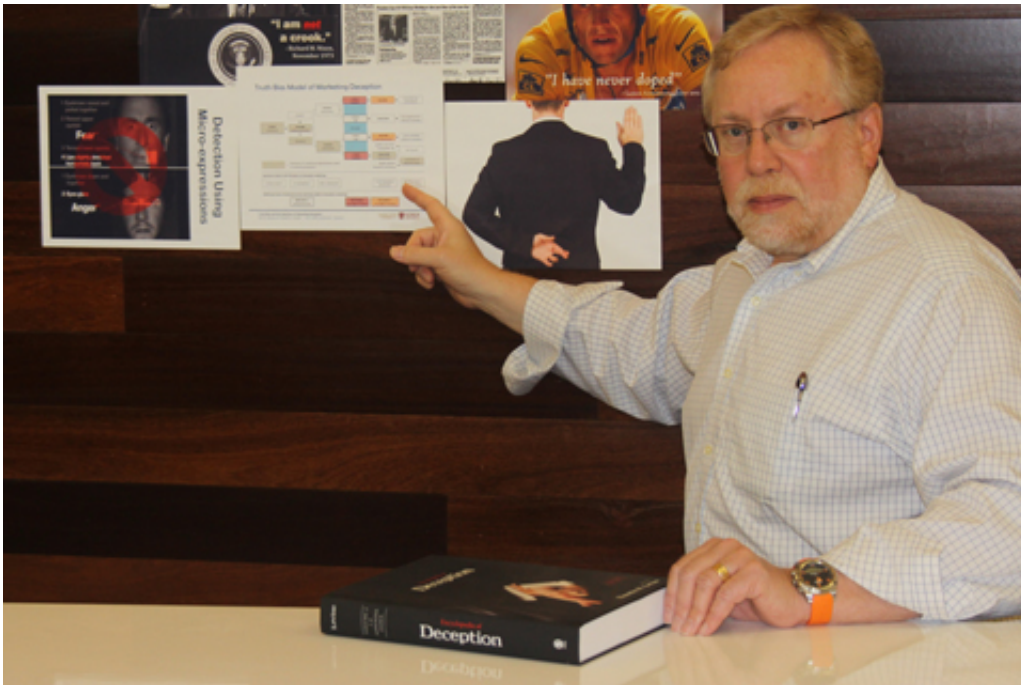


Professor's research finds most lies are told by 'a few prolific liars'

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A majority of lies are told by a small portion of the population, reveals research by Kim Serota, Ph.D., an Oakland University professor of marketing.

An Oakland University professor's research is shedding new light on the lying habits of people in the U.S. and abroad. An oft-cited study shows that U.S. adults tell an average of one or two lies per day. But those figures tell only part of the story, according to Kim Serota, Ph.D., whose research has revealed that a majority of lies are told by a small portion of the population.

In a national survey of 1,000 U.S. adults, 60 percent of the subjects reported telling no [lies](#) at all on a given day, and almost half of all reported lies were told by just five percent of the subjects. The study supports the idea that most people are honest most of the time and that a majority of lies are told by a small group of "prolific [liars](#)."

"There's a lot of research out there about why people lie and what they lie about, but there's very little research on how much people lie," said Dr. Serota, a professor of marketing. "While the average number of lies told is one or two per day, my research found that those lies are not evenly distributed across the total population."

Building on those findings, which were first published in a 2010 article in *Human Communication Research* (and recently republished in the *SAGE Encyclopedia of Deception*), Dr. Serota analyzed data on the [lying](#) habits of adults in the United Kingdom. His findings, published earlier this year in the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, found a similar trend among adults in the UK. That is, most lies are told by a small group of prolific liars.

What is a prolific liar?

Through his research analysis, Dr. Serota determined a "break point" for distinguishing between prolific liars and everyday liars. In the U.S., everyday liars tell up to two lies a day, while prolific liars tell more than two lies a day. The numbers are higher in the UK, with everyday liars telling up to four lies per day and prolific liars telling more than four lies a day.

"The distribution of lies follows a pattern referred to as the 'law of rare events.' This law tells us the upper limit of normal behavior," Dr. Serota explained. "The majority of lying fits this pattern. Prolific liars are the people who go beyond the acceptable level. The study results told us that

people in the UK have a higher tolerance for lying than we have in America."

Who is a prolific liar?

According to the data, prolific liars are generally younger, are more likely to be male and have higher occupational status. In fact, senior managers are more likely to be prolific liars than junior managers and non-management employees. This trend opposes the broader finding that people generally tell fewer lies as they get older.

More trends among prolific liars (Based on the UK study)

- More likely to extend lying behavior into adulthood.
- More likely to lie to their partner and their children.
- More likely to experience the consequences of lying. At work, prolific liars are four times more likely than the rest of the population to have been reprimanded for lying and almost nine times more likely to have been fired for dishonest behavior.
- More likely to tell both "little white lies" (e.g. lying about whether you like someone's gift or telling someone they look good when they don't) and "big lies" (e.g. lying about whether you love someone, who you have really been with, or where you have really been). Prolific liars report telling almost three "big lies" per day, compared to one "big lie" a week for everyday liars. Prolific liars also tell six "little white lies" per day vs. one "little white lie" a day for everyday liars.

Dr. Serota's current projects look at the relationship between the frequency of lying and the ability to detect lies, both interpersonally and in advertising messages.

"Prolific liars are probably not any better at detecting lies than the rest of us – and most of us aren't very good," Dr. Serota said. "But we think they are likely to use different detection strategies."

More information: A Few Prolific Liars: Variation in the Prevalence of Lying: www.oakland.edu/upload/docs/News/2014/Serota%20Levine%20Prolific%20Liars%202014.pdf

The Prevalence of Lying in America: Three Studies of Self-Reported Lies: www.oakland.edu/upload/docs/News/2014/Serota%20et%20al%20Prevalence%20of%20Lying%202010.pdf

Provided by Oakland University

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