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Exploring the Non-Malicious Influencers of Lying

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Abstract

Although lying is often studied in relation to malicious factors like crime, delinquency, and lie-detection, there may be people who lie without any antagonistic intentions. In those cases, other factors like age, self-regulation, and impression management may be at play. Some studies suggest that teenagers and children may be more likely to lie than adults because of a lower maturity or because of desires for autonomy rather than malicious intent (Dykstra et al., 2020; Levine et al., 2013). Other researchers propose that some may lie because of low levels of self-control or ego depletion (Fan et al., 2016; Welsh et al., 2014). It is also suggested that both self-regulation and ego depletion may be influenced by certain mental illnesses, which may then indirectly influence lying (Barnett, 2019; Jarrett, 2016; Remster, 2014). Furthermore, some studies propose that impression management may be a motive for deceptive behavior, especially among people with low self-esteem or social anxiety (Cantarero et al., 2018; Myers, 2011; Walczyk et al., 2016). People may also attempt to use exaggeration to impress others and foster better relationships (DePaulo et al., 2004). Thus, lying may not always be influenced by an intent to harm, but by age, low levels of self-control, and the desire to impress people. Future research on the non-malicious influencers of lying could provide insight into better treatment options for those who lie without malicious intent.

Keywords: deceptive behavior, lifespan, self-regulation, impression management, mental illness

Exploring the Non-Malicious Influencers of Lying

Lying is often considered an unethical act that becomes a part of everyday life beginning at childhood (Evans & Lee, 2011). Motives behind various types of lies have been frequently contested, and differing opinions exist regarding the meanings and morality behind them. Generally, lying is defined as “intentionally [trying] to mislead someone” (DePaulo et al., 1996, p. 981). Through movies and storytelling, many children are taught early on that lying is wrong and that telling the truth is right (Talwar et al., 2018). Therefore, they may learn to perceive someone who lies as immoral or untrustworthy (Talwar et al., 2015). Additionally, children may learn through reinforcement to be honest by experiencing the rewards for truth-telling and punishments for lying (Schweitzer et al., 2006). Lying, therefore, is generally seen as a negative concept.

In psychology, lying is often studied in relation to various malicious factors, with maliciousness defined as “the intent to harm” (King et al., 2018, para. 1). Psychologists research deceptive behavior and its associations with crime, discipline, and lie detection, usually describing lying as an intentional decision that is morally wrong (Rutschmann & Weigmann, 2017). Research has also determined that sometimes lying may be influenced by personality, such as psychopathic personality traits which exhibit antagonism, disinhibition, and aggression (Dobrow, 2017). Moreover, studies focused on the less offensive underlying factors that may unintentionally influence deceptive behavior are less common, but perhaps equally significant.

Research has shown that while lying sometimes may be seen as malicious, people occasionally do lie without the intention to deceive (Rutschmann & Weigmann, 2017). Thus, in those cases where there are no antagonistic intentions to harm, other more innocent factors may be at play. Age, for instance, may influence one’s lying behavior as children grow and learn about honesty (Evans & Lee, 2011; Schweitzer et al., 2006). Furthermore, studies have shown that low self-control may lead to negative consequences, including health challenges, mental illnesses, and bad habits that may involve deceptive behavior (Jarrett, 2016; Jiang, 2016; Lo et al., 2021). Additionally, the people in one’s environment may influence their deceptive behavior. For example, the desire to impress people can also motivate lying and a loss of authenticity which may lead to anxiety and poor performance in the workplace (Gino et al., 2020). Through research on the additional factors that may influence deceptive behavior, new methods could be discovered for treating deceptive habits in those

who mean no harm. Although deceptive behavior may sometimes be caused by an antagonistic intention to deceive, lying can be influenced by a variety of non-malicious factors, including age, self-regulation, and impression management.

Age as a Factor in Lying

Lie-telling may be influenced by the uncontrollable, non-antagonistic factor of one's age. Several studies have examined which age groups lie more frequently and how lying changes across lifespan. Additionally, research has examined the motives behind why people of certain ages may lie more than others (Dykstra et al., 2020; Evans & Lee, 2011; Levine et al., 2013). Understanding which age groups lie more often may help psychologists better comprehend the origins of deception across all ages from a non-malicious perspective.

Lifespan of Deceptive Behavior

Some studies suggest that lying decreases with age. A study involving 58 high school students was performed by Levine et al. (2013) to determine the frequency of lies among 14- to 17-year-olds. Participants were asked to estimate their daily frequency of lie-telling and describe the types of lies they told. The results suggested that teenagers, on average, likely lie around 4.1 times per day, which was statistically greater than frequencies previously defined among college students and adults (Levine et al., 2013). In addition, other research proposes that lying begins in a child's preschool years and decreases as they grow (Evans & Lee, 2011). Glätzle-Rützler and Lergetporer (2015) supported this assessment in their study determining that fifth graders are likely more involved in deceptive behavior than eleventh graders. It is suggested, therefore, that lying begins in the early years of life and then decreases in frequency as one ages.

On the other hand, some researchers propose that lying peaks in the adolescent years. Debey et al. (2015) performed an experiment which examined lie-telling across lifespan, including participants from ages 6 to 77. Upon reviewing the participants' responses about their lying frequency, the researchers concluded that lying increases throughout childhood, peaks in adolescence, and then decreases in the adult years. Some propose that the contradicting results of these studies could be settled through further research differentiating the type of lie told (Dykstra et al., 2020). For example, researchers suggest that teenage lie-telling may be related to

secret-keeping and lies of omission, but less frequently lies of commission. Future research differentiating the two may show more clearly which age group most frequently lies and whether or not their motives are led by a desire to harm others. Although the reason for the contradicting results is unclear, most research on the subject accepts that teenagers likely lie more frequently than older adults (Levine et al., 2013). Thus, lying may be connected to one's age. Instead of accrediting the frequency of lying among teenagers to malicious intent, it may be helpful to examine the more innocent motives behind their deceptive behavior.

Possible Explanations for Teenage Lie-Telling

Some studies suggest that teenage lie-telling may be related to maturity. For instance, Levine et al. (2013) proposes that the increase in lying among young people may be based on lower levels of cognitive, emotional, and moral maturity. Additional research supports that once a person has more knowledge about lying, they are less likely to lie (Evans & Lee, 2011). In other words, as a person grows and learns more about the consequences of lying, they may lie less often. If this idea is correct, then lying may be a natural habit that one grows out of as they mature.

Furthermore, significant research suggests that desires for autonomy may be related to the frequency of deceptive behavior among teenagers. Dykstra et al. (2020) propose, through studying the correlation between lying among adolescents and the quality of parent-child relationships, that teenage lie-telling may be related to desires for freedom and independence. Similarly, other research suggests that teenagers with autonomy-supportive parents are often more honest than those with controlling ones (Bureau & Mageau, 2014). It is hypothesized that this is because they trust their parents to listen to them without punishing them severely when they confess their wrongdoings. In this case, negative parent-child relationships may lead to more dishonesty, and teenagers may lie at greater frequencies because of a desire for more freedom and less parental limitation.

Self-Regulation

In addition to age, another non-antagonistic factor that may influence lying is self-regulation. A deficit in self-regulation may lead to less control over impulses and emotions (Welsh et al., 2014). Similarly, when a person exercises a lot of

self-control, they may deplete their capability for self-regulation and experience “ego depletion” (Baumeister et al., 1998). This concept is based on the theory that everyone has a pool of self-control that can be drained out, making natural impulses harder to resist. Using this theory, researchers have proposed that ego depletion often leads to unethical behavior (Jiang, 2016). Both self-regulation and ego depletion have been studied in relation to lying. In addition, different mental illnesses have been studied as factors that may affect low self-control and ego depletion, which may indirectly influence deceptive behavior. In the case that lying is correlated to these deficits in self-regulation capabilities, lying may not always be influenced by the intention to harm someone, but may at times be related to a lack of control over emotions and impulses.

Deceptive behavior may be correlated with general deficits in self-regulation. One study determined through a series of experiments examining the role of self-control in deception that those with lower self-control had more tendency to deceive (Fan et al., 2016). Furthermore, Cantarero et al. (2018) performed a study in which participants kept a journal of their social interactions, recording each time they lied for one week. Following this journaling, questionnaires were given to assess self-control. Results found that lying frequency may be related to a deficit in self-control (Cantarero et al., 2018). Deception, therefore, could be correlated with lower levels of control over emotions and impulses rather than malicious intent.

Likewise, many studies support that ego depletion may influence deceptive behavior. Welsh et al. (2014) determined, using the State Ego Depletion Scale, that a sleep-deprived group of participants had higher levels of ego depletion than another group. They then performed an experiment in which each participant had to choose whether to tell the truth or to lie to another participant with money as an incentive. The results suggested that those who were sleep-deprived and ego depleted were more likely to lie, supporting that ego depletion could be a predictor of lying behavior (Welsh et al., 2014). Additionally, Jiang (2016) tested whether or not a group of students would lie about their percentage on a word processing test if they were ego-depleted and knew the average percentage was higher than their own. He confirmed that those in the ego depletion group were more likely to lie than those in the non-ego-depletion group. Research, therefore, suggests a positive relationship between deceptive behavior and ego depletion in

addition to self-regulation. Thus, lying may sometimes be more related to limited self-regulation capabilities than an antagonistic intention to deceive.

Research on what leads to self-regulation deficits may help clarify what other non-malicious factors may indirectly influence deceptive behavior. Studies show that these deficits, for example, are possibly related to certain mental illnesses. Specifically, researchers have supported that those with anxiety and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder may have difficulty regulating their emotions (Jarrett, 2016). Likewise, some adults with hyperactivity struggle to control their impulses in the workplace, also supporting a correlation between attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and low self-control (Barnett, 2019). Depression may also be significantly correlated to low levels of self-control, which may explain some delinquency among teenagers with mental illness (Remster, 2014). Thus, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and depression may be related to deficits in self-regulation, deficits which are sometimes associated with a high frequency of lying behavior. Because of this relation to self-regulation, some researchers may consider mental illness a non-malicious influencer of lying as well. For example, some researchers propose that those with high levels of anxiety may tell more self-promoting lies (Cantarero et al., 2018). Additional research may be needed to fully determine if there is an association between mental health and frequency of lie-telling through the mediation of self-regulation.

Impression Management

Just as the ability to control one's impulses may correlate to lying behavior, the desire to control one's impressions is another non-antagonistic factor that may influence lying. Impression management is what occurs when one tries to control the way they are perceived by others, thus "managing" the impression they make (Leary, 2001). Some of this management can be positive, like when someone emphasizes their talents during a job interview. Other times, impression management can be a motive for deceptive behavior.

Several studies have examined the relationship between impression management and lying. For example, a study was performed by Walczyk et al. (2016) involving a mock job interview in which participants were asked questions that may have embarrassed them by highlighting their less-desirable traits. Following the interview, participants were asked in a questionnaire to identify the questions to which they had lied and to explain their motives for doing so.

The results showed concerns for impression management among both truth-tellers and liars, but liars were twice as likely to consider what was needed to make a positive impression than truth-tellers (Walczyk et al., 2016). Additionally, Phillips et al. (2011) issued a series of questionnaires to undergraduate students and found correlations between impression management and lying across several different studies. DePaulo et al. (1996) also support that higher scores of impression management may be related to a greater frequency of deceptive behavior, explaining that some people may create entirely new personas in order to impress people. Deceptive behavior and impression management, therefore, are likely related. Those who lie frequently may not do it out of malice, but in order to gain the approval of others. Considering additional factors could help determine what elements of impression management might lead people to lie.

Social Anxiety

Correlations between impression management and social anxiety may provide insight into what can provoke deceptive behavior. Research shows that social anxiety is sometimes correlated with a difficulty in making good impressions, which may cause people to struggle to form new relationships (Tissera et al., 2020). This struggle to make friends may be a motive for lying behavior. Those with high levels of anxiety may have more tendency to lie in order to benefit themselves, which may be due to a desire to appear more impressive (Cantarero et al., 2018). This research further supports that mental illnesses like social anxiety may indirectly influence deceptive behavior. Recognizing correlations between anxiety and impression management could open the door to understanding more profoundly why people with anxiety may lie without meaning any harm, and if this deceptive behavior could be eliminated by treating social anxiety.

Self-Esteem

Likewise, connections between lying, impression management, and self-esteem could help explain what influences deceptive behavior. For instance, Myers (2011) performed a study in which participants were asked to respond to several questions about their own feelings of self-worth. These assessments were followed by additional, similarly-worded questions, this time using machinery that would convince participants that their lies would be detected. As a result,

Myers proposed that those with low self-esteem are more likely to lie about their self-esteem in order to appear more confident in themselves. In this study, the purpose for deceptive behavior was not to cause harm, but to appear more confident than they truly felt (Myers, 2011). Similarly, according to Cantarero et al. (2018), low self-esteem may be ascribed to a greater use of beneficial lies, or lies that are promotion-focused. These promotion-focused lies are described as being motivated by desires for accomplishment, fulfillment, and other positive outcomes (Cantarero et al., 2018). This further supports that people with low self-esteem may not have malicious intent in lying, but sometimes use it to promote their image and make a good impression, which could lead to future accomplishment or fulfillment.

Exaggeration

Finally, some people may attempt to manage their impressions through exaggeration. At times, exaggeration can lead to negative impressions when a person's expectations for truthfulness are violated (Rycyna et al., 2009). On the other hand, Cole and Beike (2019) suggest that exaggerating stories may promote closeness among the listener and storyteller, and that it is not always considered harmful or offensive. They also support that this form of exaggeration may be done with no intention to harm (Cole & Beike, 2019). Furthermore, exaggeration may be implemented when one wishes to appear more desirable or exciting to the people around them (DePaulo et al., 2004). In this case, people may use deceptive behavior in order to form friendships and create positive relationships, which supports that not all deception is malicious or led by antagonistic intentions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, lying does not always imply malicious intent, but may be influenced by age, self-regulation, and impression management, factors that are often hard to control or unintentional. One's age, for example, likely influences the amount of lies told. Teenagers are shown to have high frequencies of lie-telling, which may be related to desires for autonomy or to lower levels of emotional, moral, and cognitive maturity (Levine et al., 2013). Furthermore, self-control varies widely among individuals, and research suggests that those with less self-control are more likely to be involved in deceptive behavior (Welsh et al.,

2014). Impression management may lead to deceptive behavior when one tries to appear more desirable by exaggerating or lying about their attributes (DePaulo et al., 2004). Thus, many of the factors behind deceptive behavior may have no antagonistic intentions. Lying, instead, may be influenced by the circumstances involving one's age, by the struggle for self-control, or by a desire for positive relationships and impressions.

Many psychological studies examine the antagonistic causes of lying, but the research cited in this review focuses on the more natural or innocent influencers of deceptive behavior. Some of these non-malicious influencers of deceptive behavior have connections to mental illness, including anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and depression. For instance, those who have deficits in self-regulation often struggle with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder as well (Barnett, 2019). Additional associations are examined between self-regulation and anxiety, impression management and low self-esteem, etc. in relation to deceptive behavior. These connections could open the door to future studies determining the relationship between lying and other non-malicious factors, including mental illness.

The research presented is limited because it does not fully explain all of the motives for lying, nor the negative consequences of deception. Additionally, limitations include a need for more information on the correlation between mental illness and deceptive behavior. More research could reveal new ways to promote honesty by determining how much of the decision to lie is conscious and how much is influenced by uncontrollable factors. Furthermore, a better understanding of deception's connection to age, self-regulation, or impression management could lead to more sympathy and better treatment possibilities for those who lie without malice. Society's view on those who lie could be shifted as more people come to understand how other factors influence their deceptive behavior. In summary, lying could be better understood and better treated if specifically studied for the benefit of the non-malicious liar.

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