

Please cite the Published Version

Fawcett, HE (2014) Lie Bias. In: Encyclopedia of Deception. SAGE Publications. ISBN 1483306895

Publisher: SAGE Publications

Version: Accepted Version

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Lie Bias

A lie bias is the tendency to more commonly believe that witness and suspect statements are deceptive than truthful. The psychological research literature has repeatedly shown that there is a tendency for the general public to judge others as truthful. However, research shows that police and 'professional lie catchers' may be more prone to exhibit a lie bias. This is likely to be due to the high suspicion environments in which they work as offenders also display a lie bias.

There are several explanations for the truth bias, such as that social conventions discourage the challenging of suspected deception and thus allow for poor feedback regarding whether suspected deception did in actual fact occur. However, the dominant explanation for the truth bias is the availability heuristic, the concept that individuals presume information they hear is truthful as they are more frequently exposed to truthful information than to lies in their everyday life.

If the truth bias is due to frequency of exposure to truths, it may be expected that in a highly deceptive situation and occupation a lie bias may occur. Therefore research has examined whether the frequent exposure to suspects encourages police officers to be more suspicious and thus exhibit a lie bias. There is evidence to show that police officers have a tendency towards more commonly judging statements to be deceptive than truthful. Moreover, when compared with members of the public, police officers more frequently judge statements as deceptive. It appears that increased training and experience amongst police officers enhances deception detection confidence, but has no effect upon actual accuracy. Thus, the research illustrates that police officers have similar poor lie detection performance to laypersons. This may be due to the lack of accurate outcome feedback that police officers receive on their deception judgements. If suspects believed to be deceptive are prosecuted the officer's belief that they are good at detecting deception judgment is supported. However, an acquittal can be seen as resulting from legal technicalities and poor juror decision making rather than indicative of poor deception detection ability.

As with members of the public, police officers rely on inaccurate cues to deception such as decreased eye gaze and increased movements. Lie bias is increased when deception detectors focus solely upon the non-verbal components of suspect interview behaviour. Police officers who watched videos of actual suspect interviews were more likely to show a lie bias than officers provided with the accompanying interview audio, and those given a combination of visual and audio material. This strongly supports the concept that the cues commonly but mistakenly associated with deception - gaze aversion and fidgeting - are actually more likely to occur in truthful suspects.

Research has shown that participants who were offered a financial reward for good deception detection performance actually performed worse than participants who were not offered a financial incentive. Furthermore, the motivated participants made more false alarms (that is falsely stated innocent people to be deceptive) than the low motivation individuals. The possible reason for this is that motivated individuals tried harder and so paid more attention to the erroneous non-verbal cues often falsely associated with deception, than on the actual content of their speech. Although conducted with student participants this research suggests that the high motivation of the police to identify guilty suspects and thus detect lies may actually impair their deception detection ability.

Associated with this is the tendency for pre-existing belief to bias attention to and interpretation of later information, known as the behavioural confirmation bias. The impact

of behavioural confirmation bias has been demonstrated to have a negative effect upon the interviewing of police suspects. Officers who believe that their suspect is guilty at the outset of the interview fail to re-evaluate this belief even when the suspect repeatedly and strenuously denies their guilt. This may therefore account for lie bias amongst police officers. This behavioural confirmation bias can lead to interviewers failing to acknowledge the innocence of suspects with plausible alibis. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, concentrating investigations on an innocent offender removes police focus from tracing the actual offender. Secondly, the Reid technique advises that investigators ignore the denials from suspects believed to be guilty and instead continue to insist on their guilt. Police insistence in suspect guilt has been demonstrated to lead to false confessions amongst vulnerable suspects. However, this supposed validation of the police suspicion of lying may serve to reinforce the lie bias. For these reasons, the UK does not subscribe to the Reid technique. Although the lie bias has the potential for serious negative consequences there is some suggestion that it may be overcome. Lie detection performance feedback can to some extent mitigate the impairment caused by a high motivation to detect deception. This effect appears regardless of whether the feedback is accurate or inaccurate, which is useful considering the difficulty in establishing the ground truth in criminal investigations.

The fact that offenders may frequently engage in deception to avoid conviction may make them more sensitive to accurate detecting of lies. Moreover, offenders may believe that others lie at the same high frequency as them and thus make them more likely to presume deception than non-offenders. Finally, the experience of successful and failed lying in interviews relating to their previous offending could provide offenders with the positive outcome feedback necessary to successfully deceive others. Some support for this suggestion has been found in that prison inmates are less likely than the general public to believe that the inaccurate behaviours of gaze aversion and fidgeting are cues to deception. Moreover the work of Hartwig and colleagues shows a pronounced lie bias amongst prison inmates viewing video footage of truthful and deceptive mock eyewitness accounts.

In conclusion whereas the general public consistently shows a truth bias police and offenders seem to exhibit a lie bias. Research suggests that this may be due to greater exposure to lies, more belief in the accuracy of non-verbal cues to deception and greater involvement in high suspicion contexts. Although the lie bias has the potential to hinder the proper administration of justice, by reducing motivation to detect deception and encouraging an open minded approach to suspect interviews, the lie bias may be reduced.

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See also: False Confession; Lying, Accusations; Nonverbal Cues; Prevalence of Lying; Truth Bias.

Further Readings

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