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

The main aim of the present research project was to arrive at a better understanding of why people tell each other lies in everyday interactions, since several reviews of the literature had revealed that this fundamental question was largely ignored by deception researchers. After analysis of the accounts obtained from focus group interviews on lying in everyday life had indicated that situation characteristics as well as person characteristics somehow exert their influence on the evaluation and usage of this communication strategy, we set out to disentangle some of these interacting causes. Several empirical studies were conducted of which six are presented in the consecutive chapters of this dissertation. Some studies were more exploratory in nature, while others had a more experimental flavour. All studies contributed, however, to our accumulating insight into the phenomenon.

In the remaining of this chapter, we will provide an overview of the main findings from the six studies and briefly discuss to what extent the findings agree or disagree with each other. Next, we provide our conclusions regarding the roles of situation and person characteristics in the evaluation and usage of lie telling in everyday life along with an answer to the general research question. Finally, we present a new definition for deceptive communication and propose a new direction for deception research.
Main Research Findings

In Table 8.1 an overview of the main research findings is provided. The findings were the result of quantitative data collection methods (Chapters 2, 3 and 7) and qualitative data collection methods (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). The qualitative data of two studies were, however, quantified in order to enable systematic (Chapter 4) or even statistical analysis (Chapter 6). In three studies scenarios were used as stimulus material (Chapters 2, 3 and 6) and in three studies research participants were stimulated to search their memory for lie-telling occasions (Chapters 4, 5 and 7). Despite the differences in research questions and methods, the research findings of the six studies largely support one another. Where the findings disagree, this can be attributed to differences in the research topics.

- Attitudinal versus Behavioural Measures

Most apparent in the findings of Chapter 2 is the fact that they reflect the general attitude towards lying (see Table 8.1). Lying in general is regarded reprehensible, but it is regarded more acceptable to lie when the interest of the person that is lied to becomes greater and it is regarded less acceptable to lie when the interest of the liar becomes greater. In other words, self-beneficial lies seem much less acceptable than lies told for other-beneficial reasons. As a consequence of these attitudinal findings one would expect people to tell more social lies than individualistic or egoistic lies. However, this general held assumption is not supported by the findings of other chapters. When asked to report on the most recent lie in general (Chapter 4) or in relation to their own health (Chapter 5), research participants mainly provided lies that they told for self-beneficial reasons. When invited to give an answer to the question of an alleged interaction partner (Chapter 6), research participants replied with lies most frequently in scenarios in which lying served to protect one's self-interests at the expense of the interaction partner. The findings of these behavioural studies thus suggest that people tend to tell lies mainly when it is profitable for themselves. The findings also imply that although it tends to be regarded more acceptable to tell lies for social reasons, in everyday life it may be necessary more frequently to tell lies for individualistic or egoistic reasons. The finding in Chapter 7, that the highest mean scale score for reasons-to-tell-a-lie was obtained for the Self-Preservation scale in fact supports the idea that people are most inclined to tell lies when it serves themselves directly. In sum, the present findings seem to warrant the conclusion that self-reported attitudes and self-reported behaviours with regard to lie telling do not provide interchangeable results.
Table 8.1  *Overview of the Main Findings From the Six Empirical Studies*

| Chapter 2 | • Telling a straight lie in order not to hurt someone's feelings was regarded most acceptable and telling a straight lie in order to gain at the expense of others was regarded least acceptable; telling a straight lie in order to protect oneself or to create a positive image of oneself fell in between
  • Telling a straight lie about relatively unimportant matters was regarded more acceptable than telling a straight lie about relatively important matters
  • Telling a straight lie towards an acquaintance was regarded more acceptable than telling a straight lie towards one's best friend |

| Chapter 3 | • The mean intention to tell a straight lie to a sibling was higher than the mean intention to tell a straight lie to one's father in order not to miss a party, the mean intention to tell a straight lie to friends of one's parents in order to get a job was lowest
  • Attitude, Subjective Norm, Perceived Behavioural Control and Moral Obligation showed strong inter-predictor correlations and therefore obscured the possibility to determine the salience of each of the predictors of lying-intentions by means of regression analyses |

| Chapter 4 | • Most self-reported lies were told for self-beneficial reasons; and mostly in order to avoid having to do something unpleasant and/or to gain something
  • Most self-reported lies were told towards the mother or a male gatekeeper
  • Most self-reported lies were about something the reporter had done, something that had happened to him or her, or that he or she had experienced
  • The self-reported lies were about anything
  • Most self-reported lies were straight lies and almost as many were distortions of the truth (a qualitative change of truthful information) |

| Chapter 5 | • Health-related lies are told by healthy as well as ill persons
  • The self-reported health-related lies were almost exclusively self-serving
  • By telling lies related to their health people aim to profit from the specific rewards or avoid the specific drawbacks of either being ill or being healthy |

| Chapter 6 | • Most replies were coded as Tells a Lie in scenarios with an egoistic motive
  • Most replies were coded as Tells the Truth in scenarios with an individualistic motive
  • Most replies were coded as Softens Truth in scenarios with a social motive
  • Most replies were coded as Tells a Lie in scenarios with an acquaintance
  • Most replies were coded as Tells a Lie in scenarios in which relatively important matters were at stake
  • Variations in reactions were found to vary with differences in 'action possibilities' in the scenarios |

| Chapter 7 | • Six scales with reasons-for-lie-telling and three scales with reasons-for-truth-telling were identified
  • The Prefer-Truth scale had the highest mean scale-score of the nine scales
  • The Self-Preservation scale had the highest mean scale-score of the scales with reasons for telling a lie
  • Correlational analysis supported the general belief that some people are more inclined to tell lies than are others, and our assumption that some people tell lies for one or several types of reasons but not for another type or other types of reasons |
• **General and Situation Specific Measures**

As was already stressed in the discussion of the study described in Chapter 6, people’s communicative acts seem to be tailored to a great extent to meet the specifics of the interaction situation. From this finding, we also concluded that it is largely impossible to make behavioural generalisations based on the observation of someone’s deceptive communication act in one or even several random situations. Behavioural generalisations therefore are at least restricted to situations with similar characteristics. How dissimilar situations may get, while at the same time providing valid behavioural predictions across situations, remains an issue for future research. The same conclusion regarding the restriction of generalisations seems to hold for other reactions than free responses to situations, as was demonstrated indirectly in the studies described in Chapters 2 and 3 in which situation specific measures were used. Virtually all research participants gave different responses in reaction to the differences in stimulus material. In fact, also the findings of the study described in Chapter 7 corroborate the situation specificity of measures in relation to deceptive communication, as most reasons appeared to be scalable on different lying-dimensions. Of course general scores or claims in relation to lying have some predictive value for peoples’ deceptive behaviour in real interactions and therefore a general measure or question sometimes can be sufficient. However, the more certainty one needs, the more situation specific inquiries one should make.

• **What is Lied About**

Lies are told about every possible issue. In Chapter 4 we collected lies about feelings, achievements, knowledge, actions, plans, intentions, facts, possessions and reasons. In Chapter 5, in which we focussed on one specific domain of human life, we obtained an equally broad range of issues that people lied about. This study added to the findings of the former, however, in the way that it showed beautifully that people communicate deceptively by substituting an undesirable issue by a desirable one, because of the specific social, psychological and/or practical implications that seemingly are attached to the issues. We believe that the particularities of the implications are part of a shared common knowledge that people acquire during socialisation processes they undergo in different groups or communities, varying from someone’s family, friends, schools, and company, to the society as a whole. Although we mostly collected and studied relatively small lies, we have come to the conclusion that people can lie about anything, but that they mostly will lie about issues that somehow matter to themselves and/or matter to others.
• *Lying and Deceptive Communication*

Throughout the studies either a definition of a lie or a definition of deceptive communication was operated. This was sometimes a matter of convenience, but sometimes a sheer necessity as deceptive communication is more general than lying. In fact, the definition of a lie always fits in the definition of deceptive communication. The narrow definition of a lie was used in the scenario studies described in *Chapters 2* and *3* and therefore in the findings we refer to straight lies. Straight lies are utterances in which what is said, is clearly in contradiction to the truth as known to the person who tells the lie. However, when research participants are invited to report a lie of their own, a much broader interpretation of a lie emerges (*Chapters 4* and *5*), as in addition to straight lies, clear examples of quantitative and qualitative information distortion were obtained. When reactions to communicative conflict situations are collected (scenario study described in *Chapter 6*), an equally broad range of reactions is obtained. This resulted in the development of a rather fine grained coding scheme with five different categories for reactions that in various ways departed from telling the truth. When research participants are invited to report on their lie-telling without having the possibility to check how exactly they envision lie-telling, as was the case in the study described in *Chapter 7*, we can be almost sure that they handle the same range of definitions as was apparent from the studies described in *Chapters 4* and *5*. Therefore we recommend using the more general concept of deceptive communication whenever the less narrow concept of a lie is not strictly applicable.

*The Role of Situation and Person Characteristics*

The research findings led us to conclude that peoples’ deceptive communication behaviour is not primarily determined by their opinions regarding lying and truth telling, but first and foremost by the kinds of interaction situations they encounter and what they make of these as a consequence of their experiences and general psychological make-up. When an interaction situation for instance bears the chance of hurting someone or gaining something at the expense of someone else, someone’s opinion on ‘hurting someone’ or ‘gaining something at the expense of others’ will determine for a large part how they will (re)act within such case. When an interaction situation somehow appeals to an impression management matter, it will depend on the extent to which someone cares about how he or she is regarded by others, for instance whether and how badly they want to be considered nice, competent, sweet, straightforward, and/or strong. Also it depends on for instance his
or her degree of competitiveness, or on how badly he or she wants something. In other words, communication behaviours seem to be determined not only by social standards but far and utmost by personal standards. Personal standards regarding how one should take care of ones own interests and other peoples' interests; how one should get along with for instance family, friends and strangers; what one considers important and unimportant matters, and how one thinks one should handle those matters.

The conclusions fit the $B = f(P,S)$ formula of Kurt Lewin to which we already referred in Chapter 1. Filling in the formula leads to the following function: situation and person characteristics interact in the determination of how a communication act uttered by a sender in a communicative conflict situation is going to look like. Or stated otherwise:

1. it is the person who encounters or anticipates a situation and reacts to the situation as he or she perceives it;
2. it is the person who shapes a reaction in order to direct or redirect the situation in a way he or she wants to handle, or thinks s/he must handle the situation;
3. it is the situation which has different features that stimulates or inhibits the possibility to depart from telling the truth.

It is evident that the above conclusions and assumptions need thorough empirical testing. In the literature as well as in the presented studies, we identified various characteristics that are relevant for the study of lying or deceptive communication. An overview of the various characteristics that we have found and/or expect to play a role in the decision to use and the shaping of deceptive communication are provided in the first two columns of Table 8.2. The characteristics of the communication act, that is the outcome of the person and situation interaction process, are provided in the third column. The lists of situation, person and communication characteristics are not necessarily complete and/or correct. However, we tend to think that all characteristics do provide possible relevant and interesting co-entries for further investigations.
Table 8.2  Identified Situation, Person and Communication Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation Characteristics</th>
<th>Person Characteristics</th>
<th>Communication Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- relationship characteristics</td>
<td>- perception of interaction situation</td>
<td>- content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- interaction roles</td>
<td>- self perception</td>
<td>- medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- interaction object</td>
<td>- role perception</td>
<td>- proactive or reactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- interaction goal</td>
<td>- previous experiences</td>
<td>- degree of preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- place, time, and duration of interaction</td>
<td>- personal goals</td>
<td>- duration (word, sentence, story)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- interaction history</td>
<td>- emotional state</td>
<td>- amount of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- type of conflict</td>
<td>- habits</td>
<td>- degree of correctness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- behaviour of interaction partner</td>
<td>- personality</td>
<td>- degree of directness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- emotional state of interaction partner</td>
<td>- motivation</td>
<td>- degree of complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- degree of suspicion</td>
<td>- social skills</td>
<td>- degree of fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- standards of society</td>
<td>- cognitive skills</td>
<td>- tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- interaction context</td>
<td>- communication skills</td>
<td>- loudness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- personal standards</td>
<td>- speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- nonverbal behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why Do People Tell Each Other Lies?

The general question why people tell each other lies although lying is generally condemned, can be answered by stating that people tend to tell each other lies when they regard it functional to do so. Lying is functional in occasions in which the lie-teller regards it the only, the better or the best means to control the course and direct the outcome of an interpersonal interaction situation. Situations in which lie-telling tends to be regarded more functional than truth-telling, are characterized by communicative goal-conflicts; when telling the truth is regarded to be detrimental or disadvantageous for the lie-teller him- or herself or when telling the truth is regarded hurtful or disadvantageous for the lie-tellers’ interaction partner. In what circumstances communicative goal-conflicts arise and people seek to escape from the conflict by means of telling some sort of lie, seem to depend on both situational and personal characteristics. What goal-conflicts a person will experience is assumed to depend on the specific goals a person pursues in his or her life. More research on this goal-conflict issue is needed to test these assumptions, perhaps with use of the lie-scales developed in the study described in Chapter 7.
A New Definition for Deceptive Communication

The results and insights that were obtained during the course of the present research project led us to propose a new definition or research-model for deceptive communication. Although we incorporate the view of communication scholars that lying and deception should be regarded goal-directed behaviours or interaction strategies (as do Buller & Burgoon, 1994; Miller & Stiff, 1993), our definition has some unique features. The first difference with other definitions comprises the fact that we depart from the function of lie-telling in social interactions. The second difference comprises the fact, that we replace the criterion of the lie-intention by the criterion of the goal-intention. Almost all lie-definitions we know of, incorporate as a key condition that the sender intentionally tells a lie. However, we came to the conclusion that as lie telling is regarded a means towards an end, the intention has to relate to the goal instead of the means. This way another recurring definitional problem is solved along. When lie-telling is regarded a means that is used with the aim to accomplish a certain goal, the means of telling a lie can be picked or used without an explicit awareness of the lie-user that he or she is telling a lie. In other words, we can get rid of the condition that lie-tellers must be conscious of the fact that they tell a lie as a prerequisite for labelling communication acts as lies. The consequence of limiting the conditions is of course, that we will label a much broader range of communication acts as lies compared to other scholars. However, it constitutes an advantage as it frees us for instance from having to make inclusion or exclusion decisions based on moral considerations. According to our definition it does not matter whether a lie was told for beneficial or malicious reasons. The definition we propose is the following:

*Deceptive communication is a communication strategy by which a person aims at controlling the course and outcome of an interpersonal communication situation by expressing something that he or she (subconsciously) knows not to be completely in accordance with his or her knowledge, opinion or feeling, but by means of which he or she expects to achieve the goal he or she seeks to attain within the specific interaction situation.*

When this definition is taken as a point of departure for future research, we expect the focus to shift from lie telling as a questionable behaviour that should be expelled to lie-telling as a goal-directed interaction strategy that even can be appreciated. Also the applied research designs should become more ecologically valid, while the interactions that are studied will become more real and dynamic. These advantages would certainly be
welcomed by for instance Buller and Burgoon (1996), who already for years plead for a more dynamic approach. Unfortunately a much smaller group of researchers seems to be involved in studying deceptive communication than in studying detection of deception (see Chapter 1). We are convinced, however, that detection research as a whole would greatly benefit from a clear shift of research attention to trying to understand and predict deceptive communication.

**A New Direction for Deception Research**

We have learned from the present research project that situations can be manipulated such, that more or less people will depart from telling the complete truth. This knowledge can be used to create experimental settings for role-playing in real dyadic interactions. In order to be able to study the effect of situation characteristics upon the usage of deceptive communication strategies, it would be best to create two or more different experimental settings and have various research participants act in all settings. It would be more ideal, however, to have some biographical information and personality measures of the research participants in order to be able to study the effect of person characteristics upon the usage of deceptive communication and in addition, the interaction of person and situation characteristics upon the exhibited interaction strategies. Within the envisioned experimental setting or role-playing situation, the assignment given to the research participants would no longer be that they should tell a lie as convincingly as possible, but it would be that they should try to accomplish a certain goal. This goal can be held implicit or made explicit, and the goal can be made easier or harder to accomplish depending on some characteristics of the situation. The situation characteristics can be manipulated in various ways. Most obvious is the manipulation of the characteristics of the interaction partner, but one can also think of manipulating interaction expectations and/or the actions and reactions of the interaction partner upon the actions of the research participant. Of course, the goal of this endeavour would be to systematically observe and analyse how the research participants try to accomplish their interaction goal(s) and how their strategies relate to the manipulated situation characteristics.

The proposed direction for deception research would allow the presented conclusions and assumptions in this chapter to be tested almost integrally. A step that could follow or perhaps taken together, would be to go into the 'black-box' and study the decision process that precede the utterance of deceptive messages. The Goal Limitation Model (GLM) of
Seibold, Cantrill and Meyers (1994) might provide a useful theoretical meta-perspective for this purpose and we expect it to go well with the proposed research strategy. The GLM, which is a general model for interpersonal influence strategies, already proved its value in studying the possible differences between big and little lies (Van Eenbergen, 1998). According to the study of Van Eenbergen, a number of psychological processes preceding, during, and following the telling of big lies differ from those of the telling of little lies. These differences appeared mainly the result of the much wider scope of big lies compared to that of little lies. These findings therefore stress the importance of including both little lies and big lies in future research.

Perhaps the previous suggestion is most recommendable for future lie-detection research, as this line of research seems to have focused almost exclusively on relatively big and artificial lies. The assumptions regarding the cognitive complexity of lie-telling and the involuntary leakage of signals that give the liar away (see Chapter 1) according to the study of Van Eenbergen (1998) are very unlikely to apply equally to everyday lies as well as big lies. In addition, our own research findings provided evidence for the requirement to discriminate between the kind of lies people have the most experience with (everyday lies) and lies that are much more exceptional (big lies). The reports on the self-reported lies suggested among others, that the targets of everyday lies are partly due to the lie-telling and that they usually accept or believe whatever is told to them. Therefore it seems rather unlikely that lie-telling is usually complex and that lie-tellers usually get nervous when telling a lie. In sum, we recommend lie-detection researchers to apply the newly proposed research design in future, as we believe it to facilitate the observation of nonverbal and verbal behaviour of persons across situations while at the same time enabling the determination of behaviour characteristics that are indicative for lie telling and those that are not. Also it allows discerning which variations in behavioural characteristics are related to differences in interaction situations and/or the type of lie.

When, one day, we have come to understand how relatively ‘normal’ persons behave in certain communicative goal-conflict situations, we could start thinking about studying the goal accomplishment strategies exhibited by relatively ‘abnormal’ persons. For instance, the strategies of alleged pathological liars. Or, perhaps even more interesting from a developmental perspective, we could study the ways in which people can learn to tell lies. Which in turn can lead to studying how we can prevent people to tell lies to us.