



Original Articles

Undoing the past in order to lie in the present: Counterfactual thinking and deceptive communication



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the proposal that there is a close link between counterfactual thinking and lying. Both require the imagination of alternatives to reality and we describe four studies which explore this link. In Study 1 we measured individual differences in both abilities and found that individuals with a tendency to generate counterfactual thoughts were also more likely to generate potential lies. Studies 2 and 3 showed that counterfactual availability influences people's ability to come up with lies and the extent to which they expect others to lie. Study 4 used a behavioural measure of deception to show that people tend to lie more in situations also known to elicit counterfactual thoughts. Overall, the results show that the imagination of alternatives to the past plays an important role in the generation of lies. We discuss the implications for the fields of counterfactual thinking and deception.

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1. Introduction

Reconsidering our past decisions by wondering what could have been had we chosen differently is a common feature of human thought. The process of undoing past events is termed counterfactual thinking and is characterised by the mental simulation of alternatives to reality. By imagining how things could be different, counterfactual thinking helps us learn from past mistakes, set goals for the future and solve problems (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Smallman & Roese, 2009). Our aim in this paper is to test the idea that imagining alternatives to the past may also be an important part of the process of generating lies.¹

Although the link between counterfactuals and deception has received little attention, some research points towards a positive association between these two processes. Like counterfactuals, lying about the past requires the generation of alternatives to reality which in both cases is achieved through mentally altering previous events (Debey, De Houwer, & Verschuere, 2014; Malone, Adams, Anderson, Ansfield, & DePaulo, 1997) and in both cases these changes tend to be minimal (Byrne, 2016; Vrij, Granhag, & Mann, 2010).

Additionally, separate studies in the two areas suggest that the generation of both counterfactuals and deceit rely on the same core

component processes of executive function such as inhibitory control and working memory (Drayton, Turley-Ames, & Guajardo, 2011; Gombos, 2006). Age related changes to these executive functions are associated with a decrease in the frequency we engage in both deception and counterfactual thinking (Debey, De Schryver, Logan, Suchotzki, & Verschuere, 2015; Walsh, Deeprose & Briazu, in preparation). This can be linked to prefrontal lobe function as populations characterised by prefrontal cortical impairment, such as Parkinson's disease patients, have impairments in both processes (Abe et al., 2009; McNamara, Durso, Brown, & Lynch, 2003). Counterfactual thinking therefore may represent an important process in the generation of lies.

Yet, despite the commonalities between counterfactual thinking and deception, few studies have assessed the potential link. So far studies show that counterfactual reflection can influence the perception of dishonesty (Miller, Visser, & Staub, 2005) and the likelihood of engaging in future unrelated unethical acts (Gaspar, Seabright, Reynolds, & Yam, 2015). Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, and De Dreu (2011) also showed that observed alternatives can influence subsequent deception. In their study, participants were asked to declare the outcome of a die roll which only they could see and which determined the value of a monetary prize. Although they were asked to report only the outcome of their first die roll, when they were allowed to roll additional times, participants were more likely to lie. The observation of alternative desirable die rolls (higher than the one initially obtained) brought to mind events that almost happened, thus allowing participants to justify their deception. However in this study, individuals observed

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¹ The terms lies and deception will be used interchangeably.

additional die rolls and therefore were not required to mentally simulate alternatives whereas most counterfactual thoughts occur automatically through the mental imagination of alternatives (Byrne, 2005).

Therefore the question remains, are counterfactual thoughts and deception associated? If so, how does the stimulation of alternatives to past events influence subsequent deceptive communication? The present work aims to answer these questions by examining the link between counterfactuals and lies using measures which allow for the direct assessment of both processes. By manipulating factors known to stimulate the mental representation of counterfactuals we developed both scenario-based and behavioural measures to assess whether the predisposition to engage in counterfactual thinking is associated with the propensity to deceive (study 1) and to further examine whether changing the availability of counterfactual alternatives impacts on individuals subsequent deceptive responses (study 2 and study 4) and inferences about the likelihood that someone will lie (study 3). Overall the current paper aims to clarify the relationship between imagining alternatives to the past and deceptive communication.

2. Study 1

Our first study focused on the relationship between counterfactuals and deception using an individual differences approach. People differ in the ability and degree to which they engage in counterfactual thought (Allen, Greenlees, & Jones, 2014) and deception (Johnson et al., 2005). As counterfactual thinking and deception have not been assessed simultaneously, we wanted to assess whether these tendencies are related within a single study. We tested people's spontaneous tendency to produce counterfactual thoughts and deception, and also their ability to generate these when cued. If counterfactual thinking and deception share the same underlying processes, then we should find a positive association between the spontaneous tendency to think counterfactually and lie and between the ability to generate counterfactuals and lies when cued. Spontaneous and cued generations are governed by different mechanisms (Gomez-Belderrain et al., 2005) therefore we did not expect these to be associated.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

The participants were 81 undergraduate students who received course credit for their participation. One participant did not complete all the tasks and was therefore excluded from the analysis. The remaining participants (60 female) ranged in age from 18 to 40 years ($M = 20.23$, $SD = 3.20$).

2.1.2. Materials and procedure

Two scenarios were developed based on factors known to affect the mutability of events (e.g. Byrne, 2002; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Roese & Olson, 1995). Counterfactuals are more likely to follow negative outcomes (Roese, 1997), therefore each scenario described events during which participants were asked to imagine making a series of decisions which lead to an unexpected and bad outcome. Each scenario was followed by questions probing whether participants would be inclined to lie about elements included in the scenarios. As deceptive responses depend on the potential outcome for the liar (ten Brinke & Porter, 2012), one of the scenarios involved a low risk deception opportunity (lying to a neighbour) whilst the other was of higher risk (i.e. lying to the police).

In the 'moving town' scenario, adapted from McEleney and Byrne (2006), participants were asked to imagine moving to a

new town and making decisions which result in difficulties meeting new friends. These decisions included: moving town, going to a movie rather than a neighbour's party and buying a new stereo rather than joining the gym with a work colleague.

The 'car incident' scenario was developed specifically for this study. Participants were asked to imagine making a series of decisions which lead to a minor car accident. These included going shopping to a supermarket rather than the corner shop, responding to a phone call whilst driving instead of ignoring it and driving down a new route rather than a more familiar one.

Participants were given a 12 page booklet and responded to all questions in writing. They first received the scenarios in a counter-balanced order. After each one, *spontaneous counterfactual thinking* was elicited by giving them 5 min to write a diary page about their imagined experience. After completing both diary pages, we asked questions assessing dishonesty. To measure *spontaneous deception*, participants received two questions for each scenario. For the 'moving town' scenario, participants had to write down anything they would say to their neighbour when meeting them after the party they had failed to attend. They were also asked to write any specific reason they would give for not attending the party. For the 'car accident scenario', participants had to write down anything they would say to the police if they were to come to their door and ask about the car accident and anything they would say to the police when questioned whether they had specifically seen anyone damaging the car. No time limit was imposed for answering these questions. *Cued deception* was measured by asking participants to write down all the things they could say if they wanted to mislead the neighbour or police. Finally, *cued counterfactuals* were measured by directly asking how things might have happened differently in each scenario. Throughout the study participants were allowed to look back at the scenarios as often as they wished.

2.1.3. Coding

Spontaneous counterfactuals were coded from the diary page text by two independent raters. Counterfactuals were defined as thoughts about how events in the scenario could have been different (McEleney & Byrne, 2006), for instance, '*If only I had gone shopping another time, I wouldn't have hit the car*'. Inter-rater reliability was high for both spontaneous ($r = 0.95$) and cued counterfactuals ($r = 0.96$). All discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

For spontaneous deception, participants coded their own statements in order to ensure that their deception was intentional and that potentially ambiguous statements (i.e., comments relating to the participant's own traits and past experiences) could be coded correctly. At the end of the study participants were instructed to look over their written statements in response to the two questions and code each sentence as either a lie or a truth according to the following definition of deception previously used by Serota, Levine, and Boster (2010):

'Most people think a lie occurs any time you intentionally try to mislead someone. Some lies are big while others are small; some are completely false statements and others are truths with a few essential details made up or left out. Some lies are obvious, and some are very subtle. Some lies are told for a good reason. Some lies are selfish, other lies protect others. We are interested in all these different types of lies.'

Participants' classification of sentences into lies and truths was double-checked by one coder against the scenarios themselves. A lie was correctly classified as such only if it contradicted the events as described in the scenarios. Items which were ambiguous, e.g. 'I would be too anxious to go to the party on my own', were assumed to be correctly identified by the participant. Two participants mistakenly classed a truth as a lie and one participant incorrectly

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