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NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Health & Research Journal

Vol 10, No 2 (2024)

Volume 10 Issue 2 April - June 2024

Health and Research Journal (peer review) ISSN:2459-3192

International Journal of Research and Review in Health Sciences

Volume 10 Issue 2 April - June 2024

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Published in cooperation with the Postgraduate Program "Intensive Care Units", the Hellenic Society of Nursing Research and Education and the Helerga

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doi: 10.12681/healthresj.34576

To cite this article:

Sobieska, D., Pilafas, G., & Louka, P. (2024). How has psychology improved understanding of why people lie?. *Health & Research Journal*, *10*(2), 119–122. https://doi.org/10.12681/healthresj.34576

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 04/02/2026 09:41:33

HEALTH AND RESEARCH JOURNAL
E-ISSN:2459-3192

(2024), Volume 10, Issue 2

SPECIAL ARTICLE

HOW HAS PSYCHOLOGY IMPROVED UNDERSTANDING OF WHY PEOPLE LIE?

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Abstract

The present special article discusses upon the question 'why people lie'. The answer to the later question has concerned the common mind and scholars since antiquity. However, no universal answer has been provided yet. In general psychology much attention has been paid to clinical perspectives of human behavior. In such a manner, the answer to the question of 'why people lie' has always had a moral and ethical base regarding the theoretical frameworks that explain any given answer. In recent years though, much attention has been given to two key models/theories which derive from the basic and core field of psychology. The first is the 'moral balance model', while the second one is the 'self-concept maintenance theory'. In this article, the question is addressed from both viewpoints and a conclusion is drawn based on the strengths and limits between the two key models/theories that try to explain why people lie.

Keywords: Lying, moral balance model, self-concept maintenance theory, psychopathology.

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Cite as: Sobieska, D., Pilafas, G., Louka, P. (2024). How has psychology improved understanding of why people lie? Health and Research Journal,10(2),119-122. https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/HealthResJ

Nowadays, our world is pervaded by fraud and trickery. From camouflage and imitation to overstatements and equivocations, deception has become a part of human communication. Deception researchers argued that lying is usually as involuntary as breathing.[1] There are numerous definitions of lying, but the most broadly accepted is the following: 'A lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it'.[2(p.248),3] However, it is worth noting that most people tend not to classify mistakes as lies.[4] Perceiving deception as form of lying has been considered controversial. According to one recent study, a sample of 28 students from American university reported lying roughly 1.6 time per day; It was pointed that 26% of their interactions included a lie.[5] Thereby, the current paper seeks to explore how the field of psychology has improved the understanding of why people lie to date. Its goal is to discuss the theoretical framework of lying from both developmental and social point views. Nevertheless, it turns out that lying has been identified as a contributing factor that leads to negative outcomes.[6] Therefore, the ultimate purpose of this study is to apply truth-default theory to deceptive communication scenarios in order to expand and test moral balance model and self-concept maintenance theory.

The most common approach on which research psychologists focus during investigating the concept of lying is the moral balance model. They have been studying lying for decades in order to find how lying occurs, develops and is maintained. A firmly established finding is that, as children develop social cognitive skills, they are capable to confess false statements with the aim to deceive and manage successfully those lies to be improved.[7,8] This might be associated with the parent-child relationship. Parenting by lying relates to the practice of deception in order to regulate children's behavioral states. For instance, even when it is untrue, parents may decline their childs' requests for lavish purchases by stating, 'We are too poor to acquire what you want'.[9(p.2)] Consequently, telling lies to children who are still developing their cognitive abilities will make it harder for them to interpret ambiguous information and may lead to a negative attitude towards uncertainty. Although it is difficult to explain this phenomenon, it might be related to moral balance model. The moral balance model, developed by Nisan,[10] illustrates moral behavior as a result of distinguishing good and bad behavior that seems necessary for people to make moral decisions. However, instead of accomplishing an ideal morality, people follow a restricted morality thesis that allows them to depart from what it is known to be morally correct behavior while an overall balance is kept. Additionally, Nisan[10] asserted that this balanced identity consists of both self-serving and morally compliance behavior, thus if someone does something good, they may later decide to be self-serving rather than morally compliant. There is some evidence that supports Nisan's theory of a moral balance approach. In one study consisted of 141 undergraduate students (76 females and 65 males), participants were requested to take part in a hiring task in which a candidate's morality was questionable. All students were randomly divided into one of four recall conditions: ethical-dissonance, worthy conduct, neutral event, or negative event, and were asked to evaluate the ethicality of the candidate under specific criteria. Furthermore, participants in one of the control conditions recalled an unpleasant experience from their past - this requirement was added to rule out other potential explanations of negative valence. At that point, the main assumption was that although recalling unethical behavior and negative incidents may lead to negative emotions, only the memory of unethical activity, which puts oneself in danger, would cause ethical dissonance and prompt a distancing reaction. As predicted, the final results indicated that participants were less likely to hire the candidate in ethical dissonance condition than in the control conditions. To that effect, Barkan et al[11] noticed that people who are reminded of their former transgression express a willingness to behave in a more morally ideal manner in the future, whereas trying to reinstate the moral balance model.

Another similar doctrine, closely linked to moral balance model, is a self-concept maintenance theory (SCM). According to Mazar et al,[12] SCM concentrates on self-concepts and identity which guide people's choices. Apart from their willingness of perceiving themselves as morally good, they also want the profits that may be associated with deception.[13] On the contrary to moral balance model, SCM states that people's goal is to obtain benefits that might come with deception. In other words, as long as people preserve their identity as morally good, they may cheat,

but will not surpass certain moral boundaries so as not to harm their self-concept.[14] Some evidence does support the concept of SCM that maintains moderate levels of cheating regardless of whether it is safe to be self-serving in order to be identified as a moral person concurrently.[15] Nonetheless, there are no studies, other than Mazar et al[12] testing if people change their self-image after transgressing. Recently, moderate cheating (linked to SCM) has been criticized along with the empirical findings supporting that it is a matter of saying, 'it is safe to cheat' and technically regulate it to the minimum.[16] Ultimately, self-concept maintenance theory has helped psychologists to notice that whether people can safely appear honest, all moral boundaries disappear, thereby cheating becomes a preferable strategy used in everyday life.[14]

Overall, both moral balance model and self-concept maintenance theory were defined similarly with a main difference - the rewards. The moral balance model indicates that people choose to follow a limited morality thesis that allows them to deceive as long as their identity is ethical enough. Its main concept is to keep an overall balance of lies and truths. Moreover, the study of Barkan et al[11] supports, in fact, that individuals cheat unconsciously; without aiming to use deception as a self-serving tool. The researchers argued that whether deceivers are reminded of transgressing, they are eager to confess the truth. On the other hand, Mazar et al[12] firstly claimed that SCM emphasizes on moderate cheating and deceivers whose goal is to gain benefits with trickery. However, no papers have found to support his exact findings. Instead, some researchers suggested that people cheat as much as possible only if they can safely present themselves as morally good.[16] In spite of outlining some main ideas based on observation and research, there are still several limitations on the use of deception. In the future, researchers conducting studies inside the field of deception should involve small samples or distinguish a representative sample (e.g., doctors) among 100 participants. Following this pattern will probably help them to draw more specific conclusions on the topic. In addition, participants should not be informed about the purpose of the study in advance, so that the obtained results will be trustworthy.

To conclude, both moral balance model and self-concept maintenance theory are doctrines that have helped psychologists in understanding the phenomenon of lying. However, they have not managed to gather a holistic explanation of why people lie yet. The first theory[10] along with the empirical research conducted by Barkan et al[11] support that people follow a limited morality based on their individual perception. In other terms, people might cheat only when they believe that moral balance is kept. Additionally, it turns out that those who become aware of their former transgression are eager to restore their behavior with a more morally ideal manner. On the contrary, self-concept maintenance theory[12] appears not to be tested over years. Instead, some recent studies indicate that whether people can safely appear honest they will cheat without limit or remorse.[16] Last but not least, specialists assigned to the field of developmental and/or social psychology have pointed out that the practice of deception leads to negative consequences. Children being in the stage of developing their cognitive abilities may struggle with interpreting ambiguous information delivered by their caregivers and feel uncertain. Dealing with uncertainty is usually one of the symptoms of anxiety disorders.[17] Thus, society should be aware of the negative outcomes that might come with deception even if the question of why people lie has not been fully answered.

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