Introduction

• Most people are only at chance accuracy in detecting deception, although a few expert lie detectors have been identified (O’Sullivan & Ekman, 2004).

Many explanations for poor lie detection accuracy have been suggested, including a variety of cognitive heuristics such as anchoring, accusatory reluctance, representativeness, cognitive laziness, and the fundamental attribution error (O’Sullivan, 2003). The present study examines a different aspect of the processes involved in lie detection: reacting to realizing that one has been lied to.

• Previous research has examined reactions to lying for positivity, negativity (McCornack & Levine, 1990), wrongness, and amusement (Robinson, 1994). The present study represents the first attempt to examine a broader array of emotional reactions to a set hypothetical (vs. experienced) lie scenarios. It was hypothesized that perceiving that one has been lied to will cause a variety of negative emotional states, and that avoiding such negative emotional experiences may partially explain poor lie detection accuracy. Not acknowledging being lied to protects one from the negative emotions consequent to having been duped but also may contribute to reduced lie detection accuracy. The present study, then, examines people’s reports of their emotional reactions to varied given lie scenarios, and also preliminarily explores individual differences between those reacting to lies.

Materials and method

• Eighty-five undergraduate participants were given a paper-and-pencil battery with 10 different lie scenarios (see attached sample). At the end of each scenario description, participants were asked to write how they would feel upon discovering each lie.

• Each response was coded for emotional descriptors given. Codes were based on Shaver et al.’s (1987) hierarchical cluster analysis of ratings of similarity between 135 emotional descriptors, which was modified for the current study to include the following categories: Anger, Love, Joy, Surprise, Sadness, Fear (Shaver et al.’s original categories), Disgust, and the following word-specific categories: “Hurt,” “Upset,” “Helpless,” “Confused-Lost,” “Stupid,” “Frustrating/Responsible,” “Betrayed/Used-Cheated-Taken advantage of,” and “Other.” Words clearly conveying an emotional state but failing to name one of these categories or using a metaphor (e.g., “I would feel like trash.”) or action descriptor (e.g., “I would cry.”) were categorized together. Inter-rater reliability was high (86 - 95%).

• Participants were also asked for demographic information and whether they would have liked to find out about lie. Participants also completed the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale 12-Item Form (TRIM) (McCullough et al., 1998), Ekman’s Emotional Intensity Comparison Scale (EICS), a measure of risk-taking and honesty, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1991), and the NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1985).

• The EICS and Reactions to Lying Scenarios (with TRIM), as well as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the risk-taking/honesty measure, were given in a partially counterbalanced order.

Table 1: Correlations between external measures and emotional reactions to lie scenarios.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Love</th>
<th>Sadness</th>
<th>Fear</th>
<th>Disgust</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>EICS</th>
<th>NEO</th>
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<td>(p=.024)</td>
<td>(p=.047)</td>
<td>(p=.037)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Results

• All participants described emotions in response to at least one lie scenario. Anger and betrayal/feeling cheated were the only emotions reported for all scenarios (Fig. 1). At least 25% of participants reported anger in response to every lie. Sadness was reported by more than 10% of participants in seven of the 10 lie scenarios, feeling “stupid” in four of the 10, and feeling “hurt” in three of the 10.

• Some scenarios evoked detailed reports of extremely intense and negative reactions, while others evoked minimal emotional reactions:

• Scenarios involving infidelity (2, 3, and 6) all prompted anger in more than 45% of participants, were the only lies to feature more than 10% response of “hurt,” and were almost equal to one another in reported sadness. This level of sadness was also approximated by the scenario involving parents lying about paying for college tuition. Scenarios involving less personal lies 14, in which the President of the United States lies about reasons for war, and betrayal/feeling cheated were the only emotions reported for all scenarios.

• Reported anger was closer between the latter two scenarios (6 and 3).

• Love was reported by more than 10% of participants only in scenarios 3 (involving infidelity between a partner and one’s best friend) and 10 (involving parents lying about paying for college tuition). Scenarios involving less personal lies 14, in which the President of the United States lies about reasons for declaring war, and 8, in which a lie is told to a babysitter) had similar levels of every emotion except stupidity (higher in 8) and disgust (higher in 4).

• In addition to examining frequency distributions, individual differences between participants were examined by correlating total number of scenarios in which an emotion category was invoked (producing a score of 0-10 in each emotion category for each participant) with other measures (Table 1).

Conclusions

• Because this is the first study to measure a variety of emotional reactions to lying measured in an open-response format, results reported here are foundational for future research on the topic. All participants reported emotional responses to at least some of a variety of lie scenarios, and of each Participants used descriptors for many more negative than positive emotional states. In addition, individual differences were found to account for significant amounts of the variance of overall response tendencies. Future research may seek to explore further individual differences in reactions to lies based both on affective descriptors and on other patterns in response.

Literature cited


