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Would I Lie to You? Self-serving Lies and Other-oriented Lies told across Different Media

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Abstract

This study set out to investigate in which type of media individuals are more likely to tell self-serving and other-oriented lies, and whether this varied according to the recipient of the lie. One hundred and fifty participants rated on a likert-point scale how likely they would tell a lie. Participants were more likely to tell self-serving lies to people not well-known to them. They were more likely to tell self-serving lies in email, followed by phone, and finally face-to-face. Participants were more likely to tell other-oriented lies to individuals they felt close to and this did not vary according to the type media. Participants were also more likely to tell harsh truths to people not well-known to them via email.

Keywords: lies, deception, media, internet, other-oriented lie, self-serving lie

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The lie is a condition of life -- Nietzsche

Psychologists have been very interested in the types of people who are more likely to lie (Dike, Baranoski, & Griffith, 2005; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996), why people lie (Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984), the types of lies people tell (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996), how frequently individuals lie (DePaulo et al., 1996), to whom they tell their lies to (Williams, 2001), and, more recently, across which modes of communication individuals are more likely to lie in (Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004). In this study we were interested in two types of lies: self-serving lies and other oriented lies, told over the phone, email, and face-to-face.

Theories on Impression Management

Goffman was interested in the ways people present themselves in their everyday face-to-face encounters. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Goffman (1959) argued for a dualistic image of the self. He described the self as both a performer and a character. According to Goffman (1959) the 'self-as-performer' is not merely a social product, but also has a basic motivational core which motivates us. In contrast, the 'self-as-character' represents an individuals' unique humanity. It is this part of the self which is a social product; that is, performed outwardly in social life. The 'self-as-character' is one's inner self.

Goffman believed that individuals need to present themselves as an acceptable person to others. He stated that "the impressions that the others give tend to be treated

as claims and promises they have implicitly made, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character" (Goffman, 1959/1997, p.21). He argued that individuals can be strategic in their impression formation. In particular, Goffman was interested in distinguishing between expressions 'given' (e.g., spoken communication) and expressions 'given off' (e.g., nonverbal cues) in a face-to-face interaction.

Theorists, such as DePaulo et al. (1996), have drawn from Goffman's theory to argue that "many of the lies of everyday life are told to avoid tension and conflict and to minimize hurt feelings and ill will" (p.980). To test their claims they carried out two diary studies of lying. As predicted they found that lying is a part of daily life. Importantly, DePaulo et al. (1996) also found that the lies people told either served the liars' own self-interests or were told to protect the person they were lying to – although most lies were self-serving ones. They also found that, in line with Goffman's theory, many of their participants lied to protect themselves from embarrassment, disapproval, or conflict rather than for material gain or personal advantage. In addition, they regularly lied to protect the feelings of the targets of the lies.

1.2 Target of the Lie

Few theorists have investigated whether lying varies depending on whom the lie is being told to. Should we expect that the types of lies told and frequency of telling a lie varies according to the relationship one has with the person one is telling the lie to? Some research has suggested this is the case. For example, DePaulo and Kashy (1998) found that their participants reported telling fewer lies to people they were close to and would feel uncomfortable when they did lie to these people. In addition, they found that relatively more of the lies told to best friends and friends were altruistic rather than self-serving. Drawing again from Goffman's theory if one

is to remain authentic in their friends eyes then one has to present a consistent image of the self; hence, it is more risky trying to sustain a credible character to one's friends if one tells them self-serving lies. Moreover, we would expect that individuals want to ensure that those they care about maintain their dignity and consequently would be more motivated to tell other-oriented lies to individuals one is close to.

1.3 Lying across Different Mediums

Researchers have began to investigate deception in cyberspace (e.g., Birchmeier, Joinson, & Dietz-Uhler, 2005; Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Cornwell & Lungern, 2001; Utz, 2005; Whitty, 2002; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Whitty (2002), for instance, has found that lying is a ubiquitous phenomenon in chat rooms. She found that 28% of male users lied about their gender. Cornwell and Lungern (2001) found that 27.5% of their respondents lied online about their physical attractiveness, 22.5% about their age, 17.5% about their background, and 15% about their interests. Utz (2005) found that online attractiveness deception was deemed more severe than gender switching and identity concealment. Interestingly, Caspi and Gorsky (2006) found that 84% of their sample experienced enjoyment from telling a lie online.

Researchers have also been interested in whether individuals are more like to lie in one medium more than another. An important study conducted by Hancock et al. (2004) suggests this is the case. These researchers examined lying in face-to-face situations, over the phone, via instant messenger, and via email. Participants kept a diary where they had to record their social interactions and lies for a week. They found that the highest proportion of lies occurred on the phone and least in email.

Hancock et al. (2004) contend that their results do not support theories, such as, *'The Social Distance Hypotheses'* and *'Media Richness Theory'*. 'Social Distance Theory' argues that because lying makes individuals feel uncomfortable, they will

choose less rich media in order to maintain social distance between themselves and the person they are lying to. In respect to the four types of media Hancock et al. (2004) examined, individuals would lie most in email, followed by instant messenger, followed by phone, and then face-to-face. 'Media Richness Theory', in contrast, suggest that because lying is highly equivocal individuals elect to lie more in rich media, which includes multiple cue systems, immediate feedback, natural language, and message personalisation. Hence, this theory would predict that individuals would lie in face-to-face situations more, following by phone, instant messenger, and email.

Given the results yielded from their study, Hancock and colleagues (2004) developed a new theory to explain lying across different media. They suggest that researchers need to consider other dimensions besides richness and distance. In their new *'Feature Based Theory'*, the additional dimensions they include are synchronous, recordless, and distributed (i.e., not copresent) communication. This theory proposes that the more synchronous and distributed, but the less recordable a medium is, the more frequently lying should occur. One lies more in synchronous interactions, because the majority of lying is spontaneous and hence synchronous communication should present more opportunities to lie. In recorded communication one is aware that their conservation is potentially kept or stored (e.g., in a saved email) and can be referred to in future conversations; hence, one is less likely to lie if they are aware that there is proof of their lie that can be referred to later. In media where participants are not distributed deception should be constrained to some degree as some lies can be immediately obvious (e.g., it is easier to lie in email saying one is writing a report when really one is actually playing a computer game). Hence, because telephone conversations are distributed, synchronous, and recordless, the most amount of lying should take place in this media, as supported by their results. On the other hand, email

is distributed, but not synchronous or recordless and therefore, as supported by their study, had the lowest rate of deception.

1.4 Current Study

This current study extends upon current literature on lying. Based on the above evidence, the following hypotheses were developed.

H1: Individuals will be more likely to tell self-serving lies to individuals not well –known to them than they are to tell self-serving lies to individuals close to them.

This first hypothesis is based on Goffman's theory outlined earlier in this paper. Goffman (1959/1997) discussed in detail the knowledge we have about others and argued that we are more likely to know the 'inner self' of people who are close to us. Hence, one is much less likely to get caught out telling a self-serving lie to individuals not well-known to them. Moreover, individuals are more likely to care about the opinion of people close to them and so if caught out telling a self-serving they have much more to lose.

H2: Individuals will be more likely to tell other-oriented lies to individuals close to them than they are to tell other-oriented lies to individuals not well-known to them.

This hypothesis is based on DePaulo et al.'s (1996) work which found that many lies are told to protect the feelings of the targets of the lies. If this argument is correct, we would expect individuals to tell people that are close to other-oriented lies given that we would expect that they care more for these individuals than they do for strangers.

In addition to testing out these hypotheses we wanted to examine whether Hancock et al.'s (2004) 'Feature Based' theory still holds when we also consider

the type of lie told as well as the target of the lie. To reiterate, his theory predicts that people are more likely to lie in synchronous, distributed, and non-recordable mediums. Given this we hypothesized that:

H3: Individuals are more likely to lie on the phone than in face-to-face settings.

H4: Individuals are more likely to lie on the phone than in email.

H5: Individuals are more likely to lie in face-to-face settings than they are in email.

2. Method

2.1 Materials

A survey was constructed for this study. Participants were initially asked to provide information on their gender, age, and employment status. Following from this, participants were expected to respond to twelve hypothetical scenarios. Six of the scenarios presented the participant with a 'self-serving' lie and six an 'other-oriented' lie. In six of the scenarios individuals had to imagine telling the lie to either someone close to them and in the other six they had to imagine telling the lie to someone they did not know well. Someone close to them was defined as "a member of your family, a friend, or a partner". In the scenarios the participant had to imagine stating the lie in face-to-face, phone, and email. In each scenario, participants had to rate the likelihood that they would lie with '1' representing 'not likely to tell this lie' and '5' representing 'extremely likely to tell this lie'. To give two examples:

> *You are having a face-to-face conversation with someone that you are 'close to' when they invite you to an event. You can think of something else you would rather spend your time doing so you tell them that you can't make it to the event, even though you can.*

You receive an email from a person you don't know well. Within the email they ask you if you think they look attractive. You don't think that they are attractive but you don't want to hurt their feelings so you email them back and tell them that they are attractive.

2.2 Procedure

After obtaining the approval of an ethics committee, psychology students enrolled in a large university in the UK were invited to participate in the study. Participants initially were provided with a consent form and an information sheet describing the study and the kind of questions they would be asked. They were assured of anonymity and were informed that they could withdraw consent without penalty. Those who then wished to participate filled out the survey, which took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Participants were given an email and phone number to contact if they had any further queries about the study. They were also given the telephone number and an email address of the student counselling service (which is a free service to students) in case they experienced any distress from completing the survey (although we expected they would not).

2.3 Participants

The participants were 150 psychology undergraduate students, comprising of 104 (69%) women and 46 (31%) men. Participants ranged between 18 and 25 years of age (M=19.75, SD=1.74). The majority of the sample was either unemployed (51%) or employed part-time (47%), with 1% being employed and 1% identifying as a house husband/wife.

3. Results

Paired t-test were performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the likelihood to tell self-serving lies more to people the participants did not know well compared to individuals the participants were close to (see Table 1). As predicted in every medium individuals were much more likely to tell self-serving lies to others they did not know well than those close to them. The magnitude of the differences in the means was, according to Cohen (1988), very large.

Table 1

Paired t-tests for Self-serving Lies

Media	Self-serving lie		*N*	*t*	η^2
	Close to *M* *(SD)*	Not well-known *M* *(SD)*			
Phone	3.13 (1.15)	4.11 (0.90)	150	-11.27***	0.46
Face-to-face	2.69 (1.20)	3.83 (1.02)	150	-11.53***	0.47
Email	3.56 (1.27)	4.33 (0.92)	150	-7.31***	0.26

* $p<.05$, two-tailed. ** $p<.01$, two-tailed. *** $p<.001$, two-tailed

A repeated measures ANOVA conducted on the likelihood of telling self-serving lies to people the participants felt close to across the three media revealed a significant overall difference, $F(2, 148) = 47.15$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .39$). Paired t-tests were performed to determine if phone was greater than face-to-face and if face-to-face was greater than email. Participants were more likely to tell self-serving lies to people

close to them on the phone more than there were face-to-face, $t(149) = -6.78$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = 0.24$). It was also found that they were more likely to lie in email than in face-to-face situations $t(149) = -9.66$ $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = 0.38$). Finally we checked to see if people lied more in email more than the phone and found that they significantly differed, $t(149) = -5.81$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = 0.18$).

A repeated measure ANOVA conducted on the likelihood of telling self-serving lies to people the participants did not know well across the three media revealed a significant overall difference, $F(2,148) = 38.86$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .34$). Paired t-tests were performed to determine if phone was greater than face-to-face and if face-to-face was greater than email. Participants were more likely to tell self-serving lies to people not well-known to them on the phone more than face-to-face, $t(149) = -5.14$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = 0.15$). It was also found that they were more likely to lie in email than in face-to-face, $t(149) = -8.84$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = 0.34$). Finally we checked to see if people lied more in email more than the phone and found that they significantly differed, $t(149) = -4.49$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = 0.12$).

Paired t-test were performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the likelihood to tell other-oriented lies more to people the participants did not know well compared to individuals the participants were close to (see Table 2). As predicted in every medium individuals were much more likely to tell other-oriented lies to others they were close to. The magnitude of the differences in the means was, according to Cohen (1988), moderate. A repeated measures ANOVA conducted on the likelihood of telling other-oriented lies to people the participants felt close to across the three media revealed that there were no significant overall differences, $F(2, 148) = 1.10$, $p > 0.05$ ($\eta^2 = .02$).

Table 2

Paired t-tests for Other-oriented Lies

Media	Other-oriented lie		*N*	*t*	η^2
	Close to	Not well-known			
	M	*M*			
	(SD)	*(SD)*			
Phone	4.30	4.01	150	3.56***	0.08
	(0.83)	(0.93)			
Face-to-face	4.28	4.09	150	2.71**	0.05
	(0.83)	(0.89)			
Email	4.23	3.94	150	3.72***	0.09
	(0.89)	(1.03)			

* $p<.05$, two-tailed. ** $p<.01$, two-tailed. *** $p<.001$, two-tailed

A repeated measure ANOVA conducted on the likelihood of telling other-oriented lies to people the participants did not know well across the three media revealed a significant overall difference, $F(2,148) = 4.07$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .05$). Paired t-tests were conducted to determine if phone was greater than face-to-face and if face-to-face was greater than email. There was no significant different between lies told on the phone and face-to-face, $t(149) = -.39$, $p > .05$ (($\eta^2 = .02$). Participants were more likely to tell self-serving lies to people not well-known to them in face-to-face more than email, $t(149) = 2.86$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = 0.05$). Finally we checked to see if people lied more on the phone than email and found that they significantly differed, $t(149) = 2.00$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = 0.03$).

We also compared the likelihood of telling self-serving lies and other oriented lies to people our participants felt close to (see Table 3). For each type of media

individuals were far more likely to tell other-oriented lies than self-serving lies. Finally we compared the likelihood of telling self-serving lies and other oriented lies to people our participants did not know well (see Table 4). This revealed mixed results, with no differences for lies told over the phone, more other-oriented lies told face-to-face and more self-serving lies told in email.

Table 3

Paired t-tests for Lies told to Close People

Media	Close to		*N*	*t*	η^2
	Self-serving *M* *(SD)*	Other-oriented *M* *(SD)*			
Phone	3.13 (1.15)	4.30 (0.83)	150	-10.16***	0.41
Face-to-face	2.69 (1.20)	4.28 (0.83)	150	-13.61***	0.55
Email	3.56 (1.27)	4.23 (0.89)	150	-5.41***	0.16

* $p<.05$, two-tailed. ** $p<.01$, two-tailed. *** $p<.001$, two-tailed

Table 4

Paired t-tests for Lies told to Not Well-known People

Media	Not well-known		*N*	*t*	η^2
	Self-serving *M*	Other-oriented *M*			

	(SD)	*(SD)*			
Phone	4.11	4.01	150	0.96	0.01
	(0.90)	(0.93)			
Face-to-face	3.83	4.09	150	-2.38*	0.04
	(1.02)	(0.89)			
Email	4.33	3.94	150	3.49**	0.07
	(0.92)	(1.03)			

* $p<.05$, two-tailed. ** $p<.01$, two-tailed. *** $p<.001$, two-tailed

4. Discussion

This study investigated the likelihood for individuals to tell self-serving and other-oriented lies across three different types of media, face-to-face, phone, and email. It also examined telling these lies to individuals close to them and individuals not well-known to them. In line with previous researchers, the means elicited in this study suggested that lying is a part of individuals' everyday lives. This study also suggests that lying is ubiquitous across all three types of media.

The results yielded in this study supported our hypotheses. As predicted we found that individuals were much more likely to tell self-serving lies in every media to individuals not well-known to them compared to those they felt close to. This, we believe, is because it is more risky and difficult to get away with telling a self-serving lie to individuals who are close to us. Individuals close to us have more information about us and our day-to-day lives. In line with Goffman's (1959) theory, if one is caught out by a self-serving lie, they are not only going to be judged negatively for the lie they told, but their entire character could be brought into question. There can be a more at stake here that just the being caught out for telling a lie.

We also found, as predicted, that individuals are more likely to tell other-oriented lies to people close to them than to people not close to them. Moreover, when we compared the types of lies individuals were more likely to tell someone close to them, we found that individuals were much more likely to tell other-oriented lies than self-serving lies. Other-oriented lies are typically told to protect the feelings of the recipient of the lie. Given this, one might feel more compelled to lie to a person close to them to protect their feelings rather than saying the truth, which could possibly cause them upset or distress. We are perhaps less motivated or concerned to protect the feelings of individuals less close to us. Interestingly enough though, it appeared that overall individuals were more likely to tell an other-oriented lie than a self-serving lie. Only in email to individuals not well-known to the person were participants more likely to tell a self-serving lie. Such a result questions much of the psychological literature which has tried to associate negative personality characteristics with those who are more likely to lie (e.g., Vrij, 2005), given that other-oriented lies could be constructed as an act of kindness and perhaps not an immoral act.

In addition to testing out our hypotheses we intended to examine whether Hancock's et al.'s (2004) 'Feature Based' theory would be supported when the type of lie as well as the recipient of the lie is taken into account. Unfortunately, as shown in Table 5, in each instance it was not supported by our data.

Table 5

Results from this Study compared to Theories on Lying

Type of Lie Recipient	FtF	Phone	Email
Self-serving	3	2	1

Close			
Self-serving	3	2	1
Not well-known			
Other-oriented	1	1	1
Close			
Other-oriented	1	1	2
Not well-known			
Lying Predictions			
Feature Based	2	1	3
Media Richness	1	2	3
Social Distance	3	2	1

(1 = highest amount of lying, 3 = the least)

For self-serving lies told to both people close to the participants as well as not well-known, individuals stated they were more likely to tell a lie in email, followed by phone, and lastly face-to-face. This result supports the 'Social Distance' theory. To reiterate, 'Social Distance' theory suggests that individuals are more likely to lie in media where there is maximum space between the recipient and themselves. Theorists that champion this theory argue that this is because lying makes people feel uncomfortable and that having distance between the liar and the recipient makes the liar more at ease with executing the lie. Self-serving lies are arguably more likely to make the liar feel uncomfortable and apprehensive and so email is not surprisingly the ideal place to tell such as lie. Email has the extra bonus of being an asynchronous form of media, which gives an individual time to think about how they will best tell

their lie. Phone provides the distance and eliminates some of the non-verbal cues which might give away the lie (Vrij, Edward, Roberts, & Bull, 2000).

The results for which type of media individuals would be more likely to tell an other-oriented lie were not so clear cut. Participants believed they would be just as likely to tell an other-oriented to someone close to them in any type of media. Perhaps this is because the purpose of this type of lie is to maintain the integrity of the recipient and one ought to be motivated to do this for someone they cared about in any type of media. Arguably, although one does not necessarily want to be caught out for this type of lie, one would feel less anxious about telling a lie of this kind in comparison to a self-serving lie.

When it came to telling an other-oriented lie to individuals not well-known, the participants claimed they would be less likely to say such a lie via email. This is an interesting twist. Such a result suggests that individuals would be more likely to tell people not well-known to them a truth via email that could potentially hurt their feelings. Researchers have found that individuals can be more uninhibited and aggressive online (e.g., Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Ample evidence has been found for flaming online, which is aggressive and insulting talk (Whitty & Carr, 2006). It is argued that people are more likely to talk aggressively in CMC (computer mediated communication) than face-to-face because online there is a lack of social presence and less contextual cues. This is perhaps why this current study found that individuals were more likely to say a hurtful truth than an other-oriented lie to individuals not well-known to them in email. The social distance, in this particular case, motivates the person to tell unpleasant truths.

We need to consider why Hancock et al.'s (2004) 'Feature Based' theory was not supported in this study. This study revealed that distance plays a more important

role than Hancock and his colleagues surmised. In developing a model that predicts lying behaviour, at least for self-serving lies, it would seem that distance ought to be given more weight than other features, such as whether the media are recordable or not. The 'Features Based' model also contends that individuals are more likely to lie in synchronous communication, the argument being that lying is a more spontaneous activity and so one is given greater opportunity to tell a lie in synchronous media. However, this current study found that if given the opportunity individuals would be more likely to tell self-serving lies in asynchronous communication. Asynchronous communication and distance also play an important role in predicting whether people are more likely to reveal unpleasant truths to others they do not know well.

There are some obvious limitations to this study that are worthwhile highlighting. This study considered hypothetical instances of lying and only one example of the two types of lies under investigation. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain whether the participants in this study would actually behave in the way they believe they would typically behave. At the same time, diary studies also have their limitations – getting participants to keep accurate tabs of lies and expecting them to recall each instance of lying can be an arduous task. In saying that, it is important to carry out studies to see if the results revealed in this current study are supported when we measure individuals' actual behaviours. Additionally, this current study consisted of a university population, which makes it difficult to generalise these results to a non-educated population. Future research should consider other populations to test the claims made in this paper. Finally, we considered only two types of lies, self-serving and other-oriented lies, there might be other types of lies we could have considered.

In concluding, this study highlights that when investigating the type of media individuals are more likely to lie we must take into account the type of lie individuals

tell as well as the recipient of the lie. This study found that individuals are much more likely to tell self-serving lies to individuals not close to them and other-oriented lies to those that are considered close. The potential impact of a lie probably determines whether one is motivated to tell a lie. This study did reveal that the type of media one is communicating in does partly determine if one is likely to tell a lie. For self-serving lies, participants preferred the safe distance of email. Participants felt motivated to tell an other-oriented lie to people they felt close to across any type of media. However, when it came to telling harsh truths to people not so well-known participants preferred email.

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