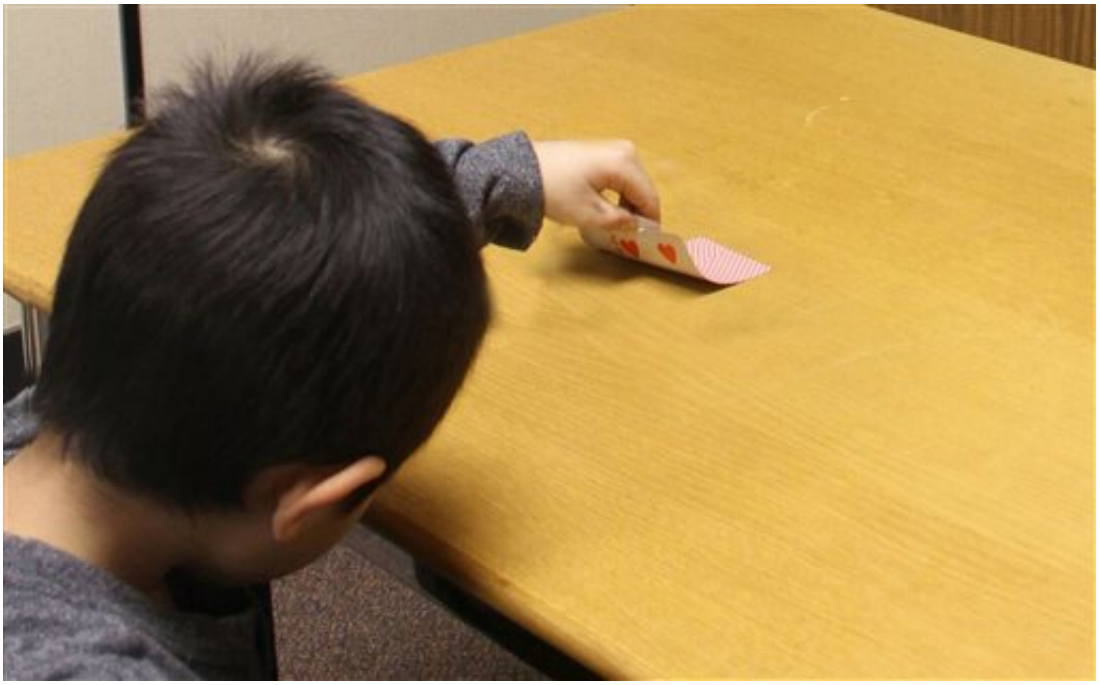
Everyone lies, but politicians do it more often

April 18 2016, by By Seth Borenstein



In this Jan. 27, 2016 photo provided by the University of Toronto, a child peeks at a hidden card when an adult leaves the room and later lies about not peeking in research about how young children start to lie by Kang Lee at the University of Toronto in Toronto. Scientists say we all lie, and this year, politicians are bending the truth big time, with real consequences. By studying how and why we deceive, the experts say they can help us better understand the 2016 election season. (Paul Zheng/University of Toronto via AP)

This is the season of lies. We watch with fascination as candidates for the world's most powerful job trade falsehoods and allegations of dishonesty.

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump routinely calls rival Ted Cruz "Lyin' Ted." Cruz retorts: "Falsely accusing someone of lying is itself a lie and something Donald does daily."

News organizations such as The Associated Press and PolitiFact dedicate enormous resources to separating candidates' truthful wheat from their dishonest chaff.

But if we've come to expect and even joke about office-seekers who seem truth averse ("How do you know a politician is lying? His lips are moving"), many of us have given little thought to our own fibs and to how they compare with politicians' deceits. What if PolitiFact looked at what we say to our spouses, friends and bosses?

For more than two decades, researchers of different stripes have examined humanity's less-than-truthful underbelly. This is what they have found: We all stretch the truth. We learned to deceive as toddlers. We rationalize our fabrications that benefit us. We tell little white lies daily that make others feel good.

Now magnify that. Politicians distort the truth more often, use more self-justifications and deceive in larger ways, and with more consequences, experts in psychology and political science say.

In this June 12, 2007, file photo, a polygraph examiner applies electrodes on the fingers of a subject in Bogota, Colombia. Scientists say we all lie, and this year, politicians are bending the truth big time, with real consequences. By studying how and why we deceive, the experts say they can help us better understand the 2016 election season. (AP Photo/Fernando Vergara, File)

Especially this year.

"I feel more worried about lying in public life (specifically by politicians, and in particular, Trump) than I ever have before," psychology researcher Bella DePaulo at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said in an email. When lies succeed, they make it "more tempting to lie. Lies can stick. They can have a lingering effect, even if they are debunked. "

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Deception starts early.

Children learn to lie at an average of about 3 years old, often when they realize that other people don't know what they are thinking, said Kang Lee, a professor at the University of Toronto.

He has done extensive research on children and lying. Lee set up an experiment in a video-monitored room and would tell children there's a toy they can have that's behind them, but they can only get it if they don't peek. Then the adult is called out of the room, returns a minute later and asks if they peeked.

At age 2, only 30 percent lie, Lee said. At age 3, half do. By 5 or 6, 90 percent of the kids lie and Lee said he worries about the 10 percent who don't. This is universal, Lee said.

A little later, "we explicitly teach our kids to tell white lies," with parental coaching about things like saying how much they love gifts from grandma, and it's a lesson most of them only get around age 6 or older, Lee said.

In 1996, DePaulo, author of "The Hows and Whys of Lies," put recorders on students for a week and found they lied, on average, in every third conversation of 10 minutes or more. For adults, it was once every five conversations.

A few years later, Robert Feldman at the University of Massachusetts taped students in conversations with total strangers and got similar results with the participants not realizing they were lying until they watched themselves.

In this photo provided by Humintell, taken in 2013, San Francisco State psychologist and company CEO David Matsumoto, right, and colleague looking at the non-verbal behavior of another employee on video as part of their analysis for deception and emotional clues, in Berkeley, Calif. Scientists say we all lie, and this year, politicians are bending the truth big time, with real consequences. By studying how and why we deceive, the experts say they can help us better understand the 2016 election season. (Hyisung C. Hwang/Humintell via AP)

"I would say we're lying constantly. Constantly," said Maurice Schweitzer, who studies deception and decision-making at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, Trump's alma mater.

The problem is there are many shades of truth-bending. Experts split on whether to count white lies—what psychologist and political scientist Stanley Renshon calls "social lubrication" that makes civilized operate. When your spouse tells you that you don't look fat in that outfit when you do, does it really do any harm?

"There's a difference between white lies and real lies," Renshon said.

Some lies, said Schweitzer, "fall under politeness norms and are not very harmful. There are other lies that are self-interested and those are the ones that are really harmful. Those are the ones that harm relationships, harm trust."

But others, like DePaolo, see no distinction: "It doesn't matter if the attempt was motivated by good intentions and it doesn't matter if the lie is about something little."

Regardless, society rewards people for white lies, Feldman said.

"We're really trained to be deceptive," Feldman said. "If we're not, if we're totally truthful all the time that's not a good thing, there's a price to be paid for that. We don't like people who tell us the truth all the time."

From there it's only a small leap to what politicians do.

"The lies that we accept from politicians right now are lies that are seen as acceptable because it's what we want to hear," like a spouse saying that an outfit flatters you, Feldman said.

Or perhaps we feel that lying is necessary.

In this June 12, 2007, file photo, students learn to administer polygraph exams at the Latin American Polygraph Institute in Bogota, Colombia. Scientists say we all lie, and this year, politicians are bending the truth big time, with real consequences. By studying how and why we deceive, the experts say they can help us better understand the 2016 election season. (AP Photo/Fernando Vergara, File)

"People want their politicians to lie to them. The reason that people want their politicians to lie them is that people care about politics," said Dan Ariely, a professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University. "You understand that Washington is a dirty place and that lying is actually very helpful to get your policies implemented."

When people deceive beyond white lies, they spend a lot of effort justifying and rationalizing what they are doing.

"They engage in something we call justified dishonesty," said Shaul

Shalvi, who runs the Behavioral Ethics Lab at the University of Amsterdam. It happens when people's desire to be ethical clash with the desire to profit or get something. In that case people are willing to lie just a bit "as long as it seems legit," Shalvi said

"As long as they have a good rationale they can stretch the truth as long as they really want," Shalvi said.

Cyclist Lance Armstrong, Shalvi said, justified his denials of doping because he felt his story raised hope in cancer victims—though it also benefited Armstrong.

"He was convincing himself that what he was doing was not that wrong at the time. I think politicians do the same," Shalvi said, who adds politicians do this frequently.

Similarly, Jennifer Mercieca, a Texas A&M professor of communications who studies political rhetoric and teaches fact-checking, said politicians such as the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy, R-Wis., "convince themselves that the ends justify the means" and "the reasons they are doing it are more important."

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The experts who study lying are alarmed by what they are seeing in 2016, and by its ramifications.

"Dishonesty is contagious," said the University of Nottingham's Simon Gaechter.

His March 2016 study examined honesty in a dice game in 23 different countries (but not the United States) and then compared them to a corruption index for those countries. The more corrupt a society was, the

more likely the people there were willing to deceive in the simple dice game.

Most people want to be honest, but if they live in a country where rule violations are rampant "people say, 'Well everybody cheats. If I cheat here, then that's OK,'" Gaechter said.

Add to that confirmation bias, Mercieca said. The public tends to believe things—even if they are false—"that confirm what we be already believe" and come from news sources and partisans that they already trust and agree with.

Political scientist and psychologist Renshon said politicians should be held up to a higher standard but over the decades, they and the government have been more deceitful and unwilling to tell the public something that could hurt them politically. When President Dwight Eisenhower misled the public about a spy plane captured by the Soviet Union, lying was the exception. By the time President Bill Clinton strained the meaning of the word "is" testifying before a grand jury, it was more common.

"We've become kind of numb to it," said Pamela Meyer, the Washington based author of the book "Liespotting" and chief executive officer of the private firm Calibrate, which that trains people and companies about how to spot deception. "In Washington, deception is the gift that keeps on giving."

But there's a high cost in everyday society—a loss of trust that is difficult to regain—when someone is discovered to be lying, Lee said. There are also costs to the liar, he said, noting studies that measure the effect of deception on the body and brain and how much energy it takes to create and maintain a lie.

"When you tell lies it costs your brain a heckuva lot more resources than when you tell the truth," Lee said.

Lee is working on a video camera that would study people's heart rate, stress level, blood flow and mood, a kind of video lie detector called transdermal optical imaging.

He envisions a future televised political debate, with a camera trained on the candidates showing their heart rates and breathing levels—"an index of lying."