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

The larger part of research conducted in the field of deceptive communication seems to be preoccupied with lie detection, while the fundamental question of why people tend to tell each other lies in everyday interactions was systematically ignored. As a result of this negligence, detection research seems to be based on a flawed understanding of the function of deceptive communication in everyday interpersonal interactions. In addition, it suffers from the fact that researchers hardly have a clue on whether, how and to what extent peoples' communicative actions are guided by the circumstances in which these actions occur and/or by the individual characteristics of the persons who exhibit them. The present dissertation set out to fill this knowledge gap. In the introductory chapter, we referred to the focus group interviews that were conducted in order to immerse ourselves quickly in the different facets of lie telling. The facts and insights that emerged from these interviews had a great impact on the research questions that were handled next. Especially in the sense that it made us aware of the possible importance of situation characteristics as lie evoking prerequisites. In fact, the significance of situation characteristics in addition to person characteristics in the evaluation and usage of deceptive communication appeared persistent in all conducted studies, regardless of the specific research strategy that was used.

In the study described in Chapter 2, it was tested whether the same situational factors people take into account when involved in the decision to lie apply to the evaluation of lies presented in scenarios. The scenarios that were developed represented 12 different situation categories formed by the crossing of the motive for lying (social, individualistic, egoistic), the relative importance of the situation (important matter,
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unimportant matter), and the closeness of the relation between the subject and the receiver of the lie (best friend, acquaintance). The acceptability of lying was evaluated from two perspectives (self, others) by 180 women of the general public. The results showed that as the interest of the person that is lied to becomes greater, lying becomes more acceptable and that as the interest of the liar becomes greater, lying becomes less acceptable. The finding of systematically higher estimations of acceptability attributed to most others was interpreted as indicating a false-uniqueness bias.

In the study described in Chapter 3, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) which predict behavioural intentions to be dependent on one’s ‘attitude’, the ‘subjective norm’ and the degree of ‘perceived behavioural control’ was extended with the variable of ‘moral obligation’ in order to provide a useful framework for the study of lying intentions. Two scenarios were presented to 92 students. The first scenario involved lying in order to get a job while the second scenario involved either lying to a father or lying to a sibling in order not to miss out on a party. The contribution of each variable in predicting lying intentions was tested with hierarchical regression analyses. ‘Attitude’ appeared the strongest and most stable predictor while ‘moral obligation’ added to the prediction of lying in order to get a job and ‘subjective norm’ to lying to one’s father in order not to miss the party. As ‘moral obligation’ was expected to have an inhibiting influence on the intention to lie, additional analyses were performed that showed it’s influence on all variables of the model. Since situational characteristics were found to influence personal cognitions, the need to focus on situational demands in future research with the TPB model is emphasised.

Chapter 4 describes a study in which self-reported lies of 130 first year psychology students were analysed and categorised using the case-oriented quantifying method, in order to gain insight into the when and why of lie-telling in everyday life. This endeavour resulted in a scheme of characteristics of the occasion (Target, and Reason), the lie (Referent, Content, and Type), and the consequence (Belief/Acceptance, Effect, and Evaluation). Parents and male gatekeepers appeared to be the persons that triggered lie-telling most often. The motives for telling lies were mostly little altruistic: the respondents mainly lied to benefit themselves. In many instances the lies were about the respondent him or herself, or something the respondent would do, had done, or had experienced. Straight lies were reported most frequently and most of the times the respondents were satisfied about the effect of the lie. The analyses revealed differences between lies of male and female as well as younger and older respondents. It is concluded that lying in everyday
life, according to our respondents, is either used to obtain a desired reaction or prevent an undesired reaction of the interaction partner.

In Chapter 5 also a qualitative study is presented. This time first year psychology students were invited to report on the most recent lie they told in relation to their health. The purpose was to gain insight into the functional and self-presentational purposes of telling these kind of lies in a variety of social interactions. The obtained range of health related lies could be clustered based on some of their prevailing joint characteristics, resulting in one large cluster of reports that involved excuses, a second cluster of reports in which lying served to draw or distract attention, and a third cluster of reports in which lying served specifically to protect ones self-interests. Further analysis of the clusters revealed that people sometimes resort to faking an illness in order to wriggle out of an obligation or to attract someone's attention. People who are in fact ill, sometimes pretend to be healthy in order not to attract unwanted attention, in order to avoid obstacles that illness brings along, or in order to create a desirable image of themselves. The function of health related lying therefore seems to coincide with profiting from the specific rewards or avoiding the specific drawbacks of each specific health-state.

In the study presented in Chapter 6 we returned to our scenario methodology used in chapter 2 on the acceptability of telling lies. This time, however, we wanted to test whether and how situation characteristics evoke deceptive communication acts by inviting research participants to write replies to the questions asked by the alleged interaction partner in the scenarios. All written replies were coded by two independent coders according to a specially developed coding scheme. The result showed that most replies could be labelled as softened or even straightforward lies, although the category of telling the truth was still very large as well. The fitting of logit models to the response patterns revealed multiple significant second-order interactions and thus provided support for the hypothesis that the distribution of answering strategies depended largely on the specific combination of the three manipulated situation characteristics.

The results led us to introduce an additional factor called 'action possibilities', as it appeared that differences in action possibilities not only determined the variation in possible interpretations of a situation, but also the variation in actual reactions. Unfortunately we cannot deduct from the observed reactions what considerations guided the individual interactants. Future research, perhaps by using a thinking-aloud method, should attempt to open up the black box. For now it seems clear, however, that as deceptive acts are tailored to meet a specific interaction goal in a specific, perhaps unique
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situation or context, one or even several random incidents of a person telling a lie are not likely to be representative for the general behavioural repertoire of that person.

The study described in Chapter 7 was conducted with the aim to develop lie-scales for differentiating between people with various lying-profiles. The previous studies provided us the insight that people differ with regard to the extent in which they pursue different goals in life and therefore in the reasons they are disposed to have for telling lies. From this acquired conviction we created a pool with Self-Oriented reasons for telling lies, a pool with Other-Oriented reasons for telling lies and a pool of Truth-Oriented reasons. Research participants were invited to rate the reasons from the three pools to the extent to which each reason applied to themselves in situations in which the reason is somehow salient. Mokken Scale analysis for Polytomous items (MSP) extracted nine reliable and meaningful scales from the resulting data, each representing a different dimension of reasons sharing a common goal in a variety of situations. The dimensions were labelled: Reaction Management, Self-Preservation, Obtain Something, Relation Management, Protection, Force Something Bad, Manage Negative Outcome, Decline Lie-Telling and Prefer Truth. Correlation analysis on the nine scales supported the hypothesized existence of different lying-profiles. However, additional correlation analysis with six social desirability scales revealed the presence of some sort of response bias. It is therefore recommended to obtain an additional measure of Impression Management whenever the scales are used for individual diagnosis.

In Chapter 8 an overview of the main findings from the six studies is provided. First, we briefly discuss the extent to which the different findings do agree or disagree with each other and what we regard as the causes of the (dis)agreement. Next, we provide some conclusions regarding how situation characteristics and person characteristics play a role in the evaluation and usage of lie telling in everyday life along with an answer to the general research question of why people tend to tell each other lies. Finally, we present a new definition for deceptive communication and propose a new direction for deception research.