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BASICS

A Highly Evolved Propensity for Deceit

By [NATALIE ANGIER](#)

When considering the behavior of putative scam operators like Bernard “[Ponzi scheme](#)” Madoff or Rod “Potty Mouth” Blagojevich, feel free to express a sense of outrage, indignation, disgust, despair, amusement, schadenfreude. But surprise? Don’t make me laugh.

Sure, Mr. Madoff may have bilked his clients of \$50 billion, and Governor Blagojevich, of Illinois, stands accused of seeking personal gain through the illicit sale of public property — a [United States Senate](#) seat. Yet while the scale of their maneuvers may have been exceptional, their apparent willingness to lie, cheat, bluff and deceive most emphatically was not.

Deceitful behavior has a long and storied history in the evolution of social life, and the more sophisticated the animal, it seems, the more commonplace the con games, the more cunning their contours.

In a comparative survey of primate behavior, Richard Byrne and Nadia Corp of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland found a direct relationship between sneakiness and brain size. The larger the average volume of a primate species’ neocortex — the newest, “highest” region of the brain — the greater the chance that the monkey or ape would pull a stunt like this one described in *The New Scientist*: a young baboon being chased by an enraged mother intent on [punishment](#) suddenly stopped in midpursuit, stood up and began scanning the horizon intently, an act that conveniently distracted the entire baboon troop into preparing for nonexistent intruders.

Much evidence suggests that we humans, with our densely corrugated neocortex, lie to one another chronically and with aplomb. Investigating what they called “lying in day-to-day life,” Bella DePaulo, now a visiting professor of [psychology](#) at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and her colleagues asked 77 college students and 70 people from the community to keep anonymous diaries for a week and to note the hows and whys of every lie they told.

Tallying the results, the researchers found that the college students told an average of two lies a day, community members one a day, and that most of the lies fell into the minor fib category. “I told him I missed him and thought about him every day when I really don’t think about him at all,” wrote one participant. “Said I sent the check this morning,” wrote another.

In a follow-up study, the researchers asked participants to describe the worst lies they’d ever told, and then out came confessions of adultery, of defrauding an employer, of lying on a witness stand to protect an employer. When asked how they felt about their lies, many described being haunted with guilt, but others confessed that once they realized they’d gotten away with a whopper, why, they did it again, and again.

In truth, it's all too easy to lie. In more than 100 studies, researchers have asked participants questions like, Is the person on the videotape lying or telling the truth? Subjects guess correctly about 54 percent of the time, which is barely better than they'd do by flipping a coin. Our lie [blindness](#) suggests to some researchers a human desire to be deceived, a preference for the stylishly accoutred fable over the naked truth.

"There's a counterintuitive motivation not to detect lies, or we would have become much better at it," said Angela Crossman, an assistant professor of psychology at the [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#). "But you may not really want to know that the dinner you just cooked stinks, or even that your spouse is cheating on you."

The natural world is rife with humbug and fish tales, of things not being what they seem. Harmless viceroy butterflies mimic toxic monarch butterflies, parent birds draw predators away from the nest by feigning a broken wing, angler fish lure prey with appendages that wiggle like worms.

Biologists distinguish between such cases of innate or automatic deception, however, and so-called tactical deception, the use of a normal behavior in a novel situation, with the express purpose of misleading an observer. Tactical deception requires considerable behavioral suppleness, which is why it's most often observed in the brainiest animals.

Great apes, for example, make great fakers. Frans B. M. de Waal, a professor at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center and [Emory University](#), said chimpanzees or orangutans in captivity sometimes tried to lure human strangers over to their enclosure by holding out a piece of straw while putting on their friendliest face.

"People think, Oh, he likes me, and they approach," Dr. de Waal said. "And before you know it, the ape has grabbed their ankle and is closing in for the bite. It's a very dangerous situation."

Apes wouldn't try this on their own kind. "They know each other too well to get away with it," Dr. de Waal said. "Holding out a straw with a sweet face is such a cheap trick, only a naïve human would fall for it."

Apes do try to deceive one another. Chimpanzees grin when they're nervous, and when rival adult males approach each other, they sometimes take a moment to turn away and close their grins with their hands. Similarly, should a young male be courting a female and spot the alpha male nearby, the subordinate chimpanzee will instantly try to cloak his amorous intentions by dropping his hands over his erection.

Rhesus monkeys are also artful dodgers. "There's a long set of studies showing that the monkeys are very good at stealing from us," said Laurie R. Santos, an associate professor of psychology at [Yale University](#).

Reporting recently in *Animal Behavior*, Dr. Santos and her colleagues also showed that, after watching food being placed in two different boxes, one with merrily jingling bells on the lid and the other with bells from which the clappers had been removed, rhesus monkeys preferentially stole from the box with the silenced bells. "We've been hard-pressed to come up with an explanation that's not mentalistic," Dr. Santos said. "The monkeys have to make a generalization — I can hear these things, so they, the humans, can, too."

One safe generalization seems to be that humans are real suckers. After dolphin trainers at the Institute for Marine Mammals Studies in Mississippi had taught the dolphins to clean the pools of trash by rewarding

the mammals with a fish for every haul they brought in, one female dolphin figured out how to hide trash under a rock at the bottom of the pool and bring it up to the trainers one small piece at a time.

We're desperate to believe that what our loved ones say is true. And now we find otherwise. Oh, Flipper, et tu?

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