

## Basically, We All Lie

A review of



**Playing the Lying Game: Detecting and Dealing with Lies and Liars, from Occasional Fibbers to Frequent Fabricators**

by Gini Graham Scott

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Reviewed by

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Everyone does it. We do it all the time. But why do we do it when we know it's wrong? According to Gini Graham Scott, author of *Playing the Lying Game: Detecting and Dealing with Lies and Liars, from Occasional Fibbers to Frequent Fabricators*, lying is useful for a variety of reasons, including human survival, preserving or destroying relationships, social or financial gain, protecting or hurting others, and protecting one's self-esteem. We tell all kinds of lies, such as the overt lie purposely meant to deceive, half-truths that are only partially false, omission or concealment of important information, and promises that we don't intend to keep.

Given the wide variety of lies and the numerous reasons for lying, it is understandable that people who normally don't lie under most circumstances, whom Scott refers to as models of integrity or straight shooters, still do lie to protect themselves or others in various situations described throughout the book. Their approach to lying in certain situations often

depends on who is involved and what is most appropriate for particular circumstances. Usually, the “straight shooter” will use this strategy when dealing with personal or social relationships in order to save someone’s feelings or avoid drama.

The most interesting type of liar described by Scott is the pragmatic fibber who, depending on the type of situation, may choose to lie by examining the cost–benefit ratio of lying and seeing if the ends justify the means. This type of strategy and type of fibber seem to be more prevalent in business and workplace situations.

In addition to describing reasons for lying and types of liars, Scott provides an overview for how to determine the reader’s own approach to lying using the “Ethical Choices Map” (p. 193). According to Scott, both ethical approaches and attitudes toward rules regarding lying fall on a continuum, similar to how the types of liars fall on a continuum.

All of these types and strategies follow a parallel pattern, ranging from the minimal potential for lying (i.e., having a moral philosophical approach, having an other-oriented view, and being a follower of rules) on one end, to the maximal potential for lying (i.e., having a pragmatic philosophical approach, having a “self-oriented” view, and being an innovator of rules) on the other. For the layperson, perhaps the most relevant aspect of the book is Scott’s assessment tool for determining liar type, philosophical approach, and strategy, called the Lie-Q Test (p. 55).

The book seems most appropriate for sociology or communications audiences interested in studying the dynamics between liars and those they lie to or in understanding strategies people use to justify lies. The author includes a plethora of in-depth interview quotes of liars, offering many examples of types of lies, who lies to whom, reasons for lying, and what to do with liars. For example, Scott gives specific situations described by interviewees to demonstrate lying in public and professional life; lying in business; lying to friends, relatives, mates, spouses, intimate others, children, and parents; and even lying to oneself.

## **Psychology’s Interest in the Lying Game**

Social psychologists in particular should be interested in this text because for over seven decades the field of social psychology has notoriously used deception in studying a variety of behaviors (Nicks, Korn, & Mainieri, 1997). Whether one believes deception in research is justified or acceptable, the use of lying in research to yield unbiased data from participants has been a long tradition.

However, there is a growing concern about using deception in research because it poses the ethical dilemma of prohibiting participants from being fully informed regarding their participation and also because deception can undermine the research–participant

relationship, as described in Benham (2008). Is lying defensible in research if the ends justify the means, or what Scott refers to as following the pragmatic approach? Benham suggested that with careful consideration for any type of deceptive practice used in research and with the use of effective and attentive debriefing, researchers can better inform and justify their practice when using deception but that they must weigh the costs and benefits of such an approach to collect their data, which is similar to Scott's description of the moral pragmatist who is concerned with right and wrong but embraces practical considerations for deception.

The focus of the field of social psychology is to understand human behavior in the context of social environments. Therefore, understanding lying and how to respond to liars is very important in order for people to successfully navigate through their social worlds, given that Scott asserts that lying is very prevalent.

Moreover, forensic psychologists and clinical psychologists would be most interested in the last chapter of the text on deceiving and perceiving lies and what to do if one is lied to or caught lying, given that their work deals with helping others (e.g., individuals, spouses, friends, family, and police) detect lying. Scott cites Paul Ekman, an expert on lying research, who states that detecting lies among those who truly believe their lies or have good control over their body, face, and voice is very difficult. However, some telling clues include increased blinking or pupil dilation, blushing, blanching, or facial sweating (p. 177).

Scott also suggests looking for several cues to lying such as pauses in speech, difficulty concealing emotions, falsely portraying emotions, and other behavioral cues from liars, such as the words they use, their voice, and their body movements. This is similar to the findings by DePaulo et al. (2003) that lies can be detected in what people say and how they say it. DePaulo et al. found that liars provide fewer details and make more negative statements and complaints; their lies are less compelling, make less sense, and seem to have fewer imperfections in the story than do true statements. Understanding these cues to lying is important for various applied psychologists working with populations apt to lie or with people who need to detect lying.

## **Limitations and a Call to Action**

Scott's text is a satisfactory overview of the nature of lying and its implication for relationships. What the text lacks is discussion of relevant research on lying that examines more than the types of lies and their detection. For example, Tyler, Feldman, and Reichert (2006) had 64 undergraduate psychology students rate liars in terms of trustworthiness and likeability. They found that participants did not judge liars simply by quantity and quality of lies; depending on the type of exaggeration and frequency, people will differentially evaluate

lies. They hypothesized that certain lies are tolerable if they show modesty, as opposed to excessive bragging, which is usually negatively perceived.

This is similar to Scott's assertion that people do not like being lied to in general but that some lies are necessary to preserve relationships, save face, or help others. However, Scott gives only brief anecdotal examples and does not present any empirical research describing how people perceive liars. Moreover, Scott's qualitative data, although extensive, lack a longitudinal perspective of the various times and situations in which people lie. A limitation to interview data is that it can be based on faulty memory or social desirability influences.

A better approach for examining lying in everyday situations was presented by DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, and Epstein (1996), who used diaries to track the types of lies 77 college students and 70 community members told every day for a week. Although social desirability bias and faulty memory issues also could influence their diary entries, the amount of data collected and length of the study make for a more plausible account of the typical lies people tell on a daily basis. DePaulo et al. (1996) found that college students lied in one of every three situations, compared with community members who lied in one of every five situations. Also, participants did not feel that they were telling "serious" lies, and that they did not worry about being caught lying.

This type of research could have added significantly to the credibility of the material presented by Scott. Overall, Scott presents an interesting perspective and summary of lying and liars. However, as a social psychologist, I would have appreciated the inclusion of the current research on effects of lying and the perceptions of liars.

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