LYING IN MOBILE PHONE CONVERSATIONS: AN EMERGING SOCIAL SYNDROME IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of telling lies during mobile phone conversations. This behavioral pattern appears to manifest very often in mobile phone conversations among Nigerians of different sex, age group and class. A total of 500 (200 males and 300 females) respondents made up of university undergraduates and lecturers from Imo State University, Uturu Okigwe were surveyed using convenience sampling technique to ascertain whether they tell lies during conversations using mobile phones. The behaviour described as “telling lies” was measured using a Social Media Scale developed for this study. The survey method was adopted and data was collected using questionnaire. Study data was analyzed using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of unequal sample sizes. Results indicate among others that there is no significant difference in the perception of married and single; male and female individuals towards telling lies via the mobile phone. Interestingly, further findings also reveal that respondents generally agree as in literature that “lying is an unavoidable part of human nature”.

KEY WORDS: Mobile Phone, Social Media, Telling Lies, Social Media Scale

INTRODUCTION

Deception which connotes telling lies is one of the most significant and pervasive social phenomena of our age (Miller & Stiff, 1993). Lying is probably one of the most common acts that human beings engage in. There is a saying that ‘lying is an unavoidable part of human nature’, so this phenomenon is worth spending time thinking and studying about. Most people would say that lying is always wrong, except when there is a compelling reason to do so - which means that lying is not always wrong. Abraham whom the Holy Bible described as “God’s friend” lied to a certain King about Sarah his wife saying that “she is his sister” because he reasoned that the King might kill him in other to covert his wife. Bok (1978) defines a lie as an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement. Every liar says the opposite of what he thinks in his heart, with the purpose to deceive (Augustine, 1952). What everyone virtually agrees with is this, to lie, you have to say something that you believe is false (Mahon, 2008). As George Costanza puts it, “it is not a lie if you believe it”. But this cannot be all that there is to lying. For example, actors on stage say things that they do not believe, but they are not lying. Also, when someone says sarcastically, “nice job, genius,” she says something that she does not literally believe, presumably without lying.

Amongst philosophers, the traditional definition is that you lie if you assert something that you believe to be false with the intent to deceive (Augustine, 1952; Williams, 2002;
Mahon, 2008). For example, when Pinocchio explained why he was not in school by saying that “two big monsters tied me in a big sack”, he intended to deceive. According to the traditional definition, it is this intent to deceive that makes Pinocchio’s statement a lie. We will call such assertions that are (a) believed by the speaker to be false and (b) intended by the speaker to deceive their audience straight-forward lies.

However, while the intent to deceive may be a regular feature of lies, it is not clear that it is a necessary one. For example, what is called bald-faced lies (Sorensen 2007) are not attempts to deceive. These are cases where a speaker “goes on the record” with something even though everybody knows that it is false. Sorensen (2007) does also suggest that bald-faced lies might be considered morally contemptible, not because they are lies, but because they are symptoms of other moral failures. Lying is a form of deception, but not all forms of deception are lies. Lying is giving some information while believing it to be untrue, intending to deceive by doing so.

A lie has three essential features:

i. A lie communicates some information
ii. The liar intends to deceive or mislead
iii. The liar believes that what they are ’saying’ is not true

There are some features that people think are part of lying which are not necessarily the case:

i. A lie does not have to give false information
ii. A lie does not have to be told with a bad or malicious intent - white lies are examples of lies told with good intention.

Our definition of a lie says that what makes a lie a lie is that the liar intends to deceive (or at least to mislead) the person they are lying to. It says nothing about whether the information given is true or false.

This definition covers ordinary cases of lying and these two odd cases as well:

i. The case where someone inadvertently gives true information while believing that they’re telling a lie. For example, because I want the last helping of pie for myself, so I lie to you that there is a worm in it. When I later eat that piece of pie I discover that there really is a worm in it
ii. The case where nobody is deceived by me because they know that I always tell lies.

The most common forms of deception include white lies, cover-ups, bluffing, euphemisms, masks, pretenses, tall-tales, put-ons, hoaxes, and so on.

A white lie is a lie that is not intended to harm the person being lied to - indeed it is often intended to benefit them by making them feel good, or preventing their feelings being hurt.

For example, I go to a dinner party and my hostess asks how I like the dish she's prepared. The true answer happens to be 'I think it tastes horrible' but if I say 'it's delicious' though a white lie, but that will be what most people would approve of and would regard telling the truth at that instance as a bad thing to do. (However, this lie does do some harm – the hostess may feel encouraged to make that same dish again because of the lie, and so future guests will have to suffer from its horrible taste.) White lies usually include most of these features:

i. They are not intended to harm the person lied to
ii. They are not intended to harm anyone else
iii. They don't actually harm anyone else (or only do trivial harm)
iv. The lie is about something morally trivial
v. They are not told so often that they devalue what you say. White lie is not a totally good thing:
vi. The person being lied to is deprived of information that they might find useful even if they found it unpleasant
vii. The person telling the lies may find it easier to lie in future and they may come to blur the boundary between white lies and more blameworthy lies
viii. White lies weaken the general presumption that lying is wrong and may make it easier for a person to tell lies that are intended to harm someone, or may make it easier to avoid telling the truth that need to be told - for example, when giving a performance evaluation it is more comfortable not to tell someone that their work is sub-standard.

The Global System of Mobile Communication (GSM) was introduced in Nigeria in August 2001. Before then, only about half a million Nigerians had phone lines in a country of about 120 million people. The number of phone users rose to 1.6 million within the first sixteen months of GSM and to 3.8 million within three years (VOA, 2002; Ndukwe, 2006). By 2008, the number has grown to over 62 million (ITU, 2009).

Expectedly, the introduction and rise in Nigeria have attracted the attention of scholars and commentators who have attempted to contextualize its evolution (Onwumechili, 2009), investigate its adoption and use (Akande and Ajao, 2006; Olorunnisola, 2009) and articulate its impact on culture, society and the economy (VOA, 2002; Ndukwe, 2006; Olorunnisola, 2009). Some have also attempted to draw attention to the abuse of the mobile phone in Nigeria, especially its use for fraud and deceit (Oyimnatumba, 2008; Adebayo, 2008; Olaleye & Okafor, 2009; Dempsey, 1999). But these are based on opinions and reportorial investigations rather than on guided empirical investigation. Put simply, empirical investigation into mobile phone deception and fraud in Nigeria is lacking.

In this study, the researchers intend to find answers to the following problems:
The Four Factor Theory has been adopted to anchor this study: This theory stated that there are four primary changes in a person when he or she is lying. This theory gained immense importance and generated a huge interest. Also, it was the basis of many further studies and also led to the research of instruments which can detect these changes.

According to this theory, there are four major changes that occur in an individual who is lying:

**Arousal:** Lying causes anxiety and arousal, either because of dissonance at conflicting values and behavior, or due to fear of getting caught. This can be detected via lie detectors, speech errors and hesitations, repetitions, fidgeting and displacement activity, blinking, higher vocal pitch and pupil dilation. When a person lies, the individual gets aroused. The individual becomes anxious. The theory also states the reasons for this anxiousness and arousal. This is because of the fear in the individuals mind that his lie may not be accepted and he may get caught. It was also observed that in some cases the arousal was caused because of conflicting thoughts in the individuals mind. Now these lead researchers to find out instruments to detect this arousal. Thus our lie detectors and speech error detectors were born. Also, during the questioning the individual is carefully observed if he fidgets or is restless. Pupil dilation is also a very common arousal. This is why poker player wear dark shades to conceal the pupil dilation when they are lying.

**Behavior control:** We try to control body language that might give us away. In fact this is impossible and leakage often occurs, for example where we are controlling our face and our legs give us away.

The second point is perhaps a counter to the first which can help detect the lie. When a person becomes conscious that he has become nervous and aroused and is fidgeting because of this, he tries to control his movements. This is a very common give away. People try to control their behavior, movements, and facial expressions. It becomes very obvious that the person is behaving in an un-natural way and can help to find out the lie.

**Emotion:** Our emotions change when we are lying. For example, duping delight, where the liar is secretly pleased at their perceived success. Guilt may also appear. Micro-motions in facial muscles can betray hidden emotions.

The third important give away is emotions. When we are lying under tensions our emotions are at the peak and we are very expressive. Even small changes in our thoughts are given away on our face and through our movements. Like if the liar is guilty about his actions but doesn’t want to accept them, the guilt is clearly visible on the face. Similarly, when a liar feels he is getting away with the lie, there is an immediate look of relief. Many a times this technique is used. Sometimes the interviewer even lets the individual feel that he has gotten away with the lie and catches him as soon as he sees some relief or happiness.

**Thinking:** To lie, we usually have to think a lot harder, such as to ensure coherence in our arguments. This leads us to take longer in speaking with more pauses. We also tend to use more generalities to avoid getting trapped by specific detail.

The fourth important change is our speech. Usually when we are making up an extempore lie, we think hard to make a perfect lie. This reflects in out speech. The pauses between words also increase as also the un-sureness in our tone. What we speak also changes. We tend to speak more in general and do not be specific. What is termed as ‘beating around the bush’ so that we do not get caught in the details?

**Interpersonal Deception Theory**

Lying happens in a dynamic interaction where liar and listener dance around one another, changing their thoughts in response to each other’s moves. Liar behavior includes:

**Manipulating information:** to distance themselves from the message, so if the message is found to be false, they can extricate themselves. Thus they use vague generalities and talk about other people.

**Strategically control behavior:** to suppress signals that might indicate that they are lying. For example their face may be more impassive and body more rigid.

**Image management:** for example by smiling and nodding more. For example, watch small children who have found out about lying. They point at their siblings, put on their best ‘innocent’ expression, hold their hands behind their backs. At that age they are very flexible and learn fast.

Before long they can pull the wool very well over their parent’s eyes. To detect liars, watch for the above behavioral patterns. People who are liars themselves tend to be better at detecting lying because they know the techniques better.

This study is anchored on selected propositions of David Buller and Jadee Burgoon’s interpersonal deception theory. Though the theory was meant to describe face-to-face interpersonal deception, suggestions have been made as to its relevance in mediated—such as telephone—deception as well (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005). Deception, according to the theory, involves “deliberate manipulation of information, behavior and image in order to lead another person to a false belief and conclusion” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). When deceivers lie, they employ one of these three strategies: falsification, concealment or equivocation.
Falsification is telling outright untruths; concealment involves telling only a part of the truth while equivocation is being totally vague.

The theory holds that deception succeeds because of our persistent expectation that people will tell the truth. This is known as truth bias. Truth bias is linked with interactivity and familiarity: “people who know and like each other are particularly resistant to doubting each other’s words”. Even when the deceiver manifests leakage (unconscious non-verbal cues that signal an internal state), such cues are ignored by the respondent. Deception also succeeds as a result of deceivers’ skills. Skilled deceivers make more strategic moves and appear more believable. Deception will more likely fail when deceivers deceive for self-gain for such deceivers often have a harder time hiding their true intention than altruistic deceivers (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005).

**EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

Empirical data supported neither of the predictions: the highest rate of deception (lies per social interaction) is found to occur on phones while the lowest is in email (Hancock et al., 2004). DePaulo and her colleagues employed a one week diary study to record people’s everyday communication, specifically deceptive communication (DePaulo et al., 1996). Their record suggests that people tell approximately two lies per day on average and that approximately 20% to 33% of our daily interactions are deceptive. DePaulo et al. (1996) studied communication through face-to-face, telephone, and written words, and the results indicate a related pattern: telephone conversations are the most likely to involve deceptive communication and face-to-face conversation is the least likely for deception. In the study by Turner et al. (1975), it was found that most lies are white lies that are told to save faces (27.7%) or to avoid possible tension and conflicts (22.2%). White lies are lies that are told for a “good reason”, for instance, to prevent harm to others, to save other people’s face, or just to make people happy. This tendency is also observed in DePaulo et al. (1988) research where the authors believe that everyday lies are mostly mundane ones, with little or no serious consequences on both sides. Acts of deception has recorded in every culture (Lewis & Saarni, 1993). In a massive Reader’s Digest poll (Kalish, 2004), 93% of participants report one or more dishonest acts at their work or school. Also 93% admit lying in the market place. Studies have shown that examining documents for contradictions has been more reliable than focusing on non-verbal cues. In fact, they have found that evaluators were best at lie detection when they were blind to nonverbal cues.

In Nigeria, the peculiar environment of mobile phone services has added to the incidence and success of mobile phone deception. Subscribers complain about high cost of calls and epileptic network connection (Adekeye, 2008). Mobile phone deception thrives in Nigeria also partly because the chances that perpetrators would be detected and prosecuted are slim. Deceivers claim to be where they should be because they want to be taken as responsible and time-conscious people. They claim to be too far away when they do not want to interact with the respondent but still want to give the impression of being friends and a willing help (Ajomobi, 2012).

More than any other category, lies told about the location of the speaker are the most common. This was not just because it was the kind of lies most easy to detect by our participant observers; it was the first category of lies to be mentioned by discussants and interviewees, and the category they considered to be the most prevalent. Most discussants and interviewees confessed to telling this kind of lie regularly, and some justified it (Ajomobi, 2012).

Among the lies to family members (parents), it is suggested that most of the lies were about money, alcohol/drugs, friends, dating, parties, and sex (Jensen et al., 2004). While among the lies to friends or other people, an anonymous study with college student subjects suggest that a significant 92% of participants have reported that they once told lies to current or potential sex partners (Knox et al., 1993). Indeed, we suspect that the initial plausibility and persistent popularity of the traditional definition, to some extent, can be chalked up to the centrality of moral concerns in considering the phenomenon of ‘lying.’

Haselton et al. (2005) investigated sex differences in emotional reactions toward various kinds of deception, specifically, in romantic relationships. Discussing deception in romantic relationships, the authors predicted and found that men and women, seeking long-term or short-term relationships, would have different patterns of emotional reactions toward different types of lies. For instance, seeking long-term relationships, men would be more upset if women lied about their fertility, but women would be more upset when men lied about their resource, status, and commitment, both before and after having sex. When seeking short-term relationships, men found lies about age more upsetting, while women would be more upset with lies denying commitment to others. Several additional studies touched on sex effects in deception detection while not studying them directly. Although results are mixed, most suggest that sex did not correlate with people’s ability in detecting deception (Aamodt & Custer, 2006).

**Hypotheses**

i. Ho1: The Perception of married and single people will not differ in lies telling through mobile phone.

ii. Ho2: Male and Female will not differ in their perception of telling lies via mobile phone.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**Participants and Research Instrument**

Five hundred (200 males and 300 females) participants which comprised 400 undergraduates and 100 lecturers from Imo State University, Imo State-Nigeria fully completed the Social Media Scale questionnaires. They were selected through stratified convenient technique. Their age ranged from 18 to 45 years and with the mean age of 21 years. Stratified convenient sampling techniques
were adopted in selecting the participants. And Out of 700 questionnaires distributed in Imo state university, five hundred participants returned and fully completed their questionnaires.

A 20 item inventory in Likert format (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree) called Social Media Scale (SMS) was used to measure the perception towards lie telling via mobile phone. Each item is scored on 1-5 point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). SMS consists of 5-items that measures perception towards lie telling via mobile phone and 15-items that measures the good, bad, and ugly sides of the social media. The validity of the scale was established using the process of factor Analysis and the reliability was established using Cronbach Alpha; with the co-efficient of r = 0.83 which implies 83.0% of internal reliability of the responses obtained in the study.

**Survey Design & Statistical Analysis**

A survey design was used in this research. The statistics used was 2*2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) of unequal sample sizes.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

**Result of Data Analysis**

**Table 1:** The result of the ANOVA analysis on testing the perception of married and single people with regards to lie telling through mobile phone and Male and Female perception of telling lies via mobile phone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (marital status)</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (gender)</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB (interaction)</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within (S/AB)</td>
<td>506.11</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>14.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calculated F-value (marital status) = 0.09  
Calculated F-value (gender) = 0.29  
Critical F-value = 3.23  
Level of significance = p<0.05

**Interpretation**

The result of the analysis obtained in Table 1 found an F-value (marital status) of 0.09 which is less than the critical F-value of 3.23 at the probability level of < 0.05. This result implies accepting the null hypothesis that the perception of married and single people do not significantly differ in lies telling through mobile phone assuming a 95% confidence level.

Also, the ANOVA result in Table 1 found an F-value (gender) of 0.29 which is less than the critical F-value of 3.23 at the probability level of < 0.05. This result implies accepting the null hypothesis that Male and Female do not significantly differ in their perception of telling lies through mobile phone assuming a 95% confidence level.

**Discussion**

The result of the analysis accepted the null hypothesis that the perception of married and single people do not significantly differ in lies telling through mobile phone assuming a 95% confidence level. Also, it was found that Male and Female do not significantly differ in their perception of telling lies through mobile phone assuming a 95% confidence level.

According to the finding, married and single people's perception did not differ, thus we can conclude that marital status does not affect perception of people toward lying on mobile phone.

Also, in line with the findings that Male and Female do not significantly differ in their perception of telling lies through mobile phone, Aamodt & Custer (2006) in their study found that sex did not correlate with people's ability in detecting deception. While among the lies to friends or other people, an anonymous study with college student subjects suggest that a significant 92% of participants have reported that they once told lies to current or potential sex partners (Knox, et al., 1993). DePaulo et al. (1996) in their study suggests that people tell approximately two lies per day on average and that approximately 20% to 33% of our daily interactions are deceptive. DePaulo et al. (1996)
studied communication through face-to-face, telephone, and written words and the results indicate a related pattern: telephone conversations are the most likely to involve deceptive communication and face-to-face conversations is the least likely for deception. According to study by Turner et al. (1975), most lies are white lies which are often told to save faces (27.7%) or to avoid possible tension and conflicts (22.2%). White lies are lies that are told for “good reason, for instance, to prevent harm to others, to save other people’s face, or just to make people happy. The success of mobile phone deception in Nigeria is not so much the product of truth bias or respondent greed as it is the product of the deceivers’ skill in exploiting the nature of the mobile phone, the peculiar Nigerian mobile phone environment, and certain socio-cultural factors. The socio-cultural factors are in themselves not deceptive but deceivers have exploited them for self-gain. However, deception is more likely to be successful in mobile phone situations because respondents do not have instant access to a large part of the deceivers’ non-verbal cues.

CONCLUSION

This study raises a lot of questions which further studies should attempt to answer. For example, what makes the Nigerian mobile phone environment peculiar? What differences exist between the Nigerian mobile phone environment and other society’s mobile phone environment? Is the preponderance of lies in mobile phone conversations in Nigeria an indication of the level of lying in the Nigerian society in general? What are the likely consequences of lying in mobile phone conversations? Is lying in mobile phone conversations common in other African countries? Is lying in mobile phone conversations a worldwide phenomenon or is it restricted to race, tribe, religion, class or level of education? Are there socio-cultural factors that have been implicated as responsible for encouraging lying in mobile phone conversations across cultures? Etc.

Certainly, there is the need for cross-cultural studies to help provide answers to these and many other questions surrounding the phenomenon of lying in mobile phone conversations. In addition, the limitation of the study lies mainly in the fact that the study sample was small in relation to the total population of Nigerian students, lecturers and teachers. An increase in the sample size is recommended.

REFERENCES


