyed is completely different from what the liar believes to be the truth.

**Exaggerations** – facts are either overstated or understated (minimized).

**Subtle lies** – literal truths that are designed to mislead, conceal information, or omit relevant details.

Of course, lies can be embedded within the truth and the most difficult lies to detect within a generally truthful account. That is why an individual who gives a generally truthful account of where they have been all day, but changes the name of one shop they entered, will be harder to detect than if the individual lies about where they have been, who they spoke to, the times they left, returned home and so on. People vary in their ability to tell lies from one situation to another. There are also consistent differences - for example, across gender - in peoples' ability to deceive in the same situation. (Although not necessarily germane to this discussion, it is interesting to note that various studies have shown that children are capable of telling deliberate lies by the age of four. The following represent some of the key differences of both the interview and interviewee that influence the ability to deceive:

**Men and women**

There is no clear difference in the frequency or amount of lies told by men and women. There is, however, a difference in the types of lies told: men tend to tell more self-oriented lies whereas women tend to tell more other-oriented lies.

Furthermore, females are generally better at detecting deception but perform the same as males when attempting to identify when strangers are lying.

**Personalities**

There are a number of personality characteristics that can lead people to be more effective or poorer liars. Those who are more effective liars include: Those high in Machiavellianism (cynical, little concern for morality, prepared to manipulate others). Extraverts, Good actors.

Those with a poorer ability to lie include: Persons with a high degree of public self-consciousness and socially anxious individuals.