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What is a lie?

INTRODUCTION

Lies are everywhere. We hear continually about lying in public and private life. Very few people would claim never to have told a lie, and even fewer would say they have never been duped by a liar. Writing in a magazine in January 1889 Oscar Wilde (1989:216) complained that, with the possible exception of the speeches of barristers, lying as an art had decayed. A hundred years later, most people would say that there is now more lying than there used to be; a British journalist (Lott 1990) has labelled the 1980s as 'the decade of lies'. In 1991, an American journalist (Bradlee 1991) commented that 'It seems to me that lying has reached epidemic proportions in recent years and that we've all become immunized to it.'

Whether lies are in fact told more often nowadays than previously is anyone's guess, but at least there is a greater awareness of the prevalence of lying, partly because public lying is now often exposed more promptly. As Rasberry (1981:2–3) says:

History has recorded numerous situations where political leaders have lied, but most of these lies were not revealed for years. Because of media improvements in the last 25 years, citizens today see and hear deception as it occurs.

We see lying as a regrettable human failing and assume that unless we make great efforts to train children to be honest, they will follow a natural tendency and tell lies. In a survey conducted in ten west European countries in 1981, respondents were asked to rank the qualities they wished to pass on to their children; in nine countries out of ten, most respondents ranked honesty first (Harding and Phillips 1986:19–21). But efforts by parents bring only limited success; most adults tell lies from time to time. Indeed, Oliver Wendell Holmes seems to have believed that as

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children grow up they lose an initial propensity to be honest. According to Alexander (1987:197), he is reputed to have said 'Pretty much all the truth-telling in the world is done by children.' Rejecting this view, developmental psychologists assume that lying by children is something that can be taken for granted. For instance, children's agreements to the statements 'I tell the truth every single time' and 'I never lie' were accepted as evidence, in an American study, of their propensity to falsify their responses (Castaneda et al. 1956:319).

Journalists and students of the mass media have shown the prevalence of lying in selected domains of social life (e.g. Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1980) but it is anthropologists who have effectively shown that in some cultures lying is ubiquitous. Gilson (1976:191) described how, in the community he studied in the Lebanon, lying was 'a fundamental element not only of specific situations and individual actions, but of the cultural universe as a whole'. Likewise Ernestine Friedl (1962:78–81) reports that in rural Greece parents deliberately lie to their young children as a way of teaching them that other people's actions and words should not necessarily be taken 'at face value'. She mentions an occasion when, at the end of a social evening, one of the participants remarked jovially 'Let's tell a few more lies and then go home.' Yet this usage suggests that no-one was being deceived. Most writers make deceit or deception, terms I shall be using synonymously, part of their definition of lying, but Friedl mentions that the Greek word *psemata*, which she translates as 'lies', is used 'with less emotional intensity, and with a milder pejorative connotation than Americans use the English word'. Perhaps some *psemata* are better described as untrue stories that only a stranger would think were true. This Greek usage parallels the use of the expression 'telling lies' by some Black speech communities in the United States as a synonym for 'talking shit', i.e. 'making a point by indirection and wit' with the expectation that there will be a similar response (Abrahams 1974:258).

Lying has been a human activity for a long time and is not merely a recent and lamentable innovation. There is no shortage of lies in the tales told by Homer and Hesiod in ancient Greece, nor, as Ruskin (1905:351–352) pointed out, was lying always regarded as reprehensible. As Scheibe (1979:83) notes:

Prometheus gained fame not only for stealing the fire of civilization for mankind but also for his skill at confabulation.

Admiration for successful liars has not been confined to ancient Greeks. The anonymous author of *The Lying Intelligencer*, introducing his satirical newsheet, with its motto *Splendide mendax*, to his London audience, wrote:

Let not my readers imagine, that I propose writing a panegyric upon the art of lying. It were absurd to recommend to mankind, what is already in such universal

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esteem. In courts it assumes the name of good breeding; in religion it is called pious fraud, it is mystery in trade, and invention in poetry. In our political contests, it is stiled opposition, liberty, and patriotism. (Anon 1763:3)

Even John Locke (1894:146–147), while disapproving of the deceit he saw engendered by oratory, observed that

It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation; ... men find pleasure to be deceived.

The pleasures of deceit are captured in the words of Robert Browning's (1981:839) *Mr Sludge, 'The medium'*

... there's a real love of a lie,
 Liars find ready-made for lies they make,
 As hand for glove, or tongue for sugar-plum.

Locke wrote in 1690 and Browning in about 1860; the subsequent supplementation of individual rhetorical skills by professional advertising agencies and government departments of disinformation confirms the truth of their comments.

Some writers, notably the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1839:36; 1840:25) and the psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi (1955:72), have even singled out the ability to lie as one of the criteria that distinguish human beings from other animals, though, as we shall discuss later, many animals practise other modes of deceit, including, in some cases, using their voices deceitfully (see Rappaport 1979:224; Thorpe 1972:33). Arendt (1968:250; cf. 1972:5) goes one step further, and proclaims that

our ability to lie – but not necessarily our ability to tell the truth – belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom.

Lacan (1988:244) presents a somewhat similar view when he states that 'the characterising feature of intersubjectivity' is 'that the subject can lie to us'. The same sentiment was expressed more elegantly in the sixteenth century by Bartholomaeus Ingannevole when he wrote that

never to lie admits of no imagining which is all that God did give man to distinguish him from the beasts of the field. (Kerr 1990:100)

It is perhaps the perception of lying as evidence for freedom and imagination that explains the attraction of compilations of lies, both scholarly and demotic (e.g. Jones 1984). Kerr (1990:99–101) includes in his anthology the only surviving fragment of what he describes as the first book of lies, dating from the sixteenth century. Lying may be reprehensible and we

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are offended if we become dupes, yet from a safe distance we can admire and enjoy the wit and audacity of successful liars. A recent *Liars' handbook* (Dale 1992) is classified by booksellers as a humorous work, as indeed its editor intended it to be. Accusations of lying, despite the risk of suits for slander or libel, are made much more readily than many other aspersions against good character. Max Black (1983:117–118) provides a good example of an almost frivolous use of this accusation when he cites a statement made by Mary McCarthy about the writings of fellow writer Lillian Hellman: 'I once said in an interview that every word she writes is a lie, including "and" and "the"'. Black cannot decide whether or not the statement is an instance of humbug.

It is only in contrast to lies and falsehoods that we are able to construct the concept of truth. As Barwise and Perry (1983:18) note:

If people said only what they knew to be the case, then we would never notice truth as a property of some utterances and not others. It is because people sometimes violate the conventions of language, inadvertently or otherwise, that we come to recognize truth as a uniformity across certain utterance situations.

With the contingency of the relation between sign and referent in mind, Eco (1976:7, 58–59) proposes that 'the definition of a "theory of the lie" should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics.'

Given the interdependence of the concepts of the truth and the lie, the central attention paid by Habermas and other members of the Frankfurt school to the concept of truth seems out of proportion to the lack of critical attention he and his followers have given to deception, even though that is the element in his conceptual kit antithetical to truth. We might even say that the language games discussed by Habermas (1970; see also McCarthy 1973) are akin to chess, where everything is, or ought to be, above board, whereas in studying lying we are looking at a language game closer to poker, where there is no board to be above. But even if there is no board, there are still rules, both stated and unstated, to the game of poker which have to be learnt (Hayano 1980, 1982). The language-game of lying 'needs to be learned like any other one' (Wittgenstein 1953:90e). Unfortunately, as we shall see, there is a shortage of evidence on how the game of lying is learnt (cf. Searle 1975:326).

Yet despite its ubiquity, antiquity, theoretical interest and, if Hobbes is right, its human specificity, most social scientists and philosophers have given lying comparatively little attention, at least by comparison with the amount of scrutiny they have given to telling the truth (cf. Bok 1978:5; Steiner 1975:220–222). By far the greater part of what philosophers have written treats lying as a form of deviance, and not sometimes as an

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instance of conforming to special norms and expectations. For purposes of the present study, we can ignore the formidable philosophical literature on the self-referencing pair of sentences in St Paul's 'Epistle to Titus' (ch. 1, vv. 12, 13) which have been studied variously as the Cretan or Epimenides or Liar Paradox (or paradoxes) (Anderson 1970; Barwise and Etchemendy 1987; Farb 1973:129–131; Mates 1981:6, 15–19). This paradox is of great interest in the development of set theory but has little direct sociological relevance. Helen Daniel (1988:3), in her literary critique, *Liars*, links the classical Liar Paradox to certain statements uttered by characters in some recent Australian novels, including Peter Carey's *Illywhacker*, but in my view the link is weak. When for example Herbert Badgery, on the first page of *Illywhacker*, says 'I am a terrible liar and I have always been a liar' (Carey 1985:11), the reader soon realizes that Badgery is in truth a consummate liar, and not a mere antipodean Cretan.

Instead of turning to the critical theorists, logicians and moral philosophers for help, the sociologist interested in lying might be tempted to think that game theorists, with their analyses of the Prisoner's Dilemma and the game of Chicken (Kuhn 1963:335; Schelling 1960), might provide useful philosophical underpinning. Unfortunately the theory of games can provide only limited help. Axelrod (1984) reports experimental evidence for the advantages of following a policy of tit for tat, of being initially honest and subsequently responding in like manner to honest and deceitful moves by one's opponent. But Williams (1988:5–6) gives reasons why Axelrod's results bear 'only indirectly on the question of human cooperation in society'. As Hollis (1989:168, 176–178) points out, 'game theory deals only with games where rational choices are instrumentally rational' (cf. Wolfe 1989:42–43). In the real world, games are embedded in social life and players choose to act honestly or dishonestly for reasons that are expressive or instrumental or both. The players are citizens, and the public interest is therefore also their own interest, however narrowly or widely 'the public' may be perceived. The typical players of games theory are more at home in the world of what Fortes (1957:160) called 'billiard-ball sociology' rather than in the muddled and complex real social world.

Despite its pervasiveness, card-carrying sociologists have done disappointingly little work on lying. Apart from the pioneering work of Simmel at the beginning of this century, little sociological analysis has been carried out (cf. Steiner 1975:221). Even the monumental scholarly survey of lying edited by Lipmann and Plaut (1927), with its twenty-four chapters, contains hardly any sociological discussion, despite the claim in the subtitle that the book includes an account of lies from a sociological viewpoint. Larson (1932) comes nearer the mark, but his source book is

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aimed primarily at the practical task of detecting the lies told by criminals rather than at locating lying in a wider context. Durandin (1972) comes closer still, with a broader-based discussion of the reasons why individuals tell lies, supported by the results of a questionnaire survey. There are just a few good field studies of lying, though most of these have been carried out by ethnographers working as outsiders away from their native cultures. I regret the scarcity of empirical findings but am glad to be spared the chore of rehearsing the definitions and analyses of lying that might otherwise be found in standard sociological textbooks; they are not there.

The relative neglect of lying has been noted by a trio of psychiatrists who recently complained (Ford et al. 1988:554) that lying had 'only seldom been the object of psychiatric or psychological investigation'. They may be right about their own discipline of psychiatry, but their judgment on psychology needs qualification. Developmental psychologists have written at length about children's ability to tell lies and to detect them, though even they have said surprisingly little about how and when children use these skills outside the laboratory.

Though the Liar Paradox has little to do with the sociology of lying, there are other associations of the word 'lie' that do have a bearing (cf. Lutman 1988). The English verb 'to lie' carries a complex semantic load through its double meaning, to speak deceptively and to be lying down, a conjuncture that Ricks (1975:123) describes as 'simply the most important pun in the language'. The pun, enriched by sexual connotations, was of great attraction for Shakespeare, and is exemplified in the final couplet of his sonnet 138:

Therefore I lye with her, and she with me,
 And in our faults by lyes we flattered be

(cf. Ricks 1975:130–131; Ewbank 1983:137–138). On the same theme, but in more light-hearted vein, is the description of psychoanalysis as 'lying on the couch' (Forrester 1989). According to Wolf (1988):

Patients inevitably deceive psychiatrists and clinicians, consciously or unconsciously, and it is not uncommon for them to lie consciously.

Surprisingly, Freud (1958) wrote little about lying as such, yet broad notions of lying and deception, particularly self-deception, are central to psycho-analytic theory and praxis. Forrester speaks of psychoanalysis as 'the science of lying' and says that 'A central preoccupation of Freudian psychoanalysis is deception' (Forrester 1989:156; 1990:119; cf. Eagle 1988; Ferenczi 1955:77–80; Forrester 1980:136–137; Goldberg 1973:99–104).

Lying occurs ubiquitously. Although Douglas (1976:68) says 'Certainly

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people do not lie much of the time', he maintains that 'falsehood knows no class lines', and that 'almost all research reports (probably all) are laundered'. However, his sociologist colleagues 'have not lied. They have merely evaded the issues' (Douglas 1976:xiii). Yet his own evidence shows that most people, or at least most Americans, lie some of the time. Likewise the existence of so-called pathological liars, who do indeed lie most of the time, is well established (Ford et al. 1988). The propensity to lie varies widely within communities and across communities, and within and across specified domains of social life. Developmental psychologists have studied extensively how this propensity, and the ability to detect lying, varies with age and gender (DePaulo et al. 1985). Thus for example over a hundred years ago Hall (1891:212) reported the results of a study of Boston adolescents disclosing that:

Boys keep up joint or complotted lies which girls rarely do, who 'tell on' others because they are 'sure to be found out', or 'someone else will tell' ...

The efforts of psychologists have focussed mainly on children. Adults have been less often studied from this viewpoint, even though interest in the topic goes back at least as far as Chaucer (1975:164) who maintained:

For half so boldly kan ther no man
 Swere and lyen, as a womman kan.

Centuries later, David Hume (1987:564) repeated this sweeping generalization with his claim that women have 'an appetite for falshood' (cf. Battersby 1981:308).

The ubiquity of lying prompts the question: why should we ever tell the truth? But while this normative inquiry may be appropriate for moral philosophy, social science is more properly concerned with answering slightly different questions: not why *should* but why *do* we so often tell the truth, and *when* do we not do so? For we find empirically that, in societies and cultures of great diversity, with their distinctive codes of religion and ethics, the truth is told more often than not. The ubiquitous, though far from universal, preference for the truth suggests that, quite apart from any moral or religious merit that in various ways may be ascribed to telling the truth, there are also strong pragmatic reasons why, in many social contexts though not in all, it is in everyone's interest not to lie. Indeed, Sir Thomas Browne, writing in 1646 in his *Pseudodoxia epidemica*, went even further. He maintained that:

so large is the Empire of Truth, that it hath place within the walls of Hell, and the Devils themselves are daily forced to practise it; ... in Moral verities, although they deceive us, they lie not unto each other; as well understanding that all community is continued by Truth, and that of Hell cannot consist without it. (Browne 1964:76)

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I doubt if Sir Thomas had any hard evidence to support this assertion (cf. Bok 1978:18–19; Johnson 1963:362), but it certainly tallies with our sociological understanding of the necessary conditions for sustained social life. We might though want to qualify Sir Thomas's assertion that the devils do not lie to one another; if they are anything like humans, they are more likely to tell lies not only continually to their victims but also, from time to time, to one another.

There are many books, both popular and scholarly, on how to detect lies and deter liars (e.g. Ekman 1985, 1989), and there are many articles in psychological journals on how the ability to tell lies and to detect them is correlated with age, gender, social class, ethnic affiliation and so on. Notably absent are accounts of how children learn to distinguish white lies from black lies in their own distinctive cultural milieu, and by whom they are taught this vital information. Learning to lie properly is an important feature of the process of human socialization, for we have innumerable good accounts of adults, in a wide variety of social and cultural contexts, exercising their social skills in telling the right lies at the right time, and to the right people. By 'right' I mean successful in achieving deception. Ochs (1986) has outlined a framework for the analysis of 'language socialization' that would suit admirably a comparative inquiry into the way in which children learn to use lying in diverse cultures, but it seems that unfortunately no such inquiry has been undertaken.

Karl Scheibe (1980:15) defends lying 'on practical psychological grounds'. Curiously, this favourable comment by a psychologist is exceptional, for although many of them have discussed how the propensity to lie can be curbed by parental action, psychologists have given much less attention to possible benefits from telling the right lies (cf. Tudor-Hart 1926). The orientation of most psychologists contrasts with the writings of psychiatrists, some of whom discuss the beneficial consequences of certain lies. For example, Joseph Smith (1968:62), an American psychiatrist, speaks of a child's first lie as 'a decisive further step into separateness and autonomy'. Ford and his psychiatric colleagues state that:

Lying becomes an important, perhaps essential mechanism by which the child can test the limits of his or her own ego boundaries in order to define and establish autonomy. (Ford et al. 1988:555)

Kavka (1985:401) asserts that lying is a means for maintaining 'narcissistic equilibrium', while the poet Joseph Brodsky (1979:32) maintains that 'the real history of consciousness starts with one's first lie.'

The thesis that lying forms an essential component in the development of consciousness and autonomy is carried a step further, into adult life, by

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the novelist David Malouf (1976:170). He ends his novel *Johnno*, about a persistent and imaginative liar, by saying:

Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us. And better, some of them, than our most earnest attempts at the truth.

Favourable or sympathetic evaluations of lying by psychiatrists and novelists are hard to match in the writings of developmental psychologists. We shall look at their findings in chapter 8.

Most psychologists prefer to work in laboratories rather than in the field. Studies of the process by which children learn when to speak the truth and when not to do so are therefore scarce (cf. Bok 1978:298). We all have to acquire these skills before we can live as fully encultured members of our communities. At home and on school playgrounds, as well as later in the workplace and the conjugal bed, we learn when it would be unwise, treacherous or rude to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Regrettably, but understandably, psychologists have been reluctant to venture into these muddy research fields, even though the study of how and when people lie in real life was an area of research proposed for psychologists by DePaulo and Rosenthal (1979:1720–1721) in their 1979 programme for studies of deception. Surprisingly, anthropologists, who traditionally have been eager to forsake the university campus for the attractions of the field, have also neglected to study the process of socialization into lying, even though it is they who have given us the best accounts of lying by adults. Psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists alike seem to have neglected an important area of study.

Curiously, little is said about lying in the formidable body of literature on moral stages inspired by Lawrence Kohlberg. Truth-telling is recognized as a norm (Colby and Kohlberg 1987a:42, 51–52; Kohlberg and Turiel 1971:433; Kohlberg et al. 1983:96) but the decision whether to lie or tell the truth receives comparatively little explicit attention in this analytical scheme (Colby and Kohlberg 1987b:281, 518, 568–569, 584; Kohlberg and Turiel 1971:422–424; cf. Blasi 1980). According to Kohlberg (1964:385–387) the only moral virtue is justice, whereas honesty is merely a character trait (cf. Rich 1986:215–216). Peters (1971:262) criticizes Kohlberg for his cavalier treatment of honesty, and maintains that he ‘is really prescribing one type of morality among several possibilities’ (cf. Snarey 1985).

In his analysis of conversational norms, Grice (1989:27) argues that people talking to one another assume that their interlocutors, like themselves, are being cooperative, and that one of the maxims they follow (part of Grice’s category of Quality) is ‘Do not say what you believe to be false’. Paley (1825:123) referred to this assumption as a tacit promise, while earlier Grotius (1925:613–614) saw it as ‘that mutual obligation which men had

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willed to introduce at the time when they determined to make use of speech and similar signs'. Lies usually succeed because dupes mistakenly assume that liars mean what they say. Dupes will not make this assumption unless their experience has been that, most of the time, most people do indeed mean what they say. In any sustained system of interaction, lying being one example, the majority of actors must pay their way; only a minority can be free riders. Hence a search for an optimal level of lying, if optimality were to be measured by maximum success, might be rephrased as a quest for an optimal number of free riders.

The topic of lying is large, while the field of deception, of which lying is one mode, is larger still. I shall aim to avoid getting lost in the labyrinths of deception by focussing firmly, though not exclusively, on lying. Some consideration of the wider topic must be provided to set lying in its proper context. I shall pay little attention to the presence of deceptively concealed bias in the mass media, a topic examined by Cirino (1971) and many others. Some aspects of lying I shall mention only in passing, partly because of lack of data, partly because of the limitations of my expertise, and partly because they appear to have only slight importance for a study intended to highlight the social significance of lying. Thus I shall have little to say about the manipulation of quantitative data to achieve deception. I recognize the truth in the words attributed, probably erroneously, by Mark Twain (1960:149) to Disraeli:

There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics.

For present purposes, however, I shall concentrate on damned lies.

DEFINITIONS: LYING AND DECEPTION

If we are to talk about lies, we need a clear idea of what a lie is. Unfortunately, but for powerful reasons, clear ideas are scarce in the social sciences (Barnes 1990:13). 'Lying' is a slippery concept (Coleman and Kay 1981:42; Ludwig 1965:7). I cannot hope to do more than highlight some of the diversities of lying as we move from one domain of social life to another, and from one cultural setting to another. This exercise should serve as an introduction to a field of inquiry that, in my view, has been strangely neglected. If it does nothing else, this book should expose those areas where inquiries are required if we are to gain an adequately grounded understanding of where and how and why people tell lies.

Some writers give a very broad meaning to the word 'lie' while others avoid the term, replacing it by euphemistic expressions such as 'elaborations of the truth', Churchill's 'terminological inexactitudes' and the game theorists' 'strategic misrepresentations' (Raiffa 1982:142). In my