# Psychological Influence on Deceptionist Lies

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the psychological dimensions of lying within the deceptionist framework, proposing that traditional theories that focus solely on intent to deceive fail to capture the complexity of why people tell lies. I primarily examine Jennifer Lackey's revised deceptionist account of lying, which broadens deception to include both explicit falsities and acts of concealment. Lackey's distinction between deceit and deception appreciates some of the nuances of lying, expanding other, more modest deceptionist theories. However, Lackey's view still overlooks lies that cannot solely be explained by conscious intent. Thus, to address these flaws, I propose a refined deceptionist view that considers both conscious and subconscious influences. Both forces may be responsible for everyday "dishonest" speech acts that are driven by the desire to evade internal conflict or emotional discomfort, not to mislead others. By integrating insights from psychology—especially the roles of self-deception and cognitive dissonance—this paper reimagines lying as a complex speech act that mediates between conscious assertion and subconscious self-preservation. Ultimately, I argue that a deceptionist theory informed by psychology more closely accounts for the blurred boundaries between lying to others and lying to oneself.

Traditionally, language philosophers have prioritized deceptive intent to distinguish lying from other types of non-alethic discourse, such as bullshit or falsity. Whereas traditional deceptionists consider intent to deceive to be a necessary condition of lying, non-deceptionists do not and have provided several accounts against this view. However, in this paper, I will consider only the deceptionist perspective. In particular, I will examine and develop Jennifer Lackey's revised deceptionist approach, which extends the traditional view to acknowledge the disconnect between personal belief and assertions. However, this view still fails to account for shame-motivated lies, self-deception, and subconscious intentions. Therefore, a deceptionist theory that considers the many practical functions of lies as speech acts would better appreciate the profound nuance of lying from a psychological perspective.

By elaborating on the definition of deception, Lackey addresses more cases of lying than pre-existing views. The traditional deceptionist approach applies the following princi-

ples to categorize a lie. Under this view, *A* lies to *B* about *p* iff:

I) *A* states that *p*
&
II) *A* believes that *p* is false
&
III) *A* intends to deceive *B* in stating that *p*.

In "Lies and Deception: An Unhappy Divorce," Lackey notes that this traditional theory employs a limited definition of deception, leaving it vulnerable to non-deceptionist rebuttals. However, she still maintains a version of deceptive intent in her revision. To broaden the scope, Lackey distinguishes 'deceit' from 'deception.' While deceit is marked by an intent to inspire a false belief, Lackey says, deception involves an intent to conceal information or evidence.[1] In her adaptation of deceptionism, Lackey incorporates her broader view of what it *means* to be deceptive in principle III:

I) *A* states that *p*
&
II) *A* believes that *p* is false
&
III) *A* intends to be deceptive to *B* in stating that *p*, meaning that *A*
  i) intends to deceive
  or
  ii) intends to conceal information or evidence.

This revision regards both explicit falsities and the act of keeping secrets as lies. In her third condition, Lackey alludes to Paul Grice's work on conversational norms, which outlines four maxims for cooperation: Quantity (say just enough), Quality (say what you believe to be true), Relevance (be relevant), and Manner (be clear, brief, orderly, etc.). While traditional deceptionists describe lies as violations of Quality in principle III, Lackey annexes the perversion of Relevance (ii) via concealing pertinent content as another form of deception. This distinction is significant because it includes more covert forms of lying, such as cases where the speaker intentionally avoids sharing relevant information, though they may never explicitly contradict that information with what they *do* say. As the act of keeping secrets is often considered a lie in colloquial use, Lackey's expansion feels more natural and aligned with what we intuitively perceive as lies. Suppose a child steals a cookie from the kitchen, knowing her father would reprimand her if he found out. When her unknowing father casually asks his daughter what she did that afternoon, she avoids any talk of cookies. While the traditional approach would not consider this a lie, the child's father might argue otherwise. This concealing of information, while covert, is intentional and active—and still a lie. Lackey's version rightfully includes such a case.

Furthermore, Lackey defends deceptionism by proposing the concept of selfless assertion—the separation of a speaker's utterance from their internal beliefs in certain contexts. If the intent to deceive is necessary, then these assertions do not count as lies, an exclusion she regards as appropriate. According to Lackey, when one's beliefs contradict their spoken statements, this does not indicate that the speaker is lying. Suppose the cookie-thief's father is devoutly religious, but he chooses not to inflict his theological views on his daughter. He

1 Jennifer Lackey, "Lies and Deception: An Unhappy Divorce," *Analysis* 73, no. 2 (April 2013): 241, https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/ant006.



may believe, wholeheartedly, that stealing is a sin that immediately warrants punishment in Hell. However, he does not tell his daughter this, instead putting her in timeout and telling her "It's OK to make mistakes"—suggestions he read in a book on parenting skills. Despite his religious beliefs, he chooses not to scare his child with damnation, instead reassuring her with a parenting cliché he may not even believe. Is his utterance a lie? Lackey would argue, no; he does not aim to inculcate a false belief in his daughter. It may be that the father trusts the authority of his parenting books and the statistical results of studies on reprimanding children in a healthy way. If the father believes he *is* lying, then he might also believe he is committing a deadly sin that will land him in Hell. This religious absolutism would be rather problematic and restrict him to act only under one viewpoint in all contexts to retain his piety. Instead, he considers his personal religious beliefs irrelevant to the context of parenting his child. Selfless assertion reaffirms the need for an intention to deceive; otherwise, such cases that lack active intent are called lies.

Lackey's proposal permits a more liberal and intuitive coexistence of personal belief and spoken words. There are many situations in which we *do* separate our personal biases from fact, acting as a vessel for the views of a third party—even an imaginary one. A ripe example is debate club. Debaters must be able to advocate for both sides of any argument, regardless of their own position on the matter. Consider a pro-life female debater arguing for abortion. While she may not agree with the perspective, she can still effectively support her claim using hard facts, reason, and other rhetorical devices. We might question her allegiance to the pro-life cause, but we would not declare that she is *lying* by participating. Instead, Lackey would say, the debater simply temporarily suspends her own beliefs, assuming the role of someone with another informed perspective. This act of simulation is allowed under Lackey's principle of deceptive intent, loosening the connection between lying and negating personal belief.

These interpretations of particular scenarios of lying are compatible with Lackey's theory. Commonly, people *do* lie by concealing information, supporting her view. Some situations, however, reveal that this perspective fails to cover all cases of lying. Let us remember the child who stole a cookie from her father, intentionally omitting this act later when telling him about her day. Assume this child concealed her actions solely because she is embarrassed to admit to them (like many children do). Even if the father knows she had taken a cookie, the daughter might still explicitly lie—screaming, "I didn't do it!" Her utterance serves not to convince the father, but to avoid the shame of admission. Lying plainly out of embarrassment does not seem to intend to conceal evidence, nor does it serve to motivate a false belief in the hearer. It is a speech act intended to protect one's dignity by denying an act they consider morally 'wrong.' One must take a roundabout, unnatural path to understand such a lie in terms of concealing evidence. It would seem, then, that Lackey's definition of being deceptive must expand to include other motives for lying, such as to avoid embarrassment or other negative feelings resulting from confession.

An apt, yet complex example of another motive is self-deception—a psychological phenomenon that Lackey and other philosophers erroneously neglect. Certain utterances can be a vehicle for lying to the self, using an interlocutor to aid in the process. At the psychological level, it appears that the speaker is motivated to influence not the hearer's cognitive state or beliefs, but their own. While intention is unclear, it still interacts subconsciously. This nuance is visible in cases that appear to fit Lackey's idea of selfless assertions, yet still covertly involve conflicting beliefs. Consider the father who 'suspends' religious fervor to be a good

parent. He appears to suppress his theological beliefs in favor of expert-recommended parenting strategies. But this swapping still involves ideology. The father is simply allowing his other belief—the belief that he should obey parenting books to be a good parent—to override his religious beliefs. Neither belief detaches or disappears from the speaker's utterance; one is simply smothered via the act of lying. Why *should* the father trust parenting books? Plenty of parents do not. The difference is in their individual beliefs in the validity of these third parties. Even if this third-party source is widely trusted and reputable, the father's commitment to it still involves belief.

Therefore, Lackey errs in eliminating the self from speech. The father's act is not truly selfless; if the father were to claim that it *is*, this might be a self-deceptive tool to protect himself from his clashing, irreconcilable values. In this regard, the lie acts as a mechanism that smooths over the rough internal disjunction between personal beliefs. It may not be possible for a human—informed by other humans through the lens of ideology and opinion—to make a truly 'selfless' assertion. Moral values and cultural norms frequently conflict, even without us knowing. It would appear, then, that the father *is* lying in some sense by favoring one belief over another; he may be lying to a *part* of himself. Although it is mostly unintentional and unconscious, this speech act is still a variation of deceiving the self.

Self-deception happens all the time. Our conscious beliefs and values often contradict our actions and utterances, and the real lie is that both polarities can coexist. So, what is the purpose of lying to the self? Often, it allows speakers to act immorally while maintaining a clear conscience or to make an exception of the self that contradicts principles they typically apply to others. However, it can also serve to resolve other internal tensions. While this mechanism fires up especially for core beliefs involving religion and culture, it is frequently, if not always, present to some degree. There are many examples that are more obvious than the father's case. Self-deception is how people who value a healthy lifestyle still lounge in bed watching TV and eating Dominos. Speech acts are often used to resolve these contradictions, with assertions such as "One more pizza slice can't hurt." The speaker may consciously disagree with that statement two hours later, when they are bedridden with a stomachache. Their utterance can then be considered a lie, which they may have consciously believed at the time, but subconsciously experienced as a contradiction to their belief that a healthy lifestyle means *not* gorging on pizza. This disconnect between belief and behavior—often called 'cognitive dissonance'—is a common example of lying to oneself.

Ultimately, Lackey's concept of lying fails to address such cases. However, self- deception is substantive to discourse regarding lies as a speech act. When a speaker utters a statement they temporarily *convince* themselves to be true, the person claims this imaginary 'other' perspective—that which was misused by Lackey's selfless assertion—as their own, even if it clashes with other beliefs. For the father, this occurs the moment he assumes the point of view of those writing his parenting books. He does not suppress his religious beliefs but rather overrides them with a lie. When a speaker's conscious beliefs converge with another perspective, yet that person subconsciously still retains opposing beliefs, the lie covers this gap in belief. It can then be said this speaker is deceiving themself—and the utterance serves as a speech act to do so. This nuance is not appreciated by Lackey's approach, which neglects the element of covert deception in both the second and third principle. She would consider cases like the father's utterance to be truthful, a fault that must be resolved in our revised theory of deception.

So how do we accommodate to this kind of lie? To respect the omnipresence of belief



in our utterances, we must specify the definition of 'belief' in our conditions. As the term can have great nuance, with multiple beliefs colliding at different levels of the speaker's awareness, this is a difficult point to capture. Additionally, as self-deception can be totally, partially, or subconsciously, one cannot neatly assign the verb 'intend' to such a case. When someone makes a statement contradicting their true beliefs in favor of another belief set, consciously believing the two align, they do not *intend* to deceive. By definition, they do not even consciously believe themselves to be lying. But we still may say that unaware speakers like the father are "lying to themselves." Furthermore, 'intention' is quite obscure across a broad range of lies, as people often do not consciously know *why* they are lying. Compulsive liars are among these cases. Those with this behavioral issue habitually lie without any concrete reason; they may not truly *intend* to deceive anyone. Rather, these speakers make random false statements on impulse, possibly to avoid the discomfort of resisting this compulsion and telling the truth. Nonetheless, regardless of the existence of an active intention to deceive, they are still lying by definition.

Respecting the nuance of intent, we might adjust principle III to include this variation of conscious or subconscious intent, annexing the additional motive of lying to evade negative emotions like shame or discomfort. Additionally, principle II must be altered to respect the plurality of beliefs that may cause a lie. With this view, the necessary and sufficient conditions of lying can be restated as:

I) *A* states that *p*
&
II) *A* believes that *p* is false by at least one personal belief
&
III) *A* intends to be deceptive to *B* in stating that *p*, meaning that *A*
  i) consciously intends to deceive
  or
  ii) consciously intends to conceal information or evidence
  or
  iii) subconsciously intends to evade negative emotions.

By altering condition II, we include cases where, from the perspective of one of *A*'s beliefs, the belief expressed in *p* is false—even if it is true according to another conflicting belief. This accommodates cases like the religious father. From the perspective of his theological views, the belief that it is OK for his child to make the mistake of stealing is false, even if this is true according to his belief in parenting books and studies. But he may not be consciously aware of this disjunction, a problem that condition III addresses. By describing iii as a genuine form of deception, III now includes cases of self-deception, lies motivated by shame, compulsive lying, and other psychological impulses influencing unconscious deception. For the father, this manifests in his subconscious intent to evade the discomfort of his two contradictory, unresolvable beliefs. For the shame-evasive child, avoiding embarrassment is an unconscious motive. And for the compulsive liar, the agitation of denying an impulse—which is akin to ignoring a nagging itch—causes a split-second decision to lie and elude that feeling. For all three examples, this revised framework accurately assesses each additional motive for lying as valid.

I anticipate other philosophers responding to this proposal with a number of reasonable questions. Why should the condition of consciousness be reserved to i) and ii), while iii)

is the only type of deception regulated by the unconscious? If *A* has to believe *p* is false by only at least one personal belief, then does the definition of lying include too broad a scope of utterances? If the subconscious can contribute to a lie, then do people lie all or most of the time? While these are justified rebuttals, they can be addressed through counterexamples that lay bare the mechanics of self-deception for further examination. For example, the latter two questions may not necessarily be problems; lying *is* a relatively common human speech act, and a theory accounting for its frequency should not be discounted simply due to its expansiveness. However, to respond to the first query, applying the subconscious to part i) and ii) may in fact broaden the scope beyond what is helpful by creating inconsistencies in reasoning. The subconscious cannot be applied to part i) as intent necessarily requires a conscious notion of purpose. It would be equally difficult to incorporate the unconscious into part ii), as people rarely include every detail possible when answering broad questions like "How was your day?" By involving the unconscious with concealment, this may mean that anything one fails to mention about their day is a lie, which does not feel true in the practical sense. Ultimately, it might be necessary to distinguish self-deception from other forms of lying to avoid merging two kinds of non-alethic discourse; perhaps lying to oneself is an entirely different species than lying to others. An expansion of this theory must address and adapt to such critiques. However, I maintain that my psychological account provides direction to better demarcate the fluid borders of a lie. To refine the overly modest deceptionist view, philosophers must consider the variation in a liar's intention and motives, as well as the influence of the subconscious.

**Works Cited**

Lackey, Jennifer. "Lies and Deception: An Unhappy Divorce." *Analysis* 73, no. 2 (April 2013): 236–248. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/ant006.