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The Science of Lying

An old vagabond man holding a lamp strolling about in daylight was asked what he was doing, the man replied “I am just looking for a single honest man.” Diogenes kept on searching for a single honest human being but found nothing but rascals and scoundrels. Are there really not a single person who was born free of one of the deadliest sins? What is it about lying, while being fully aware of its consequences, that people still fall prey to the temptatious allure of deception. Is there such a thing as honest or “white” lies that benefits others more than the liars themselves? The science of lying dictates that none of us is clean of lying. It’s either you are deceiving yourself of not lying, or lying to others to deceive them.

ARE WE ALL LIARS?

Look back to when you first woke up this morning and count how many times you lied to someone since then. Were those “thank you” after receiving your cup of coffee in the drive-thru sincere at all or are those just empty words driven by social etiquette or habit? Or telling your friend they look good today even when you know full well they are having an off-day just to cheer them up and maintain the good relationship. Did you really mean it when you said “I am doing great! thank you for asking” when in reality you are having a rough patch lately and just avoiding having to open up to anyone about your problems. These are some of the examples of what you might have lied today that people do not consider a bad thing to lie about. You might have not remembered a single lie since this morning that came out of your mouth but as the research reported from a YouTube show *The Science of Lying* from SciShow says that an “average person lies a minimum of once to twice per day.” We are all instinctive liars. In a study at UMass Amherst, 121 pairs of undergraduate students engaged in a 10-minute conversation and were instructed to appear likable or competent. At the end of the conversation, students have reviewed themselves having a conversation with their partner and reported to have told, on average, 2 to 3 lies. Some students are even surprised at how often they unconsciously lie. This experiment shows that lying is a part of our everyday interactions with everyone intentionally or subliminally.

Even if you believe that you haven’t lied once this week, self-deception is in itself a lie. Making yourself subconsciously believe that you are telling the truth when in fact you are only deceiving yourself to prove to others that you are sincere is considered lying. Most common behavior of a pathological liar is making themselves believe that they are telling the truth while throwing away the idea that it was in fact a lie, so “at the moment they are telling [the lie] they whole-heartedly believe [it].” (SciShow).

Much can be said about adults telling lies whether for the good of others or personal benefit. Sometimes it comes out of pure selfish reasons or altruistic behavior. But what about children? People say that children are innocent and cannot even bear a lie for too long especially to their parents. According to a developmental model of lying by Victoria Talwar and Kang Lee reported by Romeo Vitelli Ph.D in his article *When Does Lying Begin?*, children start telling “primary lies” at around the age of 2 to 3. An example of a primary lie is when you ask a kid in a suspicious tone about “who ate all the ice cream?” and they reply with “I don’t know”, while their hands are all sticky and mouth covered with chocolate. It is “designed to conceal transgressions but fail to take the mental state of the listener into consideration.” (Vitelli). At about age of 4, children start to tell “secondary lies” which are better geared toward listeners and with more valid statements. This is when they start to think before telling the lie and make up a more plausible, but not too believable, cover up story. And by the age of 7 to 8, they learn to tell “tertiary lies” which are more consistent with established facts and make follow-up statements to further cover up the lie. Even Charles Darwin suggested that children as young as 30 months old are already capable of producing lies after seeing his son trying to deceive him. In a more appalling report, some researchers suggested children started lying as early as 6 months old. (SciShow). Children, as adorable as they are, they are not so innocent after all.

THE SCIENCE OF LYING

When it comes to deception, it is not always as simple as a straightforward binary question whether someone lied or not. But rather, lying begs for a more elaborate answer as to why we lie and the way we lie. The ability to lie is not inherited nor taught to children. There is no good parent out there in their right mind who would teach their children how to lie. Possibly only to omit unnecessary information to prevent hurting someone’s feelings. But we don’t lie just because we can or we are a bad person. In an experiment by David Maxfield and Joseph Greeny, a group of teenagers who just finished Bible-studying were tasked to play an unsupervised game of shooting bean bags in holes of varying sizes which would earn them cash based on the number of their successful shots . The first part of the experiment let these teens submit their own performance report and get paid accordingly. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of the money-driven teenager lied to earn more cash. But what was interesting is when the second part of the experiment where they signed an “Honor code” indicating their honesty in reporting their score prior to the game. The result, the statistics was reversed or 80 percent of the teens told the truth facing humiliation with honesty. This little experiment suggests that in most situations our conscience is asleep or as Albert Bandura, a Canadian-American psychologist, puts it, in a “moral slumber”. The deception was not due to a “moral defect”, but rather us people are not all the time ready to face humiliation or accept losses willingly. A moral nudge such as signing an honor code or a commitment to wake up our conscience would generally make us more honest and even willingly trade money for morality.

Another reason why people lie is that it is a part of our developmental growth. In an article by Theodor Schaarschidt, *The Art of Lying*, he reported that “it shows that lying is a major component of the human behavioral repertoire”. Without the ability to lie, we would appear tactless or insensitive and have a hard time coping in a social environment. Furthermore, children need to learn the concept of lying to develop their cognitive skills and have an understanding of the signals and symptoms of lying in the event they are being lied to. Also, lying is “linked to creativity since the ability to create fiction often relies on the same cognitive skills that go into telling a successful lie.” (Vitelli). A child’s cognitive abilities appears to have a connection with their ability to lie successfully.

CONSEQUENCES OF LYING

There are certain benefits that come along with lying but what everyone knows and fears about are the consequences it entails. Besides the obvious punishments liars experience when getting caught at their lie such as broken relationships or trust issues, lying takes a toll on our health physically, mentally, and even emotionally. Successful lies require strong conscious efforts to concoct. A study reported by Richard Gunderman in a blog post, *Is Lying Bad for Us?* conducted at the University of Notre Dame, experimented with 110 people over a 10 week time period. Half of the participants were instructed to stop lying and the other half were not. Those who reported to have managed to tell fewer lies experienced less mental health problems than those who were not instructed to stop lying. The reason being is that lying takes more of our mental resources than if we were to be honest. Sustaining a lie is even more stressful as you would have to constantly be on your guard to avoid detection at all times. Even when the lie ran rampant undetected, cover ups after cover ups will eventually destroy relationships with people as lying “tends to make relationships with colleagues, friends, and family members shallower and less meaningful.” (Gunderman). Just imagine living a toxic life with a lie that you kept your whole life and constantly runs away from it. It can impact your behavior and manifest in your daily mood that will let people see you in a different light and potentially define your personality.

Furthermore, because the nature of lying is concealing the truth and deceiving others, sometimes about an embarrassing mistake or a blunder, intentional or not, we get used to the feeling of concealing facts and running away from the truth which is damaging to our self-esteem or self-confidence. As an example, this can lead to a syndrome called *Impostor Syndrome*--a psychological pattern in which the person constantly doubts her/himself of abilities and has this constant fear of being exposed as a fraud. This is common among programmers or developers because computer programming can be daunting and overwhelming especially for fresh developers in the industry. They might do good in an interview and feel good about their impression of the interviewer, but deep inside, they fear that they are not up to par with other developers and constantly worry of messing up big time. All because of the good impression they need to uphold from the initial interview. And in order to have a good interview, it is not uncommon to sugar-coat some details about your experience or skills that are not necessarily candid.

Finally, lying snowballs. Dr. Jordan Peterson, a psychology professor and author, once said, “the problem of lying is that it’s a hydra.” Once you initiate a lie it is hard to stop and cover up your lies. Take the Watergate scandal for one. During the administration of the 37th president Richard Nixon, the break-in scandal of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Washington, D.C, was consistently denied by the president to have anything to do with the incident. Succession of cover ups turned into a big scandal and eventually led to Nixon’s resignation as the president of the United States. Not only lying will take a toll on your health, it is almost as addictive as drugs or smoking as one lie encourages another, making it worse instead of dispersing suspicion.

BENEFITS OF LYING

Now if there are consequences to lying, there are also benefits that come with deception. The reasoning why we are such good liars, while being fully aware of the consequences, is because of the certain advantages in concealing the hard truths.

First, Social advantage. We can all relate to this, you might have attended a highschool party before for the first time and you suddenly feel out of place. You don’t feel like you belong in this type of setting and you already have the urge to leave the party. You start talking to some people and engaging in short conversations, but it seems difficult to find common interest to build upon meaningful conversations. So you stretch some truths a little to keep the conversation going since your brother listens to rock music anyway and the person you are talking to appears to be a fan of such music. You pretend that it was your jam. Situations similar to this example are some of the very common use cases of deception where it benefits the liar but does not affect others in a harmful way. Rather, it helps us to acclimate to social changes and uncomfortable situations.

Another benefit of lying is that it acts as a coping mechanism for low self-esteem or who have had traumatic experiences. There are times we don't want to bring up our horrible past so we lie about being ok but we are still deeply affected by the memory of it. Also lying is beneficial for people with low self-esteem or who do not get along very well with people. They lie about their personal interests to align with the interest of those in their peers so they can blend in and eventually be a part of a group with common interest. You might not like some of the ideals of that particular group but you never really know until you experience it firsthand. So there is also a benefit of discovery as well. A quote from the Scientific American blog post, *The Art of Lying*, “it shows that lying is a major component of human behavioral repertoire; without it, we would have time coping.”

SELF-DECEPTION

As a clinical psychologist Dr. Cortney Warren in her Ted talk *Honest Liars* at TEDxUNLV suggested, “at the core, we lie to ourselves because we don’t have enough psychological strength to admit the truth and deal with the consequences that will follow.” We refuse to believe the truth because we lack the courage to admit it. Denial is one of Sigmund Freud's *12 Ego Defense Mechanisms* and is a “psychological strategy that protects our egos” (Warren) from harmful information. We might say to ourselves “I’m not that fat” when in fact you’ve gained almost 20 pounds within two months after stopping from regularly exercising and eating a healthy diet. Another type of self-deception is rationalization or creating excuses or reasoning to justify our actions. For example, drinking alcohol even though we are aware of its harmful side effects to our health, we justify that it helps us forget our problems and unavoidable in some social circumstances due to peer pressure. Our minds have the power to make us believe an idea that we generated ourselves through “cognitive distortion” to protect ourselves and our precious ego.

In extreme cases, abusing self-deception can lead to negative effects in our cognitive skills. Pathological or compulsive liars are masters at self-deception. They lie as if they “wholeheartedly believe their own lies” (SciShow). California researchers found that pathological liars have about 25 percent more white matter in their prefrontal cortex and 14 percent less of the grey matter than normal people--part of the brain for critical thinking. The surplus of white matter suggests that pathological liars are quick to make connections in their brain and are really good at keeping all the information in their head in order to sustain the lie. Consequently, the shortage of grey matter makes it hard for them to keep a stable relationship with people for thinking less critically.

IS LYING BENEFICIAL OR DETRIMENTAL?

In conclusion, having discussed the advantages of lying to our developmental growth and the consequences it entails once abused, is lying generally good for us or more harmful? At a personal standpoint, lying is universally frowned upon and more frequently attributed to selfishness than altruism. Also, frequent deliberate lying puts unnecessary mental strain in our head and could cause health problems in the long run. A single trivial lie may seem harmful at first, but it can be a seed that will grow into something bigger than we expected and shape our personality which can potentially destroy our relationships with others and our own reputation. Conversely, white lies to preserve friendships and maintain good standing with people are essential to our development as a person to cope with our social environment. We would not want to hear unfiltered discouraging feedback from our friends when we ask them “how do I look?” before going on a date or blatantly telling your partner or spouse they are getting fat and needs to workout. Just as everything in life is balanced, we need to make use of this tool in our repertoire wisely and with respect to others. As lying can break relationships as it can strengthen it with good judgement.

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