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### Deception

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**Deception – Attitudes toward**

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## DECEPTION – ATTITUDES TOWARD

### **Deception – Attitudes toward**

Most research on attitudes toward deception points in the same direction: it shows attitudes tend to be negative. Although telling a lie is seen as publicly condemned, research - as well as experience – also tells us deception is nonetheless very common. This resonates with other often found evidence that even though a person might hold a negative attitude toward deceiving someone else, this attitude will be attenuated by a multitude of factors including situational aspects, intentions, and his or her position or perspective. It seems, therefore, that an exception to the rule is easily made. Below we present findings of research on and records of attitudes toward deception and discuss these exceptions to the negative attitude toward telling lies.

Deception can be found in all realms of life, and attitudes vary according to this. Most people will agree that lying about Santa Claus to their children is permissible, whereas deception by governments or banks is widely criticized. On the one hand, we want to raise our children to be honest people and for that reason we teach them to never tell a lie. On the other hand, we also want our children to be polite, decent people; come their birthday, a child must pretend to like grandma's gift. In some situations telling a lie is even seen as the moral thing to do. Almost all people, even those who have a high moral standard, will deceive another person whilst holding the belief – and maintaining it to others – they are adhering to their honesty ideal.

Throughout history, records of attitudes of deceptive behavior have been dominated by accounts of theologians and philosophers. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, for example, declared one should never tell a lie. Doing so would throw away a man's

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dignity. He reasoned we owe the truth to everybody, even to a murderer at the door inquiring about our friend's whereabouts. The notion that lies are at times justifiable, however – one that was already common in antiquity – could not be held back.

Although these kind of historic accounts inadvertently condemn the act of telling a lie, bending the rules to serve self-interest was not an exception: with the prescription not to tell a lie, exemptions always followed soon thereafter.

Today, attitudes are predominantly negative as well. However, one should not jump to the conclusion that all lies are seen as bad. One reason for this is that factors that make telling a lie more or less acceptable are taken into account when we evaluate a specific lie but these factors are not taken into account when we formulate our negative evaluations of lying overall. On top of this, we all want to maintain an image of ourselves as an honest person. Psychologists argue people do this by having a negative attitude toward deception while allowing some room for justification when they tell a lie themselves. Factors that make people more tolerant of lying include differences in the situation, the reason with which a lie is told, the target of the deception, whether you are the deceiver or the deceived, and the liar's personality.

As noted above, attitudes vary across situations. For instance, lies are judged less harshly when the stakes are low and when a lie has little impact. When the stakes are high and a lie can potentially have large consequences, judgments are more unforgiving. Different situations also vary in the amount of room they leave for deception to be accepted. This is due in part by the expectations situations inherently bring with them. In a poker game a player is expected to bluff; in a negotiation people feel using a deceptive tactic like making false promises is inappropriate.

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One other often mentioned factor that influences whether an attitude toward deception is more or less negative is the reason with which a lie is told. A reason for telling a lie can for instance be to save another person from harm. A large proportion of all lies are told with this apparent altruistic intent, and this tends to make evaluations of these so-called other-oriented lies – although still tending toward the negative end of the spectrum – more favorable. Empirical work confirms attitudes toward telling a lie are more accepting when the reasons for telling it are not self-serving, for instance to save another from losing face or to protect his or her self-esteem.

Another factor that influences a person's attitudes toward deception is the target of the deception. Telling a lie to a friend is less accepted than to an acquaintance, and, ironically, it seems the lies we do tell our close others are the more severe, bigger lies. In romantic relationships honesty is also valued highly. Yet, comparable to the aforementioned situations, when the target of a lie is one's romantic partner, people are quick to come to the conclusion that misleading one's partner is in some situations acceptable and even the moral thing to do.

When a lie is told, there are always at least two sides to the story. The person telling the lie will have a different view on the situation than the person who is lied to.

Whether one is the deceiver or the deceived, or in other words, the perspective one has, affects one's attitude toward deception. For those who are left to deal with the consequences of a lie told to them, attitudes are strongly negative.

Attitudes toward lying have also been found to vary according to the personality of

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the person who has this attitude. Although a clear relationship between specific personality characteristics and general attitudes toward lying is hard to find, for different types of lies some personality characteristics do in part predict their acceptability. For example, people high on self-monitoring, the ability to regulate ones self-presentation to achieve a desired appearance of oneself, have been found to judge self-serving lies more acceptable than people low on this personality variable.

Other factors that have been found to influence attitudes toward deception include age and culture. It seems children acquire an increasing appreciation for factors like the intention of the liar. For adults it seems that as people get older their attitude toward telling lies becomes a little more negative. Although research suggest that attitudes are in part learned and culturally determined, for different cultures there seems to be no hard and fast rule when it comes to attitudes toward deception. Differences that do exist between cultures vary according to relationships, situations and motives for the lie. An example of where cultures have been found to differ in their attitude is a lie about a good deed. Chinese children were found to view this kind of lie as a more positive act than Canadian children, because they considered telling the truth about a good deed bragging.

In the above, factors that influence attitudes toward deception have been discussed. It should be noted however, that these attitudes are mostly self-reports and therefore might be influenced by social desirability and lack of self-knowledge. There is uncertainty about whether these explicit attitudes are in accordance with actual behavior. The question remains whether a person who has a positive attitude toward deception will deceive others more often than a person who holds a more negative

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attitude toward deception. It can be argued a positive attitude will benefit a liar, because lying without the anxiety and guilt stemming from a negative attitude toward deception might make the lie more difficult to detect. For the act of deceiving another person, as well as for other socially sensitive behavior, implicit attitudes might have a greater predictive power. It seems people who have positive implicit attitudes toward deception might be more inclined to engage in spontaneous deceptive behavior, yet it is for future research to find more evidence to support this statement.

In sum, our attitudes toward deception are predominantly negative although not unconditionally so. Even though we have the tendency to hold the belief that telling a lie is wrong, at the same time there is a manifold of factors that moderate this tendency. This may be for a good reason: The fact that we hold such a belief whilst recurrently and intentionally deceiving each other may make us hypocrites, but this belief that telling a lie is wrong also allows us to maintain a view of ourselves as honest people.

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See also: Lie acceptability; Lying, Intentionality of; DePaulo, Bella; Lies, Types of; Lying as Norm in Social Interactions.

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### **Further readings**

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