

CHAPTER I

A WORLD AWASH WITH LIARS

Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides.

—André Malraux

In 2009, during President Barack Obama's joint address to Congress, Representative Joe Wilson did not agree with what the president was saying about health care reforms. In front of everyone seated in the Chamber of the House of Representatives and in front of a live television audience of millions, Wilson yelled at the president, "You lie!" The insult echoed through the Chamber and into Americans' living rooms. Had Wilson cast such an aspersion 2 centuries earlier, he would have been risking his own life (Parker, 2009). Earlier in America's history, an accusation that someone was a liar was the central insult leading to most duels (Greenberg, 1990). The prevailing view was that, among men of honor, to have one's honesty and integrity questioned was the gravest of all insults. That form of tarnish on one's reputation was so damaging in social and business matters that one was left with no option other than to strike down the person who had defamed them. If someone accused another of being a liar, the recourse was to defend one's character by dutifully attempting to kill the accuser.

Representative Wilson's accusation did not lead to a duel. Admonished by politicians from both parties, Wilson quickly and publicly apologized for his insult, seeking forgiveness for his impropriety. President Obama noted the offense and accepted Wilson's

apology, saying, “I’m a big believer that we all make mistakes. . . . He apologized quickly and without equivocation and I’m appreciative of that.” There would be no need for firearms in settling the matter.

In this book, we throw around the label “big liar” without much consideration of honor, reputation, and hurt feelings, and without much fear of being challenged to a duel when we pin the label on some people. These days, claims of truth and falsity tend to be resolved through open debate, and disputes about whether someone is a liar or a straight shooter generally don’t devolve into mortal combat. Fortunately, we live in a time in which we can openly consider the facts about lying and liars. We can discuss who the big liars are, and we can examine why they are so dishonest. Lying is now an open topic of scientific inquiry.

When was the last time you told a lie? What was the lie about? Did you tell your boss that you were sick at home when you were actually relaxing poolside? Did you tell your spouse that you liked something more than you really did? Did you say to someone, “It’s good to see you too,” when it wasn’t particularly good to see them? Most people are sporadic liars. Whether they intend to or not, most find themselves occasionally dropping bits of falsity into conversations. More often than not, those little lies are relatively benign and trivial untruths used to spare someone’s feelings or to facilitate polite social conversations. Few would be morally outraged if they discovered those white lies. However, other times the lies hold tremendous weight, concealing the most despicable truths. The world is awash in the lies of 8 billion people. With every little falsehood, each of us contributes a few drops to that sea of deception.

While everyone is prone to bend the truth on occasion, some people lay out lies with such frequency that they seem entirely severed from any need or ability to speak the truth or to share genuine versions of themselves with others. Those profuse prevaricators spew lies with complete abandon, often leaving a wake of broken hearts,

chafed coworkers, and exasperated friends and family. Other liars are conspicuous because of the gravity of their lies. They tell extremely consequential lies that upend the lives of everyone around them. This book is about lying in general, but it focuses on the big liars—those few people who use lies as one of their principal strategies for navigating life. By telling lies prolifically or by telling enormously consequential lies, they warp our understanding of reality.

If you peruse the news on any given day, you will likely come across stories of people who made headlines because of their lies. Every day, journalists track the veracity of statements by politicians, pointing out each instance in which this congressman twisted the truth or that president told a bald-faced lie. Some statements by politicians are deemed to be gentle varnishings of the truth, while others fall into the “pants on fire” realm. Financial leaders are jailed after being caught red-handed in their fraudulent schemes. Industry titans are dethroned when they are found misleading investors about the bottom line or lying to customers about the effectiveness or safety of their products. Religious leaders are defrocked when they are discovered conning the faithful or weaving untruths to conceal their own sinful escapades. Big liars make great headlines.

Jessica Vega is one example of a little-known person who rose to a certain degree of notoriety because of her big lies. Jessica was a 25-year-old living in New York. She and her boyfriend, Michael, had been together for a while and had a kid together. She had dreams of having a fancy wedding with a nice dress, flowers, and all the rest, but she and Michael couldn’t afford it, at least on their own income. She was aware that people were often generous toward people who were dying, so she decided just to tell people she was not long for this world. She claimed that she had been diagnosed with leukemia and that doctors had told her she only had 5 months to live. She produced a forged letter from a doctor confirming that leukemia would soon end her life. She even lied to her boyfriend, convincing

him that he would soon be raising their child on his own. She stated that before she died she wanted to have a nice wedding and marry her boyfriend. Plans for a lovely wedding soon got underway. She lied to the owner of a wedding dress shop about her terminal affliction. The owner felt desperate to help and generously gave Jessica a \$1,500 dress, a seamstress to take care of any alterations, and some nice shoes. Jessica had shaved her head to make a more convincing case for her leukemia, so someone donated a new wig for her to wear at the wedding. Another person donated a set of wedding rings. Someone else donated a stay in Aruba for the honeymoon. Others donated plane tickets for the flight. Someone else, touched by her story, paid for a wedding photographer. Many came to her aid donating cash. As one person duped by her lies said, "It seemed so genuine. I never questioned it." Finally, the day arrived, and Jessica celebrated the wedding she had always hoped for. However, not long after they wed, her husband Michael started to grow suspicious about her illness. He did a little investigating and found out that the letter from the doctor was a forgery. His wife was not dying and did not have leukemia. As Michael put it, "Jessica lied about everything, and she's not sick. She pulled the wool over everybody's eyes." Jessica was arrested and charged with six felonies. Michael divorced her.

In total, Jessica's lies netted her many thousands of dollars in donations for her wedding. As the prosecutors contended, "By pretending to have a terminal illness, Vega inexcusably took advantage of the community's hearts and minds, and profited off of their generosity," adding that "our office will hold this individual accountable for fleecing the public through lies and deception." In court, Jessica admitted to making it all up. She apologized. She spent some time in jail and was ordered to pay back all her victims (Crimesider Staff, 2012; Ng, 2012). Stories about big liars like Jessica Vega can be found in news stories around the world almost daily.

We need not look to the news to find big liars, though. They are all around us, from the uncle whose every story is a self-aggrandizing exaggeration to the romantic partner who professes love each day but has devoted their heart to another. Everyone probably has stories about big liars we have crossed paths with. Sometimes when we discover a big liar, we can avoid their deceit by simply avoiding them. Other times we are forced to deal with their dishonesty because they are at our workplace, in our social circles, or in our families.

WHAT IS A LIE?

Before we discuss lying in more depth, we first address exactly what a lie is. People get caught up in semantics about what counts as lying and what does not, so it's important to be crystal clear about how we define lying. All untrue statements are not lies. Sometimes people are simply misinformed or mistaken. If someone mistakenly says, "Thomas Jefferson was the second president," though it was actually John Adams, most will consider that a mistake, not a lie. If we consider the distinction between a lie and a mistake, we immediately recognize what distinguishes the two—it is the intention. If someone wanted you to fail your history test, so they intentionally misinformed you that Thomas Jefferson was the second president, they would be lying. Only the intention to mislead separates the mistake from the lie. Most dictionary definitions of lying capture this element of intent, with definitions, such as "to make an untrue statement with intent to deceive" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). More broadly, people tend to see intent as a central feature of most immoral wrongdoing; otherwise, they treat the incident as a mere accident or oversight (Schein & Gray, 2018). Thus, deception researchers also place intent as a central criterion of lying (Bok, 1978; Buller & Burgoon, 1996; Ekman, 1985; Vrij, 2000).

But things get more complicated. Consider the following situation. Brian's girlfriend, Shannon, asks him what he did last night. Brian

says that he stayed at home and watched television, which he actually did. What Brian left out, though, is that he also invited his ex-girlfriend over, and they had sex. Did Brian lie? After all, he said nothing that was untrue. Does omitting some important fact constitute a lie? If so, are we lying when a kid asks how we like their drawing, and we say something like, "I like the way you made the person green," but we don't say, "I think this looks weird and amateurish"? Many people view such attempts to intentionally exclude information with the intent to mislead as *lies of omission*.

What if Shannon asks Brian what he is going to do today? Secretly, Brian has made plans for his ex-girlfriend to come over and have sex again. He tells Shannon, "I'm just going to hang out at home alone." As it turns out, Brian's ex-girlfriend never arrives for their clandestine dalliance. Could we say that Brian lied? Sure, he intended to lie, but what he told Shannon turned out to be true. So, did he lie? By most definitions, he had lied because he believed that what he was saying was untrue when he said it. So, the reality of the world is not as pertinent to defining a lie as the belief and intention of the liar is.

Some philosophers (e.g., Bok, 1978) have argued for a broader definition that dispenses with the criterion that a lie must be a statement that is untrue. They prefer that lies be defined as *statements intended to deceive*, whether those statements are technically true or not. Likewise, using language that is technically true but intentionally misleading would also be viewed as a lie. For instance, if I said, "You should be aware that John drinks at work," you might be concerned about John's alcohol problem. While my statement is technically true (John actually drinks water at work all day long), my language was chosen to erroneously paint John in a negative light. In a real-life example of misleading language, President Clinton contended that he had been honest when he said "there's nothing going on between us" when referring to his sexual affair with Monica

Lewinsky. He argued that the truth or falsity of the statement “depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” For the most part, then, the broad definition of lies (statements intended to deceive) seems to capture most examples of what people consider to be lies.

People also deceive with their silence. Imagine that you find a wallet in the gym and you put it in your pocket. A couple of minutes later, someone asks, “Hey has anyone seen a wallet around here?” You remain silent. Have you lied? If intentional silence is used to communicate a deceptive meaning, we view that silence as a type of lie. Silence is just another way we communicate untruths.

Looking at the various definitions of lying, we can see three key common criteria (see Mahon, 2008, for a review). The first is that there must be a communication, usually by speaking words but also via sign language, gestures, the pen, social media posts, smoke signals, silence, and so on. The second criterion is that the communicator must believe that what they are communicating is not the full truth that one would expect in such a situation. The third condition is that the communicator intends for their communication to be misleading. With those criteria in mind, we prefer to define a *lie* as an intentionally misleading communication meant to create untrue beliefs. This definition includes lying as one form of deception, a form that hinges on the intentionally dishonest use of communication, whether wholly untrue, misleading, or omitted. For most practical purposes, we can stick with the shorthand: A lie is a communication intended to deceive.

At its core, a lie is simply an attempt to persuade (Stiff, 1996). People all have goals. They use lies to help achieve those goals. Lying is just one form of social manipulation, and it is a rare form at that. It is useful to think of lying not as a unique dastardly tactic. Instead, it is one of the many tools people use to try to influence others to get what they want in life.

DEFINING BIG LIARS

With lying sufficiently defined, we now consider big liars. We define *big liars* as people who tell big lies or who lie frequently. Some people manage to accomplish both. Our definition has two elements. First, big liars can be defined as people who tell big lies. By *big lies*, we mean lies that are extremely consequential and are likely to produce substantial effects, often disastrous ones. This definition is somewhat idiosyncratic because it hinges on a subjective evaluation of the consequences of a lie. Nonetheless, most people can readily recall someone whose lies caused massive problems. A business owner who finds out that her co-owner has been lying about company profits for years would surely view her betrayer as a big liar. A man who is scammed out of his life savings would similarly identify the perpetrator as a big liar. Likewise, a political leader who uses a lie with calamitous effects would undoubtedly be labeled a big liar by many of their constituents. Big liars who tell massive lies are defined subjectively by the impact their lies have on others. Those subjective outcomes are difficult to calculate scientifically. Instead of using a scientific metric, we tend to identify these big liars based on the level of reputational notoriety they achieve. A second way of defining big liars involves how often a person lies. We can define big liars as people who lie very frequently. These big liars seem to lie with a predictable regularity that far surpasses the dishonesty of an average person. We can identify these big liars simply by finding those people who lie the most; however, we must find a way to measure how often they lie.

MEASURING LYING

A young woman sat at a café enjoying coffee and a good conversation with one of her closest friends. They talked about work, their romantic lives, worries, and plans for the future. They shared and bonded. It was a lovely conversation. When the conversation ended,

the young woman took a diary book out of her purse. She jotted down some notes about who her friend was, what they had talked about, and how long the conversation had lasted. She wrote some notes about how many times she had lied to her friend, and she wrote down what she had lied about and why she had lied. This woman was a participant in a large psychological study on lying. She had agreed to take detailed notes after each social interaction or conversation she had. She would track the particulars of each social interaction, especially information about every lie that she told. She would do this for the next week, as would many other people who were participants in the study.

These types of diary studies are common techniques used to assess the prevalence of lying in the world around us (DePaulo et al., 1996; George & Robb, 2008; Hancock et al., 2004). One obvious limitation of self-report techniques is that we can never know how accurate and honest the diary recordings are. After all, why would a researcher trust a liar to provide honest information about their own lying? Most deception scientists are cautious in their analyses and interpretations, taking self-reports about honesty with a grain of salt. As researchers in this field, we (the authors) know that when people are asked to self-report, they generally provide accurate responses, especially when asked via the types of anonymous surveys that we used in our deception studies. For instance, when people answer survey questions and later are asked those same questions again while hooked up to a polygraph machine, their answers tend to be the same (Brigham et al., 1974; Clark & Tiff, 1966). Other studies have also assessed the accuracy of self-reported lying (e.g., Halevy et al., 2014). In those studies, researchers asked people how much they lie. Then, unbeknownst to the participants, the researchers created situations in which they could verify if participants in fact cheated and lied in a game. It turned out that people who reported being big liars actually did lie more frequently in the games. While we can never be

absolutely sure that someone is being truthful in our surveys, several lines of research suggest that they generally are.

HOW OFTEN DO PEOPLE LIE?

Pete Rose was a dominant force in American baseball for decades, first as a player and then as manager of the Cincinnati Reds. He had held the all-time hitting record, he was a three-time World Series winner, and he had been selected as an All-Star 17 times. However, he had secrets. In 1989, the commissioner of Major League Baseball announced that Pete Rose was being investigated for serious allegations that were later revealed to be about gambling. Pete was accused of gambling on Major League Baseball games, breaking one of the most serious rules in the league. For the next decade, Pete denied having gambled on baseball to anyone who would listen. He professed his honesty to reporters, fans, baseball officials, and anyone else who would listen. He was asked about the gambling accusations at every turn, and he was always adamant that he had never gambled on Major League Baseball games. His ardent fans believed him and supported him. Finally, after almost a decade and a half of vehement denials, Pete came clean, acknowledging that he had indeed bet on baseball games (Rose, 2004). However, he was clear to note, he had never bet on games involving his own team, the Cincinnati Reds. Pete had lied, consistently, regularly, and effusively for years. Nobody knows how many times he lied, but it was considerable by any measure. Eventually, many baseball fans began to forgive Pete for his deceit, with many arguing that his sins should be forgiven and he should be inducted into the Hall of Fame. Then, 3 years after his initial admission, Pete made another confession. He had, in fact, bet on games involving the Cincinnati Reds. His mountain of lies was a bit taller.

If we want to measure how often people lie, we ultimately have to ask them. There are some laboratory approaches in which

researchers bring subjects into a lab, have them play a game or complete a task for money, and then secretly note how many lie to get more money (Ariely, 2012; Halevy et al., 2014). However, how much can a contrived laboratory study tell us about lying in the real world? To understand people's dishonesty in real life, we have to trust their self-reports. That is, we have to ask them how often they lie.

Returning to the lie diary studies we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, we can look at what those studies found. In the 1990s, a couple of studies found that people told about one or two lies per day (DePaulo et al., 1996; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996). A more recent diary study found that people told an average of 1.6 lies per day (Hancock et al., 2004). Another found that, on average, people told slightly less than one lie per day (George & Robb, 2008). So, across the diary studies, researchers found that people told an average of about one to two lies per day. Across the diary studies, people lied in 20% to 33% of their conversations (DePaulo et al., 1996; George & Robb, 2008; Hancock et al., 2004). Based on all those studies, we consider one to two lies per day as a baseline average. Keep in mind that big liars lie much more than average.

Information about lying is also available from several national polls that asked Americans whether or not they lie at all. In the early 1990s, the soon-to-be-famous author James Patterson was working as an advertising executive. He and another market researcher, Peter Kim, carried out a huge nationwide study in which they anonymously surveyed thousands of people. One of the topics they covered was lying. They found that 91% of the Americans they surveyed reported lying regularly. Two thirds reported that they saw nothing wrong with lying, and the majority indicated that they lie to their spouses, friends, and family. If you think that makes Americans seem morally bankrupt, consider the fact that almost one in 10 of the participants said they would gladly murder a stranger for a few million dollars (Patterson & Kim, 1991). A *Reader's Digest* poll found

that 99% of readers reported engaging in lying or other forms of dishonesty (Kalish, 2004). In another study, 96% of people admitted that they had lied to avoid work, and the vast majority reported that they had never been caught (Tomaszewski, 2021). It seems that almost all Americans lie.

According to one study, the vast majority of people express a willingness to lie to others (84%; Drouin et al., 2016). In another, about one in five people reported lying every day (J. E. Grant et al., 2019). In other studies, less than half the people said they have lied on a given day, but when asked about lying over a week that number grows to 92%, and over 3 months, it grows to over 99% (Serota & Levine, 2015; Serota et al., 2010, 2021). In our own research, we found that people report an average of 1.4 lies per day, which is very similar to what others have found (Hart et al., 2021; Serota et al., 2010; Verigin et al., 2019). Taken together, these studies suggest that most people lie, and on average they seem to do so a couple of times per day.

OUTLIERS

We have documented the fact that, on average, people seem to lie somewhat regularly. However, it is interesting also to examine those who lie most. Thus, we turn our attention toward those at the extremes. If we take a second look at the diary studies in which people on average lied about one or two times a day, we can examine the patterns of dishonesty a bit more closely (DePaulo et al., 1996). Though the average was about two lies per day, things were a little more nuanced than that. What that means is that not everyone lied once or twice a day; there was quite a bit of variability in deception among those people. Some people certainly did lie exactly two times per day, but others lied much more than that, and others lied less often. We can analyze that variability and identify the most dishonest individuals.

If we look at most traits and characteristics of people, we see that individuals can differ quite a bit from one another. Take income, for example. In 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau calculated that the average household income from wages was about \$52,000 (as cited in Wang, 2021); that number provides a fine summary of how households in the country are doing financially. That average value also hides some important details. For instance, it conceals the fact that in 2019, a couple of hundred households each brought in more than \$50 million in wages alone. Those extreme values are called *outliers*. The average (also called the mean) can hide the outliers. When I tell you the average human is 5 feet, 5 inches tall (Roser et al., 2013), you know nothing about Sultan Kösen, the tallest living human, who stands at 8 feet, 3 inches tall (Guinness World Records, 2021). Sultan Kösen is an outlier. Knowing the average tells you little about people at the extremes.

What happens if, instead of looking at the average number of lies people tell per day, we look at the details behind that average? Just as with household income and height, we can see substantial variability. Some report lying very little or not at all, and some lie substantially. What interests us is the small handful of people who report lying considerably more than everyone else. Those outliers (or *outliers*) are a major focus of this book.

A detailed analysis of DePaulo et al.'s (1996) data from diary studies on lie frequency revealed that some people lied habitually (Serota et al., 2010). On average, people told about two lies per day, but one person reported telling 46 lies over the course of the week; that works out to about 6.6 lies per day. Serota et al.'s reanalysis showed that a small group of liars (about 9%) told a disproportionately large percentage (26%) of the lies. Additionally, each of those liars told an average of about five lies per day.

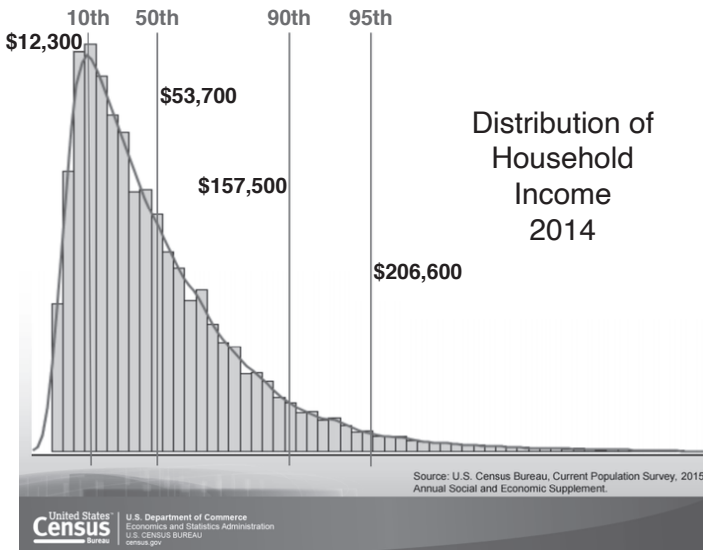
In our research, we became interested in the outliers only recently. We wanted to understand the people who lie much more than

the average person, so we set out in pursuit of the big liars. Who are the people who practice deception every single day and in most of their social interactions? What separates the big liars from the rest of the populace? How did they become big liars? How does their dishonesty affect their lives and the lives of the people around them? Ultimately, what can we do if these big liars are in our lives?

With lying, we find what, in the world of research and statistics, is called a *positively skewed distribution*. The majority of the people lie very little, but a small segment of the population lies a lot. Household income in the United States follows this positively skewed distribution as well. The top 10% of households bring in more than 30% of the income. If you look at the graph in Figure 1.1, you can see that in 2014 the bulk of households earned under \$206,600 per year, but a smaller subset earned substantially more. Those households at the far right side of the graph are the outliers.

We can also see positively skewed distributions in the studies on lying. For instance, we can examine the data from one study in which the researchers recorded 10-minute conversations people had with a stranger and then counted how many times they had lied (R. S. Feldman et al., 2002). On average, people told two lies during their short conversations. However, a reanalysis of the data showed a positive skew—41% of the people told no lies at all, and another 19% told only one lie (Serota et al., 2010). Thus, most people either were completely honest or hardly lied at all, while a small group of participants (26%) told 72% of the lies. The biggest liars passed off 12 lies in only 10 minutes!

The outliers, the people who lie more than everyone else, stand out even more in studies in which researchers measure how many lies people have told in the past 24 hours. In one of those studies (Serota et al., 2010), 60% of people reported that they told no lies at all on the preceding day (see Figure 1.2). Another 15% reported telling only one lie. So, again, most people seemed to be pretty honest.

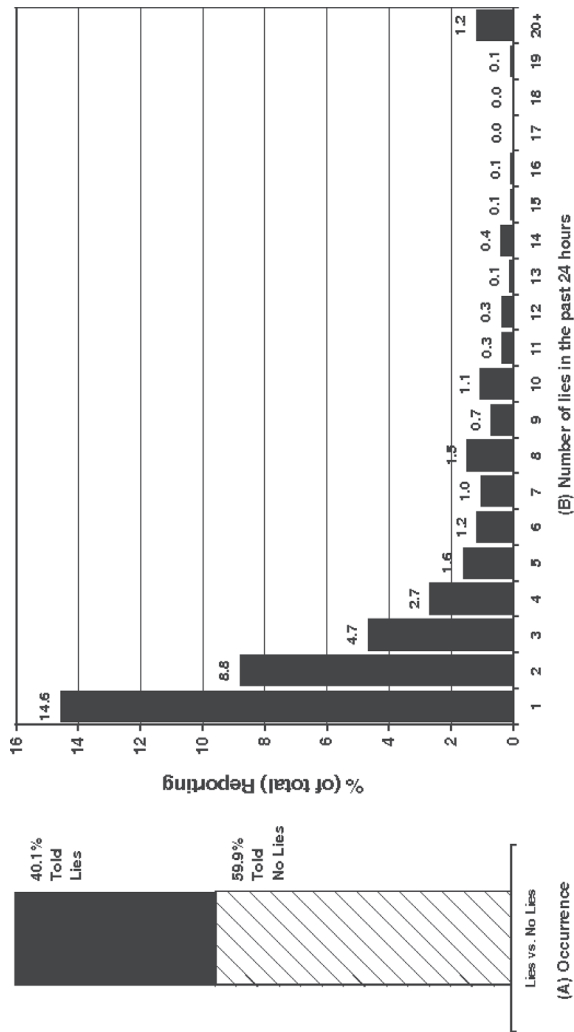
FIGURE 1.1. Distribution of Household Income 2014

Note. From the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. In the public domain.

However, a small group (5%) told 50% of all the lies! What happens if we look for the top 1% of liars in that group? These people are the top of the heap in terms of dishonesty. Those top liars report lying over 20 times per day. The biggest liar in that group reported telling a whopping 53 lies in one day. Talk about big liars!

The positively skewed pattern of lying follows what is known as the *Pareto principle* (Pareto, 1896). Vilfredo Pareto was an Italian economist in the 19th century. Pareto noticed that many distribution patterns follow a type of power law in which roughly 80% of the instances are accounted for by around 20% of the agents.

FIGURE 1.2. Distribution of Lies Told per Day



Note. From "The Prevalence of Lying in America: Three Studies of Self-Reported Lies," by K. B. Serota, T. R. Levine, and F. J. Boster; 2010, *Human Communications Research*, 36(1), p. 9 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2009.01366.x>). Copyright 2010 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission.

For instance, Pareto noted that 80% of the land in Italy at the time was owned by 20% of the population. Likewise, researchers have found that about 80% of criminal convictions in the United States are tied to just 20% of the population (Caspi et al., 2016). As professors, we have ventured a guess that 20% of the students account for 80% of the cases of people reporting that their dog ate their homework. It looks like deception also tends to follow the Pareto principle, with a handful of people accounting for the bulk of the dishonesty in the world around us.

IDENTIFYING THE BIG LIARS

In our own studies, we too have found a positively skewed distribution of liars. In one study, the participants reported telling an average of 2.4 lies per day, yet one person told 20 lies per day (Hart et al., 2019). Along with measuring lies per day, we have measured the number of lies people tell per week, as lying is more stable over a week than it is over a single day (Serota et al., 2021). In one study, participants reported telling an average of five lies per week, yet a small group lied considerably more; the top 10% of liars told over half of the lies, with one person lying 100 times per week (Hart, Curtis, & Randell, 2023). In a similar study we carried out (Hart et al., 2021), people told an average of 13 lies per week, but a small number of people said that they told over 100 lies per week. This research informs us of an important finding related to lying—a small group of big liars do most of the lying in U.S. society.

Big liars are not unique to any one culture: They have been detected in various cultural groups and around the world. Even among hunter-gatherer tribes, lying is commonplace, and some members of the tribes are recognized as big liars compared with others. For instance, the Hadza are a nomadic group of 300 hunter-gatherers who live around Lake Eyasi in the hinterlands of northern Tanzania. The Hadza men hunt for giraffes and zebras, while the women forage for tubers and berries (Marlowe, 2010). Anthropologists have

found that the Hadza can exhibit blatant displays of selfish dishonesty (Apicella, 2018). The Hadza can also readily rank the people in their camp from the most honest to the most dishonest (K. M. Smith & Apicella, 2020). It turns out that the Hadza have big liars too.

This is our jumping-off point. We discuss lying in general, but we also examine the big liars more specifically. We are interested in studying the outliers in the world of dishonesty—people who lie more than everyone else or wreak havoc with their lies. We are after the people who make the average person look like a real Honest Abe. So, how do we separate those who belong to that elite group of prevaricators from those who are just typical, run-of-the-mill fibbers? If you were ever at an amusement park as a kid, you may recall a sign that read, “You must be *THIS* tall to ride,” with a line indicating the requisite height. Some evidence suggests that prolific liars tell about five or more lies per day and make up around 5% of the population (Halevy et al., 2014; Serota & Levine, 2015; Serota et al., 2021). In our research, we have also found that the top 5% of liars each tell about five lies per day. Additionally, when we asked people how many lies someone would need to tell per day for their lying to be problematic, the typical response was five. Thus, five or more lies per day or the top 5% are probably good criteria for identifying big liars. While those cutoff scores can help identify big liars who lie frequently, it’s important to keep in mind that some big liars tell fewer but significantly more problematic lies. To identify them, we need to look at the substantial mayhem their lies cause. Throughout this book, we work from the definition we presented earlier: Big liars are people who lie excessively or who tell big lies.

TRAITS OF BIG LIARS

If we want to identify and perhaps avoid big liars, it helps to know who to look for. A number of personal traits and situational factors are consistently associated with lying. Not surprisingly, big liars possess

more of those features than the average person. In this section, we explain what those features are.

Age

Reminiscing about childhood lies, one person recalled, “My friend said his dad had eggs and beer for breakfast and then peed for 3 hours straight” (Spohr, 2018). Kids are notoriously dishonest, so it might not be surprising that youth is one trait that partly predicts who the big liars will be. The most prolific adult liars in the population tend to be young (Serota & Levine, 2015). This finding is not surprising given that lying peaks in late adolescence and then gradually declines across adulthood (Debey et al., 2015; Gerlach et al., 2019; Glätzle-Rützler & Lergetporer, 2015). In our own studies, we also have found that the biggest liars tend to be several years younger than the rest of our participants (Hart et al., 2021; Hart, Curtis, & Randell, 2023).

Gender

We have also explored whether gender is associated with the tendency to be a big liar. There are consistent gender differences in a number of behaviors and mental processes, such as aggression, sexuality, cognitive abilities, and mental health. When it comes to lying, there have been conflicting findings, with some studies showing substantial gender differences and others finding none. When those studies are taken together, it appears that men are slightly more dishonest than women—a difference of only 4% (Gerlach et al., 2019). Men and women also tend to tell different types of lies. While men are more inclined than women to tell self-serving lies, women are more apt to tell altruistic lies aimed at making someone else feel better or aimed at strengthening a relationship (DePaulo et al. 1996;

Erat & Gneezy, 2012; R. S. Feldman et al., 2002). When it comes to big liars, the evidence seems pretty clear that men are much more likely than women to be the most prolific liars (Hart et al., 2021; Markowitz, 2021; Serota & Levine, 2015).

Intelligence

Some have argued that intelligence might make someone a more capable liar. Just imagine if Albert Einstein had focused his immense cognitive resources on lying instead of relativity theory. However, no clear link has been observed between big liars and intelligence. Some researchers have found a link between higher intelligence and lying (Sarżyńska et al., 2017), while others have concluded that people with lower cognitive abilities are the ones who tend to lie most often (Littrell et al., 2021). We think that the jury is still out on whether big liars are more intelligent than people who lie less often. Perhaps highly intelligent people are more able to tell convincing lies than those with lower intelligence, but there is no convincing evidence that they take advantage of that ability.

Attitudes About Lying

Another approach to understanding who the big liars are is to look at people's attitudes about lying. If people consider lying to be immoral, we should expect them to be honest. But what if they have no qualms about lying? There is quite a bit of variability in people's attitudes about deceit, with some people seeing lying as very wrong and others viewing it as entirely permissible (Oliveira & Levine, 2008). Not surprisingly, we have found that the biggest liars tend to view lying as more morally acceptable than those who lie less often do (Hart et al., 2019). Most people have a need to see themselves as good and morally dutiful, so they are mostly honest (Ariely, 2012). When

people break with their moral principles, they feel guilty. People who are unencumbered by feelings of guilt tend to lie significantly more than those who feel more guilty (Ashton & Lee, 2007, 2009; T. R. Cohen et al., 2012). Paying attention to people's moral attitudes about dishonesty will help you spot big liars.

Religiosity

Somewhat relatedly, we have examined whether religious beliefs and attitudes correspond with a person's tendency to lie a lot. In Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, and most other religious faith systems, dishonesty is discouraged (Zagorin, 1996). If religious adherents recognize honesty as important to their faith systems, it stands to reason that people with stronger religious convictions might be less likely to be big liars.

Some studies found that people with stronger religious beliefs were morally opposed to lying and lied less than people with less strong beliefs, but other studies found no connection between religiosity and dishonesty (Childs, 2013; Kramer & Shariff, 2016; Oliveira & Levine, 2008; Shalvi & Leiser, 2013). To address this controversy, we recently completed a large study in which we measured both religiosity and lying in several different ways (Cox et al., 2022). One clear finding was that the more religious a person was, the more negative was their attitude toward lying. They saw lying as wrong. However, we found that religious people seem to lie as much as nonreligious people do.

Relationship Style

Lying occurs within relationships, including parent and child, romantic, friendships, workplace, and so on, and a person's relationship style is related to their patterns of lying. Relationship styles,

sometimes known as *attachment styles*, can be understood by looking at how one person connects or bonds with another (e.g., Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Some people see others as safe, reliable, and warm, so they are comfortable letting down their guard and being vulnerable with others; these people are referred to as *securely attached*. Other people are psychologically independent and are often unresponsive to others or emotionally unavailable. These people have an *avoidant attachment style*. Others worry about abandonment, require reassurance, and are extremely sensitive to the judgments of others; these people have an *anxiously attached* style. People with anxious and avoidant attachment styles tend to lie more in romantic relationships, friendships, and with strangers than do people with secure attachment styles (Cole, 2001; Ennis et al., 2008). People with avoidant and anxious attachment styles use dishonesty to manage and regulate social attachments: People with avoidant styles tend to keep people at a distance, and people with anxious styles try to avoid negative judgment. So, knowing how a person approaches relationships can help you discern who is likely to be a big liar.

Self-Esteem

Commenting in an anonymous online forum about lying, one person wrote,

I have a problem. It haunts me every day. My entire life is a lie. I've lied to my parents, my significant other, my closest friends, strangers. I made up everything about my life, and I can't go back because those lies ARE my life now. Everyone in my life thinks I'm perfect, but I'm the opposite. I lie about very big things. I lie about my accomplishments the most, however. People think I'm successful; I'm really not. . . . My lies were all about my image. . . . They were just for my own personal ego.

A woman we refer to as Amy began to notice her prolific lying in high school (Whyte, 2017). For instance, she lied to people about her sexual experiences: “I made up everything. I made up the name and everything about this fictitious person, and, yeah, that person actually never existed.” Amy explained, “It wasn’t the pleasure of telling the lie. It was the pleasure of the fact that I would be noticed because of telling the lie.” Eventually Amy was telling 20 to 30 lies per day. “Pretty much everything out of my mouth was a lie,” she said. Her lies were driven by her low self-esteem. “The whole purpose behind it was for my own self-satisfaction and to make me feel better about the person I was,” she said. “I believed if I lied I would be perceived as someone who was better than who I was.”

Big liars often have low self-esteem. People with low self-esteem believe that they lack good qualities and tend to see themselves as failures (Rosenberg, 1965). On the other hand, people with high self-esteem take a more satisfied and positive view of themselves. Like Amy, people with low self-esteem sometimes present an enhanced version of themselves to the world or may conceal their shortcomings to avoid a further decline in how the world might view them (J. E. Grant et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2019).

Dark Traits

Dave was a good-looking man in his 30s who was working on his third marriage. He was a relatively new employee of a fast-growing company and had come to the attention of a psychologist who was hired to help with organizational changes at the company (see Babiak, 1995). Dave’s manager noted that he was often disruptive and offensive. While Dave impressed everyone with his intellect and drive, his boss soon noticed that Dave was copying other people’s work and turning it in as his own. When confronted, Dave brushed aside

the concerns and said that it would have been a waste of his time and talents to reinvent the wheel. Dave concocted lies to avoid meetings, to take advantage of people, to get out of projects he found boring or beneath him, or to shift blame to others. After only a few months on the job, his colleagues realized that Dave was consistently dishonest. They described him as a phony yet felt anxious about calling him out on his lies. When interviewed by the psychologist, Dave came across as superficially charming and egotistical. He fancied himself a key player in the company. He seemed unconcerned about the impression his colleagues had of him and seemed to view them as mere objects. When asked how he managed to get what he wanted at work, Dave said, without emotion, “I lied” (Babiak, 1995, p. 180).

Some people like Dave callously and remorselessly use lies to manipulate and victimize others. Some other more notorious examples are the serial killer Ted Bundy and the fraudster Bernie Madoff. What is it about their personalities that allowed them to casually use deception to take advantage of others? There is a cluster of personality traits, called the *dark triad* of personality traits, that is generally associated with a selfish disposition (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The first of the dark traits is *Machiavellianism*, which is the tendency to engage in cold, self-interested manipulation of others. People with Machiavellian personalities are opportunistic and have little allegiance to conventional morality. They tend to see others as instruments they can use to achieve their own goals. Next is *narcissism*, which is a grandiose sense of self and a need for admiration, often coupled with a sense of entitlement and a disregard for the needs of others. Narcissists are self-absorbed and are often boastful. It seems like most workplaces have one. Finally, there is *psychopathy*, which is the tendency to engage in antisocial behavior, typically coupled with a lack of empathy or guilt. People high in psychopathy coldly and often impulsively violate the rights of others and frequently engage in criminal behavior. At their core, the dark triad traits

share self-centeredness and diminished empathy. All three dark triad traits are correlated with excessive lying and other dishonest behaviors (Flexon et al., 2016; Halevy et al., 2014; Hart et al., 2019; Zvi & Elaad, 2018). If you interact with someone with these dark triad traits, you will likely observe that they use deception and other anti-social practices to get what they want.

Compassion and Empathy

In contrast to people high on the dark triad traits, we might expect empathic and compassionate people to lie very little. However, the relationship between empathic compassion and lying depends on the type of lies we are looking at. Compassion increases altruistic lying (Lupoli et al., 2017)—compassionate people are motivated to reduce harm, and that desire leads them to tell altruistic lies to spare feelings, reduce worry, and so on. For instance, if a compassionate parent noticed their child feeling down about their lack of musical ability, the parent might feel inclined to tell an altruistic lie: “I think you are one of the best musicians I’ve ever heard!” In contrast, compassion reduces self-serving lies. People who are deeply concerned with others around them are unlikely to use dishonesty to take advantage of those people. Likewise, empathy decreases self-serving lying, but it simultaneously increases altruistic lying (Pierce & Thompson, 2021; Xu et al., 2019).

Histrionicism

Another personality trait, *histrionicism*, is also associated with lying. Histrionic people tend to present themselves in a dramatic, attention-seeking manner (Renner et al. 2008). They often engage in overtly flirtatious or theatrical behavior in social settings. Their dramatic style is often aimed at drawing attention to themselves. They may

act excessively emotional, intimate, or provocatively and become frustrated when others do not reassure them that they are the center of attention. We found that people who are high in histrionic traits are much more prone to be big liars (Weaver & Hart, 2022). It might be that dishonesty is just one way these people attempt to draw all attention to themselves.

Personality Traits

In our final analysis of personality traits that are associated with being a big liar, we examine what are referred to as the *Big Five* personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The Big Five are personality dimensions that are thought to best account for most of the variation in human dispositions. *Openness to experience* is the tendency to be open-minded, curious, and adventurous. *Conscientiousness* is an inclination toward being organized, dependable, and diligent. *Extraversion* is a disposition in which one is sociable, outgoing, and energetic. *Agreeableness* is the propensity to be warm, friendly, helpful, and tactful. Finally, *neuroticism* is the tendency to be emotionally unstable, irritable, and negative. We have found nuanced results, with certain personality traits corresponding to specific types of lies. Openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness were associated with fewer self-serving lies, while neuroticism was associated with more frequent self-serving lies. Higher conscientiousness was associated with telling fewer altruistic lies. Finally, high agreeableness was associated with telling fewer vindictive lies. When considering the Big Five personality traits, each type of lie seems to be associated with a somewhat different personality profile.

On the whole, we think there is good evidence that big liars tend to have a particular set of demographic and personality commonalities. The traits that correspond with higher rates of lying are the ones that should be predictive of being a big liar. If we can

be mindful of the people in our lives who possess those traits, and especially if we can notice when people exhibit many of those traits together, we may identify big liars before we fall victim to their lies.

THE SITUATION

While understanding the person and their underlying personality traits can be helpful in understanding the propensity to lie, we should also give serious consideration to the situation. Most of us have probably been in situations in which we felt that lying was our best option for sparing someone's feelings, helping a friend out of a difficult spot, or avoiding some other catastrophic outcome. Even the most honest person might be tempted to lie if the contextual variables were just so. The psychologist Kurt Lewin (1936) offered an equation meant to account for human behavior. It is written as $B = f(PE)$, or behavior (B) is a function (f) of the person (P) and the environment (E). The equation can be understood as an explanatory system for all human behavior. It suggests that we cannot know about a person's tendency to lie simply by knowing their personality dispositions. We must also consider the context in which that person is operating and all the forces that are influencing them. An extremely honest person might start lying in a situation because it would spare someone's life, and an extremely dishonest person would likely stop lying in a situation in which they could easily have whatever they wanted through honest means. As it turns out, people do not lie at random. Rather, they lie when contextual variables motivate them to do so (Hart, 2022; T. R. Levine et al., 2016).

An incentive to lie must be present, either securing a desired consequence or avoiding a negative consequence (Bond et al., 2013; Gerlach et al., 2019; T. R. Levine, 2020). When it comes to lying, the situation may be much more powerful than personal characteristics in predicting when someone lies versus when they tell the truth

(Vedantam, 2018). So, what types of situations tend to be associated with being a big liar? An obvious condition is when people are violating the rules and expectations of others. Whether children behaving disobediently, spouses being unfaithful, or employees embezzling funds, people at risk of being harshly punished tend to lie. People also lie if they worry that the truth will harm others they care about. People lie to spare the feelings of people they care about, such as spouses and friends (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; R. E. Turner et al., 1975). More broadly, people tend to lie when the truth will cause others to react in ways they want to avoid. However, people do not lie if their dishonesty is sure to be detected and punished. People lie when they feel confident they will get away with their deception (Fellner et al., 2013; Lundquist et al., 2009; Markowitz & Levine, 2021). Interestingly, anonymity or even the sense of anonymity increases lying. In one study, people who were in a darkened room were significantly more likely than those in a well-lit room to lie for a greater financial reward, even though the brightness of the room had no effect on anonymity (Zhong et al., 2010).

Our honesty or dishonesty is also influenced by the people around us. If people see lying as socially sanctioned, they are more apt to lie. For instance, if we see people with whom we identify (referred to as *ingroup members*) lying, we are more inclined to lie. Even seeing someone from the same school or who shares the same birthday lie is enough to influence people to deceive (Ariely, 2012; Gino & Galinsky, 2012). People are also more likely to be frequent liars if they affiliate with frequent liars (Mann et al., 2014). Birds of a feather flock together, even when it comes to dishonesty. Additionally, people in groups become more dishonest than they were as individuals (T. R. Cohen et al., 2009; Kocher et al., 2018). It seems that being in a group allows one to spread blame or moral responsibility for dishonesty to all the other group members, leaving every individual person feeling less culpable.

Looking at lying from a broad cultural level, we can see that dishonesty is imbued in the fabric of some cultures more than others (see J. A. Barnes, 1994, for a review). For instance, one study found that people around the globe are mostly honest, but the citizens of Switzerland, Norway, and the Netherlands were more honest than the people of Peru, Morocco, and China (Cohn et al., 2019). It is unlikely that people from one region are inherently more honest or dishonest than people from another region. It is more likely that some countries simply have social or cultural structures in place that promote or minimize the motivation to be dishonest. A study of people in 23 different countries showed that the amount of dishonesty in each country was correlated with the amount of institutionalized rule-breaking, such as government corruption, election fraud, and tax evasion, that occurred within those countries (Gächter & Schulz, 2016). In countries where rule violations were rampant, people in experimental settings were more likely to lie for financial gain. It seems that people adjust their levels of honesty or deception to the context in which they live. People surrounded by dishonesty will tend to be dishonest themselves.

Another situational feature associated with frequent lying is the presence of moral reminders and moral commitments. Moral reminders and moral commitments can be presented in the form of honor codes that people are asked to sign (Mazar et al., 2008). By signing honor codes (usually at schools or workplaces), people agree not to engage in dishonest behavior. People who sign honor codes lie significantly less than those who do not. In a study on moral reminders, the researchers asked participants to sit in front of a mirror. The idea was that seeing oneself would be a moral reminder, in particular that seeing oneself misbehave would be an unavoidable reminder of one's moral shortcomings. People who were seated in front of a mirror were much more honest than people who were not. However, not all moral reminders seem to be effective. The researchers

found that having people reflect on the Ten Commandments from the Bible had no discernible effect on lying (Verschuere et al., 2018).

People's level of moral engagement is not stable, but rather it is high in the morning and then fades through the day. Interestingly, people were much more likely to be honest at the start of the day and increasingly more likely to be dishonest as the afternoon rolls around (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014). A similar effect appears with sleep deprivation—people deprived of sleep lie more (C. M. Barnes et al., 2011). Also, we can cause moral disengagement by wearing people down with a mentally taxing computer task. Once worn down, people lie more (Gino et al., 2011). All this research informs us that big liars may lie more in situations that decrease their moral engagement. Taken another way, we can reduce the odds of people lying to us if we can increase their moral engagement.

Let's consider one last situational variable that influences lying. As we can all attest, interacting with a wonderful person can brighten your day, and interacting with a jerk can ruin your day. Those situational variables are important in determining the honesty or dishonesty of people in social situations. In one clever study, the researchers gave participants false scathing feedback about an essay they had written (Yip & Schweitzer, 2016). Soon thereafter, the upset people were placed in a situation in which they could either lie or tell the truth. The upset people were much more likely to lie. In another study, researchers found the same effect in the opposite direction. People who were made to feel happy and grateful by someone else were much more inclined to be honest afterward than were people who were not (DeSteno et al., 2019). It seems that feeling threatened or attacked leads people to lie more frequently (Tangney et al., 2007; Yip & Schweitzer, 2016).

We hope we have made the case that big liars are not always inherently dishonest people. Rather, big liars seem to be products of

both their innate dispositions and the contexts and situations they inhabit. If we want to identify the big liars in our world, we should be mindful of both.

A THEORY OF LYING

Deception researchers have uncovered a copious amount of information about the traits of people who lie frequently and the types of situations in which they are most likely to lie. The information allows us to piece together an understanding of who the big liars are and what factors seem to underlie their dishonesty. Taking all that information together, a theoretical perspective begins to emerge. We can begin to distill the tangle of data and identify a clear set of features that are common among liars. A theory of liars can be crafted.

Liars have similar reasons for lying, namely, the prospect of speaking truthfully seems antagonistic to their goals. Speaking honestly, at least in their assessment, would lead to undesirable outcomes. Honesty impedes the pursuit of goals for people prone to lying. Thus, concealing the truth seems more attractive. Also, liars believe they can get away with their deception. People don't lie if they think they will be caught unless they view the consequences of being caught as relatively minor. Thus, liars assess the risk of lying, which includes the probability of being caught and the consequences of being caught as well as any other negative outcomes that might be produced by the lie. Finally, we can also see that people have, to varying degrees, a need to maintain their self-images; many want to preserve a vision of themselves as honest, good people (Cressey, 1953; Frank, 1987; Mazar et al., 2008). Most will refrain from substantial lying because it violates their moral principles. People who lie more freely are less concerned about morality, or they find it

easier to morally justify their dishonesty. From these conclusions, we have formulated a theory of lying, called the *tripartite theory of lying and dishonesty*, that hinges on three criteria (Hart, 2022). The first is the perceived utility of lying.

The Expected Utility of Lying (U)

Utility, a concept from the field of economics, is the satisfaction that is derived from something. People lie when they think lying will produce some satisfying outcome or utility. They behave dishonestly when they spot an opportunity for dishonesty to allow them access to desirable outcomes that honesty would not. When people have violated rules, lying allows them to escape punishment. When they spot an opportunity for nefarious gain, a lie might help them go undetected. The utility of lying might also stem from avoiding the dangers posed by others who are more threatening and powerful. But people also lie for more noble reasons, such as to spare the feelings of a loved one. Still, lies occur when the liar spots an opportunity to get a desirable result that honesty would not produce. For the most part, people tend to lie when the truth will cause others to think, feel, or react in ways they want to avoid.

The Expected External Disutility of Lying (ED)

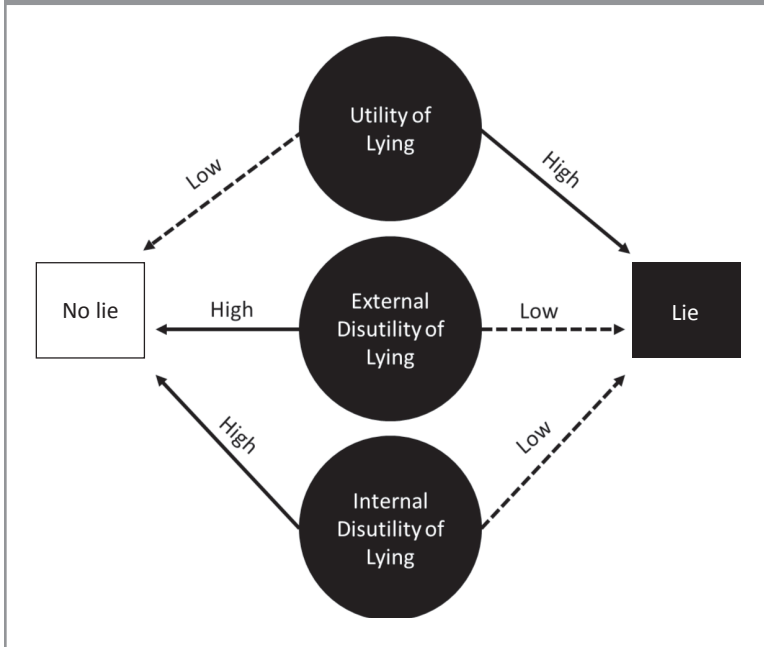
Disutility, or *negative utility*, is a concept that encompasses the idea that something produces an unsatisfactory outcome. People lie when they expect the disutility of lying to be low. That is, they tend to behave dishonestly when they think their dishonesty will go undetected or when they expect that the consequences of detection are tolerable. People do not lie if their dishonesty is likely to be detected and punished harshly. In short, people consider the bad outcomes that may follow dishonesty.

The Expected Internal Disutility of Lying (ID)

Internal disutility is an intrinsic aversion to something. People can conceptualize a higher moral realm that they perceive as satisfying. People usually behave morally (honestly) to feel the satisfaction of being in that higher moral realm. Likewise, people generally avoid dishonesty because it leads to moral dissatisfaction or a degraded sense of self. When we notice that we are behaving immorally, most of us feel the weight of shame, guilt, and regret. We have a moral aversion to lying per se.

However, people have a remarkable capacity to ethically justify their dishonesty. They manage to convince themselves that they are lying for the greater good (“My lie will prevent many other bad things from happening”). They devalue the target of their dishonesty (“That person doesn’t deserve the truth because they have always been a jerk to me”). They use counterfactuals to rationalize their lying (“If others were in this situation, they would do the same thing”). Also, people will engage in a form of moral accounting to justify their dishonesty (“I was honest all week, so a little lie right now isn’t that bad”).

Taken together, the tripartite theory of lying and dishonesty (see Figure 1.3) predicts when people will lie and when they will refrain from lying. Essentially, if we can understand when people see a utility in lying, when they perceive external disutility, and when they expect to feel internal disutilities, we can predict the circumstances in which people will be dishonest. For example, imagine a mother who cannot afford the expensive medical treatment for her severely ill child. Now imagine that if she lied on a form about having medical insurance, the doctor would deliver the treatment. We can see how that mother might see a strong utility in lying. Now further imagine that she knows that doctor is very sympathetic and would likely not report her to the police should the lie be discovered. In that case,

FIGURE 1.3. Tripartite Theory of Lying and Dishonesty

the mother might rightly perceive a low external disutility of lying. Suppose even further that the doctor normalized lying by saying to the mother, “I know a lot of people who can’t afford this treatment simply lie on the insurance form, and I think that is not a bad thing to do,” as he winks at her and hands her a pen. We might surmise that the mother would now view the lie as morally permissible. The tripartite theory of lying and dishonesty tells us that mothers in this situation would be much more likely to lie than they would if the child were less ill, the consequences of being caught lying were harsh, and the doctor discussed the importance of absolute

honesty. The theory lets us know who tends to be honest and who tends to lie.

THE THEORY OF BIG LIARS

The tripartite theory of lying and dishonesty addresses situations in which we might expect people to lie. However, it also predicts who is likely to be a big liar. Big liars are simply people who meet the three criteria regularly. That is, big liars are people who consistently see a utility or an upside to lying, consistently view the probability and consequences of being caught as tolerable, and consistently view their lying as morally or ethically permissible. Using this theoretical perspective, we can break down the three elements of being a big liar.

The first criterion is that big liars see some advantage to lying. They consistently calculate that others will respond in undesirable ways if they are honest. So, who are these big liars? For starters, they are people who are regularly doing bad things and don't want to be caught and punished. A thief is likely to lie regularly to cover their tracks. A spy will need to lie frequently for the same reasons. A kid with difficult-to-please parents is likely to lie to conceal violations of rules. Importantly, people with things to hide are not always bad people. Gay children growing up in intolerant homes may lie to conceal their sexual identities from parents who might treat them harshly. People with a high need for approval may lie to receive the approval they desire from others. People who feel unworthy may lie to seem less deficient. Someone who worries they are boring may lie to seem more interesting. A lazy person may lie to seem more productive. People with low self-esteem may lie considerably. Big liars can also be people who constantly worry that their honesty will harm others. They may lie often because they don't want to hurt people's feelings, or perhaps they want to boost someone's ego when that person appears fragile. In all cases, liars lie to avoid unwanted outcomes.

According to the second criterion, big liars consistently view the risk of being caught as tolerable. Risk is a function of both probability and consequences. Any time someone lies, there is a probability that their lie will be detected and there will be consequences if they are caught. Big liars regularly compute the probability of being caught as acceptable or they assess the consequences of being detected as acceptable (at least compared to the consequences of being honest). Big liars believe they have a workable lie that can reasonably substitute for the truth. Who are these people? Certainly, people who are confident in their ability to get away with lies. People who feel well-equipped for deception are likely to lie more. Big liars will also believe the consequences of detection are tolerable. They could simply underestimate the negative outcomes of being caught in a lie. They are also likely to believe that lying is tolerated by others. We have seen, for example, in certain cultures lying is more tolerated than in others. They may also be more willing to tolerate risk. Risk-averse people are probably less inclined to gamble by telling a lie. Additionally, we might expect people with a short-term focus to lie more than people with a long-term focus do. Lying is often more attractive than honesty in the moment, but if the lie were to be discovered days later, the consequences could be enormous. Finally, people who are less likely to suffer severe consequences if their lies were discovered might lie more frequently. Those with nothing to lose may be more apt to lie.

The third criterion is that big liars will view their lying as a morally or ethically permissible alternative to honesty. We might expect to see big liars emerging from subcultures in which lying is tolerated or viewed as morally permissible. People who don't consider the morality of their behavior are likely to lie more often. Psychopaths and Machiavellian types who have lax moral systems should be expected to lie more. People who do not value cooperation and group harmony should view lying as more acceptable. Also,

people who believe others are lying to them or otherwise treating them unfairly should be more inclined to lie reciprocally. In this vein, we expect that people who feel oppressed or morally violated will lie frequently to their oppressors.

Additionally, we can expect that big liars will justify their behaviors morally and ethically via belief systems, such as *just-world beliefs* (i.e., people get what they deserve) or by blaming the victims (i.e., people are victimized because they somehow bring about their own exploitation). Researchers have found that people who are prone to guilt lie less than people who are unencumbered by those feelings. We expect big liars to view their lies as being relatively harmless and therefore justifiable. Similarly, we expect people with lower levels of empathy to tell more antisocial lies and people higher in empathy to be more inclined to tell altruistic lies.

This theory of liars provides a convenient way of organizing ideas about when and why people are dishonest. We refer to it as we move through this book discussing big liars. Lying is driven by external incentives, such as the desire to secure gains that could not be had through honesty, and by internal incentives, such as the desire to view oneself as a morally upstanding person. We find that big liars are heavily incentivized to depart from the truth and to use deception to achieve their goals.

CONCLUSION

We have introduced definitions of lying and of big liars. We have offered a detailed depiction of the frequency of lying, showing that most people are honest most of the time but big liars are statistical outliers who lie considerably more than the rest. We characterized the traits and characteristics of big liars as well as the contexts and situations in which they are most likely to lie. Finally, we offered a theory of big liars that considers their incentives and allows us to

accurately predict who will be the big liars in our lives. We think that big liars are a distinguishable group of people whose prolific and consequential lying can be predicted from a cluster of individual and situational variables.

In the chapters that follow, we examine examples of the various big liars in our world. We explore how they lie and how their lies affect the people around them. But first we consider the development of big liars. Why do most people develop into fairly honest individuals, whereas some become big liars?