



MALINGERING, DECEPTION AND LIES

Serafín Lemos Giráldez

Psychology Faculty, University of Oviedo

Malinger, deception and lies clearly form part of human nature, and are present in both the personal sphere and in life within society in general. From the briefest of structured greetings, of the type “Good morning, how are you? Fine, thanks”, where words lose their genuine meaning in mere polite formulas, to the most sophisticated forms of communication in the complex social framework, we are involved in a game of roleplay, where things become mixed and confused: what we are with what we appear to be, reality with image, the function of author with that of actor.

Deception is not exclusive to the human species, but is a characteristic found in all primates and in other animals living in highly complex social environments; in the animal and plant kingdoms, numerous types of living creatures have developed, in the course of evolution, highly sophisticated capacities for camouflage and adaptation, which have prospered by virtue of the confusion created in competitors and predators.

Survival in a complex social medium has favoured the development of the cerebral neocortex in the human being and in other higher mammals, which has in turn made possible the acquisition of extraordinary mental abilities and concepts, such as self-awareness and the theory of mind, which permit not only the recognition of personal characteristics, but also the anticipation of the thoughts and intentions of congeners, thus increasing social skills and group cohesion. Without entering a discussion of whether primates are conscious of their behaviour, their thinking is reflective and their acts follow a preconceived plan (the mentalist hypothesis), or whether these abilities are the result of mere innate reflexes or instrumental learning processes (the behaviourist hypothesis), what seems evident is that these capacities are at the basis of what Whiten and Byrne (1997) have called “Machiavellian intelligence”, a theory according to which the primates have managed to develop diverse social strategies that are advantageous to their survival, resorting for their own convenience to the use of agonistic or cooperative behaviours, according to the demands of the situation. Machiavellian intelligence is a capacity that appears to have been induced by the need to master ever more refined

forms of manipulation and fraud in the social context, and which manifests itself through the use of strategies of tactical pretence, lying and deceit. As Smith (2005) argues, Machiavellian intelligence may have provided the driving force for our ancestors to acquire ever greater intelligence and to increase our tendency to change our minds, to make deals, to boast/bluff and to plot with others. Smith thus considers human beings to be born liars, having developed much more sophisticated forms of deception than even our closest primate relatives.

But pretence and the deceiving of others would not have reached such a degree if we humans had not also developed the ability to deceive ourselves. Self-deception helps us to lie to others more convincingly, and the capacity for believing our own lies helps us to more effectively dupe those around us. Furthermore, it permits us to perfect the art of “lying sincerely”, without the need to resort to theatricality to pretend that we are telling the truth. This is the thesis of sociobiologist Robert Trivers (2002), who argues that the chief function of self-deception is to be able to deceive others more easily, so that credulity with regard to one’s own fabrication makes it more convincing for everyone else.

Thus, pretence, implicit lying and deliberate deceit form part of all the scenarios in which human social life unfolds. In an ongoing developmental process that begins in childhood, we lose spontaneity as we gradually become convinced that honesty is not always possible or appropriate, because it can harm other people or oneself. So, well-intentioned friends lie in order to flatter, to sweeten the truth, to give support or to protect; politicians and social leaders lie to achieve their aims, to avoid problems or to seduce the electorate (with the paradox that it is the biggest liars who are keenest to expose the lies of their adversaries); the media lie, concealing information or publishing information that serves their interests, emphasizing certain news items or counteracting them with others; publicists and salespersons lie in all types of commercial transaction in order to win over their clients; and, along with many others, professionals lie so as to defend their interests, or to achieve social recognition or the satisfaction of their clients. In sum, everyone tries to accommodate reality to their own intentions, expectations or needs; but what is most sur-



prising is that knowing the world is like that, we act as though everything was true – or perhaps we need to persuade ourselves that it is.

In the different contexts of the psychologist's professional activity, dissemblance, concealment, exaggeration, leaking and falsification of the information provided are highly frequent phenomena, and constitute important obstacles to the proper assessment of cases and the decision-making process. Undoubtedly, the same difficulties exist in many other professional fields; in our own context, however, such behaviours can have a range of causes, which may be pathological (the existence of a mental disorder), criminological (the intention to avoid legal responsibility) or merely adaptive (the desire to achieve particular objectives in adverse circumstances) (Rogers, 1997).

An essential premise for the professional exercise of the psychologist is the cooperation and honesty of the client or patient; correct psychological assessment and diagnosis depend on the assessed person's honesty and will to offer information, as well as on the accuracy and veracity of the data provided. Although in professional practice psychologists tend to assume the truth of the testimony and data given by clients or patients on describing their behaviours, their states, their symptoms or their psychological problems, this assumption may be somewhat naive. As is well known, numerous factors may give rise to reluctance and to lack of cooperation, such as the pursuit of a particular aim (economic, professional or judicial), doubts about the confidentiality of the data, disagreement with the point of view or values of the professional, the defence of one's own interests, the nature of the assessment or test (voluntary or imposed), or simply lack of attention in performing tests or filling out scales and questionnaires. Malingering and defensive or deceitful attitudes are not, however, dichotomic phenomena, but rather tend to present varying degrees of intensity, depending on the circumstances or motives behind them.

With the aim of analyzing these issues, we have invited experts from different fields of professional psychological activity to express their points of view on how malingering, deception and lies can affect the validity of psychological assessment, and to identify the procedures and strategies employed for counteracting their effects.

The articles by Ramón Arce and Francisca Fariña and by Verónica Godoy and Lorenzo Higuera deal with a highly controversial issue, that of the credibility of testimony in forensic contexts. The key question concerns whether the credibility of a statement can be the object of scientific re-

search, or whether it belongs to the realm of subjectivity. Arce and Fariña present a systematized procedure developed by the authors themselves for making decisions about the reliability and validity of declarations, or the veracity of the psychological trace adduced or refuted by claimants; Godoy and Higuera, on the other hand, undertake a critical examination of the validity of a procedure for determining the credibility of statements, namely, Criteria-Based Content Analysis (CBCA), employed by some forensic psychologists. The article by Jaume Masip deals exhaustively with another important question, of potential relevance to the forensic context, namely, the reliability of the popular belief that lying can be better detected through non-verbal behaviour than through the analysis of verbal messages.

Another two articles examine malingering and deception in the clinical context. The work by Mercedes Inda and cols. offers some conceptual and methodological reflections relevant to the study of malingering behaviours, as well as describing the clinical conditions in which such behaviours most frequently occur and presenting some instruments specifically designed for their exposure. Manuel Porcel and Rubén González, openly assuming that lying and pretence constitute an essential part of human behaviour, argue that pathological behaviours are nothing but a fictional cover for life problems, and that psychotherapeutic intervention, if it is to be successful, should operate on the basis of this assumption.

The analysis and management of malingering and of social desirability in psychological assessments carried out in organizational contexts are splendidly dealt with by Jesús F. Salgado, while finally, deception and acquiescence or social desirability responses on the MMPI-2 are examined in the paper by Héctor González Ordí and Iciar Iruarrizaga.

We thank all the authors for their participation in this special issue, and hope that the contributions presented here will be of interest and practical utility for professional psychologists.

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