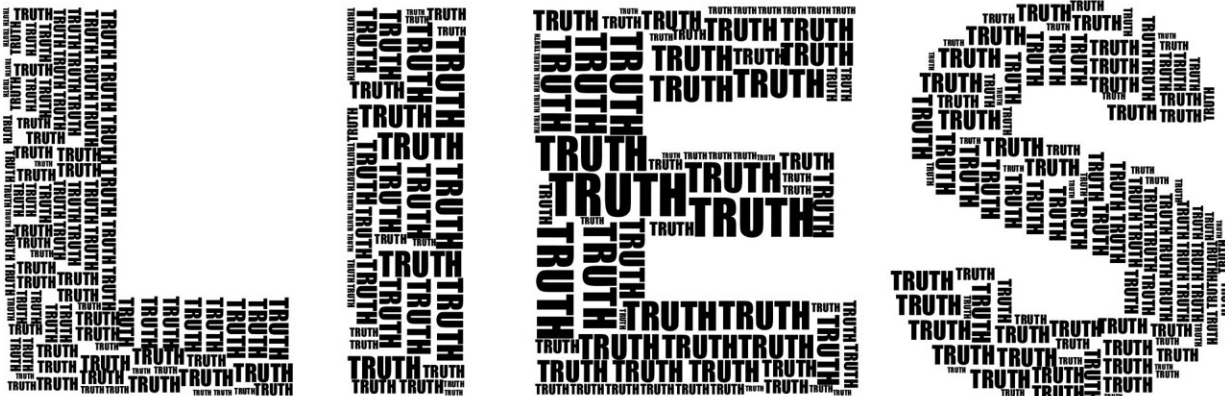


New research shows most people are honest—except for a few

October 28 2021, by Shannon Thomason



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

People are more honest in day-to-day life than previously thought—except for "a few prolific liars," according to the results of a new study.

There has been an assumption for a long time that people lie a lot, and that lying is ubiquitous and really common, says the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Timothy Levine, Ph.D., who studies

deception. Past research has found that people lie, on average, about once or twice per day.

However, researchers have learned that the average number of lies per day reported in the literature does not reflect the behavior of most people. The distribution of lying is highly skewed: Most people report telling few or no lies on a given day; and most lies are told by only "a few prolific liars," the study's authors determined.

Levine, along with co-authors Kim B. Serota of Rochester University in Michigan and Tony Docan-Morgan of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, are authors of the study "Unpacking variation in lie prevalence: Prolific liars, bad lie days, or both?" It was published in *Communication Monographs*, the flagship journal of the National Communication Association.

Levine, who is Distinguished Professor and chair of the Department of Communication Studies in the UAB College of Arts and Sciences, says the message in this paper is that everyday communication is probably safer than you think it is.

"That said, there are these few prolific liars out there," Levine said. "And I think this study showed that they are a real thing. There is that kind of top 1 percent who are telling more than 15 lies per day, day in day out."

Over the past decade, the skewed distribution of lie prevalence has emerged as an "exceptionally robust phenomenon," Levine said. "People are mostly honest, except for a few pathological liars."

Most previous research on lying looked at snapshots of deception at one point in time. This new groundbreaking research study involved so much work it may be one-of-a-kind, Levine says.

The study tracked people's lying every day over three months. More than 630 participants were asked to keep a daily deception journal, yielding 116,336 lies.

The results showed about three-quarters of the study participants were consistently honest, telling between zero and two lies per day. By contrast, a small subset of people—about 6 percent—averaged more than six lies per day and accounted for a sizable proportion of the lies.

"It was a really hard study to pull off, where you get people to answer the survey every day for three months in a row," Levine said. "And we find, yes, there are people who lie way more than the rest of us. Seventy-five percent of us are, really, pretty honest. There are a few people who are super-honest."

People also have good and bad lie days, when they tell more or fewer lies than is typical for them, Levine says. People do not lie for the most part, he says, a few pathological liars aside. Also, for the most part, people do not lie unless they have a reason to. Our daily [communication](#) demands "are a big driver for most of us on how honest or dishonest we are," Levine said.

This is more evidence that people are probably more honest than a lot of people might think, he says, even in the era of fake news and misinformation.

"People are mostly honest, and people mostly believe other people—and deception is more of a kind of exceptional thing rather than a chronic worry," Levine said.

More information: Kim B. Serota et al, Unpacking variation in lie prevalence: Prolific liars, bad lie days, or both?, *Communication Monographs* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/03637751.2021.1985153](https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2021.1985153)

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

Citation: New research shows most people are honest—except for a few (2021, October 28)
retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-10-people-honestexcept.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.