

Motivations, Moral Components, and Detections of Lying Behavior to Benefit Self and Others

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Abstract This study surveys the literature regarding the motivations that are behind lying behavior, morality of lying behavior, and identifies two different types of lying behavior. This literature review also observes lie detections that can be used to identify destructive and typical dishonesty. Lying behavior is categorized into two groups: those who lie to benefit themselves (pro-self), and those who lie to benefit others (pro-social). This study will analyze each category and distinguish the differences between them in regards to identification, motivations, and detections. In addition, this study will also cover the morality of lying behavior as recognized through previous research.

Keywords Pro-Social Lying, Pro-Self Lying, Lying Behavior, Morality, Lie Detection

1. Introduction

“Each of us has been socialized to believe that lying is bad. We are taught, and we teach our children, that lying is immoral, reprehensible, and a mark of an immature person.”[19]. These views have strong, long-lasting traditions in philosophies, social psychological theories, and religions. Even the Bible gives numerous examples of heroes engaging in lying behavior for a cause beneficial to others. The idea that lying behavior occurs every day is no surprise[19]. During the course of the day, the general population will lie in one out of every five interactions. College age students are even more likely to lie at one out of every three interactions[23]. These statistics show that the occurrence of lying behavior in the general population is exceedingly common. The regularity of lying behavior is apparent, however the morality of lying and the motivations that drive lying behavior have been challenged and studied throughout history.

The morality of lying behavior is an important topic when opening up the idea that all lying behavior is not morally wrong. However, just a few theories have been developed to identify levels of morality and its relationship to lying behavior. Kohlberg’s stages of moral development frequently act as a manuscript in determining the morality of lying behavior. Kohlberg divided his theory into three divisions: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. The major difference in these divisions is the focus, or drive, that is derived from the individual. In the first division,

the drive to engage in lying behavior is coming strictly from the individual. In the second, the drive is shared among both the individual engaging in lying behavior and significant others in the individual’s life. In the third division, the focus that was strictly on the individual is now onto the pride for all of life or the common good[10]. These major divisions in how individuals act regarding morality play a major role in lying behavior. This theory proposes the exceptional idea that all lying is not immoral. Although this theory proposes that all lying is not immoral, it does not fully prove that an individual functioning with post-conventional morality level will only engage in pro-social lying behavior. The same assumption can also be proven true for individuals who are at a consistent pre-conventional stage of moral development. These individuals can engage in pro-social lying behavior even though it is typical of these individuals to engage in pro-self lying behavior.

People of all age, sex, and race tell lies to accomplish the most simple of goals in social interaction. Motivations behind lying behavior are assumed to vary from deceiver to deceiver. However, Steinel, Utz and Koning[21] proposed a theory, which suggests that there are two types of lying behavior that determine our motivations. This empirical study suggests that there are two levels of motivation in lying behavior: pro-self and pro-social. The main difference between these two subtypes is the intended beneficiary of the lie itself. In a pro-self motivated lie, the individual is intending to benefit him or herself through the act of lying. In a pro-social motivated lie, the individual is intending to benefit only others through the act of lying. This theory gives an interesting take on lying behavior. It is a stimulating assumption to make that out of all the lying behavior in daily communication, they can be divided into just two different sub-groups. Further analysis of the individual sub-groups

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occurs later in this review. Kohlberg's stages of moral development and the theory proposed by Steinel et al.[21] increase awareness to the psychological understanding of lying behavior. Their research shows that there could be more to lying and deception than what history has presented. The consistently presumed assumption is that lying behavior is morally wrong and telling the truth is morally right. New research on the stages of moral development and the theory on pro-self and pro-social motivations challenge this concept[16].

The physiology, detections and interventions of lying behavior have proven to be beneficial in bringing awareness to deception. Lying and the process of its detection are morally, ethically, socially and scientifically loaded issues that are becoming increasingly important in psychology[8]. Physiologically, lying involves the intentional suppression of the predominant truth response[24]. Detection of lying behavior has been an ongoing discovery for numerous researchers. Some researchers promote nonverbal detection of lying behavior where the detector strictly looks at the body language of the individual lying. From there, the detector can easily identify if the individual is engaging in lying behavior. Other theories state that the use of verbal language while in the midst of a lie can easily indicate lying behavior to detectors[2].

Lastly, interventions of lying behavior can be necessary when destructive lying takes place. Destructive lying, as used in this paper, is lying behavior that is harmful physically, mentally, or emotionally to one's self or to others. The literature on interventions of destructive lying behavior has shown to be an important factor when fully assessing lying behavior.

2. Pro-self Lying Behavior

Steinel et al.[21] defined pro-self lying behavior as any form of lying behavior that is intended to benefit only the individual who is lying. This form of lying behavior is commonly used in all areas of an individual's lifestyle. From politics to religion, pro-self lying behavior is becoming increasingly common. Pro-self lying behavior may not always come across as beneficial to the one telling the lie. However, the key to determining pro-self lying behavior versus other kinds of lying behavior is identifying the intention of the liar. For example, a client could lie to his or her psychologist about having feelings of depression in hopes to receive psychotropic medication. The intention of the client is to benefit him or herself by abusing the prescribed medication. This client is responsible for pro-self lying behavior whether he or she accomplishes the goal derived from the lying act[21].

In order to assess and compare pro-self lying behavior with other forms of lying behavior and deception, it is necessary to first obtain a general understanding of the purpose and intent behind this behavior. What is evident in research is that the majority of these individuals, no matter

the age, willingly admit to lying in order to protect their self-esteem and project their desired self-image. Although some individuals use pro-self lies more than others, every individual shares the same feelings of protection over his or her own self-esteem and self-image[26].

2.1. Illustrated Demographic of Pro-self Lying Behavior

Research shows that all individuals are guilty at some time of pro-self lying behavior. But what characteristics differentiate the frequent user from the recreational user? There are certain individual and group demographics that help identify the frequent pro-self liar. Attachment style, personality traits, family background, race, and age all play major roles in identifying extreme users of pro-self lying behavior.

Ennis, Vrij, & Chance[7] created a study which looked further into attachment style, and whether it had an effect in the occurrence of pro-self lying behavior. "Attachment styles are generally associated with attachment figures. Evidence suggests that attachment styles influence a range of relationship types and how we react in interpersonal relationships with others"[7]. In previous studies, research has been done on attachment relationships with romantic partners and how they affect an individual's rate of deception[4]. Cole showed that frequency of lying behavior was consistent across romantically involved partners rather than directed by relationship-specific factors such as reciprocity. Thus, just being in a relationship with a romantic partner categorized an individual as having the same lying behavioral characteristics as others in romantic relationships [4]. In this study, more than just romantic relationships are being measured as far as attachment styles.

Ennis et al.[7] sought to prove that any type of relationship (i.e. imaginary, real, intimate, weak) affected lying behavior and could help identify pro-self lying behavior. They found that "results relevant to the relationship between people's attachment needs and lying presented an interesting pattern. People's anxieties about how others judge them (attachment anxiety), rather than their privacy needs (attachment avoidance) predicted the frequency of lying in relationships"[7]. Therefore, the demographic of a pro-self liar would include an individual who is high in anxiety and has a need to impress others rather than a need to avoid others out of protection of privacy. Those individuals who are consistently using pro-self lying behavior have been found to depend heavily on all of the relationships (significant and insignificant) in his or her life. The study done by Ennis et al.[7] creates a correlation between attachment styles and frequency of lying behavior. However, it is necessary to point out that attachment styles occur for a number of different reasons, depending on the individual. Therefore, such assumption that all individuals who rely on relationships will engage in pro-self lying behavior is too general. It is necessary to know that this type of attachment style is more prevalent in pro-self lying behavior, but is not an indicator that can stand on its own.

Other key characteristics that are positively correlated with pro-self lying behavior are emotional problems, behavioral problems, poor relationship skills, and poor quality of family influence. It is important to note that these variables apply in almost all individuals at some point and to some degree[6]. When two or more of these characteristics are prevalent at the same time in one individual, the likelihood of that individual engaging in pro-self lying behavior significantly increases. Overall, the majority of the studies done on the demographic of a suspected pro-self lying individual show that the quality of parenting during the adolescent stage of development is a major determinant in the frequency of lying behavior.

As stated earlier, all individuals have engaged in one form or another of pro-self lying behavior. The predictors of pro-self lying behavior mentioned in this section are indicated to depict those who are frequent users of pro-self lying. It is necessary to look at both the demographic of the individual as well as the outlying factors in order to fully conclude the type of individual engaging in this behavior. Although the stated demographic is found in pro-self lying individuals, this does not mean that individuals who do not qualify under this demographic are exempt.

2.2. Motivations of Pro-self Lying Behavior

Our behaviors are motivated from our thoughts and beliefs. So what is it that motivates us to lie? What thoughts and beliefs trigger the need for deception that is intended to strictly benefit the individual lying? Many studies show that there are several motivations that eventually result in frequent use of pro-self lying behavior. However, it is important to note that just one of these motivating factors alone will not predict pro-self lying behavior.

The motivations behind pro-self lying behavior are determined by the situation and individuals involved in the lying behavior[19]. What may typically motivate one individual to lie does not make it safe to assume the same motivating factor applies to another individual. This example applies for the different experience and situation each individual is in, as well as the risk accounted for each lying encounter. For example, the motivations of individuals in relationships differ from individuals lying to their teachers or parents. A study done by Saxe[19] measured the lying behavior of undergraduate college students in relationships. Eighty-five percent of the students reported that they have lied in their current relationship[19]. Participants claimed that the justification for the lying behavior was to “protect” their partners. The majority of the individuals were lying about another relationship that they did not want their partner to know about. Although the lying individuals claim to be protecting their partners by lying, subconsciously, they are intending to benefit themselves. The personal benefit of the lying individual is the relationship that will stay in tact if the lie is heard and believed by his or her partner. Therefore, the motivation of pro-self lying behavior in relationships is most likely going to be protection over the other partner and desire to maintain the relationship[19].

Grover & Hui[11] believe that another area of motivation in pro-self lying behavior is in the work place. Dishonesty has remained present in the work place for years. Job pressure has shown to motivate lying behavior among many employees to their superiors. When pressure is involved in any situation, individuals are more likely to engage in lying behavior to avoid the conflict that arises from pressure-provoking situations. Individuals in the workplace are more likely to engage in pro-self lying behavior under two circumstances: 1) when performance pressure is experienced and 2) when the individual could potentially be rewarded for engaging in lying behavior. Extrinsic rewards easily motivate an individual to silence the personal morals and focus on the reward that would benefit the individual[11].

In personal relationships with family members, parents, and teachers, motivations of pro-self lying behavior are limited. Individuals usually found themselves searching for morally acceptable reasons to engage in pro-self lying behavior. Results show that the main reason for engaging in pro-self lying behavior while being able to morally justify the act is when an individual must choose to either benefit him or herself through lying behavior or endanger the welfare of others. Therefore, only when an individual is faced with the decision to either benefit him or herself, or harm others, the individual is strongly motivated to engage in pro-self lying behavior[12].

In conclusion, research has shown that individuals are motivated to engage in pro-self lying behavior for several reasons. The motivation can be determined depending on the individual engaging in lying behavior, the situation, and the other individuals involved. As stated earlier, motivation is likely to change from individual to individual, and does not carry the same weight for every circumstance. Research has shown that the motivation is likely to be an extrinsic reward or personal gain. This is a strong and safe conclusion to the research that has been done. Certain pressures can influence the motivation by increasing the desire to lie. Other circumstances encourage the liar to choose to benefit him or herself instead of harming others. Lastly, a lack of integrity can result in a destructive pattern of pro-self lying behavior.

3. Pro-Social Lying Behavior

“From an early age, individuals are socialized to be truthful in social contexts”[17]. However, they are also taught, either explicitly or implicitly, to not tell the blunt truth in some social situations where the truth may be trivial or hurtful to the recipient. Due to this contradiction, all lying behavior is neither judged nor evaluated equally. People lie everyday and judge deception according to their own circumstances[17]. In some contexts, individuals judge deception to be the morally correct choice of action. Justifications for lying in various situations have been debated throughout history. The conclusion these philosophers and researchers have deduced can be summed

up in one theory. The lying behavior that philosophers believe to be most justified both morally and socially is pro-social lying behavior[16]. Pro-social lying behavior, defined by Steniel et al.[21], is selfless lying behavior or deception that is used only to benefit others. This type of lying behavior is seen as the most justifiable and self-less type of lying behavior. The theories on this type of behavior assume the individual has positive intentions to preserve the individual's feelings instead of avoid an uncomfortable interaction.

Pro-social lying behavior has been a struggle between morality and deception for a number of years. The researchers who have studied pro-social lying behavior show through empirical research that both levels of morality and lying behavior differ from individual to individual. The main area of concentration these researchers focus on are the levels of morality that conflict with pro-social lying behavior. Pro-social lying behavior differs from any other form of deceptive behavior because of the intent the individual has to benefit others[26].

3.1. Illustrated Demographic of Pro-social Lying Behavior

The demographic of pro-social lying individuals has varied among different research that has been done throughout the years. Most of the findings, however, seem to be in agreement with a few key characteristics, which help predict pro-social lying behavior. In one study done by Popliger et al.[17], 72 children participated in a gift-giving paradigm. The children were given a disappointing gift and the experimenters analyzed the children's response. The majority of children lied to the experimenters when asked if they liked the disappointing gift they received. Although they did not know the experimenter or had any previous encounter with the individuals partaking in the experiment, the children were still fearful of hurting the feelings of the experimenter. The younger the children were, the easier it was for them to engage in pro-social lying behavior[17]. This example done by Popliger et al. is a good example of preserving the experimenter's feelings, however, it is important to note that it could be possible for the children to be motivated by avoidance of an uncomfortable situation instead of the desire to do a self-less good deed.

3.2. Motivations of Pro-social Lying Behavior

Our motivations are what drive us to act in certain behaviors. The motivations for lying behavior can vary depending on the individual and the social situation that he or she is in. In pro-social lying behavior, the justifications and reasoning an individual uses to lie can be used to explain the motivations behind the behavior that was used. Amada[1] believes that the main justification when engaging in pro-social lying behavior is the desire to spare an individual's negative feelings or enhance positive feelings. In Amada's research, the majority of individuals believe it is better to spare other's feelings by lying than to tell the truth and hurt the individual. Amada also proposes that when an

individual uses justifications, they are only hiding the guilt and shame that is felt when the rules of morality or social convention are broken. Shame and guilt can be applied in any situation where lying behavior takes place because of the battle between right and wrong. No matter what decision is made regarding lying behavior, moral or social rules are expected to bend, causing feelings of guilt and shame. Although these emotions are not what motivate the behavior, they can be used as cues in determining if the behavior occurred[1].

3.3. Morality of Pro-social Lying Behavior

Morality of pro-social lying behavior has been under the microscope for a number of years. Philosophers and researchers have struggled with the idea of doing something morally wrong, engaging in lying behavior, in order to benefit someone else. It is possible to commit an act or behavior that is both moral and immoral at the same time. Choosing to do the "right" thing may be impossible to do in such ethical dilemmas.[10] identifies further Kohlberg's model of morality, which helps assess these moral and ethical dilemmas. Kohlberg states that an individual can be aware and knowledgeable of right and wrong, but still choose wrong. Therefore, just knowing good and evil cannot determine the act or behavior. Kohlberg believes that the morally good decision is the decision, or behavior, which leads to actions that are prescribed by the rights of others[10].

Morality in regards to pro-social lying behavior will never fully be determined. The assumed behavior that individuals should use varies greatly among philosophers. These types of ethical and moral dilemmas let researchers evaluate and predict a proper way to engage in the morally and socially acceptable behavior. Although opinions of these philosophers differ, levels of morality have shown to depend on the individual. Therefore, to fully judge if an individual is engaging in morally acceptable behavior, the morals of the individual must be taken into account. To assume that certain individuals are engaging in morally unacceptable behavior without the knowledge of that individual's moral code would be improperly assessing both the individual and the situation[10]. Morality and pro-social lying behavior will still remain an opinionated subject that leaves much room to debate and further investigation.

4. Detections & Interventions of Lying Behavior

Lie detection has proven to be beneficial in a number of ways. The knowledge and understanding of lie detection is necessary to gain complete awareness of lying behavior. Lying behavior does not stop once the lie has been told. Once a lie is told, lying behavior only expands and complicates. The individuals who were on the receiving end of lying behavior have a choice whether to believe the lie or claim it as false. The individual who engaged in lying behavior,

regardless of the type, are now more likely to engage in lying behavior again. Studies have shown that lying behavior becomes further ingrained and repetitive the more it is used in everyday communication[24].

4.1. Verbal Cues of Lying Behavior

“To communicate effectively, conversational participants must be able to trust one another and assume that others are being truthful”[2]. It is necessary to be able to discriminate between truths and lies in communication. In order to do so, individuals must identify verbal cues of lying behavior. The key understanding that a detector must recognize is that individuals engaging in lying behavior are constantly monitoring their behavior in an attempt to avoid being detected. Therefore, the behaviors these individuals are emitting can be significant clues to detection. The paradoxical idea that these lying individuals are attempting to come across as extremely truthful can clearly indicate verbal cues that will distinguish their lying behavior[2]. Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal[27] believe that characteristics of the voice and projection provide the most reliable and noticeable cues of detection. Zuckerman et al.[27] believe that the voice is less responsive to self-regulation than other expressions and thereby provides a more reliable cue of deception. Through the large amount of research done, it is safe to assume that the best way to detect lying behavior in verbal contact is through the voice. Fluctuations and abnormal tendencies are the best indicators in recognition.

When individuals are engaging in lying behavior they are putting on an act or performance in order to deceive the individual being lied to[15]. Putting on a performance involves much more intricate and complicated behavior changes than regular interaction and communication. Another verbal indicator of lying behavior is any observable behavior, which shows that the individual is losing control of his or her own performance[15]. When individuals are engaging in lying behavior and playing a deceptive role, they perform as actors and actresses. Any time they lose control or the behavior suddenly changes is a major cue of lying behavior.

4.2. Nonverbal Cues of Lying Behavior

In being skilled at detecting deception, it is important to fully understand both verbal and nonverbal cues of lying behavior. More studies have been done on nonverbal communication, which indicate lying behavior can be identified through more than just verbal communication.

One study examined a subset of 11 nonverbal visual behaviors that could be indicators of lying behavior[20]. Of these nonverbal behaviors, only a few showed significance. Overall nervousness and tension, pupil dilation, and raised chin are all nonverbal behaviors that have shown to be direct indicators of lying behavior. Overall nervousness could be an easy indicator of lying behavior due to the intensified situation the individual is in. Anytime an individual is being

interrogated or questioned, nervousness is a probable characteristic. However, individuals who are honest usually have much lower levels of nervousness because they have nothing to be anxious about. They do not have the fear of being found guilty or falsified. Pupil dilation and a raised chin are physiological and cognitive responses to lying behavior[20].

4.3. Interventions of Destructive Lying Behavior

“Lying and deception are behaviors that have been studied and discussed extensively in the scientific, philosophical and legal communities for centuries”[8]. The research done on lying behavior and detection had required researchers to investigate further. The next step to this process would be possible preventions and interventions, if necessary. Interventions of lying behavior have shown to be necessary when destructive lying takes place. Destructive lying behavior is defined by lying behavior that is harmful physically, mentally, or emotionally to one’s self or to others. However, as seen throughout the multitude of research, lying behavior is an everyday occurrence that appears in common communication. Therefore, researchers have asked the question, “how is it possible to intervene and prevent an everyday and common behavior?”[8] Although destructive lying behavior is detrimental to interpersonal relationships and communication, it is still a common occurrence. Therefore, researchers propose the idea that all lying behavior does not need intervention or prevention. Others counteract that idea by proposing that if a behavior is destructive, no matter how prevalent it is, it should be intervened in and prevented. Unfortunately, the researchers, philosophers, and scientists who stand by that proposal have not promoted any interventions that will prevent destructive lying behavior[5].

Interventions of destructive lying behavior are underdeveloped and under-researched. Although the majority of research on lying behavior lists types, motivations, and detections of both pro-social and pro-self lying behavior, they lack research and exploration on the next step of the process. This next step is necessary to fully assess lying behavior and understand the process an individual who engages in lying behavior must go through[5].

5. Summary & Discussion

Lying is a critical concept in moral philosophy and psychology. When psychological researchers began to question the common moral rule, which states that all lying is wrong, questions started to unfold in the field of deception and every day social interaction. As research continues to build regarding lying behavior, psychologists and sociologists around the world are beginning to inquire more information[13]. Lying behavior is common in every day communication. The regularity of lying behavior is apparent, however the morality of lying and the motivations that drive

lying behavior are continuing to unfold through empirical studies and psychological research through the recent years.

Although a number of theories on lying behavior have been introduced through out the years, a reoccurring theme has been noticed in the majority of these models. This theme divides lying behavior into two categories. These categories are pro-self lying behavior and pro-social lying behavior. The intention of these two categories is what separates them from being alike.

Different motivations of these two categories of lying behavior have appeared through research and exploration. For example, children believe that pro-self lying behavior is the worst form of lying that an individual can use[3]. Motivations for pro-self lying behavior can be determined depending on the individual who is engaging in lying behavior, the situation the individual is in, and other individuals involved. Motivation is likely to be an extrinsic reward or personal gain of some sort. Pressures from peers or self can increase pro-self lying behavior, especially in a high-stress working environment. Pro-social lying behavior shares a completely different set of motivations. Research has shown that the major motivation of pro-social lying behavior is the enhanced positive emotions that are a result of doing a selfless act for another individual[22]. Other key motivating factors are determined by the situation. When engaging in lying behavior decreases risk or increases reward of another individual, pro-social lying behavior is likely to take place. The negative toll that lying behavior carries is cancelled out by the positive gain of another individual[9].

When pro-social lying behavior is evaluated in research, morality and ethics are generally weighed and assessed along with the empirical findings. When determining morality it is important to identify the specific culture we are observing. Cultures across the world hold different ethical and moral codes. Some cultures believe that lying can be justified under a number of circumstances, while others disagree entirely.

Although morality of lying behavior remains uncertain in areas, lying behavior and lie detection are common practices and therefore relevant to functioning in the social world[18]. Lying behavior can be detected in a number of ways. The majority of research found on lying behavior mainly discusses the ability to detect deception and lying behavior.

Lying behavior has been commonly overlooked in the field of psychology and sociology for a number of years. The truth of this subject is that lying behavior occurs in all areas of life. Not only does lying behavior occur in social interactions, but also in a larger psychological picture as well. A number of psychological disorders identify lying behavior as a key characteristic, which, if left untreated, can lead to self-suffering and destructive lifestyles. For this and many other life-impacting reasons, lying behavior has recently grown in research and assessment. Understanding the motivations, moral components, and detections of lying behavior can be used as an advantage of awareness to any psychologist, sociologist, or inquiring individual.

6. Recommendations

After reviewing the previous research, and thoroughly analyzing the literature and empirical findings on both pro-self and pro-social lying behavior, a few recommendations have been created for further research and evaluation of the literature on lying behavior. First, the majority of research that was found when searching for lying behavior was found under lie detection as well as the age group of adulthood. Therefore, the other main topics discussed such as pro-self lying behavior, pro-social lying behavior, and morality should be more focused on in further research. In regards to age groups, further research should be done on childhood and emerging adulthood in order to progress further in awareness of lying behavior.

Second, the least amount of research that has been found in relations to lying behavior was research and empirical studies on the age category of emerging adulthood. This is a huge concern for anyone wanting to observe the behavior of young adults and college aged students and how they interact. There is a major jump in research from children to adulthood.

Lastly, along with the age group of emerging adults, the subject of morality and lying behavior has also shown to be the least discussed topic in research on lying behavior. This is a major concern as it plays a major role in pro-social lying behavior. Although morality is a subject that is difficult to measure empirically, it is extremely important to assess through further research for a better specified view on psychologically evaluated lying behavior.

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