

What's in a Lie?

As time goes on I become less confident in people's ability to spot a lie.

I was a skilled liar growing up. I had no problem looking you straight in the eye and with every emotion and conviction I could possibly display, I would lie to your face without the slightest feeling of guilt. However, as my childhood went on I realized there were many holes in my strategies. I got caught, not because I lacked sincerity, but because of a problem creating plausibility in motive and narrative. My lies fell apart under interrogation. What this made me do was refine my strategies.

I added subtlety and embarrassment to my lies. Rather than telling your teacher you are sick and coughing a couple of times, you could get a little quite, infer a desire for privacy, and then tell them that it hurt when you peed. The teacher doesn't expect you to be playing several moves ahead and will believe you.

The more complex the lie, the harder it is to create a believable narrative. As I became I teen I abandoned lies that were too complex since I knew I lacked the preparation to carry them out. However, I always thought about the cost/benefit of my lies and analyzed the plausibility of carrying them out. At the time I found them highly valuable, and in retrospect I vastly underestimated the value of lying ... I wish I honed my skills better.

As an adult this all evaporated over time. I choose my associations and I have little reason to lie. I much prefer to surround myself with people and situations that treat me with respect and value me for who I am without moralizations. However, I have been learning about lying from other angles as an adult. Poker, parenting and employing people has added a lot of insight on top of studying psychology and evolution.

One thing I've learned is that catching people in lies isn't about a secret trick. It is about either having evidence that runs contrary to their narrative, or by analyzing their narrative one step beyond what they prepared for.

In poker there are a lot of physical, vocal and subconscious tells that can lend insight to the psychological demeanor of your opponent. People often look tense when they are anxious (bluffing), and feel relaxed when they are comfortable (have a great hand). People swallow when they are being judged and lying. People's hands shake when they bluff. People make jokes and are lighthearted when they have a great hand. People bet weak when they have a weak hand at key spots, and put all their money in with strong hands. All of this is true, but it is just the first step.

The people who have studied poker to any degree or have played a bit has learned these things. They have either decided to mask them, or add vastly more complexity to their lies.

When I make a large bluff, I often sit stoically for 20 seconds, then, I act like something catches my eye and breaks me into a lighthearted demeanor and maybe I will make a joke about it. This makes it so the other people believe they found a piece of information I didn't mean to let out. They think I have a very strong hand if I can feel so lighthearted the longer I am being put in the hot seat. While if I make a big bet with a great hand I will be stoic for 20 seconds, then swallow and do very subtle things to hide. Of course, if anyone knows I am playing these moves they can possibly get tells on this, but I try to stick one move ahead of my opponents and add complexity and subtlety to the point that they don't suspect intent. Some players I play with regularly, I just stay stoic the whole time.

There is no golden bullet in poker. The best poker players only use tells as a small supplement to their balanced poker playing. The best poker players focus much more on the cards, ranges, and basic psychology vastly more than physical tells. Why? Because there is no golden bullet for seeing lies. I honestly believe there are significantly more mistakes at the poker table in the belief that you got some psychological tell, rather than inadvertently giving away accurate information. Lies are as good as the knowledge and preparation that went into them. Some lies are simple, and some lies are incredibly intricate. Some of the best lies are complex wrapped up in the guise of simplicity.

Historically, slaves often wanted to portray themselves as dumb to their masters. Why? Because if you are playing chess when someone else believes you are playing checkers, you will have the upper hand. Historically, wives did the same thing to their husbands. Often kids do this to their parents. Telling people you are playing one or two levels deep makes playing six levels deep highly effective.

I read a while back that an easy way to spot a lie in a certain circumstance is to accuse someone of whatever you suspect about them right from the front. "Did you steal the cookie from the cookie jar?" Honest/innocent people say "No" and then might discuss things. Guilty people obfuscate and don't answer directly "who me?" This is an attempt to refocus the discussion, and an innocent person isn't thinking that far ahead. However, now that I told you this, you can think one step ahead of this knowledge. This means this trick won't work on you if you are able to remember this paragraph.

Since the Kavanaugh hearings I have heard people proclaim they believe or don't believe people. I think all of them are full of shit. I think I am vastly better at spotting lies than most people and I have absolutely no idea who is lying or telling the truth. These are two incredibly intelligent people with highly complicated lives and highly complicated minds. They weren't born yesterday. They know what they think. They know what you think. They know what you think they are thinking. They know what you are thinking about what they are thinking they are thinking you are thinking. Etc, etc.

I believe absolutely nothing that exits people's mouths just because they want to say it.

People don't say things because it is truthful, people say things because they believe it will benefit them to say it. If you have a good culture where honesty is beneficial, you are more likely to get honesty. A courtroom, a classroom, a senate committee and a poker table aren't these environments.

The only way to really spot a lie is by getting one step beyond the preparation of a person (interrogation), and to have evidence that runs contrary to their narrative. Everyone proclaiming they know who lies or tells the truth outside of this is usually just proclaiming their dumb arrogance.