
Introduction

IT is September 15, 1938, and one of the most infamous and deadly of deceptions is about to begin. Adolf Hitler, the chancellor of Germany, and Neville Chamberlain, the prime minister of Great Britain, meet for the first time. The world watches, aware that this may be the last hope of avoiding another world war. (Just six months earlier Hitler's troops had marched into Austria, annexing it to Germany. England and France had protested but done nothing further.) On September 12, three days before he is to meet Chamberlain, Hitler demands to have part of Czechoslovakia annexed to Germany and incites rioting in that country. Hitler has already secretly mobilized the German Army to attack Czechoslovakia, but his army won't be ready until the end of September.

If he can keep the Czechs from mobilizing their army for a few more weeks, Hitler will have the advantage of a surprise attack. Stalling for time, Hitler conceals his war plans from Chamberlain, giving his word that peace can be preserved if the Czechs will meet his demands. Chamberlain is fooled; he tries to persuade the Czechs not to mobilize their army while there is still a chance to negotiate with Hitler. After his meeting with Hitler, Chamberlain writes to his sister, ". . . in spite of the hardness and ruthlessness I thought I saw in his face, I got the impression that here

was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word. . . ."¹ Defending his policies against those who doubt Hitler's word, Chamberlain five days later in a speech to Parliament explains that his personal contact with Hitler allows him to say that Hitler "means what he says."²

When I began to study lies fifteen years ago I had no idea my work would have any relevance to such a lie. I thought it would be useful only for those working with mental patients. My study of lies began when the therapists I was teaching about my findings—that facial expressions are universal while gestures are specific to each culture—asked whether these nonverbal behaviors could reveal that a patient was lying.³ Usually that is not an issue, but it becomes one when patients admitted to the hospital because of suicide attempts say they are feeling much better. Every doctor dreads being fooled by a patient who commits suicide once freed from the hospital's restraint. Their practical concern raised a very fundamental question about human communication: can people, even when they are very upset, control the messages they give off, or will their nonverbal behavior leak what is concealed by their words?

I searched my films of interviews with psychiatric patients for an instance of lying. I had made these films for another purpose—to isolate expressions and gestures that might help in diagnosing the severity and type of mental disorders. Now that I was focusing upon deceit, I thought I saw signs of lying in a number of films. The problem was how to be certain. In only one case was there no doubt—because of what happened after the interview.

Mary was a forty-two-year-old housewife. The last of her three suicide attempts was quite serious. It was only an accident that someone found her before an overdose of sleeping pills killed her. Her history was not much different from that of many other women who suffer a midlife depression. The children had grown up and didn't need

her. Her husband seemed preoccupied with his work. Mary felt useless. By the time she had entered the hospital she no longer could handle the house, could not sleep well, and sat by herself crying much of the time. In her first three weeks in the hospital she received medication and group therapy. She seemed to respond very well: her manner brightened, and she no longer talked of committing suicide. In one of the interviews we filmed, Mary told the doctor how much better she felt and asked for a weekend pass. Before receiving the pass, she confessed that she had been lying to get it. She still desperately wanted to kill herself. After three more months in the hospital Mary had genuinely improved, although there was a relapse a year later. She has been out of the hospital and apparently well for many years.

The filmed interview with Mary fooled most of the young and even many of the experienced psychiatrists and psychologists to whom I showed it.⁴ We studied it for hundreds of hours, going over it again and again, inspecting each gesture and expression in slow-motion to uncover any possible clues to deceit. In a moment's pause before replying to her doctor's question about her plans for the future, we saw in slow-motion a fleeting facial expression of despair, so quick that we had missed seeing it the first few times we examined the film. Once we had the idea that concealed feelings might be evident in these very brief *micro expressions*, we searched and found many more, typically covered in an instant by a smile. We also found a *micro gesture*. When telling the doctor how well she was handling her problems Mary sometimes showed a fragment of a shrug—not the whole thing, just a part of it. She would shrug with just one hand, rotating it a bit. Or, her hands would be quiet but there would be a momentary lift of one shoulder.

We thought we saw other nonverbal clues to deceit, but

we could not be certain whether we were discovering or imagining them. Perfectly innocent behavior seems suspicious if you know someone has lied. Only objective measurement, uninfluenced by knowledge of whether a person was lying or telling the truth, could test what we found. And, many people had to be studied for us to be certain that the clues to deceit we found are not idiosyncratic. It would be simpler for the person trying to spot a lie, the lie catcher, if behaviors that betray one person's deceit are also evident when another person's lies; but the signs of deceit might be peculiar to each person. We designed an experiment modeled after Mary's lie; in which the people we studied would be strongly motivated to conceal intense negative emotions felt at the very moment of the lie. While watching a very upsetting film, which showed bloody surgical scenes, our research subjects had to conceal their true feelings of distress, pain, and revulsion and convince an interviewer, who could not see the film, that they were enjoying a film of beautiful flowers. (Our findings are described in chapters 4 and 5).

Not more than a year went by—when we were still at the beginning stages of our lying experiments—before people interested in quite different lies sought me out. Could my findings or methods be used to catch Americans suspected of being spies? Over the years, as our findings on behavioral clues to deceit between patient and doctor were published in scientific journals, the inquiries increased. How about training those who guard cabinet officers so they could spot a terrorist bent on assassination from his gait or gestures? Can we show the FBI how to train police officers to spot better whether a suspect is lying? I was no longer surprised when asked if I could help summit negotiators spot their opponents' lies, or if I could tell from the photographs of Patricia Hearst taken while she participated in a bank hold-up if she was a willing or unwilling

robber. In the last five years the interest has become international. I have been approached by representatives of two countries friendly to the United States; and, when I lectured in the Soviet Union, by officials who said they were from an "electrical institute" responsible for interrogations.

I was not pleased with this interest, afraid my findings would be misused, accepted uncritically, used too eagerly. I felt that nonverbal clues to deceit would not often be evident in most criminal, political, or diplomatic deceptions. It was only a hunch. When asked, I couldn't explain why. To do so I had to learn why people *ever do* make mistakes when they lie. Not all lies fail. Some are performed flawlessly. Behavioral clues to deceit—a facial expression held too long, a missing gesture, a momentary turn in the voice—don't have to happen. There need be no telltale signs that betray the liar. Yet I knew that there can be clues to deceit. The most determined liars may be betrayed by their own behavior. Knowing when lies will succeed and when they will fail, how to spot clues to deceit and when it isn't worth trying, meant understanding how lies, liars, and lie catchers differ.

Hitler's lie to Chamberlain and Mary's to her doctor both involved deadly serious deceptions, in which the stakes were life itself. Both people concealed future plans, and both put on emotions they didn't feel as a central part of their lie. But the differences between their lies are enormous. Hitler is an example of what I later describe as a natural performer. Apart from his inherent skill, Hitler was also much more practiced in deceit than Mary.

Hitler also had the advantage of deceiving someone who wanted to be misled. Chamberlain was a willing victim who wanted to believe Hitler's lie that he did not plan war if only the borders of Czechoslovakia were redrawn to meet his demands. Otherwise Chamberlain would have

had to admit that his policy of appeasement had failed and in fact weakened his country. On a related matter, the political scientist Roberta Wohlstetter made this point in her analysis of cheating in arms races. Discussing Germany's violations of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1936, she said: ". . . the cheater and the side cheated . . . have a stake in allowing the error to persist. They both need to preserve the illusion that the agreement has not been violated. The British fear of an arms race, manipulated so skillfully by Hitler, led to a Naval Agreement, in which the British (without consulting the French or the Italians) tacitly revised the Versailles Treaty; and London's fear of an arms race prevented it from recognizing or acknowledging violations of the new agreement."⁵

In many deceptions the victim overlooks the liar's mistakes, giving ambiguous behavior the best reading, collusively helping to maintain the lie, to avoid the terrible consequences of uncovering the lie. By overlooking the signs of his wife's affairs a husband may at least postpone the humiliation of being exposed as a cuckold and the possibility of divorce. Even if he admits her infidelity to himself he may cooperate in not uncovering her lies to avoid having to acknowledge it to her or to avoid a showdown. As long as nothing is said he can still have the hope, no matter how small, that he may have misjudged her, that she may not be having an affair.

Not every victim is so willing. At times, there is nothing to be gained by ignoring or cooperating with a lie. Some lie catchers gain only by exposing a lie and if they do so lose nothing. The police interrogator only loses if he is taken in, as does the bank loan officer, and both do their job well only by uncovering the liar and recognizing the truthful. Often, the victim gains *and* loses by being misled or by uncovering the lie; but the two may not be evenly balanced. Mary's doctor had only a small stake in believing her lie.

If she was no longer depressed he could take some credit for effecting her recovery. But if she was not truly recovered he suffered no great loss. Unlike Chamberlain, the doctor's entire career was not at stake; he had not publicly committed himself, despite challenge, to a judgment that could be proven wrong if he uncovered her lie. He had much more to lose by being taken in than he could gain if she was being truthful. In 1938 it was too late for Chamberlain. If Hitler were untrustworthy, if there was no way to stop his aggression short of war, then Chamberlain's career was over, and the war he thought he could prevent would begin.

Quite apart from Chamberlain's motives to believe Hitler, the lie was likely to succeed because no strong emotions had to be concealed. Most often lies fail because some sign of an emotion being concealed leaks. The stronger the emotions involved in the lie, and the greater the number of different emotions, the more likely it is that the lie will be betrayed by some form of behavioral leakage. Hitler certainly would not have felt guilt, an emotion that is doubly problematic for the liar—not only may signs of it leak, but the torment of guilt may motivate the liar to make mistakes so as to be caught. Hitler would not feel guilty about lying to the representative of the country that had in his lifetime imposed a humiliating military defeat on Germany. Unlike Mary, Hitler did not share important social values with his victim; he did not respect or admire him. Mary had to conceal strong emotions for her lie to succeed. She had to suppress the despair and anguish motivating her suicide wish. And, Mary had every reason to feel guilty about lying to her doctors: she liked them, admired them, and knew they only wanted to help her.

For all these reasons and more it usually will be far easier to spot behavioral clues to deceit in a suicidal patient or a lying spouse than in a diplomat or a double agent. But

not every diplomat, criminal, or intelligence agent is a perfect liar. Mistakes are sometimes made. The analyses I have made allow one to estimate the chances of being able to spot clues to deceit or being misled. My message to those interested in catching political or criminal lies is not to ignore behavioral clues but to be more cautious, more aware of the limitations and the opportunities.

While there is some evidence about the behavioral clues to deceit, it is not yet firmly established. My analyses of how and why people lie and when lies fail fit the evidence from experiments on lying and from historical and fictional accounts. But there has not yet been time to see how these theories will weather the test of further experiment and critical argument. I decided not to wait until all the answers are in to write this book, because those trying to catch liars are not waiting. Where the stakes for a mistake are the highest, attempts already are being made to spot nonverbal clues to deceit. "Experts" unfamiliar with all the evidence and arguments are offering their services as lie spotters in jury selection and employment interviews. Some policemen and professional polygraphers using the "lie detector" are taught about the nonverbal clues to deceit. About half the information in the training materials I have seen is wrong. Customs officials attend a special course in spotting the nonverbal clues of smuggling. I am told that my work is being used in this training, but repeated inquiries to see the training materials have only brought repeated promises of "we'll get right back to you." It is also impossible to know what the intelligence agencies are doing, for their work is secret. I know they are interested, for the Defense Department six years ago invited me to explain to them what I thought were the opportunities and the hazards. Since then I have heard rumors that work is proceeding, and I have picked up the names of some of the people who may be involved. My letters to them have

gone unanswered, or the answer given is that I can't be told anything. I worry about "experts" who go unchallenged by public scrutiny and the carping critics of the scientific community. This book will make clear to them and those for whom they work my view of both the hazards and the opportunities.

My purpose in writing this book is not to address only those concerned with deadly deceptions. I have come to believe that examining how and when people lie and tell the truth can help in understanding many human relationships. There are few that do not involve deceit or at least the possibility of it. Parents lie to their children about sex to spare them knowledge they think their children are not ready for, just as their children, when they become adolescents, will conceal sexual adventures because the parents won't understand. Lies occur between friends (even your best friend won't tell you), teacher and student, doctor and patient, husband and wife, witness and jury, lawyer and client, salesperson and customer.

Lying is such a central characteristic of life that better understanding of it is relevant to almost all human affairs. Some might shudder at that statement, because they view lying as reprehensible. I do not share that view. It is too simple to hold that no one in any relationship must ever lie; nor would I prescribe that every lie be unmasked. Advice columnist Ann Landers has a point when she advises her readers that truth can be used as a bludgeon, cruelly inflicting pain. Lies can be cruel too, but all lies aren't. Some lies, many fewer than liars will claim, are altruistic. Some social relationships are enjoyed because of the myths they preserve. But no liar should presume too easily that a victim desires to be misled. And no lie catcher should too easily presume the right to expose every lie. Some lies are harmless, even humane. Unmasking certain lies may humiliate the victim or a third party. But all of this must be consid-

ered in more detail, and after many other issues have been discussed. The place to begin is with a definition of lying, a description of the two basic forms of lying, and the two kinds of clues to deceit.