

Tina's Situation: Why Lying Makes Sense

Kirk M. Sladic

Consider the following hypothetical situation: Tina is a friend who, in the past, drank to excess, became addicted to drugs and associated with people who conducted criminal activities. She has been jailed on several occasions and served time in prison twice. The first time was for possession of narcotics with the intent to sell. After serving time for that charge, she was again imprisoned after being convicted of manslaughter following a street fight in which she stabbed a man while defending herself. However, after her second interment, Tina turned her life around. She entered a one-year in-patient alcohol and drug rehabilitation program and has now been sober for ten years. She attended college and graduated *magna cum laude*. Tina is now seeking employment in the field she studied in school. Her grades, work experience and strong references have landed her more than a dozen job interviews. However, at each of these interviews she is asked to fill out a standard employment form with the question, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Tina has consistently answered this question honestly, and, although the interviews go well, she has never been asked back for a second interview. Tina believes that her felony conviction is keeping her from gaining employment and has asked for your advice. Should she lie about her criminal past on her applications? What should you tell her?

This hypothetical situation raises an ethical and philosophical dilemma that has burdened humankind from at least the times of the ancient Greeks. Tina has a decision to make, and there are only two potential courses of action. Her choices are, quite simply, to remain honest on her job application with regards to her criminal record and

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston

Volume 3, 2004: pp. 182-191

© 2004 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.

All rights to be retained by the author.

risk repetition of her prior rejections, or to fail to reveal her criminal record with the hope that this bit of deception will prove profitable by affording her an opportunity for employment based on her professional merits rather than her dubious past. The former course of action adheres to the Western cultural norm promoting honesty, where the latter conforms to the implicitly accepted quest for material advancement within American society. When the situation is deconstructed, a very old tension remains as its foundation: the dualism between what is ethically “right,” so often aligned with spirituality, and what is materially beneficial. Plato (1965/2000) calls lying a “subversive and destructive” practice, and it seems that Tina would be guilty of lying should she misrepresent her past on a job application (p. 29). However, the prevalence of lies in Western society, ranging from innocuous white lies to large scale corporate lies, indicates that her choice is not so simple and that the nature of lies is not so clearly defined.

Many philosophers and theologians have operated under the assumption that humans are in some way special, through a capacity for reason, divine design, or an amalgam of both; thus they judge the activity of humans by a different standard than the activity of animals. However, evolutionary theory, once applied to human development, bridges this apparent chasm and the Great Chain of Being falls apart like an ill-treated dime store necklace. Mitchell (1986) notes that the application of what are generally considered human behaviors, such as deception, to animals is not a new concept, but rather has its “counterpart in the comparative psychology of the late 1800s” (p. 4). Researchers have found deception of one type or another in their studies of animal behavior right up to the present day. While not quite the same as direct, verbal lying, chimpanzees have behavior patterns that suggest intentional deception, both toward other chimpanzees and human observers. De Waal (1986), in his analysis of the chimpanzees at the Arnham Zoo in the Netherlands, explains that the chimpanzees demonstrate “nonritualized, intelligent forms of deception” which “suggest, but cannot prove, the existence of *intentional* deception” (p. 221). He gives as an example one chimpanzee’s action following a fight with another chimpanzee. The first animal was wounded and walked with a limp for a week. However,

researchers note that after that period, the wounded chimpanzee only limped when within the visual perception of the victorious chimp. Additionally, Miles (1986) describes deceptive behavior more analogous to human lies in the actions of language-trained apes that use signed untruths to shift blame from themselves for various misdeeds (p. 249).

Deception also exists in much simpler forms of animal life, although it certainly cannot be called intentional. However, its mere existence provides for an interesting perspective when compared with human lying, and especially the motivations for lying. Lloyd (1986) identifies patterns of deception in *Photuris* fireflies (p. 113). This type of firefly imitates the flashing patterns of other breeds to lure them in under the guise of a mating ritual, only to devour them (p. 116). Similarly, Munn (1986), in his study of South American “neotropical birds,” notes their use of deceptive calls in order to gain access to food (p. 170). The birds he studies “give hawk alarm calls when there is no hawk or bird resembling a hawk present, apparently in order to gain a split-second advantage over other birds in aerial tumbles after flushed prey arthropods” (p. 170). Even camouflage, a natural protector against predators, is in a way, a form of deception. Nature has equipped, for instance, a certain insect with the ability to appear to be a part of a tree. In this case, the deception is decidedly evolutionary rather than intentional, but deception is still present. Obviously, these kinds of deception are outside the realms of any ethical dispute, but they, together with primate deception, show a tendency in all animals to use deception. Moreover, the goals of the deception are completely selfish: attempts to avoid punishment or pain, the quest for food, and basic survival. If we set aside the question of ethics and treat humans as advanced animals, the prevalence of deception in all these animal species suggests an inherent value in it that would have otherwise been bred out by Darwinian evolution.

On the surface, these instances of animal deception may appear to bear no relevance to Tina’s situation. However, if Tina is thought of as simply an individual of a particular species, and the workplace as simply an intricately complex, natural environment, her choice becomes increasingly apparent. She is not a bird or firefly hunting for food, but she still requires food for nourishment and health. She may not live in a tree, but she still needs shelter and comfort. Add to these

basic prerequisites the normative drive for the acquisition of material property so dominant in American culture, and her obvious, natural course of action is to lie on the job application. It is a reoccurring, survivalist feature in many animals to use deception of some kind to preserve or enhance their own well-being. Clearly, in humans, deception becomes more complicated, but the inclination toward material betterment is still natural, and the presence of deception in so many animals indicates that it is, in fact, a beneficial trait.

However, as Wilson (1998) notes, many ethical philosophers have argued against the direct comparison of the actions of a human as a member of a society and those of lower animals in nature (p. 8). The view held by these philosophers is that the “primary origin of moral instincts is the dynamic relation between cooperation [with] and defection” from society, and that only animals with a high level of intelligence, “human beings and perhaps their closest relatives among the higher apes,” are capable of understanding this dynamic and developing moral instincts (p. 10). Succinctly put, because humans are more intelligent than other animals, they develop a moral code and should be held to higher ethical standards than animals. Further, Wilson explains the belief that there is “abundant evidence [in] history that cooperative individuals generally survive longer and leave more offspring,” thereby bettering society (p. 10). However, in the proposed scenario, Tina exemplifies an individual who has fallen outside the generality of this ethical statement. She has attempted to adhere to societal mandates against lying without success. For her, lying is not a “defection” from society, but rather a means of survival in a society that has ostracized her.

Research into the behavioral patterns of small children adds credence to the notion that deception and lies are inherent traits within human beings, as well as other animals. Obviously there are physical and psychological limitations that restrict the abilities of small children to deceive; once they become physically autonomous, at least to the degree that they can walk and gesture, it appears the inclination to deceive makes its presence known. Much of the research concerning young children and deception operates under the “assumption that only 4-year-olds, but not still younger children possess some understanding of the possibility of false belief,” and thus are capable

of lying (Chandler and Afifi, 1996, p. 750). Chandler and Afifi cite a series of experiments “in which two-and-a-half to five-year-old children were encouraged to hide a treasure in a series of differently colored containers” (p. 752). A small toy left trails revealing the paths of each of the hidings. Other children were then encouraged to attempt to find the location of the “treasure.” The results of these experiments indicate that “70 percent of even the young 2 ½-year-olds took active steps to disinform their opponent by laying false trails to empty containers” (p. 753). The propensity of even young children to deceive suggests that deception may be an inherent human quality. Chandler and Afifi also question the idea that lies are “prototypically” reprehensible, suggesting rather that “the fact that deceit usually profits the deceiver likely contributes to a widely held folk belief that there is a deep connection between deceit and harmfulness” (p. 739). Instead, it would seem that society has constructed a stigma surrounding lies and deception. Chandler and Afifi even question the actual existence of this stigma, noting “there are few among us who do not harbor a certain secret pride at having successfully lied our way out of some especially tight spot” (p. 731). The young children’s behaviors indicate a natural tendency toward deception for self-betterment. Also, Chandler and Afifi point to the pride people feel in “pulling off” a deception. They believe this pride demonstrates that while society superficially abhors dishonesty, there is an undercurrent of intellectual admiration for those who lie and lie well. Perhaps Tina should even be proud of her deception should she lie on the application without detection.

Other scholars support the possibility that the conception of lies as generally harmful or even evil is misrepresentation of the true, although not expressed, values of American society. Mothersill (1996) explains that while “we say that truthfulness is good and lying is bad, the way we act suggests that that is not what we really believe. We think of utterly truthful persons as a hazard, and as for lying, we all lie all the time” (p. 913). She suggests that simply learning verbal communication indirectly instructs children about what a lie is and how to construct one. In learning to speak, children associate newly learned phrases with situations, objects, and people. If the association is correct, the children are rewarded. If it is not, they are corrected.

From this, it is a simple development for children to realize that there are sentences they “wish to be true but are false” (p. 915). When children intentionally use such false sentences to induce a hearer to believe it, they make their “first lie” (p. 915). Mothersill disagrees with both the consequentialist and Kantian imperatives against lying. She argues that the Kantian universal imperative is not realistic because “at least some lies are allowable” (p. 925). As for the consequentialists, she believes their view of “lying as an addiction” is unfounded; with the amount of lying that occurs on a daily basis, the globally “disastrous consequences” the consequentialists fear would have already become apparent (pp. 924, 925). As do Chandler and Afifi, Mothersill regards lying as a way of life intricately woven into the minds of humans from the very onset of language instruction, and maintains that society actually sees lying as “something that must be countenanced...if we want our children to prosper in society” (p. 917). Surely, a simple lie on a job application would help Tina to “prosper.”

Many researchers have conducted studies into the use of persuasion in human communication. Persuasion, whether used in as a professional environment, such as in sales, or in a personal environment, such as convincing a friend to loan out \$20, is an elemental part of human communication. Neulip and Mattson (1990) argue that the majority of persuasive communication involves deception of some kind and that “deception is a general technique or strategy, that may be implemented by using various specific compliance-gaining message strategies” (p. 410). To provide authority for their argument, they conducted a study utilizing a questionnaire with specific, hypothetical situations that required participants to create persuasive arguments in attempts to induce friends to comply with the participants’ hypothetical requests. After collecting and analyzing the results, they found that less “than 2% of the messages for any of these situations were coded as truthful” (p. 415). At least within the constrictions of this single experiment, they concluded that indeed, deception and verbal lying were key elements to most persuasive communication. Tina’s situation resembles, albeit loosely, the kind of persuasive communications that were used in the experiment. If the vast majority of the sample group used deception as a means of persuading, why shouldn’t Tina? After all, completing a job application and being interviewed are really

nothing more than formalized situations in which the applicant must persuade the potential employer to hire him or her. The majority of test subjects used deception in their persuasive arguments, indicating that whether they admit it or not, they approve of lying and deceit in persuasive attempts.

Recent debate over ethical research procedures concerns not only the research but the very definition of lying as well. Lawson (2001) is concerned with the ethical issues involved in revealing information to participants in research. She notes a categorical differentiation in the definition of deception between the “informational view,” and the “relational view” (p. 115). The informational view makes a black and white demarcation between truth and lies: “giving false information, allowing false assumptions, and withholding information are deceptive” (p. 115). The relational view is more dynamic and allows for more situations to be defined as non-deceptive. From this vantage, deception occurs when one party withholds “the truth from someone to whom the truth is due” (p. 117). The disparity between the two views is important to research because there are certain criteria regarding deception that a proposed study must meet to remain ethical in the scholarly community, and part of those criteria are the nature of the deception and how much information is revealed to the potential participants. If the informational view becomes the academic standard for ethicality in research, the number of vetoed study proposals would probably increase. Conversely, the more subjective standards of the relational view will allow greater freedom in research.

If applied to the Tina’s hypothetical situation, the difference between the relational and informational views of deception makes an enormous amount of difference when judging the appropriateness of lying on the job application. If Tina chooses not to admit her felony record on the application, the informational view, while not necessarily deeming the choice ethically good or bad, decidedly categorizes it as a deception and lie. The relational view, on the other hand, cannot, without intense scrutiny of the situation, categorize it as a deception, let alone as ethically good or bad. The relational view uses “relational criteria, including denial of right to the truth, betrayal of trust, and impairment of commerce with reality [to] finally determine what is deceptive” (Lawson, 2001, p. 115). The second of

the criteria is probably the easiest to explain away in Tina's situation. Quite simply, there is no pre-conceived trust existent between Tina and the company to which she is applying. They have no personal history, nor is there any reason for the company to believe what Tina indicates on her application, so there is no "trust" to be betrayed other than the company's assumption of honesty on Tina's part: an assumption ill-advised considering the pervasiveness of deceit in society and the world. In fact, in a study of the expectancy and acceptance of deception, Gordon and Miller indicate that in "some situations [e.g., sales negotiations, *job interviews* (emphasis added)] the use of deception is highly normative" (2000, p. 52).

The first and third criteria are a little harder to apply in Tina's case. The criterion of "denial of the right to truth" indicates deception based on the worthiness of the listener to receive valid information from the communicator. If the receiver is not worthy of truth, as many would say Kant's (2002) "murderer" is not worthy, then the conveyance of a falsity is not necessarily a deception (p. 129). In Tina's situation, the receiver, in this case the company to which she is applying, may be worthy or not. However, if the general attitude toward large corporations is taken into account, it may well seem that the company does not warrant complete openness on Tina's part. Large corporations have lied to the public, or have at least been deceptive in their advertisements, so they may not be worthy of complete truthfulness. If Tina's potential employer is a large company, then she would not be deceiving according to the relational view, since the receiver of her communication, in many people's eyes, does not have the "right to truth." Finally, Lawson's third criterion for deception in the relational view, the "impairment of commerce with reality," also warrants some analysis. The reality of Tina's situation, assuming that the hypothetical situation is true, is that she is intelligent, driven, and that the mistakes of her past are far behind her. Considering this circumstance, her admission of a felony conviction actually conveys a mistruth about her because, although descriptive of her past, it is not descriptive of the temporal reality of Tina in the present. Therefore, the company's "commerce with reality" would actually be *maintained* if Tina omits her felony conviction from the application because the company would then perceive Tina as she is without the taint of a

felony conviction far in her past.

Tina's situation is an uneasy one. Sociologists, ethicists and philosophers, over the years, have offered myriad definitions of deception, each with its own nuances and unique characteristics. Despite Kantian and Biblical imperatives, there are certainly many cases which people, generally speaking, recognize as lies, but find socially acceptable: after "an exceedingly boring meal, someone may say they had a 'great time'; an unappetizing dinner may be described as a 'delicious meal'" (Miller and Stiff, 1993, p. 23). Communicators produce these types of lies to spare people's feelings. However, when lies involve a communicator's own self-interest, society, more often than not, labels these lies as bad or unacceptable. Tina's potential lie decidedly falls into this latter category. However, even when it seems apparent that lies are self-involved, some definitions of deception, like the relational view, allow for quite a bit of subjective and interpretive leeway. Additionally, deception, whether intentional or not, seems to be a prevalent form of survival in many animals and, despite the cries of humanists and religious thinkers, some evolutionists include humans as a type of animal. As such, human lying and deception is only a natural way of promoting one's self-interest, and self-interest is an evolved and more complex form of survival. Moreover, Tina has nothing to lose and will not physically hurt anyone by lying on the application. Because of her past, society has cast Tina out and she should do what she must to get along.

Works Cited

Chandler, M.J. and Afifi, J. "On Making a Virtue out of Telling Lies." *Social Research* 63 (1996), pp. 731-761.

De Waal, F. "Deception in the Natural Communication of Chimpanzees," in R.W. Mitchell and N.S. Thompson (eds.), *Deception: Perspectives on Human and Nonhuman Deceit* (State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 221-244.

Gordon, A.K. and Miller, A.G. "Perspective Differences in the Construal of Lies: Is Deception in the Eye of the Beholder?" *Personality and Social Science Bulletin* 26 (2000), pp. 46-55.

Kant, I. "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," in

D. Benatar (ed.), *Ethics for Everybody* (McGraw-Hill, 2002), pp. 127-130 (original work published 1799).

Lawson, E. (2001). "Informational and Relational Meanings of Deception: Implications for Deception methods in research," *Ethics and Behavior* 11 (2001), pp. 115-130.

Lloyd, J.E. (1986). "Firefly Communication and Deception: 'Oh, What a Tangled Web,'" in R.W. Mitchell and N.S. Thompson (eds.), *Deception: Perspectives on Human and Nonhuman Deceit* (State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 113-128.

Miles, H. L. "How Can I Tell a Lie? Apes, Language and the Problem of Deception," in R.W. Mitchell and N.S. Thompson (eds.), *Deception: Perspectives on Human and Nonhuman Deceit* (State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 245-266.

Miller, G. R. and Stiff, J. B. *Deceptive Communication* (Sage Publications, 1993).

Mitchell, R.W. "A Framework for Deception," in R.W. Mitchell and N.S. Thompson (eds.), *Deception: Perspectives on Human and Nonhuman Deceit* (State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 3-41.

Mothersill, M. "Some Questions about Truthfulness and Lying," *Social Research* 63 (1996), pp. 913-929.

Munn, C.A. "The Deceptive use of Alarm Calls by Sentinel Species in Mixed-Species Flocks of Neotropical Birds," in R.W. Mitchell and N.S. Thompson (eds.), *Deception: Perspectives on Human and Nonhuman Deceit* (State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 169-176.

Neulip, J.W. and Mattson, M. "The Use of Deception as a Compliance Gaining Strategy," *Human Communication Research* 15 (1990), pp. 409-21.

Plato. *Republic*, trans. P. Murray and T.S. Dorsch, in *Classical Literary Criticism* (Penguin, 2000).

Wilson, E.O. "The Biological Basis of Morality," *The Atlantic Online* (1998). Retrieved 20 June 2004, <http://theatlantic.com/issues/98apr/biomoral.htm>.