Disentangling deceptive communication: situation and person characteristics as determinants of lying in everyday life
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General Introduction

- What do you think when you hear the term lying?
K: uh, handy.
- Handy?
J: A little sneaky.
K: Yes, sneaky, sure, in some situations, well ...
- Can you explicate that a little more?
K: Why I regard it handy? I think for everyone, uh, I think everyone lies once in a while, let me ..., did you ever lie?
R: Yes, of course!
K: Did you ever lie?
J: Yes.
K: You as well?
E: Yes.
K: Precisely, thus you will have experienced that it is handy and that is why I say that it is handy. It thus is handy just to be able to use a lie! You all have done Social Psychology and everyone strives to get the maximum, isn't it, the maximum benefit for himself. (...) interviewees laugh ...
J: Well, I do not totally agree with that, I don't think that is true in normal, with friends for instance, I don't think that anyone strives for the maximum benefit for himself, only, uhm, I do think that people do their best to avoid unpleasant situations, then I think it comes very handy.
K: Yes, I don't agree with what you just said, but we don't have to go into that cause that is something different, but you are right with that, the last thing as well ...
- You said, you regard it sneaky?
J: Yes, I regard it a little sneaky cause, uh, I regard it more admirable when someone is able to handle with only the truth, I mean, everyone uses a lie once in a while, but that is also a sort of admission of weakness ...
F: In itself it is also quite handy. I mean, if you had to tell the truth all the time, that is very laborious or you would hurt someone or whatever.
The above excerpt from a focus group interview with Dutch psychology students talking about lying in everyday life (Backbier, 1994), provides an example of the dual nature of lying. On the one hand we seem to avoid lying because it is morally reprehensible, on the other hand we seem to be unable to handle our social lives without telling a lie once in a while. The focus group interviews were conducted at the start of the present research project, as a means of gaining a quick acquaintance with the different facets of lying in everyday life. The interviewees provided insights into the ways ordinary people think and speak about deceptive communication in everyday interactions. Also they provided examples of lie-telling in everyday interactions along with various explanations for resorting to telling lies instead of the truth. Although one might think that this approach would no longer be necessary, in fact the contrary appears to be true. Several reviews of the literature conducted in the last decade (e.g. Barnes, 1994; Buller & Burgoon, 1994; Ford, 1996; Hyman, 1989; Meerum Terwogt-Kouwenhoven, 1992; Robinson, 1996; Saxe, 1991), revealed that the fundamental question of why people tell each other lies in everyday interactions has been largely ignored in the field of deception research. Without such knowledge we not only tend to have a very flawed understanding of the function of lying in everyday interactions, but we also run the risk of basing lie detection research on invalid assumptions.

Sketch of Research Lines

Most researchers in the field of deception have been and still are involved with studying issues related to lie detection (see for reviews on the art and feasibility of lie detection: Ekman, 1992; Ford, 1996; Robinson, 1996; Vrij, 1998). Frequently studies on lie detection are based on the assumption that people are concerned with lying successfully and not getting caught. In addition, they are prone to assume that for most people lie telling is cognitively difficult and that as a result lie-telling causes the liars to experience a certain degree of arousal. The non-verbal signals and deception cues that result from this arousal are assumed to give the liar away. It appeared to us, however, that none of the previous assumptions has been tested by the researchers involved in lie detection, nor seem they to be based on the empirical results of researchers who have studied other issues related to lying.

A second line of research has a less extensive history than that about lie detection, and also the issues that are addressed tend to be more diverse and less related to each other.
Examples of the issues that have been investigated, are: types of deception (e.g. Hopper & Bell, 1982; McCormack, 1992), moral judgements about different types of lies (e.g. Lindskold & Walters, 1983; Robinson, 1994), learning to lie (e.g. Feldman, 1982; Lewis, 1993), lying to yourself (Baumeister, 1993), motives or reasons for lying to others (e.g. Camden, Motley & Wilson, 1984; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer & Epstein, 1996), lying in close relationships (e.g. Metts, 1989), lying in the workplace (e.g. Grover, 1997), lying prone personalities (e.g. Christie & Geis, 1970; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964), sex differences in lying (e.g. DePaulo, Epstein & Wyer, 1993) and lying as a communication or persuasion strategy (e.g. Buller & Burgoon, 1996; Miller & Stiff, 1993). From this list, although it is by no means complete, it is apparent that we are dealing with a highly complex and multi-aspect phenomenon that has not yet received exhaustive research attention and will not fit easily into a general theoretical framework. Also it involves a phenomenon that can be addressed in a moral as well as a pragmatic way, depending on whether one focuses on the harmful effects or on its functionality in everyday interactions. As our research aim is to arrive at a better understanding of why people tell each other lies in everyday interactions, it follows that we take a pragmatic approach to the issue and strive for ecologically valid answers.

Identification of Research Entries

In order to find some entries that would be of use in trying to unravel why people tend to tell lies although lying is generally morally condemned, we scrutinised the protocols of the previously mentioned focus group interviews (Backbier, 1994). From the analysis of the obtained accounts, one specific insight turned out to be crucial for the further course of the research project. This insight was that the use and evaluation of lying as a communication strategy seemingly depends on many interacting factors and conditions.

Whether or not one tells a lie appears to depend on: who the interaction partner is, how important something is, how much someone wants something, how believable something is, what someone aims at by telling a lie, etcetera. In addition, it appears to depend on the interviewee what kind of utterance or answer he or she regards a lie; what he or she regards a good or a bad reason for telling a lie; how good or bad a lie-teller he or she regards him- or herself; how frequently he or she tends to resort to telling a lie, etcetera. Although these various factors and conditions associated with lie-telling are certainly tangled to a great extent, it appeared that at least two key factors can be separated: situation characteristics and person characteristics.
Chapter 1

To social psychologists this finding may not come as a surprise, as they all are familiar with the formula of Kurt Lewin, stating that social behaviour is a function of both the person and the situation or \( B = f(P,S) \). Although the implications of this formula are not very apparent in most social psychological research, we took it as our challenge to try to unravel some threads of the tangled roles of person characteristics and situation characteristics in the occurrence of deceptive communication in everyday interactions. During the course of the project, we also paid attention to the communicative acts or deceptive messages themselves, a focus that brought us closer to the insights and research methods of communication scholars.

Outline of the Presented Studies

The aim of the present research project is to arrive at a better understanding of why people tell each other lies in everyday interactions, by focusing on the role of situation and person characteristics in the evaluation and usage of this communication strategy.

Chapter 2 describes a study in which the emphasis is on the influence of different characteristics of the interaction situation on the evaluation of different kinds of lies. By means of a scenario methodology, research participants were presented with systematically varied situation descriptions and asked to indicate to what extent they find the presented lies acceptable from a self and others perspective. The evaluations of the acceptability of the lies were subjected to multivariate and univariate analyses of variance in order to reveal what situation characteristics contributed significantly to the obtained response patterns.

Chapter 3 describes a study in which the emphasis is on the cognitive considerations of persons who in different interaction situations had the possibility to tell a lie. This study addressed a twofold research question; what cognitive considerations precede deceptive communication and do these considerations vary with variations in the interaction situation? The extended theory of planned behaviour (Beck & Ajzen, 1991) served as a framework for the development of the questionnaire. Regression analyses and analyses of variance were used to test whether and how the measurements of the various cognitions contributed to the prediction of lying intentions.

Chapter 4 describes a study in which self-reports of naturally occurring lies were analysed in order to learn more about the causes and purposes of lie telling in everyday life. The context or situations, in which the lies are deemed effective and/or necessary, were explicitly taken into account. The addressed research question was; when and why do people tend to tell lies? By means of the case-oriented quantifying method the self-reports
were analysed systematically. In addition it was explored whether there were differences between the lies of male and female participants and between younger and older participants.

*Chapter 5* describes another qualitative study based on self-reported lies. However, as we aimed to explore a more specific domain that is of everyone’s concern, the focus was on health related lies. The study addressed the question; when and why do people tend to tell lies in relation to their health? By systematically analysing the self-reports, we gained insight into the functional and self-presentational purposes of health related lies. Also we gained insight into the way the broader social context is of influence to the decision to lie about ones health.

*Chapter 6* describes a study in which we aimed to test the acquired insight that situation characteristics are major factors affecting decisions as to whether to lie or otherwise depart from telling the truth. Research participants were provided with scenarios and asked to respond freely to the questions asked by a hypothetical interaction partner in communicative conflict situations. After the responses were categorized according to a coding scheme, they were analysed by means of fitting logit-models to the cross-classified data. These analyses revealed which and how situation characteristics significantly contributed to the obtained response patterns.

In *Chapter 7* a study is described in which we aimed to develop new lie-scales from the acquired conviction that people differ in the goals they pursue in life and therefore differ in the reasons they have for telling lies. The addressed question is; can we measure differences in peoples’ inclination to tell lies, taking into account that lying serves different purposes in different interaction situations? Research participants were provided with three different item pools and invited to indicate to what extent each of the reasons applied to themselves. By means of scale analyses it was determined which items together form reliable and meaningful lying dimensions. Additional correlation analyses on the scales revealed patterns of individual differences in reasons for telling lies and therefore provided initial support for the existence of different lying-profiles.

*To Conclude*

The main body of this dissertation consists of six consecutively conducted empirical studies. The presentation order of the six chapters therefore reflects an increasing insight into the phenomenon under study. As the chapters have been written as separate papers, some overlap between the introductions of the successive chapters does occur. The various
Chapter 1

studies are all dealing with issues related to the roles of situation and person characteristics in the occurrence of deceptive communication in everyday interactions. In Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6 the emphasis is on the influence of different situation characteristics on the evaluation, motivation or usage of the communication strategy. In Chapters 3 and 7 the emphasis is on individual differences in cognitive considerations and reasons for telling lies within specific contexts or situations. A synthesis of the various findings is spelled out in the final chapter (Chapter 8). Based on the obtained insights, we present a new definition for deceptive communication and propose a new direction for deception research.