

# Interpersonal Deception Theory: Ten Lessons for Negotiators

by James Hearn



## Introduction

Believe me -- one of the few universal truths in life is that everybody lies. Lying is not necessarily the product of a malignant heart. Rather, it is simply a component of our human nature. What is meant by the term lie for the purposes of this paper is engaging in intentional deception during interpersonal (i.e., face-to-face) communications.

Some deception is culturally acceptable while other forms are not. Proof of the ubiquity of deception in our culture is that our language has developed an array of terms to classify, and rationalize or condemn, such behavior. The deception may be a simple white lie to save feelings (which is socially acceptable) or it may be a fabrication told to gain the advantage during a complex negotiation (which is ethically questionable). It has been estimated that “deception and suspected deception arise in at least one quarter of all conversations.” <sup>[1]</sup>

Interpersonal Deception Theory: Interpersonal Deception Theory (“IDT”) attempts to explain the manner in which individuals while engaged in face-to-face communication deal with, on the conscious and subconscious levels, actual or perceived deception. IDT proposes that the majority of individuals overestimate their ability to detect deception.

The genesis of IDT is the paper by the same name published by two communications professors, David B. Buller and Judee K. Burgoon, in 1996. <sup>[2]</sup> Prior to this study deception had not been fully considered as a communication activity. Rather, the work had focused upon the formulation of principles of deception. These principles were derived by evaluating the lie detection ability of individuals observing unidirectional communication. These early studies found initially that “although humans are far from infallible in their efforts to diagnose lies, they are substantially better at the task than would result merely by chance.” <sup>[3]</sup> However, this assertion should be contrasted with subsequent statements made by the same researchers. For instance, DePaulo has estimated the human ability to detect deception at 53%, which she states is “not much better than flipping a coin.” <sup>[4]</sup> She has also stated that “human accuracy is really just better than chance.” <sup>[5]</sup>

Buller and Burgoon posit that in most cases people find themselves not merely observing, but actually interacting with persons who are less than honest. They find the derived data alone unhelpful in determining the effect of deception in the context of social interaction. Their examination and analysis merges interpersonal communication theory with the previously derived deception principles. <sup>[6]</sup> This work yields 18 general propositions concerning interpersonal communication and deception. In a paper of this length it is possible only to summarize the results of this work in order to apply the predominant findings and principles to the field of negotiation theory.

Deceptive communication takes many forms. However, three dominate deception strategies have

been observed in interpersonal communications. One strategy is falsification where the deceiving party (also referred to as the “Sender”) creates a fiction (i.e., flat-out lies to the recipient of the communication, who is also referred to as the “Receiver”). The second type of deception is concealment. In concealment the Sender omits certain material facts which results in deceptive communication. Finally, equivocation is included in the roster of deceptive behavior. When employing equivocation the Sender skirts issues by, for instance, by changing the subject or offering indirect responses. [7]

Most individuals believe that they have the ability to detect deception when engaging another in conversation. They believe that such detection can be made by not only listening to what is said but also by looking for certain nonverbal clues from the Sender (i.e., failure to maintain eye contact, shifting eyes, etc.). IDT states that, in fact, people are relatively inept at detecting deception in interpersonal interactions. The theory also importantly demonstrates that nonverbal behavior is not necessarily a predictable indicator of deception.

Thus, IDT shows that individuals lack an important ability which they believe they possess. For the negotiator, whether it is a consumer negotiating the purchase of an automobile or a professional negotiating a complex business transaction, this misapprehension can carry with it severe consequences.

The only defense to ignorance is knowledge. One must then be informed of and acknowledge their limitations. Once they are so aware they may actually turn weaknesses to their advantage by compensating for them. This paper will propose methods by which negotiators may do just that.

### **The Communication Exchange**

The fact that makes the work of Buller and Burgoon applicable and important to the field of negotiation is that they moved away from the consideration of one-way communication and focused upon situations involving two-way communication. When they did this they found that individuals constantly adjust their behavior in response to feedback (verbal and nonverbal) received from the other party. [8] Humans are capable of communicating on auto-pilot just as most are capable of walking without volitionally moving each muscle involved in the task. However, when attempting to deceive, an individual must consciously deal with the various and complicated components of the communication process. This leads to what Buller and Burgoon refer to as cognitive overload. [9] When an individual is experiencing such overload they are more apt to exhibit a non-strategic display. [10] This means simply that they will have a lapse in their efforts at deception. This lapse is generally exhibited nonverbally and is referred to as leakage, the unconscious nonverbal cues signaling an internal state, which is discussed more fully below.

### **Deception in Communication**

Buller and Burgoon are more concerned with an individual’s motivation than with their actual actions in determining deception. In their work they found that every deceptive act has, at its core, at least one of three motivations. The first is to accomplish some task or attain some goal. Second, the communication may be directed at maintaining or creating a relationship with the other party. Finally, deception is often used to save face of one or both of the parties to the communication. [11]

Deceptive communication was also found to possess four main characteristics. [12] The use of uncertainty and vagueness can be one indicator of deception. Deceivers were also found to take longer to respond and at times to even withdraw from interaction.

Most people are uncomfortable when engaging in deception. One way in which they deal with this feeling is to attempt to disassociate from the behavior. They will do this by such things as utilizing group references (i.e., making “we” as opposed to “I” statements).

Another way in which Senders deal with the personal effects of deception is to engage in masking behavior. Masking is an attempt to protect the Sender’s self-image and their relationship with the Receiver. When engaging in intentional deception Senders will attempt to suppress any bodily cues which may signal deception. This can result in stiffness in interaction. They may also engage in compensating behavior, such as exhibiting extreme sincerity. The difficulty is that the detection of all of these behaviors can only be done if they are measured against the Sender’s base-line behaviors.

### **The Concept of Leakage**

Buller and Burgoon found that behavior outside of the deceptive Sender’s conscious control, mostly nonverbal in character, can signal dishonesty. This concept is known as leakage and predates the development of IDT. The concept was developed by Miron Zuckerman, et al., who created a four-factor model to explain when and why leakage is apt to occur. [13]

Under the four-factor model the extreme concentration required by an individual engaged in deception and employing the compensating mechanisms to mask that deceit may result in their performance appearing polished or rehearsed. Lying also causes a Sender to become psychologically and physiological aroused. Such arousal is difficult to mask and will eventually evidence itself. It is this very principle on which the polygraph machine is based.

Zuckerman, et al., also observed that those engaging in deceit experience strong feelings of guilt and anxiety which must also be dealt with and suppressed. Thus, the cognitive difficulty and rigor of engaging in deception will have an affect on the Sender which will result in their engaging in unintentional nonverbal behaviors (i.e., they evidence leaks on the micro level which are very quick and difficult to detect). Employing the foundational work of Zuckerman, et al., IDT looks beyond such micro-behaviors. Buller and Burgoon state in this regard:

“We have expanded on this notion in IDT by specifically arguing that strategic image and behavior management, if carried to extremes, may result in uncontrolled or rigid presentation, inexpressiveness, and reduced spontaneity, which qualify as nonstrategic [deception revealing] behaviors.” [14] Thus, their focus is upon the overall decline in the Sender’s performance. Interestingly, whether or not the deception will be successful will still depend upon whether the Receiver is inherently suspicious. This will hinge on several factors including the relationship between the parties, and the subject and stakes of the communication.

### **The Effect of Truth Bias and Suspicion on the Detection of Deception**

Humans have a predisposition to believe what they are told. This is referred to as the “truth

bias.” [15] This means that, all things being equal, a person will err on the side of believing the information conveyed to them interpersonally.

Although the truth bias is the default setting, individuals can come to doubt the veracity of any information conveyed. In IDT this is known as suspicion. On the continuum of trust suspicion is at the midpoint, falling between absolute truth and the expectation of falsity.

When Receivers become suspicious they will leak this feeling. Thus, if the Sender leaks deception, most often, the Receiver will respond by leaking suspicion. However, rarely does suspicion lead to the direct confrontation of the Sender by the Receiver. Instead, Receivers tend to use indirect methods to obtain further information. Buller and Burgoon found that there is no real evidence that even this behavior works to uncover deception. [16]

### **Adaptive Behavior of the Deceiver**

Both Senders and Receivers leak. When the Receiver doubts the truthfulness of the information conveyed they will give clues in the form of non-typical behaviors. This will occur even if they attempt to mask such behaviors. [17]

However, the studies demonstrate that deceptive Senders are by their nature more attuned to sensing suspicion than the Receivers are to sensing deception. Thus, Senders can, and will, adjust their message and its manner of presentation if they sense suspicion. They will often do this by mirroring the behavior and mannerisms of the Receiver. This serves to make deception all the more difficult to detect. [18]

A myriad of other factors can make deception difficult to detect. For instance, there is what is known as the “Othello error.” Individuals who are actually telling the truth behave in the same way when falsely accused or confronted with suspicion as do those guilty of actual deception. The term Othello error refers to the situation where a truth teller’s adaptation to a false accusation strikes the respondent as devious.

### **Application of Theory to the Negotiation Process**

What should a negotiator take away from IDT? The following suggestions are offered:

**1. Acknowledge your limitations** – IDT is, in part, important because it demonstrates that people are poor at detecting deception. Thus, it is crucial that one not rely upon a perceived ability to detect deception in the negotiation context. Forewarned, in this case, is forearmed.

**2. Is there a reason to lie** – There are habitual liars who compulsively engage in deception. However, most people do not lie without reason. It is natural to think that deception would be beneficial to any negotiating party. However, this is not the case. This view misinterprets the process of negotiation.

Many statements will be made in the course of a negotiation. Not all statements will completely true or completely false. In evaluating the veracity of any given statement or response the negotiator should ask whether and in what way deception would be beneficial to the Sender.

Leakage actually varies based upon motivation. For instance, when “deceit is motivated by self-interest it will contain greater strategic (i.e., compensating) behavior to formulate plausible lies, reduce leakage, and project a favorable image.”

**3. Flood the circuits** – IDT demonstrates that when a Sender’s cognitive abilities are “overloaded” they will begin to leak. It stands to reason that the greater the load, the greater the leak and the easier its detection. Another major premise of IDT is that individuals are poor lie detectors in one-on-one communication situations. Thus, it would appear to be to a negotiator’s advantage to increase the load on their opposite.

This may be accomplished, for instance, if the negotiator can arrange to get their opposite in a two-on-one negotiation. In this way the Sender’s work will be doubled. There may even be an opportunity for a “good cop-bad cop” scenario where one of the negotiating pair purposefully leaks suspicion while the other does their best to suppress such leaks.

There is at least one caveat to this procedure. Buller and Burgoon state that when communication transactions go beyond two participants they become increasingly less interpersonal and their model may begin to break down. To combat this perhaps only one of the negotiating pair should actually conduct the negotiation while the other observes the lone negotiators behavior.

**4. Watch for leakage** – The major reason for successful deception is that in interactive contexts Receivers fail to recognize the available clues and leakage. Thus, in a negotiation one should watch for those clues discussed herein. The difficulty of this task is acknowledged (i.e., considering truth bias, deceiver sensitivity, etc.).

**5. Compensate for truth bias** – One should be aware of the existence of the truth bias. This awareness does not necessitate a shift down the truth continuum to an expectation of falsity. However, realizing this inherent bias one should be more able to prevent its exploitation.

**6. Watch your own suspicions** – It should be remembered that being inept at detecting deception also means that one is inept at determining veracity. Therefore, one should be careful not to over interpret behavior as leakage.

**7. Realize you are at a disadvantage** - The research demonstrates that deceivers are more adept at detecting Receiver suspicion and adapting to it than Receivers are at detecting deception. This can mean that the deception Sender can be aware of the Receiver’s doubts even before they are.

**8. Know your opposite** – The ability to detect leakage is related to one’s familiarity with the normal behaviors of an individual. In polygraph exams the operator will begin by asking simple questions (name, age, address, etc.) to establish a base-line against which to measure subsequent responses. The negotiator should also attempt to do this with their opposite prior to commencing substantive negotiations.

It is more difficult to detect deception in one to whom we are favorably disposed. IDT says that it is dangerous to negotiate with someone you know and respect since it increases the truth bias. The obverse is also true. If a relationship is based upon mistrust or is otherwise negative there may actually be a lie bias held by the parties.

**9. Sleep on it** – Individuals are better at detecting deceptive in a reflective mode. Therefore, one should seek the opportunity to reflect upon the course of the negotiation prior to finalizing the deal.

**10. Trust but verify** – In the end there is no substitute for knowledge. Going into a negotiation a negotiator should have as much knowledge as possible about the subject of the negotiation, the possible positions to be taken by their opposite, the reputation of their opposite and their ultimate bottom line. All theories, including IDT, are simply tools to assist the negotiator in obtaining the best possible result. No theory can act as a substitute for a careful investigation of the statements and allegations made during the course of a negotiation.

## End Notes

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2 David B. Buller and Judee K. Burgoon, "Interpersonal Deception Theory," *Communication Theory* 6, no. 3 (August 1996).

3 Bella M. DePaulo, Miron Zuckerman and Robert Rosenthal, "Humans as Lie Detectors," *Journal of Communication* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1980).

4 Rachel Adelson, "Detecting Deception," *APA Online* 35, July/August 2004 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaugo4/detecting.html> ; Internet; accessed June 4, 2006.

5 Carrie Lock, "Deception Detection," *Science News Online* 166, July 31, 2004 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.sciencenews.org/articles/20040731/bob8.asp> ; Internet; accessed June 4, 2006.

6 Buller and Burgoon, 204.

7 Ibid. 207.

8 Ibid. 232.

9 Ibid. 210.

10 Ibid, 218.

11 Ibid. 206-207.

12 Ibid. 216-217.

13 B. M. DePaulo, M. Zuckerman, and R. Rosenthal, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. L. Berkowitz, vol. 14, *Verbal and Nonverbal Communication of Deception* (New York: New York Academic Press, 1981), 1-59.

14 Buller and Burgoon, 217.

15 S. A. McCornack and M. R. Parks, M. R., Deception Detection and Relationship Development: The Other Side of Trust, ed. M. L. McLaughlin, vol. 9, Communication Yearbook (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1986), 377-389. 16 Buller and Burgoon, 229-230.

17 Ibid. 231.

18 Ibid. 231-233.

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