

The many faces of lying

Alessandra Lemma Author Information

In this paper the author explores the psychic functions of lying and draws on Glasser's (1979) notions of self-preservative and sadistic violence to identify three selfobject configurations. Each of these is associated with specific anxieties to which the lie offers an apparent solution. The first configuration is sadistic lying. Here the intent is to attack and triumph over the duped other. The lie allows the object to be controlled and humiliated. This gratifies the self by reversing an earlier humiliation. The second and third configurations are both forms of self-preservative lying, where the lie may be best conceived as a 'symptom of hope' (Winnicott, 1985). In the second configuration, the object is felt to be unavailable or inscrutable. The lie may be used to create an attractive self that will elicit the object's love, admiration and concern. In this way, the lie serves to eliminate doubt about the object's intentions towards the self. In the third configuration, the object is felt to be intrusive, and the dyadic relationship is overpowering. Here the lie can represent an attempt to insert a third into the relationship.

If, like truth, the lie had but one face, we would be on better terms. For we would accept as certain the opposite of what the liar would say. But the reverse of truth has a hundred thousand faces and an infinite field

(Montaigne, Essays).

Why lie?

There is little doubt that the struggle for life amongst animals has favoured the better mimickers and bluffers: the pug-mouth caterpillar masquerading as a twig or the leafy sea-dragon of the Sargasso Sea donning a seaweed disguise in order to eat the fish that come to prey on it are but two examples of the numerous deceptive strategies found amongst animals. Such deception is no game: animals whose disguises do not work, do not survive. Indeed, Darwin noted long ago the evolutionary advantage conferred by the ability to deceive. And some even suggest that a similar advantage may have contributed to the evolution of a human consciousness capable of deceiving itself and others (Trivers, 1985; Badcock, 1995; Smith, 2004).

A study of the lie homes in on fundamental existential and psychoanalytic questions. The existence of the lie bears witness to our difficulties in negotiating space in relationships. We need lies because of the existence of the 'other' (Sartre, 1956) or, as Jankélévitch suggested, because lies are a survival strategy in a world of 'partial, opaque, uncommunicative and secretive creatures' (1945). Approaching lying from a purely philosophical perspective, Jankélévitch strikes a psychoanalytic chord with his analysis as he hints at what we can reformulate, in analytic terms

as the selfobject configurations that might make the lie necessary to ensure psychic survival. For example, in a world of 'opaque' objects (Sodré, 2002), that is, an object who is mentally unavailable, we might wonder whether one solution to ease the torment of absolute doubt is to create certainty through lying. This represents an internal giving up on the 'real' object felt to be inscrutable or unavailable to the self, to be replaced by its omnipotent control via a selfobject configuration based on a lie. The lie can at least be known with absolute certainty by the self; it is, after all, a secret creation of which the liar is the author. In the moment of the lie, the liar creates the illusion that he can control, and therefore that he 'knows', what the other will believe and think. Indeed, Bion (1962) drew attention to the way in which the lie, unlike the truth, is felt to be possessed by the self.

The linguistic roots of the words 'truth' and 'lie' shed further light on the possible functions of lying. The Greek etymology of the word 'truth' is 'open'; that for 'lie' is 'curved' (Forrester, 1997). These linguistic roots point to the way in which the lie involves a psychic detour—the lie allows the individual to 'curve' round the truth. The use of lying indicates the difficulty, even danger, in being open and direct with one's objects. In psychic terms the lie then becomes necessary, we might say, when there is a need to bypass one's objects, to 'work round them' in some way or even to swerve violently in order to avoid a head-on collision with them.

Lying, as Bollas has pointed out, involves the 'manipulation of the object world' (1987). The aim of this paper is to identify particular types of selfobject configurations that may help in thinking about 'the many faces of lying'. To this end I draw on Glasser's (1979) notions of self-preservative and sadistic violence and propose a distinction between self-preservative lying and sadistic lying. Some forms of deceit are a type of violence and constitute deliberate assaults on the other. In sadistic lying, the intent is to attack and triumph over the duped other. The object needs to be controlled and humiliated for the self's gratification, often to reverse an earlier experience of humiliation. In self-preservative lying, the lie may be best conceived as a 'symptom of hope' (Winnicott, 1985). Although such lying may also be a manifestation of a wish to control the object, the dominant mental representations of self and other are of a qualitatively different kind. In self-preservative lying, the object is primarily experienced as a threat to be avoided or bypassed.

In my view, therefore, we can understand the lie not just as an attack or triumph over the duped 'other', but also in at least two further ways. First, it can represent an attempt at communication with an object felt to be emotionally unavailable or inscrutable. The lie is used to substitute the 'real' self felt to be unlovable for a 'made-up' version of the self felt to guarantee the object's love. Second, the lie may be used as a way of protecting the self from an intrusive, omniscient, mad object. Here the lie is used as a barricade to keep out a dangerous object.

The baby as 'dupe': The dynamics of sadistic lying

In one of the few papers entirely devoted to the question of lying in psychoanalysis, O'Shaughnessy (1990) sensitively traces the struggle for the analyst working with patients who lie. In this paper, she describes lying as a manifestation of a narcissistic

- 738 -

organisation, situating lying as a 'character perversion'. Her case studies illustrate how the lying patient perverts communication and, in so doing, reveals a narcissistic idealisation of the lie's destructiveness. A key theme of her paper is that of the liar in identification with a 'lying object'. This paranoid-schizoid type of identification suggests that the split is not between good and bad objects but, as she puts it, between 'suspect and bad objects'. O'Shaughnessy's paper highlights how an act of deception can represent an attack on the other in which lying becomes fused with sadistic excitement and triumph over the other.

If there is a lying object, this raises the question of what the self feels the object has lied about. One can but speculate as to the developmental origins of sadistic lying. Although Freud said very little about lying, what he did say is helpful when thinking about possible origins. His first explicit formulation of lying appears in 'Little Hans' in 1909, in the context of Little Hans's fantasy and 'countless extravagant lies' about the presence of his little sister the summer before her birth. Freud understood Little Hans's 'lies' as acts of revenge upon his father for having misled him with the fable of the stork: if his father could treat him as stupid enough to believe that children were delivered by storks, then Little Hans could reverse the narcissistic injury and give his father a taste of his own medicine via these confabulations. This passing reference to lying is very illuminating. It suggests a link to an oedipal scenario, with lying used as revenge for having been deceived about sexual matters. This was later also described by Fenichel (1946) in his account of lying.

Little Hans's confabulations are an omnipotent distortion of reality that allow him to retaliate against his father. I would like to propose as a hypothesis that intolerable feelings of inferiority and smallness, as expressions of ongoing oedipal conflicts, can contribute to the development of what might be referred to as a 'totalitarian'¹ state of mind in which the other is controlled and humiliated through lies. This was a striking feature of my assessment of Mr S, a man in his forties, who was referred by his GP to a psychology department because of a

depressive episode following the end of his marriage. I am reporting here selectively from a six-session generic assessment which, though informed by my psychoanalytic training, was not intended as a specialist psychotherapy assessment.

Session 1

I started by briefly explaining to the patient that this was an assessment. Mr S then expressed dissatisfaction with his GP who had referred him, and said that he doubted I could be of help. He questioned my qualifications, saying I looked very young. I remained silent. He then went on,

P: I do have a right to know your credentials. My problems are complicated and I don't want to waste your time or mine. Things in my life are very complicated. I don't like talking about myself. I very much doubt anyone ever understands what another person thinks.

1 An interesting account of the relationship between totalitarian political regimes and the use made therein of lies can be found in Koyré (1998).

- 739 -

[As he spoke, his aggressively scrutinising and suspicious manner made me feel under pressure to prove my credentials.]

A: It sounds as though no matter how qualified or not I might be, it would probably make little difference to whether you felt able to talk to me as you seem to feel that understanding between two people is always imperfect.

P [in what I felt was an aggressively flirtatious manner]: At least you're a woman. I could never talk with a man. My mother understood me perfectly but my father was stupid. To this day I can't understand what she ever saw in him and why she spent her life following him around the world in his pointless travels.

At this point, someone inadvertently walked into the room. When Mr S resumed speaking he sounded angry.²

P: That's unacceptable. There's no privacy here and you expect me to pour my heart out ... I hate the NHS [National Health Service]. I should have known better and gone private. My mother always hated the NHS too. She always hated hospitals because the wards were dirty. She should know ... she spent enough time in them. It was probably living with my father that made her ill. She always took me to private doctors ... [Brief silence.] My father always supported the NHS because he was a liberal idiot with lofty ideals but no real drive. But it's a mess ... just look at this office. [Laughs, mockingly.] I'm really not sure you can help me. Nothing personal, but I have work problems and ... well ... actually, it's just one of my partners ... well, that's being generous ... he's a stupid buffoon. [He leans back in the chair, smiling. There is something chilling about his retreat into contempt.] It gives me intense pleasure to get one over on him at every opportunity. I make up stories ... just to wind him up and he falls for it every time. Every time! He's a problem. He gets in the way of me doing good business and when things go badly at work, it puts me under pressure.

Later in the session, Mr S told me about his experiences at boarding school, emphasising how his mother had never wanted to send him away. It had been his father who believed 'it would be character building'.

By the end of this first session I felt that Mr S's oedipal anxieties manifested themselves powerfully through his relationship to me and the setting. Any attempt to make contact with him was derided and I became identified with his stupid father or the buffoon, whilst in his mind he enjoyed a special 'private' place with his mother. When someone walked into the office he appeared truly startled as if he was suddenly concretely confronted with the existence of the third.³ The association that followed, to his mother and the 'dirty hospital', made me think about how sharing space with a third might have become something 'dirty' for him because it contaminated the specialness of the dyadic intimacy.

² I was seeing Mr S in a GP surgery.

3 Such an interruption would be likely to elicit some kind of response in most patients, but it was the ensuing specific associations that led me to interpret it in light of oedipal conflicts.

- 740 -

Session 3

Towards the end of the third session ...

P: That painting ... [He points to a watercolour on the wall.] Who is it by?
[Silence.] Your silence is deeply irritating. There was a teacher at boarding school who was always serious; you could never get him to laugh at a joke. I enjoyed winding him up by lying to him.

A: You took pleasure in knowing something he did not know and then seeing him fall for your lie.

P [laughs]: It was pleasurable—he always fell for it. We all laugh at other people's misery. It's human nature. You sit there all smug but I bet you're no different. When it comes down to it, everybody shits.

There is a brief silence and Mr S looks back at the painting and smiles.

P: Whoever the artist is, that painting is no good.

A: Just a few minutes ago you had been interested in the painting but perhaps my silence felt as if I was sitting here smugly, secretly laughing at you for asking the question. But now you are laughing at my no-good painting.

P: It's just a painting.

Session 5

Mr S cancelled the fourth session at the last minute. He said he had 'important business to attend to' related to the possibility of a partnership with a well-known art collector. I found myself disbelieving him.

The following week he made no conscious reference to the previous week's cancellation. Instead, he recounted feeling bored and frustrated by the company he kept. Later in this session he said, looking at a box on my desk,

P: I bet none of your patients would dare to look into that box, but I'm thinking, 'Why not? Why not take a risk? What could Dr Lemma do anyway?'

[His provocative stance felt violently intrusive.]

A: My not answering your question about the painting two weeks ago left you feeling very angry, as if I was keeping you out of something private to me, like the box on my desk that you now want to look into. I think that by cancelling last week's session, and wanting me to know that you would be otherwise engaged with someone who was willing to discuss art with you, unlike me, you were perhaps wanting to exclude me from something private to you.

P: You bought that shit? What I told you is a pack of lies. [Laughs.] I don't know, don't they teach you anything?

Even though I had not, in fact, 'bought the pack of lies', I nevertheless suddenly felt the violent impact of his exposed lie/penis as if I had been duped. The unmasking of the lie—and in his mind the exposure of me as the stupid, duped one—was the ultimate triumph. In that moment I felt I had become the humiliated father whose

failure was cruelly and excitedly exposed, while he reassured himself that he was not the castrated one.

Mr S then excitedly went on to tell me how he had learned the pay-offs of lying when he was very young. He told me again that he had lied a lot at boarding school and to his father in particular. He went on,

P: You're now probably making a mental note: 'Patient is a psychopath'.
[Laughs.] But I assure you that, if that's what you think, I don't care. You're the naïve one if you believe that people are truthful.

A: You seem to live in a world where it's safer to lie than to allow yourself to believe another person and to then risk being exposed as the duped one who believes the pack of lies.

P [looking to the floor and now speaking in a flat tone]: Lies keep me warm.

A: Lies are perhaps like a skin for you that keeps you warm and safe in a world where you feel you can't trust anyone.

P [looks at me fleetingly and then to the floor, and now sounds more anxious]:
The police are after me. [Silence.] I've said enough. Isn't it time yet?

At this point, I felt confused and tantalised. I was unsure as to whether he was 'winding me up' with one of his lies or whether he was indeed worried, and the anxiety this gave rise to became converted into some kind of secret he could use to locate in me a feeling of confusion and ignorance which he found intolerable in himself.

A: You're keeping what you are saying quite vague as if there is a part of your

mind I must be kept out of. P [sounding more aggressive again]: All psychologists are voyeurs.

This was an interesting response, which I felt reflected a projective identification into me (which, in a way, I enacted through my probing) of his own 'curious/voyeur' self who felt tantalised by secrets, as I had indeed felt tantalised by his vagueness.

Given the very limited contact I had with Mr S, my thoughts about the function of lying in his psychic economy need to be treated as speculative. Nevertheless, Mr S shares many similarities with another of my current cases and also shares some of the qualities captured in O'Shaughnessy's (1990) paper, which is based on ongoing analytic work. To this extent, I think that this case provides further support for some of the ideas explored in that paper.

Mr S appeared to be in identification with a lying object—his mother—by whom he had felt painfully deceived as she chose his father over him, as he saw it, following him 'on his pointless travels'. He defended against this awareness by locating the blame in his father, and through a defensively constructed oedipal illusion (Britton, 1989) whereby he was the one his mother preferred over his father. He appeared invested in keeping his father in a humiliated position whilst he shared the exciting space with his mother. His internal world was dominated by a deceitful object by whom he felt painfully rejected and humiliated and with whom he defensively

- 742 -

identified as a way of restoring his narcissistic equilibrium. Mr S's statement, 'Lies keep me warm', might be understood as reflecting how he wrapped himself up in his lies to maintain this equilibrium.

Mr S's suspiciousness of me in the transference was managed through his denigration of me, thereby reducing me in his mind to an impotent figure of ridicule whom he could 'wind up' at will. The lie allowed him to project his own excluded, duped self into me as the recipient of his lie and to triumph over the object, thereby reversing the painful reality of the oedipal exclusion. This dynamic was evident in many of his relationships.

In Mr S's case, the lie appeared to preserve identity against anticipated humiliation and helped to defend against his castration anxiety but, as with

perversions more generally, he dehumanised himself and the object in the process. For these reasons, the use of this type of lying is perhaps best classified as an instance of perversion. As Stoller has pointed out, 'Perversion is theatre' (1985). Lying makes for exciting theatre: the liar sets up his script and then watches excitedly the object fall for his carefully constructed lie. He observes the humiliated other and triumphs, thereby reversing the earlier trauma when he was the one who was duped.

Mr S's case, and others I am unable to report on, have led me to speculate that one possible origin of sadistic lying may then be traced back to the child's first experience of feeling small and 'inferior', namely the discovery that he does not have sole possession of the mother. For some infants this reality may be experienced as so intolerable that it cannot be metabolised, precluding the possibility of mourning the loss of the object. Rather, reality is itself experienced as evidence of the object's lying nature. It's as if the child says to the mother, 'I believed it was just you and me, that the breast was all mine, but it isn't: you lied to me'. This could then become the internal prototype of the child's first experience of being deceived. The child's subjective experience is of having been rejected brutally by the parental couple and humiliated—he is the dupe.

Weinschel (1979) also notes how lying is linked with an internal experience of being lied to by one or both oedipal parents. In his view, the patient's use of lying expresses his resentment over being lied to. Weinschel's paper represents a significant and helpful contribution to this comparatively neglected area. His case material illustrates how the origins of lying can be traced back to unresolved oedipal conflicts resulting in a predominantly neurotic character structure. However, as he notes, he does not address what he refers to as the pre-genital roots of lying. I would like to suggest that where the oedipal conflicts bear the hallmark of pre-genital processes, the form taken by lying is perverse, not neurotic. Where the reality of the parental couple cannot be accommodated (for whatever reason), a malignant identification with a triumphant, lying object can take root in the personality and forms the core of a character perversion (O'Shaughnessy, 1990).

One manifestation of this kind of malignant identification is the self's need to repeatedly place the object in a very particular humiliated position characterised by the object's ignorance: the one who is 'blind' to what is happening, yet is tantalised by the suspicion of something secret and exciting from which he is excluded and of which he cannot make sense. In the context of the transference, the 'true' contents

of the patient's mind may be erotised by being kept secret from the therapist through the lie. Sometimes the lie is never explicitly admitted to, but only hinted at; it leaves behind a trail of uncertainty and confusion for the therapist who feels suspicious yet is not in possession of the full facts. Feelings of exclusion and/or confusion can then dominate the countertransference. In the patient's mind, the therapist is positioned as the dupe and the patient relates to the therapist from a superior, triumphant position. The secret lie—which is experienced as a possession because it is felt to be created by the self—is exciting and compels the liar to lie even more.

In other cases, as with Mr S, the patient eventually admits to the lie. In the transference the lie, followed by its admission, becomes a concrete enactment of a reversal of roles: the patient first keeps the therapist out of his mind's exciting bedroom, whilst the therapist's curiosity and confusion are tantalisingly aroused by the ambiguity of the narrative. The therapist then becomes projectively identified with the patient's castrated self over whom the patient triumphs in the moment when the lie is revealed. Sadistic lying therefore distinguishes itself from the other types, which I will discuss next, by its intent to consciously deceive and humiliate the object. The moment of revelation is not, in these cases, a moment of communication; rather, it is the moment in which sadistic triumph is most acute.

Self-preservative lying

In self-preservative lying, the lie represents a solution to internalised selfobject configurations that are qualitatively different to those in the type of sadistic lying just described. I am focusing now on two different internal scenarios. In the first scenario, the self experiences the object as emotionally unavailable or inscrutable. In the second scenario, the self experiences the object as intrusive and omniscient. Unlike sadistic lying, the primary anxiety in self-preservative lying is not about castration. Rather, in the first scenario, the anxiety relates primarily to the loss of, or uncertainty about, the primary object's love and concern. In the second scenario, claustro-agoraphobic anxieties are primary in response to an intrusive object.

In the first scenario, an unresponsive, absent or 'opaque' object (Sodré, 2002) has been internalised, whose unresponsiveness or inscrutability elicits profound anxiety. The 'true' self experiences the object as inscrutable or unresponsive either because it is felt to be narcissistically involved with itself or because it is lost or absent for other reasons. In these cases the lies that are told are typically ones that allow the self to construct a lovable or impressive version of the self and/or lies whose content aims to elicit the object's concern by placing the self in

situations of invented danger. Here, the lie allows for the creation of a version of the self that is believed to provide a way through to the object who will certainly love, admire or be concerned about the self. It is as if the person acts as his own loving mother, comforting himself with this idealised version of the self now in relation with a loving, involved object. In the moment of the lie, the liar is able to assuage his doubt regarding the contents of the object's mind because he convinces both himself and the object of his own importance. I will illustrate this dynamic below through my once-weekly work with Tony, a 19-year-old man.

- 744 -

Case 1: Tony

Tony was referred by his doctor because of difficulties with managing his anger. He had been adopted as a very young baby. He described a happy early childhood but he had later felt sidelined when his adoptive parents naturally conceived a baby girl when Tony was aged 7.

In our first session Tony told me that he had dropped out of university after a tutor accused him of plagiarism. This he denied, emphasising that he had not, as he put it, 'stolen somebody else's words'.

During the early months Tony cancelled several times, at very short notice, leaving elaborate messages for me outlining why he could not attend. The excuses he gave had one thing in common: they were all fairly implausible, if only because they repeatedly cast him in a favourable light—the good son, the helpful citizen, the trusted friend. On one occasion, for example, he had found himself caught in a trapped lift and had to help other distressed people trapped with him. When he came to the session the following week, he recounted in an animated manner how he had to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to an older woman who had lost consciousness. On another occasion he had saved a man who was being mugged. He would also recount somewhat implausible events from his childhood that left me feeling his whole self was precariously built on a lie.

The tales of near-death experiences or acts of bravery placed Tony at the epicentre of some impending disaster. The sense of urgency conveyed by the

stories helped me to understand Tony's desperate need to impress upon me a very particular version of himself. Tony was not deluded. I felt that he knew very well that he was lying but, as he told me the lie, he needed to believe in its truth and, crucially, he needed me to believe in it too. Rather than feeling duped or undermined as I was being offered another untruth, my countertransference was primarily one of feeling protective and sympathetic towards this young man.⁴

At eight months into the therapy, Tony began to wonder about his birth mother. He mused about what she looked like. This fleeting thought was quickly followed by him saying that he 'didn't buy' the story his adoptive parents had given him when they had described his mother as a deprived, adolescent girl who had no resources to look after him. In moments of despair and rage, Tony would say that this was a 'lie'; he remained convinced that his birth mother had been no more than a 'selfish, spoiled girl' who was now living comfortably with her family and never gave him a second thought. His conscious fantasies about his birth mother, just as with his lies, were attempts to construct a narrative about his life, to fill in the gaps.⁵

At six weeks before our first summer break, Tony began part-time work in a bookshop. Within two weeks of starting this job, Tony started the session speaking somewhat manically about how his boss would be showing his writing to a publisher. After a silence, he went on,

⁴ Of course, his lies were also expressions of his hostility towards me in the transference, but his attacks did not share the sadistic quality I encountered with Mr S.

⁵ See also Wilkinson and Hough (1996), who have developed this idea and provide very interesting clinical examples of work with adolescents.

P: I had a dream last night. It was kinda weird. There was this girl ... she looked familiar but I couldn't see her face ... anyway, I'm sitting on top of this mountain

and I'm writing this poem. I see her and she asks me what I'm doing. I tell her but she wants to see the poem. I don't want to show it to her, I want to read it to her. She gets upset because she says she wants to see the page. So she leaves and then I don't remember exactly what happens but I try to chase after her or something and I fall over and the paper in my hand flies away. [Silence.] I just feel people don't get me. Like my mother, she's always checking up on me, asking for details. Why can't people just take me at face value? I've had enough. Talking doesn't help. I don't know what you think ... you never say anything! Anyway, I'm not sure anyone ever wants to know what someone is really thinking.

A: Maybe there's a bit of suspiciousness here between us: you can't trust that I want to know your true feelings and thoughts, and you feel I'm suspicious of what you tell me, a bit like the girl in the dream who wants to see the actual page.

The following week, Tony returned in a very manic state of mind.

P: You won't believe this! My boss has set up lunch for me with this big publisher to discuss my writing ... I'm going to have to get down to some serious work because if there's a deal, it's got to be secured quickly because it's almost August and everyone disappears then. You know what publishers are like ... they're fickle ... so unless something is in black and white they might change their minds and then I'll be back to square one.

A: I think you may be quite worried about how fickle I am in my commitment to you if I can go away for the summer. Just as you are keen to secure a contract with this publisher, you're anxious to secure a firm place in my mind over the summer break and perhaps it feels easier to believe that I will keep 'Tony the author' in mind more than 'Tony the sales assistant'.

P [laughs nervously and breaks off eye contact]: Yeah ... I'm a bit worried about not having my sessions ... sometimes I do get all confused inside my head and it helps to talk about it here.

Some two weeks before I left for the summer break, Tony's adoptive mother was diagnosed with suspected breast cancer. This news profoundly disturbed him. The session following this news, he began by saying that he felt aggrieved by his father's accusations that he was not being caring towards his mother. He went on,

P: ... but sometimes, when I see her [mother] reading with my little sister and all that stuff, it gets to me and I just want to shout at her. I know she tried her best but I guess that ... I don't know ... I guess I've never forgiven her for having my sister. I don't care what others say: it's not the same when you're adopted ... [Looks on the verge of crying.] I don't know that I can manage this. It's doing my head in. I'd rather run away. But I know that's not the grown-up thing to do ... maybe I just have to tell her. [Silence.] I used to talk to her when I was little, so maybe I can do that now. You know, have a kind of honest heart-to-heart with her.

- 746 -

A: I'm also wondering whether, as our break is now very close, perhaps you also feel the need to have an honest heart-to-heart with me.

Tony looks startled, as if caught out, and for a split second I worry that I have made a mistake by implicitly acknowledging my awareness of his lying.

P: What do you mean?

A: I mean that sometimes it might be difficult for you to show me the real you because you are so afraid I will reject you.

P [fidgets a lot—no eye contact]: I haven't always lied to you. I tell you the truth more than to others. I've told my mother about the publishing contract too ... How can I now turn round and tell her I'm a hopeless failure? I couldn't look her in the eye again. I can't tell her.

A: You feel exposed by me. At one level I think there is some relief that we could have an honest heart-to-heart just now. But as soon as the truth is out you are left worried that my eyes are looking at a failure. And that's what you fear your mother will see if you tell her the truth.

The transference relationship was dominated by Tony's insistent need to establish an idealised relationship with me. He needed me to admire and love him, and for myself to be 'perfect' so that he could protect our relationship from the shadow of the internalised inscrutable object that otherwise tormented him. Doubt about my intentions towards him was experienced as intolerable. Consequently, I often felt the pressure of his need to control my version of him in my mind, as communicated through his lies.

The difference between Tony's lies and what I came to regard as his more truthful statements was the degree of detail that accompanied the lies. In contrast, the truth, as, for example, when he described aspects of his childhood and his adoption, was marked by a striking absence of detail. The impoverishment present in these stories conveyed something of Tony's internal world: a self relating to a lost object that had no contours; it existed as a piece of knowledge—'my birth mother'—but it was no more than this. His lies were, I think, attempts to reach this object by creating a version of himself that would convince the object of his own worth. During the lie he could bask in the object's love and admiration, undoing the painful reality of his abandonment.

The lies also provided insight into the psychic manoeuvres Tony deployed to protect himself from the disturbing knowledge of this early abandonment. For example, we might understand the lie about the woman whom he had to resuscitate mouth to mouth, or the man whom he rescued from the mugging, as narratives about his vulnerable, frightened baby self who risked dying without caring intervention. In the lie, however, instead of being abandoned by the one who should have cared for his baby self, Tony emerged as a lovable hero who could rescue his own baby self. In other words, in the lie, he could be his own loving mother, thereby reversing the earlier trauma.

Tony's case presents many layers of complexity. In one sense we might say that Tony was identified with a lying object: his birth mother who, in his mind, 'lied'

- 747 -

about why she had to renounce him; and his adoptive parents who 'lied' to him by having their birth child, reneging on their promise, as it were, that he would be their only child. However, unlike the malignant identification with the lying object that O'Shaughnessy (1990) writes about, and which I noted in my experience with Mr S who used lying sadistically, I would like to suggest that, in

Tony's case, his triumph over the object is not primary; rather, the lie is primarily an attempt to create an impressive version of himself that guarantees, for the duration of the lie, the object's love and admiration. In the transference, the lie and its impact on me—the imperative to relate to the version of him contained in the lie—was a powerful expression of his internal struggle: how to survive in a world devoid of loving objects whom he could trust would accept his 'true' self. Yet by lying to me and to others, he perpetuated this internal drama, as he could never find out whether his 'true' self would be accepted.

In the lie Tony set up an alternative selfobject configuration: he remodelled the self and constructed an omnipotently controlled fantasised mother who loved him. His hatred of the internal object by whom he felt rejected was expressed through this control: in the transference I had to see him as he wanted to be seen. Paradoxically, however, his attempt to control the object through the lie was also his way of protecting it from his own attacks by transforming it into a loving object towards whom he had no grievance.

Lying in childhood is very common and normal. In its most innocuous incarnation, the lie—that 'bastard offspring of symbols' (Rappaport, 1979)—is the cousin of make believe. To substitute an event that might happen for one that does happen confers control and power over a world that, for the growing child, feels ever more out of his omnipotent grasp (Forrester, 1997).

From a developmental point of view, lying also performs another important function that bears on this discussion. There are many everyday scenarios where we can observe the developmentally normal process by which the child gradually separates, yet maintains linked internal and external reality and so finally can know his own mind (Fonagy and Target, 1996). Lying can be thought about as part of this process. Through the lie the child can transform something untrue/unreal into something 'real' by placing a lie about the self inside the object's mind (Fonagy, personal communication). In other words, the lie provides a vehicle for exploring one's own internal reality through the object's response to it, thereby making it 'real' for the self. Tony's case illustrates how such a process can become vital to the very integrity of the self, but also more problematic, as he could only feel loved and wanted if he 'made up' a version of himself. Yet, through the lie he was paradoxically making himself more 'real' by finding a new and 'better' version of himself in the object's mind. His lies were narratives that allowed him to look at the object without shame or rage and to believe that the object would look back lovingly at him. Indeed, some of the time his lies felt like 'aspirations' (Alvarez, 1992) that contained seeds of hope and called for my receptive containment. In Tony's case, I would like to suggest, his lies needed to be heard as pieces of fiction that held the self together and were restitutive of self-esteem (Deutsch, 1982; Wilkinson and Hough, 1996).

In other cases where lying is dominant, and which I would like to suggest are another sub-type of self-preservative lying, the underlying dynamics are different to those just described. Here the internal world is dominated by an all-seeing, omniscient object that is felt to intrude into, and control, the self. The early dyadic intimacy is undiluted and the self feels suffocated by the object's intrusive takeover. The lie is used to divert the object, to create a kind of boundary between self and object. The lie essentially performs the function of the absent third/father creating distance between self and object, as I hope to show through my work with Ms B, whom I saw on a twice-weekly basis.

Case 2: Ms B

Ms B was 30 when we first met. She had sought therapy because she felt depressed. She had a history of self-harm and substance abuse in late adolescence. Her early history was punctuated by her mother's repeated admissions to psychiatric hospitals due to psychosis. She was depicted as very intrusive. Her father had left when Ms B was under one year old.

My first awareness that Ms B was lying to me occurred after a request on my part at the start of the session to change one of our session times as a one-off:

P [after a long silence]: Sorry ... I got lost in my thoughts ... No, I don't think that's going to work for me ... I can't come earlier or later as I have a dinner to go to ... sorry, I'm being a bit vague but that's because I have so many commitments right now, they're getting confused in my mind. But ... yes ... I have this dinner to go to. [Brief pause.] It's going to be held at A's house ... C will be there, which will be nice, but A is such a lousy cook so we'll all have to go there starved otherwise it will be unbearable to eat the stuff she dishes up! Last time I got food poisoning.

She goes on to give me details of the dinner. As she speaks, what she says feels forced and distanced.

A: My asking you to change the time next week has turned me into a therapist who dishes up poisonous therapy.

P [after a prolonged silence]: I don't know how to say this but I know I have to try otherwise this whole thing is pointless. [Long pause.] I just lied to you. It's not the first time. I know it's bad, especially in this kind of relationship, but sometimes I do it so automatically I no longer notice I'm doing it. Sometimes, I end up believing what I say. I get all confused.

A: Lying to me seems like the only option when you feel I'm asking something of you that feels intrusive.

P: Yes ... I would find it hard to just say 'no' to you.

Ms B went on to speak about her general difficulties in setting boundaries with others. She left the session looking very anxious and did not come for the second session that week, cancelling at the last minute.

- 749 -

The following week she lay on the couch, very silent. After 10 minutes, she started,

P: I had a dream last night. I'm in a house but it doesn't feel like a house. I think that was because the house was in the middle of a large field and it's as if there are no walls. I know that there should be walls but as I go to touch them, they crumble and I'm staring out into this open field. It's cold and I'm trembling. I don't want to be there, but I can't get out. I know it sounds stupid because there were no walls but I was stuck on the spot and couldn't move. [Silence.] I hate it when you don't say anything. It's your job to interpret dreams, isn't it?

The dream had sparked off in me a lot of thoughts and I was tempted to interpret but I was also strangely perturbed by a pressing need within me to interpret. This is why I opted to remain silent. I felt as if I was perhaps being invited to invade her mind with my interpretations, which would be no more than offering her crumbling walls/words that could not provide any solid boundary between the contents of her mind and the contents of my mind.

P: You're playing games. My last therapist would always give me an interpretation. I miss her so much. She really helped me. She was ... well ... wonderful. I just wish she hadn't become ill ... I know you'll think I'm idealising her. I'm not. I can see faults in her. If I had to find any fault in her, I would say that it was her consulting room: the couch looked out on to a window and I think I prefer looking out at a wall. It's stupid, but actually the wall in this room makes me feel safer somehow. I know where the room ends. In my flat I have a large reception room. It feels like space sprawls and I have had to buy lots of screens to divide it up, create little corners. D calls them my 'safe, cosy corners'.

A: Your dream helps us to understand how in your mind it often feels like there are no walls, no screens, which make you feel separate. I think you feel trapped in this boundaryless space. In your flat you quite literally create safe little corners with screens and last week when you felt intruded upon by my request to change the time you used a lie as a kind of screen.

P: I felt bad about lying. I think that's why I cancelled the next session ... I had the thought that I was never going to come back, but then I realised it was stupid. I've been running away all my life. But when you asked me to change the time, something just flipped in my head. [Silence.] Mother demanded to see me last night and like an idiot I went round. What the hell for? Just to get abused by her, telling me I had to take her here and there and every-bloody-where.

There was a long silence, during which she cried.

I've told countless lies. I can't even keep up with myself sometimes. It's mostly to mother. I just hated her, the way she took over ... I had to find ways to control her, keep her out. It was just me and her. It was hard. Maybe it would have been different if my father hadn't left. Would you believe it, I've even made

- 750 -

up boyfriends in the past, borrowed other people's photographs, to show to my mother ... so that she would leave me alone. How pathetic is that?

Intimacy requires a ratio—an immeasurably variable one to be sure, depending on the individual—of reciprocal concealment and reciprocal knowledge. One of the functions of the lie is to control this distribution of knowledge. In normal development the child's realisation that he can choose to not disclose a thought, fantasy or feeling heralds the birth of an awareness of inner life as distinct from the outer world. Indeed, the child's first lie represents a momentous step into separateness and autonomy.

Ms B's predicament illustrates how secrets and lies can be used as a way of protecting the privacy of the self (Mollon, 2002). Ms B's internal world was populated by an intrusive, dangerous object who had to be controlled through lies, as became apparent in the transference. In the sessions just reported, the now 'outed' lie, in the context of our relationship, became like the crumbling walls of her dream, offering no protection from my invasion into her mind, hence the cancellation of the following session. In the work with Ms B, I often experienced a pressing need to remain silent, as I felt I became so identified in her mind with the intrusive object that the very act of making an interpretation could all too readily be experienced as a hostile takeover of her mind.

My work with Ms B helped me to understand that, where the two-person relationship has become entrapping and intrusive, and where there is no 'third' to dilute the intensity of this relationship, the lie can be used in an attempt to insert a third between the self and the object. Ms B had to quite concretely invent a third (as she illustrates when she tells me of the fabricated boyfriends) to act as a buffer between herself and her mother. Not only did she use lies to insert a third into our relationship, but also for the first nine months she always left her mobile phone on. While she never answered the calls, it seemed as though the presence of an 'other' in the room (concretely represented by the ringing buzzer) reassured her that we were not alone.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of 'truth' we do well to allow for the possibility that our patients lie to us and that they lie to us more often than we probably acknowledge or ever know about. Their reasons for doing so may be situational, yet of no less significance, or they may reflect more enduring character traits linked to specific selfobject configurations that have taken root in the personality. In this paper I have attempted to outline three possible configurations, linked to qualitatively different anxieties, and which denote different functions of lying in the psychic economy.

Although I have emphasised differences between the three configurations, one dynamic was strikingly similar in all three cases, namely the imperative,6 as

experienced in the transference, to believe what is prescribed by the patient's lie. In such cases, the analytic space becomes a scripted, constrained space within

6 This imperative is, however, experienced qualitatively differently in the countertransference depending on the particular selfobject configuration that is being enacted.

- 751 -

which the therapist experiences the full impact of the enactment of an internalised relationship to an object with whom honest and direct communication is felt to be an impossibility. A lie is always an indirect form of emotional communication about the internal world. Whatever the function of the lie, there is some truth in the lie—it is often the ‘truth’ about the nature of the internal objects (O'Shaughnessy, 1990).

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Peter Fonagy, Susan Levy, Priscilla Roth, Anne Ward and Heather Wood for their helpful observations on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Paul Williams and the two reviewers for their encouragement and helpful guidance.

- 752 -

References

Alvarez A (1992). *Live company*. London: Routledge.

Badcock C (1995). Psychodarwinism: The new synthesis of Darwin and Freud. London: Flamingo.

Bion W (1962). Learning from experience. London: Karnac Books. [→]

Bollas C (1987). The shadow of the object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known. London: Routledge.

Britton R (1989). The missing link: Parental sexuality in the Oedipus complex. In: Britton R, Feldman M, O'Shaughnessy E, Steiner J, editors. The Oedipus complex today: Clinical implications, p. 83-102. London: Karnac.

Deutsch H (1982). On the pathological lie. J Am Acad Psychoanal 10: 369-86.

Fenichel O (1946). The psychoanalytic theory of neurosis. London: Routledge.

Fonagy P, Target M (1996). Playing with reality: I. Theory of mind and the normal development of psychic reality. Int. J. Psycho-Anal. 77: 217-33. [→]

Forrester J (1997). Truth games: Lies, money and psychoanalysis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ.Press.

Freud S (1909). Analysis of a phobia in a five-year-old boy. SE 10, p. 5-149. [→]

Glasser M (1979). Some aspects of the role of aggression. In: Rosen I, editor. Sexual deviation. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

Jankélévitch V (1945). Du mensonge [About lying]. In: Philosophie morale, 1998. Paris: Flammarion.

Koyré A (1998). Réflexions sur le mensonge [Reflections on lying]. Paris: Editions Alia.

Mollon P (2002). Shame and jealousy: The hidden turmoils. London: Karnac.

O'Shaughnessy E (1990). Can a liar be psychoanalysed? Int. J. Psycho-Anal. 71: 187-95. [→]

Rappaport R (1979). Ecology, meaning, and religion. California: North Atlantic Books.

Sartre J-P (1956). Being and nothingness. Washington: Washington Square Press.

Smith DL (2004). Why we lie. New York: St Martin's Press.

Sodré I (2002). Certainty and doubt: Transparency and opacity of the object. Bull Br Psychoanal Soc 38: 1-8.

Stoller R (1985). Observing the erotic imagination. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press.

Trivers R (1985). Social evolution. California: Benjamin/Cummings.

Weinschel E (1979). Some observations on not telling the truth. J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn. 27: 503-31. [→]

Wilkinson S, Hough G (1996). Lie as narrative truth in abused adopted adolescents. Psychoanal. St. Child 51: 580-96. [→]

Winnicott D (1985). The antisocial tendency. In: Deprivation and delinquency. London: Routledge.

Article Citation [Who Cited This?]

Lemma, A. (2005). The many faces of lying. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 86:737-753