Deceptive Communication Behavior during the Interview Process and the
Consequences in Employee Selection

Angela Q. Glass

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Queen University of Charlotte
Abstract

In an extension of previous studies on deception and deception detection, this paper investigates generalized clues in assessing lying and altered communicative behavior during the interview process. Attention is given to how professionals increase their deception detection accuracy to make sense of the interviewees’ communicative behavior. This study is based on observations of social desirability bias and the need of interviewees to display it. Research may reveal a process in which candidate communicative behavior is evaluated by a set of outlined steps to help detect deception and greatly reduce the prospect of making bad hires.
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I believe understanding deception is important because lying is a daily activity (Vrij, 2000). A great part of daily conversations involve some kind of deception, which is understood as a deliberate attempt to mislead others. Unfortunately, researchers have found that individuals are generally good at lying and bad at detecting lies (Giordano & Tilley, 2006, p. 1). Researchers have tried to improve individuals’ deception detection accuracy to minimize the impact of it, including warning individual about deception. However, detecting deception is a complicated endeavor. Based on studies completed thus far we know that job candidates modify their behavior simply out of a healthy self-image and to express a need to be liked and accepted. Let’s keep in mind that self-deception (unconscious bias toward favorable self-portrayal) and impression management (when people consciously use inflated self descriptions, faking, or lying due to a hypersensitivity to situational self-presentation demands) (Houran & Krieger, 2006, p. 2) can lead to tainted candidate evaluations. These factors make it crucial for the hiring professional to be prepared to address these concepts.

Review of Literature

Below, I explore literature related to interpersonal deception theory and its relationship to communication apprehension and factors influencing deception detection. Also, I will touch on problem-solving strategies and the use of personality measures for employee selection as a benchmark to improve the selection process making bad hires from erroneous information supplied by candidates less common.
Interpersonal deception theory (Buller & Burgoon, 1996) contends that interactive deceit differs in fundamental ways from non-interactive deceit. According to this theory, senders may draw upon the benefits of interpersonal interaction to craft more believable messages (Dunbar, Ramirez, & Burgoon, 2003). Not only they may draw upon the truth or positivity biases that attend interpersonal interaction and the sense of commonality that reciprocal interaction patterns often foster, but they may also draw upon receiver feedback to repair any deceptive messages that elicit negative feedback and even enlist the receiver in the process of constructing plausible messages (Burgoon & Buller, 1994; Burgoon, Buller, Floyd, & Grandpre, 1996).

Some researchers relate the act of lying to communication apprehension (an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons) and vocal stress. It is important to note that communication apprehension and deception are compatible concepts of study because physiological arousal has been associated with three types of deceptions: prepared, spontaneous, and delayed interrogative lies (O’Hair, Cody, & Behnke, 1985, p.286). Let’s differentiate these concepts: a prepared lie is when the individual has previous knowledge of the deception to be communicated and knows the approximate timing of it. In the spontaneous deception condition individuals have no knowledge that they will enact any type of lie, their answers are unstructured or unplanned. During delayed interrogative lies a delayed interrogative question is posed to elicit a deceptive answer right at the conclusion of an interview.

Podlesny and Raskin’s studies have “attempted to identify and measure the psycho physiological parameters that reflect the arousal state of a speaker during the act of deception
and their results indicated that heightened arousal levels are common during deceptive communication” (as cited in O’Hair et al., 1985, p. 286). The findings show that liars who report a high level of communication apprehension demonstrate significantly higher levels of vocal stress when lying preparedly than when communicating a prepared truthful response. The important factor related to my research is the relationship found between communication apprehension and vocal stress levels, which provide ample support for earlier theories of anticipatory responses to communication interaction and contribute to the effectiveness of detecting deception.

On another note, Schlenker and Weigold present two views regarding how impression management affects personality measures. One view is that people engage in impression management on specific occasions—for example when applying for a job—and doing so inevitably degrades test validity. The second view is that, during social interaction, most people behave in ways that are intended to convey a positive impression of themselves (as cited in Hogan, Barrett, & Hogan, 2007, p. 1270). These findings are very important to my study since I believe hiring professionals can learn from previous research in order to make sense of the interviewees’ communicative behavior and the process of controlling one’s behavior during any form of social interaction, including responding to interview questions.

Regarding factors influencing deception detection, Hamel, Burgoon, and Blair (2006) posit competitive views of the effects of arousal (stimulus), emotional state (such as fear of detection or guilt), cognitive load (or difficulty of the lie), and attempted behavioral control (the harder deceivers try to succeed, the more they are likely to fail). DePaulo & Kirkendol propose building upon these foundations what they call “the motivation impartment effect,” (as cited in Hamel
et al., 2006, p. 3). They argue that all of these factors will debilitate nonverbal performance by revealing telltale nonverbal cues that make deception more detectable when receivers can see or hear nonverbal features of a message and less detectable when only words are available. However, deceptive verbal performances are suggested to be facilitated by motivation, the reasoning behind this claim is that when deceptive individuals are highly motivated, they will experience increased arousal and negative emotions of guilt, discomfort, and/or the fear of being caught (Hamel et al., 2006, p. 3). Generally speaking, deception triggers involuntary “leakage” (signals that escape from a deceptive interviewee despite his or her attempts at control). As the nonverbal leakage becomes more evident, deceivers are also expected to exert greater behavioral control to conceal it, but the harder they try, the more their nonverbal performances becomes unnatural. Thus, behavior backfires making deception more readily detectable when receivers can observe nonverbal indicators during the deceptive communication process (Hamel et al., 2006, p. 4).

Ample research has been conducted on the subject of deception and revealed that deception is a substantial part of every day communication; it is not only common but socially acceptable. While a number of studies focus specifically on cues to deception, sufficient studies also have been conducted on the differences in the behavior of deceivers and truth tellers. According to the interactive deception theory (Buller & Burgoon, 1996), deception is viewed as a dynamic process where senders and receivers monitor, control, and modify their messages and mutually influence each other’s actions. Interactive contexts give deceivers more opportunities to adjust their behavior to receiver’s reactions. Buller and Burgoon state that deceivers will engage in more strategic activities (preplanned or intentional techniques used by
individuals to look truthful) and will exhibit more nonstrategic behavior (unintentional cues that can betray a person’s real feeling, emotions, and psychological state) than truth teller, and that deception involves more cognitive overload than telling the truth. The assumption made in this theory, that it is more difficult to tell a lie than the truth, does not seem very convincing as lies are practiced every day. We have to keep in mind that there are situations when being truthful requires much more effort than lying, and truth is not always prepackaged (Frank & Vasilyeva, 2006, p. 5).

One important aspect of deception not generally discussed is the social implications of deception. A great deal of research has been done claiming that lies actually help people preserve their emotional equilibrium. Paula Lippard’s study (1988) seeks to contribute to the growing body of research that focuses on the social implications given that deception is seen as a “normal” part of interpersonal communication rather than as a form of social or moral deviance (p. 91). I believe exploring the social implication of deception is important because if deception is frequently judged as the “right thing to do,” (to avoid hurting someone’s feelings), and a possible form of communication competence, then we need to be aware of the moral and ethical implications in social settings. Lippard identifies five situational exigencies (motivations) affecting how deception is used as a problem-solving strategy: (1) to save face (self or others), (2) to guide social interaction, (3) to avoid tension or conflict, (4) to affect interpersonal relationship, and (5) to achieve interpersonal power (p. 92). Based on the above mentioned situations, the study concluded that lies are motivated by a need to defend oneself socially or economically in a disadvantaged situation, supporting the idea that people lie in a purposeful and motivated way (p. 92). If we are able to determine the specific situation or
reason why a person lied, then we can make sense and determine the pattern of deception that can be expected in such situation and determine the most appropriate strategy for meeting the posed challenge. Her findings outline the nature and function of interpersonal communication, but it also highlights the need for further research to tease out the effect and impact of deception acceptability in social settings.

The research above seems to imply that the quest for alternatives to daily deception obviously raises ethical issues, issues which have always been linked to the examination of human deceit. This concern also deserves further questioning and research.

*Theoretical Assumptions and the Role of Communication*

For this study, I take on an interpretive, social constructionist perspective to explore how verbal and non-verbal communication is manipulated during the interview process and the implications of altering communicative behavior to create favorable impressions. I believe the interviewees’ distortion of their competencies and credentials in the interview process stems from their desire to be liked by hiring professionals. As symbolic interaction theory explains, this need arises in the process of interaction between people.

This study contends that communicative behavioral clues to assess lying are too generalized to be effectively applied to most people. Therefore, I am interested in how hiring professionals make sense of the interviewees’ communicative behavior (verbal and non-verbal) to increase their deception detection accuracy. I consider this study to be important both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it may predict whether motivational factors facilitate or influence verbal and nonverbal performance during deceptive communication. Practically, it may reveal
the realistic, specific, well-defined behavioral criteria needed to determine if a candidate can deliver the expected results.

**Research Questions**

In conducting my interpretive and social constructionist research, I was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do interviewers interpret verbal and nonverbal communication during the interview process to obtain information that will reduce bad hires?

RQ2. To what extent do interviewees alter their communicative behavior to create a favorable impression?

In sum, I study how interviewers and interviewees make sense of their communicative behavior during the interview process. Previous studies examine a common pattern to most deceptive situations caused by a question or request which creates a dilemma in a person’s mind which in turn prompts a deceptive response. In other words, most lies are responsive rather than initiating. Job candidates predictably distort the way they present their competencies and credentials out of concern for making a favorable impression. These distortions (known as social desirability biases) can be expressed through unconscious behaviors (leakage) or can reflect deliberate deceit. Researches suggest that inconsistencies or the changes in delivery are clues that something peculiar or “out of sync” is going on (Houran & Krieger, 2006, p.4). People naturally pick up on cues when trying to assess the sincerity of someone, but more often than not people focus on cues that indicate when someone is stressed, not necessarily when they are lying. However, cues alone can not absolutely guarantee that someone is lying, but they can alert one to the distinct possibility of deception.
Methodology

Decades of research have demonstrated that employment interviews alone have limited validity in predicting job performance. To explore deception during the interview process, I will conduct an in-depth qualitative study in the Human Resources department where I currently work. I will perform a qualitative study using observation (notes during the job interview) and an anonymous survey to make meaning of the interviewer and interviewee’s communicative behavior. The survey along with observation and notes will allow me to better understand the shared reality created by the interviewer and the interviewee during the hiring process and make sense of the realities they have co-constructed as a result of going through the process.

Since perception and interpretations are what really matters, the goal of this study will be to give “voice” to the interviewer/interviewee experience. Below I will discuss the methods and procedures that will be used to conduct this study. First, I will explain in detail the setting of this experiment, and then I will explain how data will be gathered and evaluated.

Setting

I will observe 10 job interviews that will be conducted by the Human Resources department of Fluor Corporation Power’s division. Two rooms will be used to conduct this experiment: the medium size conference room designated for HR where the interview will take place and a small conference room adjacent to the reception area where candidates will fill out an anonymous survey. This survey will allow me understand or make sense of the interviewee’s performance if he/she chooses deceptive communicative behavior during the in-person interview process.
Participants

The sample will consist of 10 job candidates randomly selected through the resume application database and that have applied for the same exact position during a period of one week. Gender and ethnicity will not be taken into consideration.

Procedures

I will be using two HR specialists to conduct the interviews with both interviewing five candidates. I will talk to one of the HR specialists (HR No. 1) prior to the interviews informing him/her of the experiment and making him/her aware of the cues to look for during the interview such as vocal stress, eye contact, phrase repetition and inconsistencies in the applicant’s speech or behavior. The HR specialist will take notes during the interview of these cues based on a list I’ll provide. I will be present in all interviews performed by him/her as an observer only. I will not make the second HR specialist (HR No. 2) aware of the cues of this experiment but I will be present during the interview to take notes of the candidate’s behavioral cues based on the same list provided to HR No. 1. I will collect the notes from HR No. 1, compare them with my notes taken during the interviews performed by HR No. 2 and determine consistencies/inconsistencies of the interviewee’s behavior during the process.

The HR specialists will meet the interviewee in the reception area of the building (10th floor) and will be given a visitor’s badge issued by the receptionist. The interviewee will be led to the HR conference room where he/she will be asked to sit down and make him/herself comfortable. The interview will follow a standardized Behavioral Analysis Interview (BAI) format which usually begins with general questions before moving to specific questions about the job, including a request for a detailed narrative about the interviewee’s activities in his/her
previous/current job. Interviews will last approximately 20 to 30 minutes. The HR No. 1 will look for accuracy in the information provided in the candidate’s resume vs. the information given during the interview to detect any type of deception (e.g., background information, professional experience, references).

When the interview is finished, each interviewee will be taken to the small conference room and instructed to complete an anonymous survey which will consist of two sections: demographic information and personal experience. The latter section will include questions to test the honesty of the interviewee as it relates to his/her personal experience. The survey will be structured to yield a Yes/No answer with one final feedback/essay question regarding their truthfulness during the interview process. The survey will include the following questions: Did you present yourself in an honest and truthful way? Did you answer the interviewer’s questions as honest as possible? Did you feel at any point of the interview the need to conceal and or alter qualifications about yourself? The essay question will ask: Did you alter your communicative behavior to create a favorable impression? If so, explain why?

To avoid any external influences and to assure an unbiased response to the survey, the interviewee will be left alone in the small conference room for about ten minutes to complete it and be instructed to drop it off in the sealed box labeled “Interview Survey” located next to the entrance door. Upon completion, the interviewee will be free to leave the building after dropping off his/her visitor badge at the receptionist desk.

Data Analysis

As described earlier, this study focuses on how interviewees use verbal and nonverbal language to create a favorable impression during the interview process. So, when evaluating
data I will take note of the interviewee’s behavioral cues and the interviewer’s knowledge or awareness to spot deception. After one week of interviews, I will have ten interview surveys which will help me to determine the percentage of deception that may have taken place during the interview process and may validate the shared knowledge that candidate’s unconscious bias toward favorable self-portrayal is as common as expected. If the survey results show a high percentage of participants answering “Yes” to the majority of the questions it will support the hypothesis that interviewees alter their communicative behavior to create a favorable impression.

I will use three cues indicative of deception to measure changes in communicative behavior (vocal stress, eye contact, phrase repetition), and any inconsistencies in the way the applicant talks or behaves will determine any “leakage.” For example, if certain phrases have been repeated consistently during the interview it could indicate the interviewee’s inability to control/conceal his/her behavior and that the harder he/she tries, the more his/her verbal performances become unnatural. Inconsistencies also may include an increased use of short sentences and frequent errors in the person’s speech. Generally, liars must work particularly hard to make lies flow smoothly and therefore they tend to speak more rapidly or become tongue-tied.

Comparing notes from HR No. 1 and my notes from interviews performed by HR No. 2, will most likely show contrasting candidate behavioral patterns. To evaluate the results I will look for any mismatch between what was said and what the person appeared was feeling, any inconsistencies will be used as an indicator of deception.
Conclusion

The goal of my interpretive and social constructionist research is to show that employment interviews alone can not be used as a valid check point to assess employee performance and reduce bad hires. I believe hiring professionals need to be aware of verbal and nonverbal cues displayed by the interviewee during the employee selection and possibly develop a communication strategy to reduce bad hiring. One person's behavior can differ greatly from that of another under identical circumstances, which means that if leakage is detected through behavior that differs from normal nonverbal interaction, an interviewer needs to observe what constitutes normal behavior for each interviewee. A behavioral baseline of honesty can be a useful point of reference for the interviewer in detecting deception.

Implications and Contributions of the Study

The interviewees’ rating of their own truthfulness during the surveys will serve as a manipulation check on whether the candidate acknowledges deception and was willing to disclose it. Several implications of this study seem warranted. First, no matter how good of a liar someone is there will always be some form of leakage or physical display. Second, the claim of whether a hiring professional can be equipped to spot the telltale signs that a candidate is lying or not telling the whole story. Finally, it is appropriate to discuss the notion of whether people can learn to become better “lie detectors” or not. Many sources claim that they can teach how to detect deception reliably, but the evidence does not generally back up these claims. The latest research suggests that lie detectors are born rather than made. Houran and Krieger (2006) propose a complete system of checks and balances that can greatly reduce the prospect of making bad hires from erroneous information given by candidates (p. 4).
Limitations and Delimitations

Because of time constraints, I will be using a very small sample (ten participants), include candidates that applied for a specific job during a one week period and the interviews will only be conducted during a one week period. A delimitation of this study is the non inclusion of gender and ethnicity when selecting participants. I chose not to include gender and cultural background because I believe it will make the study broader and complex, but the use of these variables deserves further research and study. On the other hand, a limitation of this study could be that job candidates won’t have the option to opt-out of participating in the survey possibly affecting the truthfulness of their feedback to create a favorable impression.

Summary

This study uses Buller & Burgoon’s interpersonal deception theory (1996), and an interpretive, social constructionist perspective to examine hiring professionals’ deception detection accuracy to minimize the impact of deception and to observe how interviewees alter their communicative behavior during the interview process. To assess accuracy, interviewers will have to develop critical skills to find the right person for the right job.

Drawing on literature addressing both interviewee and interviewer communicative behavior during the interview process, it is possible to argue in this study that there will not be a significant difference between deceivers and truth tellers in behavioral communication, strategy use, and nonstrategic behavior. I believe that there may not be enough evidence that deceivers, as well as truth tellers, apply strategies or modify their behavior based on interview settings. While it is important to have an accurate assessment of candidates’ traits and abilities,
professionals need to understand that virtually everyone exhibits social desirability biases to some extent (Horan & Krieger, 2006, p. 2).

In closing, although there are no fail-proof methods for determining whether candidates are being deliberately deceitful about themselves during the recruitment process, the present study will provide strong support in the developing of a process in which candidate communicative behavior is evaluated by a set of outlined steps helping hiring professionals detect deception while interviewing potential employees and greatly reduce the prospect of making bad hires. Competence in this area can be a distinct advantage; greater ability to gauge the veracity of responses enables the interviewer to focus on honest answers and avoid wasting time following false leads. Businesses must adapt quickly to the ever-changing environment and finding the right person to fit a company’s needs is essential.

*Future Study*

As previously mentioned, deception as a daily activity raises ethical issues and deserves further study and research. In addition, future study of deception from a moral/ethical communication lens may contribute to the understanding of the ethical issues posed by the prevalent acceptability of deception in the business world.
References


