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Case-based modeling of prolific liars and constant truth-tellers: Who are the dishonesty and honesty self-reporters?☆

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ABSTRACT

Do some individuals identify themselves to be prolific liars? Here, “big-liars” are individuals who self-report telling lies twelve-or-more times annually. What share of Americans (or any other national population) is big-liars? What share reports telling no lies? Can individual social-economic status (SES) and social factor configurations identify big-liars consistently? The present study includes proposing and testing the case-based theoretical tenet that single-variable SES and social factors do not identify big-liars or self-report truth-tellers consistently even if these single-variables associate significantly statistically with lying/truth-telling in symmetric tests. The theory here proposes that configurations (i.e., screening algorithms or recipes of SES and social factors) are capable of identifying big-liars as well as self-reported persons claiming to never lie. A national omnibus, representative, sample of Americans ($n = 3350$) provide some surprising answers to the questions and substantial support for the usefulness of case-based configurational models for identifying big-liars. To prevent, “I knew that” perceptions, before reading further (using a pen or pencil), consider answering the following multiple-choice questions. What share (%) of Americans identify themselves to be non-liars: 30, 40, 50, 60, or 70? What share (%) identify themselves to be big (i.e., monthly) liars: 30, 40, 50, 60, or 70?

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1. Introduction

Possibly unsurprisingly, telling lies is headline news especially in 2015 and 2016. The following two brief stores illustrate. Running for U.S. President in 2015–16, Donald Trump has repeatedly labeled his political opponents liars. He dubbed Senator Ted Cruz lying when it became clear that Cruz was a serious rival for his nomination; he identified Senator Marco Rubio an “even a bigger liar” than Cruz. He dubbed Dr. Ben Carson a pathological liar and said former Florida Governor Jeb Bush’s lies were almost as bad as Cruz’s. Trump has termed virtually every mildly adversarial media member a liar, too. Yet for the “2015 Lie of the Year Award”, PolitiFact (a Pulitzer award-winning fact checking organization) recognized “the misstatements of Donald Trump” as the recipient of the award, “PolitiFact has been documenting Trump’s statements on our Truth-O-Meter, where we’ve rated 76 per cent of them ‘Mostly False’, ‘False’ or ‘Pants on Fire’, out of 77 statements checked. No other politician has as many statements rated so far down on the dial” (Holan & Qiu, 2015, p. 1).

The Wells Fargo retail banking scandal of 2016 is a second example of widespread lying. For years, Wells Fargo employees secretly issued credit cards without a customer’s consent—an assumed consent lie. The employees created fake email accounts to sign up customers for online banking services. They set up sham accounts that customers learned about only after they started accumulating fees. In 2016 these illegal banking practices cost Wells Fargo \$185 million in fines, including a \$100 million penalty from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the largest such penalty the agency has issued. Federal banking regulators said the practices, which date back to 2011, reflected serious flaws in the internal culture and oversight at Wells Fargo, one of the nation’s largest banks. In September 2016 Wells Fargo fired at least 5300 employees who were involved but no senior managers. In all, Wells Fargo employees opened roughly 1.5 million bank accounts and applied for 565,000 credit cards that may not have been authorized by customers, the regulators said in a news conference (Corkery, 2016).

The present study conceptualizes four types of individuals based on their self-reported lying versus non-lying frequency and whether they view most others as being honest or dishonest. This study investigates whether individual social-economic status (SES) and prosocial and antisocial behaviors identify big-liars consistently. The study describes the “heavy-half” of self-reported big-liars—adopting the heavy-half proposition from prior marketing theory (Cook & Mindak, 1984; Perfetto & Woodside, 2009; Twedt, 1964), that is, half or the majority of lies are

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told by a relatively small share of the population (e.g., a population share less than 20%). The study proposes a case-based theory that individuals scoring high on complex configurations of SES and social behavior conditions are consistently big-liars while other cases scoring high on other complex configurations of SES and social behavior conditions identify “truth-tellers” consistently. The present study defines “truth-tellers” to be individuals claiming not to tell lies.

The study recognizes the invalidity of variable-based, symmetric, null hypothesis statistical testing (NHST) (Falk & Greenbaum, 1995; Gigerenzer, 2004; Hubbard, 2016; Trafimow & Marks, 2015) and tests the consistency of the findings with predictions of the theory via the use of “somewhat precise outcome testing” (SPOT) (Woodside, 2016). SPOT is asymmetric testing whereby all or nearly all cases with high scores in the complex antecedent configurational model should have high scores in the outcome condition (i.e., frequent lying).

Lying is an important issue to study (Bok, 2011; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Ekman, 2009; Vrij, 2000). Catching lies is difficult and even most professionals are unable to identify liars as in the work done on catching liars by many scholars (Ekman, 1996; Ekman & O'Sullivan, 1991; Ekman, O'Sullivan, & Frank, 1999; Loeber, Green, Lahey, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1991; Vrij, 2004, 2008). Although how honest people are in reporting high dishonesty is a philosophical question, still some prior studies also examine self-reported liars (Feeley & Young, 2000; Halevy, Shalvi, & Verschuere, 2014; Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010). Self-report data for the U.S. adult population show the average rate of lying is around 1.65 lies per day (Serota et al., 2010). Feldman, Tomasian, and Coats (1999) report that as individuals grow older, they become more proficient at lying. One study reports a decrease in lying associating with increasing age; younger persons may lie more frequently than older persons but age alone is unlikely to be sufficient for accurately predicating lying with high consistency (Serota et al., 2010).

Some studies report males lie more than females while others suggest females lie more frequently than males (e.g., DePaulo et al., 1996; Levine, Park, & McCornack, 1999). In other studies, no gender differences were observed when controlling for other demographic predictors (Serota et al., 2010). For gender and all other SES variables, dichotomous and quintile cross-tabulations with these variables and the lowest and highest quintiles for lying indicates the occurrence of numbers of cases in all cells. The issue of substance is not if a relationship exists that refutes a null hypothesis or whether or not one SES variable relationship with lying has a larger effect size than another SES variable. The substantive issues are what configurations of SES conditions indicate frequent liars and what configurations of SES conditions indicate non-liars, if any. Both genders will occur in both big-liar and truth-telling configurations.

A study (Vrij, Granhag, & Mann, 2010) identifying individuals who might be naturally good at lying establishes that being good at lying is inherent in some individuals and related to personality. Levine and Bond (2014) investigates prosocial lies, lies told to benefit others, and finds that prosocial lies are often judged to be more moral than honesty. No overlapping activity was observed during the moral judgment of anti- and prosocial lying. Cognitive and neural processes for the moral judgment of lying are modulated by whether the lie serves to harm or benefit listeners (Hayashi et al., 2014).

Professionals can learn how to better discriminate between truthful speakers and liars relating to extremely high-stakes lies (Shaw, Porter, & ten Brinke, 2013). Francis, Pearson, and Kay (1988) report a significant positive correlation between the lie scale scores and religiosity and confirm the proposition that children who score high on their lie scale also tend to score high on the religiosity scale, although most of religions forbid lying (Bok, 2011).

Following this introduction, section two describes case-based models of big-liars and truth-tellers. Section three presents the method to test the propositions in the case-based models. Section four presents

the findings. Section five is the discussion section. Section six discusses limitations. Section seven concludes.

2. Case-based model of big-liars and truth-tellers

Fig. 1 is a visual summary of a configurational theory of complex antecedent conditions leading to big-liars and four types of individuals. The Venn diagrams in Fig. 1 suggest the adoption of the perspective of configurational influence on outcome conditions. The arrows in Fig. 1 illustrate five of six principal propositions in the theory. P1a: SES recipes by themselves are sufficient in identifying big-liars with high consistency. P1b: Constructing separate configurations of SES conditions having high consistency in indicating big-liars for separate samples of cases supports high cross-validity. P2: SES recipes by themselves are sufficient in identifying cases with high prosocial behavior. P3: SES recipes by themselves are sufficient in identifying cases high in antisocial behavior. P4: A high antisocial behavior recipe by itself is sufficient for identifying cases of big-liars. P5: A high prosocial behavior recipe by itself is sufficient for identifying self-report non-liars. P6: Configurations of SES along with pro- and antisocial behavior are necessary to construct recipes to identify big-liars and cases of the four types of lying. P6 stands in conflict with the first five propositions. P6 implies that the first five propositions are insufficient in identifying big-liars and individuals representing each of the four combination of lying/truth-telling and pro- and antisocial behaviors. P6 implies that including both SES and socially-related behavior are necessary. The study considers opposing views rather than advocating one perspective necessary for identifying big-liars. While advocacy hypothesis construction and testing is the current dominant logic, the study adopts a multiple (competing) hypotheses stance rather than an advocacy hypothesis stance as Armstrong (1979) recommends.

P7: Asymmetric models identifying truth-tellers are not the mirror opposite of models identifying big-liars. P7 builds from the complexity theory principle that the causal conditions resulting in favorable outcomes include some ingredients that are not found in the causal conditions resulting in unfavorable outcomes (Hsiao, Jaw, Huan, & Woodside, 2015). P7 is an adoption at the human case level of Weick's (1987) highly reliable organization (HRO) proposition that the study of failure is distinct from the study of successful enterprise operations.

P8 proposes four two-conditional outcomes: big-liars who believe everyone lies (i.e., “rounders”), big-liars who believe most others are honest (i.e., “confessors”), truth-tellers who believe most others are big-liars (i.e., “skeptics”), and truth-tellers who believe that most others are honest (i.e., “innocents”). P8: Unique configurations of SES characteristics and social behaviors indicate each of the four personal-world belief outcomes.

An attempt is not made to show P6 or P7 in Fig. 1. The theory proposes that different configurations containing two-to-seven socioeconomic-status configurations associate with big-liars for each of four types of individuals. The seven SES conditions appear in the Venn diagram in Fig. 1. Fig. 1 illustrates all possible two-way to seven-way configurations of the seven simple antecedent conditions. Seven socioeconomic configurations are age, education, gender, income, marital status, does have any children-at-home or not, ownership of residence. The study also proposes that prosocial behavior and antisocial behavior also associate with big-liars and four types of individuals. The present study demonstrates how fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) — a relatively new method of configurational analysis that builds from an asymmetrical way of thinking about relationships among antecedent conditions. The study here uses fsQCA to investigate how configurations of antecedent conditions (“causal recipes”; Ragin, 2008a,b, p. 9), rather than how individual antecedents, indicate prolific liars and how distinctly different recipes indicate truth-tellers.

Rounders are the big-liars in a dishonest world (B~H, thus, big_liars AND ~honest_world, where ~ indicates NOT or negation of the condition).

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