

Straight Dope on Being Duped

Duped: Truth-Default Theory and the Social Science of Lying and Deception

Timothy R. Levine

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One can go back at least four thousand years and find documented proscriptions against lying and deception from religious traditions as varied as Hinduism and then Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity. And with proscriptions have come prescriptions to detect them with three being paramount.

The first prescription is the use of textuality, both intra and inter. With intratextuality, detectors look for degrees of consistency and coherence within combinations of a suspect's verbal and nonverbal behavior. The latter is a 'reading' of a suspect's physical mannerisms and sensory presentation—especially visual and vocally auditory—contributing to a social narrative about what the suspect may be up to. The more consistency and coherence you find, the less likely lying and deception are occurring. The less you find, the converse applies.

With intertextuality, deception detectors look for correlations between elements of a suspect's verbal and nonverbal behavior—especially narrative elements—and relevant elements external to the suspect. These external elements are obtained by investigating people who may be at least partially 'in the know' and situational aspects bearing on the suspect's narrative. Again, the more you find, the less likely lying and deception are occurring. The less you find, the converse applies. Both intratextuality and intertextuality continue to be applied within many common deception detection techniques of today. But accuracy is very modest at best, and I agree with Levine's coverage of the scientific literature in Chapter 4 of *Duped*.

The second prescription is to induce a confession of having committed the proscription. A confession has until fairly recently been assumed to indicate a ground truth, i.e., that the proscription actually occurred. Long controversies about the effective merits of using pain versus more humane prescriptions seem to be often resolving towards the humane, even before

ethical considerations are considered (Alison & Alison, 2017; Alison et al., 2014; Alison et al., (2013). That's not to say that severe pain or its threat cannot be very effective; and that aspects of pain and the humane cannot induce or detect false confessions and false memories. However, confession as ground truth has often been tenuous even without a world of plea deals, secondary gain, factitious disorder, unconscious guilt, and interrogator chicanery (cf. Kassin, 2017; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004).

The third prescription is to look for 'tells'—e.g., aspects of verbal and nonverbal behavior usually irrespective of context that concurrently indicate committing the proscription. There have been a myriad of 'tells' in the history of the psychology of lying and deception detection—frequency of use of certain pronouns, response latencies to questions or stimuli, degree of verbal detail, frequency and emphaticity of direct denials of committing the proscription, microfacial expressions of presumed affect, blood pressure and respiration, galvanic skin response, aspects of the electroencephalogram and of functional magnetic resonance imagery, and direct electromagnetic stimulation of various brain areas. Accuracy has often been very modest with varying estimates of true and false positives and negatives (Rosenfeld, 2018; Vrij, 2019). The same is the case for how prior probabilities of committing proscriptions should interact with the data at hand in a real-world, high-stakes challenge; field and lab experiments; and epidemiological survey research (Giolla & Ly, 2019).

This brings us to Levine's *Duped*. The book is a summary of much of what this professor of communication studies at the University of Alabama has been professionally up to for over two decades. It's extremely valuable in at least three ways. It provides a cogent assessment of the field, a theory that reasonably explains most of the findings, and a way forward. Let's look at each.

Levine's notes that most of the history of research on lying and deception detection has focused on verbal and nonverbal 'tells'. Most of this research involves artificial situations in a field setting or in labs divorced from meaningful social context so vibrant when lying and deception occur in everyday life and those infrequent moments of high-stakes crisis. This research almost always has required concurrent detection of deception, even if most of the time we discover deception after the fact. Thus, we've been left with a significant problem of ecological invalidity.

One upshot is that in general the accuracy in detecting lying and deception via 'tells' has been a bit better than chance. And he intimates that even brain research involving the EEG and the fMRI may not yield significantly more accuracy. He even writes that methods to elicit 'tells' based on increasing the psychological stress on a suspect may not only be ineffective but impede accuracy. But he also notes that in social psychology experiments so prevalent in the history of psychological research, subjects are almost always fooled by deception.

How to put all of this together? Have we reached a dead-end? Not according to Levine via his own research and that of his colleagues in years of deception detection experiments described in *Dupez* and founding his Truth-Default Theory. He has found that there are only a few prolific liars and deceivers out there, while most of us tell the truth, act in truth, and discern the truth most of the time. So most of the time, except for some unusual situations, we usually correctly discern truth. Motives for truth telling and lying are similar, and most of us lie only when truth seems to be not an option in satisfying a motive. Truth works most of the time. And since most of us tell the truth most of the time, it makes sense to have a default response to assume the truth in others. This default is operative except for situations wherein there seems to be a significant motive for our interlocutor/suspect to lie and for a small number of very poor liars we meet. The

very poor liars help us understand why findings for textuality and ‘tells’ have been a bit above chance as opposed to chance.

In addition, Levine has found that most of us vary in the degree to which we exhibit one of two demeanors—one of honesty and dishonesty, even as both have little to do with whether we are lying and deceptive or not. Both are based on combinations of verbal and nonverbal behaviors and constitute each individual’s Believability Quotient, again divorced from whether they should be believable. All this provides a rationale for the modest findings on intratextuality and ‘tells’, and has pointed the way for Levine and his colleagues to go in a different direction.

That direction is to return to intertextuality and to confessions. The more recent research of Levine and his colleagues supports asking better questions to optimally compare, contrast, and assess correspondence between narrative aspects of a suspect’s verbal text and what is obtained from other people and through situational analysis. I also read Levine to support applied social psychological approaches to asking questions facilitating a suspect’s decision to “spill the beans”, whether through rationalization, justification, cognitive dissonance, or other inferred intrapsychic phenomena. These phenomena facilitate the suspect doing the right thing—not deceiving but truth telling—because it becomes the right thing for the suspect—as opposed to do the wrong thing—not deceiving but truth telling—yielded under duress.

There are other long-term issues awaiting theoretical and empirical clarification by Levine, his colleagues, and others in the field. A more indirect approach to detecting lying and deception and/or the truth is through first detecting the presence of guilty knowledge (Verschuere et al, 2011). This can occur through differential psychophysical reactivity to stimuli that should have special meaning only to someone committing a behavior that may warrant deception and lying. Is acceptable accuracy here obtainable, and does it then facilitate

the validity of intertextuality and ‘tells’? Or how to best detect other phenomena that may involve self-deception? How do we better optimize results now labelled as inconclusive? In addition, much more research should be applied to the specifics of interrogation and interview techniques that interact with the presence and accuracy of the textualities, confessions, and ‘tells’. Finally, more research on accuracy of detecting lying and deception needs to be better integrated with true and false positives of truth telling.

I end this review with two caveats. First, I’m uncomfortable with how Levine discusses some of the most significant researchers in the field. I wouldn’t necessarily use the term *ad hominem*, but instead an unusual frankness, perhaps acerbity, applied to what he considers the deficiencies of their research. He cites how some researchers publish huge numbers of papers and obtain significant research funding with the same small group of collaborators, perhaps constituting a cult (p. 88). How some engage in “statistical shenanigans” (p. 316). He describes a “complete falling out” with one significant researcher (p. 337). He states that many social scientists “...just give mere lip service to theory. That is, they bullshit.” (p. 299). He cites a set of significant researchers critiquing *his* work with a critique not being “logically sound or good-faith academic argument” (p. 285). And he even approvingly cites a deception by omission on his part—hiding that he’s accepted a job offer from his current employer until his resignation time is closer—that might be construed as professionally unethical (p. 109). Maybe all this—except the last item—will become part of the Open Science in Psychology movement (Nosek, 2019) that has come to the fore and may be needed. Perhaps, Levine just doesn’t suffer people he thinks are fools lightly. Or maybe I’m impeded by a certain sense of propriety, maybe gone forever, maybe never was.

Second, in a world in which some academics and pundits claim that truth is being killed or is already dead (Field, 2018), what does lying and deception even mean versus competing rhetorical narratives wherein utility not correspondence to reality nor coherence to cognitive-affective schemata or belief systems is key?

In any case, Levine has done a great job in language accessible to undergraduate and graduate students, scientific professionals, and interested members of the general public. Of special note is a short chapter (pp. 93-100) in which carefully defined concepts, modules, and propositions constituting his overarching Truth-Default Theory are presented. And he succeeds in carefully laying out years of relevant, coherent, and interrelated research behind the theory. The field of the psychology of deception detection only can benefit.

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