

Everyone Is Pretty Much Lying All the Time, According to a Professor Who Studies Deception

On the continuum between total truth-telling and dishonesty, most of what people say falls somewhere in between.



Whether it's Hillary Clinton changing her story about her email use, the Pentagon changing its story about a recent bombing of a hospital in Afghanistan, or Volkswagen misrepresenting the amount of emissions produced by its vehicles, lies and dishonesty are everywhere. Corporations lie about their products; movie stars lie about their age; people lie about cheating on their spouses. Are we living in an age where lying has become more common, or does it just seem that way because technology has made it easier to get caught in a lie?

We posed the question to Dr. Matthew McGlone, a cognitive psychologist who literally teaches the course on "Lying and Deception" at the University of Texas in Austin. In his own research he studies psycholinguistics, or how people influence each other's behavior through verbal communication. He's co-written and edited two books on the subject of lying, and most recently, has been studying identity thieves and doctor shoppers looking for pills as modern forms of lying. He walked us through the history and development of lies, and explained why lying will always be a human tendency.

VICE: Is lying part of human nature? How early do humans begin to lie?

Dr. Matthew McGlone: The evidence seems to point to right around 19 months. [That's] when we first see observations of anything you could call "lying" in humans. When we look at this age, we look at "pretend play," where it's not clear that children are necessarily trying to make you believe something that isn't true, but nevertheless, they're clearly manipulating things that they know don't exist. One of the milestones that social scientists talk about in terms of a child's ability to lie is the acquisition of what's called theory of mind—the basic idea that different people have different beliefs and knowledge. That might seem obvious to us as adults, that what I know and believe is different from what you know and

believe, but it's not obvious to children.

Do we classify those types of lies differently than, say, outright dishonesty?

We talk about there being a continuum between truth-telling and dishonesty; the vast majority of that continuum is really, at best, half-truth telling. Nobody tells the entire truth; it would be impossible. The truth is that most things that we count as deception, even outright lies, have some element of truth to them. But we can distinguish between deceptions, whether it's deception by omission—I selectively choose details to tell you without disclosing others—as opposed to deception by commission, in which I fabricate details. Lies can be a combination of omissive and commissive in structure.

If most lies are at least partially composed of some true facts, what kind of cues can people look for to catch lies?

The cues that people normally rely on are based on wives' tales or social stereotypes—that liars tend to avoid your gaze, or they tend to act nervous, or they tell stories that are very abstract with few details. A lot of people rely on those cues, but there's no evidence to support them. In fact, there's strong evidence that relying on those cues can lead you astray. The most compelling ones are cues-in-context, where rather than it being, "I know you're lying because you're avoiding my gaze," instead you look for indicators that are very context-specific that something false or likely to be deceptive has been generated.

A person was telling me this elaborate hero story, where he saved a woman from being kidnapped while pumping his gas in New Jersey. It's been against the law for 20-plus years in New Jersey to pump your own gas. That doesn't mean he didn't actually jump in and stop a kidnapping, but he did say something that clearly can't happen by state law and would lead you to be suspicious. It's not because of his gaze or the language he used, but because of a specific fact that you happen to know. Someone else told me he dropped out of Princeton Law School, which, given that Princeton doesn't have a law school, would be really hard to do!

Some other examples of this are normative cues. Someone in my neighborhood said he was digging in his garden and found a dinosaur bone. I checked that out, and you have to dig really, really deep; you don't tend to find dinosaur bones in this part of the world lurking near the surface. Does it mean that he's lying? No,

but it's really unlikely [that this actually happened]. It's using elements of the context and finding either direct contradictions based on your knowledge, or apparent ones based on what you know about probability, like the probability that you can find a dinosaur bone three feet down in your yard.

Do individuals and institutions lie in different ways, or is the difference mainly one of scale—that institutions have a much greater capacity to project their own messages and narratives?

One difference is scale, but I'd also say that at the institutional level, there's lots of care put into discoverability—wording that's non-committal or can support a subsequent claim of plausible deniability. I think that's true of a lot of institutional deception. Some examples of bullshit are phrases like "Some Assembly Required" and "Results May Vary," which on the surface, of course, are technically true. Something with a million parts does have some assembly required; it happens to have *lots* of assembly required. For diet plans that rarely work it is true that results may vary, but the statement "results may vary" only lives up to the letter but not the spirit of honesty.

With companies that have large legal departments and public relations firms that are looking at communications, they're going to be sensitive to their wording and plausible deniability more so than any individual, unless that person is a pretty precise linguist. It's [also] easier than ever to do sock puppets, or have someone write good reviews of you and bad reviews of your competition on review sites.

Polls indicate that American public trust in institutions is at an all-time historic low. Are institutions actually lying more frequently than they have in the past?

I think it's a new incarnation of what's been going on for a long time. There's a book called *The Devil Wins*, about a history of the public's perception of deception. He'll point out things that were written in essays read at various royal courts in Europe, things that monks wrote in the medieval era, talking about how deception has become so rampant that God is going to strike us down because we've become so corrupt.

I think we're seeing the modern incarnation of that. I'm not sure that there's any more lying going on per se, but now we have large archives of public figures and everything they've said, we have an internet which is easy to access, so it's now easier to catch people in lies. There have also been, post-Watergate, all these

events that get compared to that. That's become an idiom and even a political platform.

What about lying to ourselves? Do we lie to ourselves in the same manner, or are there different constructs for self-deception?

To some extent, rather than selective excerpting, we will engage in selective memory. The sense of nostalgia for the 80s as a happier, simpler time, when MTV had lots of fun, poppy music, [ignores] the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Iran-Contra affair, the fear of a crumbling Soviet Union; that's just one example. In the 80s, Reagan said, "Let's go back to the 50s"—the beginning of the Cold War, the era before Civil Rights. We tend to selectively look at the past as a simpler time because we made it through, while downplaying the negative things that happened. That functions in self-deception.

Another that we do is we'll rationalize. We'll develop explanatory mechanisms that justify why we ultimately made the decision we did, and not other decisions that could have led to different consequences. It's hindsight bias, a form of cognitive dissonance. That's a big mechanism of self-deception. You want to remember something as being good and important if you've decided that it was essential to your identity.

On Motherboard: Awkward Texting Is the New Lie Detector

Do you think technology like social media is changing the way we lie, or just making it easier?

It's giving us more opportunities to do things we always did. In the 50s, there was a sociologist by the name of Erving Goffman, who talked about self-presentation: how our real selves differ from the selves we want people to know about in public. Conveniently, he referred to this public persona as "face." We talk about saving face, protecting face, repairing face. Given that we're living in the era of Facebook, it's absolutely a face machine. There are plenty of studies which suggest that people who rely on social media posts to know about the lives of other people develop a very distorted picture of their friends, and in most cases get far more optimistic and rosy pictures of their friends' lives than they're actually [leading]. That's not because these people are necessarily intending to mislead on social media, but they are putting their best foot forward, with their successes and thrills and not their failures and disappointments.

I also do a lot of work on persuasion in addition to deception, and when you talk about tactics of persuasion, people talk about social proof. It's just the idea that if I want to convince you that something is the right thing to do and that I'm believable and credible, some of the best evidence for that is I've got other people who are doing what I tell them. The number of followers you have on Twitter, or the number of likes you have on a Facebook post—we look at these as signs of credibility. There's a whole industry in creating ghost Twitter followers or pumping up Facebook likes or sponsored Facebook posts, where companies elevate certain people's posts and make them prominent. These are things that we've always done in human deception but there are so many opportunities for them to manifest themselves in a big way in social media.

How do you teach your students how to credibly identify what a truthful fact or assertion is?

We'll dissect the source of a claim, the circumstance in which it's being said; if there's evidence being cited, where that evidence is coming from, and what the source's relationship is to it. I'll ask them to entertain the counterfactual that if it were a lie, how discoverable would it be? Is this evidence that you could go find through a Google search or Snopes or FactCheck? If this were a lie, how discoverable would its deception be? We talk about a system for doing that and obviously it changes from when you're talking about an interpersonal interaction or a Facebook post or a political speech. We'll go through all the different factors that could lead to a judgment about something being truthful or deceptive.

Does that apply mostly to interpersonal lying?

We spend all of our time talking about human deception, but from a frequency standpoint, the action in deception is all in immunology and microbiology. If you take a look at viruses like the common cold virus, the rhinovirus, HIV, or Ebola, the reason why they're so deadly is because to the human immune system, they look benign. They effectively fool the immune system. There's a big field of immunology called mimetics, where they study how these pathogens are able to deceive the immune system. Nobody's saying it's strategic or that they intend to fool but the human immune system doesn't recognize them. Many cancers work the same way. Some cancer cells will look like a benign part of your esophagus so antibodies don't go after it. There's this big area of nonhuman deception in which you can look at animals; arctic foxes, whose coats change white in the winter and back to brown in the summer, and all sorts of marine life who look like their

[environment]. To my way of thinking, some of the most fascinating stuff going on in deception is in biology and medicine, looking at viruses and pathogens fool the body.

I have this woman who is a retired biologist-slash-botanist come to my class and talk about immunology, and also orchids. Many orchids reproduce by fooling male bees into thinking that they're female bees. The male bees are trying to get it on with the orchids, these sticky pollen sacs will get stuck to the male's back and then is carried to next orchid and that's how they cross-pollinate.

So you're basically saying that deception is an inherent part of biological evolution?

Honesty may be the best policy as we say in human affairs, but it sure isn't nature's policy.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

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Source: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/exqmpn/everyone-is-pretty-much-lying-all-the-time-according-to-a-professor-who-studies-deception-511

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