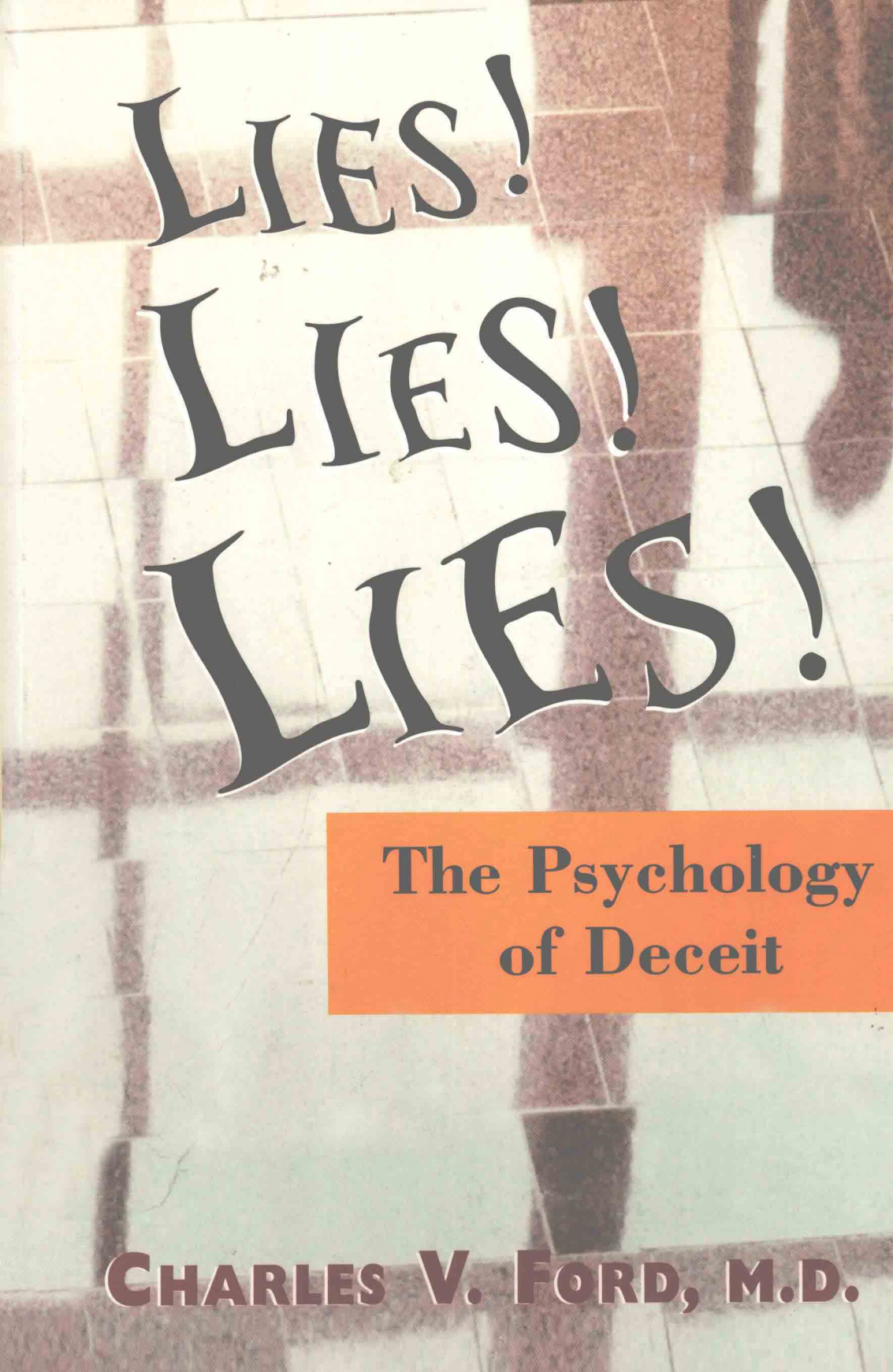
LIES!
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The Psychology of Deceit
CHARLES V. FORD, M.D.

Lies! Lies!! Lies!!!

The Psychology of Deceit

Charles V. Ford, M.D.

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Preface

My scientific interest in deception began with my contact with psychiatric and medical patients who, as compulsive liars, told fantastic yet somehow believable stories in an effort to make themselves more interesting. Later, I became increasingly aware of the almost constant barrage of lies that one experiences in day-to-day life—from children, politicians, salespeople, advertisers, colleagues, friends, relatives, and even oneself.

Lying is a ubiquitous yet, from a psychological perspective, understudied phenomenon. Why lying should be the subject of so little scrutiny is of interest in itself. Perhaps it is because lying is such an intensely emotional issue. Adults tell children that there is nothing worse than a liar. In the age of chivalry, calling someone a liar was grounds for a challenge to a duel. Despite such attitudes about the evils of lying, we are all liars: we lie to others, and we lie to ourselves. If lying is so prevalent, why is it regarded as so bad, and why has it been the subject of so little study?

Noting the scarce psychiatric information available about the subject of prevarication, my colleagues Drs. Bryan King and Marc Hollender and I reviewed the medical literature on lying and wrote a review article that was published in 1988 in the *American Journal of Psychiatry.* We attempted to be objective in our approach rather than to take a moral position. The response to this article was fascinating. Several newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe,* published feature articles based on our work, particularly emphasizing our ideas about the role of personality in lying. One newspaper columnist, without mentioning us specifically by name, expressed the opinion that society was in trouble because by not taking a moral stance (condemning lying), we (psychiatrists) were in essence condoning it.

As a result of this publicity, my colleagues and I were interviewed on a number of television and radio programs, including some that permitted listeners or viewers to call in with questions. This media exposure provided us and the general public with new information about lying. It was personally gratifying to receive letters from all parts of the United States. Some persons confessed that they were compulsive liars and wrote that they agreed with our proposed formulations as to why they lied. Family members of liars wrote to say that they were helped by what they had learned about compulsive lying, particularly the neurological substrates of this disorder. They told us the information helped them become more understanding of their relative.

Many of the questions directed to me about lying related to one or more of the following areas: How can you tell when someone is lying? Do lie detectors work? Should one be "truthful" about extramarital affairs? Is it always wrong to tell a lie? Why do politicians tell so many lies? What do you do when you know that your child is lying? Of course, questions that deal primarily with issues of morality are not easily answered by a scientific approach. Others, such as how lie detectors work and their degree of accuracy, are more subject to an objective description.

My intention in writing this book is to provide up-to-date information on these popular interests. I hope to go beyond that goal and stimulate interest in the concept that lying is part of the interface between a person's internal and external worlds. By this last statement, I suggest that there is an internal world composed of beliefs, fantasies, and perceived realities, and there is an external world of shared beliefs, or "reality." At the interface between these two "worlds," we lie if we deceive others as to what we believe in our personal internal world, or we engage in self-deception if we distort or change information as it passes from the external world into the internal world. In psychoanalytic terms, the function that controls this interface is called the *ego*. I conclude that lying, self-deception, and the assessment of reality are closely related to one another.

The reader of this book who expects to learn how to better detect the lies of others will learn that it is difficult to do so and that it may not, in fact, be in one's best interests to do so. Furthermore, it may

not be desirable to learn how to lie more skillfully. Questions about morality and lying are to a large extent unanswerable. I hope that the reader learns to look at lying and truth-telling in a new light and learns how pervasively lies and self-deception influence human relationships and political decisions. Perhaps the most important lesson for any reader is how we use lies to deceive ourselves.

Contents

Chapter 1

Everybody Lies

Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying.

—Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1*

None of us could live with a habitual truth teller;
but, thank goodness, none of us has to.

—Mark Twain

"Lies! Lies!! Lies!!! That's all I ever hear from you! You lie when the truth would serve you better!" Rick screamed at Cindy. He had just returned from retrieving a sweater from Cindy's car, where he had found several videotapes on the front seat that she had told him she had returned days earlier. Rick became enraged. This type of lie from Cindy seemed habitual, but Rick's furious outbursts had no effect on her behavior.

Later that night, after Rick had cooled down somewhat, Cindy initiated some passionate lovemaking: "Oh, Rick, you are so sexy, so masculine, SO BIG! Oh God, how you turn me on!" Rick once again forgave Cindy's misdemeanor.

"There is nothing worse than a liar. You simply *must* tell the truth!" Ten-year-old Tyler listened to the same lecture from his mother for the umpteenth time. He had pleaded ignorance when asked how a vase was broken, but his younger sister had told his mother that it happened when Tyler threw a ball at her.

Later that afternoon, when Tyler answered a telephone call

from the pastor of the family's church, Tyler's mother said in a soft voice, "Tell him I'm not here. All he wants is a contribution for the new steeple."

"What do you mean you haven't attended classes all semester? What have we raised, a bum?" Spencer's parents were livid. They had just learned that although Spencer had registered for school at a prestigious southern university and tuition had been paid, as far as anyone could determine, Spencer had not attended a single class after the first week of school. During many phone calls, Spencer had described examinations and term papers and had even complained about his professors. In retrospect, Spencer's parents realized these conversations were fabrications. As a result of Spencer's glowing reports, they expected that their son would have a B+ or A– average for his first semester in college.

"We just don't understand it," they said to the assistant dean for student affairs. "We always had such high expectations for Spencer, and he has always pleased us."

The speaker, dressed in a blue NASA jumpsuit that reflected a rank of U.S. Marine Corps captain, enthralled the audience with the description of his flight into space aboard the shuttle *Atlantis.* He passed around an official NASA helmet for their admiring examination and then spoke of the excitement of being catapulted off an aircraft carrier in an F-18 jet fighter and going in "fast and low" to bomb Libya.

An American hero? Not quite. Not only was Robert J. Hunt not an astronaut, but he wasn't even a Marine. In fact, he didn't have a pilot's license or, according to police, even a driver's license. This impostor not only had perpetrated a successful hoax on the Experimental Aircraft Association of Boston but also had conned a young professional woman into marriage and out of thousands of dollars (Neill 1989).

Surprised and hurt by the criticism surrounding his plans to lay a wreath at the Bittburg Cemetery in West Germany, the president of the United States professed his concern about Jewish victims of Nazi Germany. He described his intense emotional reaction to what he had personally witnessed as an American army officer assisting in the liberation of a German concentration camp.

This lapse in "truth-telling" might be described as *pseudologia*

fantastica (a matrix of fact and fiction, described in Chapters 2 and 7), because it was well known that Ronald Reagan never left the United States during World War II; he was a special "liaison officer" who served in Hollywood (Schaller 1992). Reagan's later disclosure that he had received a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease may cast light on some of his statements. Pseudologia fantastica is frequently associated with cerebral dysfunction (see Chapter 3).

Paradoxes of Lying

The above illustrations demonstrate some of the many paradoxes that characterize the phenomenon of lying. Rick is furious with Cindy when he doesn't want her to lie, yet he is all too ready to hear her lies (flattery) about his sexual prowess. Tyler's mother tells him "there is nothing worse than a liar," yet a few minutes later she instructs him to lie to their minister. Spencer's parents are furious at him for lying to them, yet he is only telling them what he thinks they want to hear. If Robert Hunt, obviously a bright and talented man, had spent as much energy applying himself to genuine accomplishment as he had to masquerading as a pilot, he could probably have been a most successful man. Finally, the president of the United States lives in a fishbowl; logically, there could be no question that Ronald Reagan's fabrication would become known and that negative consequences would result.

Despite being condemned by phrases such as the one used by Tyler's mother, lies are a ubiquitous phenomenon. Much of our psychic energy is spent sorting out the day-to-day, hour-to-hour information that bombards us. "Did he really work late last night?" "Can I believe the advertisement, or is it a bait and switch?" "Has the car been as trouble-free as the seller claims?" Everyone continuously shares and receives information and must simultaneously evaluate both the effect of the information transmitted and the accuracy of information received. Only the foolish and the naive accept as true everything that is said or written. To quote a cynical old saying, "Believe nothing that you hear and only half of what you see."

Many people look back in time and see a decline in honesty and truth during the past several decades. Although this opinion is cer-

tainly debatable, no less an authority than Benjamin Bradlee, editor of *The Washington Post,* has publicly stated that lying has increased "enormously" during his lifetime (Williams 1988). Whether Bradlee is correct, or whether we are just much more aware of lying today, there is no doubt that our society is permeated with deceit.

Everybody Lies

A book based on a poll of Americans, *The Day America Told the Truth* (Patterson and Kim 1991), claimed that 90% of the people polled admitted that they were deceitful. Lies told, in order of frequency with which they were acknowledged, included lying about one's true feelings, income, accomplishments, sex life, and age.

Furthermore, many (possibly most) Americans believe that people are more dishonest now than a decade ago. In a 1987 poll by *U.S. News and World Report*–Cable News Network, 54% of the respondents thought that people were more dishonest than they were 10 years previously, and 71% indicated that they were dissatisfied with current standards of honesty (McLoughlin et al. 1987). One in four respondents thought that the president of the United States and leaders of Congress often do not tell the truth. Despite (or perhaps because of) this pervasive perception of deceit, 94% of the persons polled believed that honesty in a friend was an extremely important quality—vastly more important than any other attribute.

As an introduction to the prevalence and importance of deceit in everyday life, including in those we trust, it is useful to explore the phenomenon of lying in several different situations.

Lies for Purposes of Sexual Gratification

When it involves sexual information, accepting a lie as the truth can lead to disease or death in this age of sexually transmitted diseases. Yet, a study of dishonesty in the dating of college students found that 60% of the women stated that they had been lied to for the purposes of obtaining sex, and 34% of the men admitted to having lied for that reason. Furthermore, 4% of the men and 42% of the

women stated that they would understate to a new sexual partner the number of previous partners they had had (Cochran and Mays 1990).

Dr. David Knox and his colleagues at East Carolina University investigated lies told by college students to a current or potential sexual partner (Knox et al. 1993). Ninety-two percent of the students (anonymously) reported that they had lied; the authors questioned whether the other 8% were lying about not lying. The most frequent lies of both sexes related to the correct number of previous sexual partners. Women were more likely to lie about having been sexually gratified, and men were slightly more likely to have falsely proclaimed, "I love you." The authors noted that the lies served at times to increase the chances of sexual consent but that many of the lies were to spare the feelings of the current partner. In either situation, the lies decreased potentially useful communication.

In her report on adultery, Annette Lawson (1988) estimated that about two-thirds to three-quarters of American and British married persons have extramarital affairs at some point. Of note, it may be the lying associated with infidelity rather than the sexual behavior itself that causes the most pain within the marriage. Lawson commented that in "open marriages," it is the failure to tell the other partner about an affair that constitutes unfaithfulness. She also observed that telling the spouse about an affair is often an expression of self-centeredness and hostility rather than an effort to improve communication and resolve problems. She described one woman who "confessed" her affair to appease her conscience but who had every intention of secretly continuing the extramarital liaison.

Lies in the Workplace

A recent survey by Thorndike Deland Associates estimated that one in three people "varnish the truth" or engage in out-and-out lying when seeking employment (Underwood 1993). Candidates for executive jobs are just as likely to lie as those seeking lower-level positions. The type of lie varies from falsely claiming college degrees to stretching periods of employment to cover periods of unemployment. A typical fabrication told by a man is that he played

on his college football team. A typical lie told by a woman is that she was president of her sorority. Ed Andler, author of *Winning the Hiring Game* (as reported in Underwood 1993), stated that this type of lying has about doubled since the mid-1970s. One reason for the increased rate of deceit is the low risk of detection. Because employers fear lawsuits, they are reluctant to provide negative information about former employees. According to one employment service manager, most employers will now give out little more than the worker's "name, rank, and serial number" (Underwood 1993).

Lies do not stop when an applicant is hired and becomes an employee. Lies among employees of corporations are common and are motivated by a variety of reasons, including protecting one's "turf" and attempting to resolve problems, such as those encountered when reporting to two supervisors who make conflicting demands (Grover 1993a).

Lies in the workplace are not limited to employees. Jackall (1980) studied managerial style at a large bank and found that the "effective manager" had developed a number of strategies, some deceptive, to keep workers productive. The deceptive strategies included lying to workers about opportunities for advancement, deceiving overworked employees about possible forthcoming relief, displaying bursts of staged anger, playing workers off against each other by the use of innuendo, and using worker informants to gather information about their co-workers.

When an adversarial relationship develops between workers and managers, deceit becomes a frequently used tactic in the conflict. The resultant decrease in truthfulness will adversely affect the ability of the organization to fulfill its mission (Culbert and McDonough 1992).

A recent wave of restructuring (downsizing) has occurred among corporations and other organizations. Employees—including many who have worked for the same company for decades—have been laid off. Tension is high in the workplace, and many employees have experienced a loss of trust and loyalty in companies that they previously identified as "family."

Competition among co-workers for the remaining positions leads to increased fear and a lack of willingness to cooperate with one another. These conditions are counterproductive to creating a

climate of trust, honest communication, and greater efficiency. Ultimately, the negative effects on the company's bottom line caused by decreased efficiency resulting from loss of morale may outweigh the savings brought by a reduced payroll.

The Lies of Advertisers

An article in one of the United States' leading advertising periodicals started with this sentence: "In 1991, truth in marketing has become as contradictory a concept as nutritional desserts." This article by Fara Warner (1991, p. 4) further stated that instead of supporting the honest attributes of their products, many advertisers "fall into a Pinocchio complex of unsubstantiated, irrelevant, or utterly false claims." This phenomenon of misleading advertising is so pronounced that one manufacturer used a deliberately exaggerated liar—"Joe Isuzu"—to create interest in its product (Lippert 1987, p. 58).

Newsweek magazine attributes to philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers the contention that television advertising is the main villain in creating a continuous barrage of "disinformation." *U.S. News and World Report* also quotes advertising executive Jerry Della Femina (whose firm was responsible for the very effective "Joe Isuzu" advertisements) as saying, "We're conceived, born, and deceived. By the time someone reaches the age of 10, he's pretty cynical" (McLoughlin et al. 1987, p. 59).

Few people would argue about the necessity of advertisements. In a large metropolitan society, advertising is the tool that producers use to communicate information to potential consumers. Conversely, consumers in need of a product search advertisements for information. Despite the usefulness of this medium of communication, few advertisers limit their advertising to providing basic information. Advertisers promote their wares by use of blatant misrepresentation, exaggeration, bait-and-switch techniques, and the subtle implication that something positive will accrue to the consumer who uses the product. I briefly discuss each of these strategies.

Blatant misrepresentation. Unfortunately, even in this relatively sophisticated society, blatant misrepresentation and bold-faced lies

are not uncommon. For example, Mark Hulbert (1991), author of the *Hulbert Guide to Financial Newsletters,* found it necessary to publicly rebuke the advertising claims for Jay Schabacker's *Mutual Funds Investing* newsletter. Schabacker had claimed that Hulbert had rated his newsletter number 1, while in fact it ranked near the bottom (number 12 of 14) of Hulbert's list. One must keep in mind that the targets of Schabacker's dishonest advertisement were people with money to invest—people who are presumably not naive about financial matters.

Other advertisements with blatant misrepresentations are those that often appeal to less sophisticated consumer groups. Such advertisements may be found in certain tabloids and promise that their products will increase the size of one's penis or breasts, restore virility, or provide rapid weight loss without effort.

Exaggeration. Advertising frequently exaggerates the attributes of a product. I remember a cartoon from decades ago featuring a street that had three hamburger stands. The first had a sign saying "best hamburgers in America," the second had a sign saying "best hamburgers in the world," but the third modestly claimed "best hamburgers on this block." Superlatives abound in advertising, and this form of advertising is more difficult to discredit than blatant lies. Such advertisements may be accompanied by a small-print disclaimer that results were obtained by "professionals" or the equivalent.

The exaggeration of a product's virtues is known as *puffery.* This advertising technique is widely used, sometimes blatantly and sometimes subtly. Puffery suggests the superiority of the advertised product through implication rather than by literal claims—"Nothing beats a great pair of L'Eggs," for example. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has been relatively lax in policing puffery claims, particularly those that "puff" by implication, because of the assumption that people expect advertisements to exaggerate, and therefore, astute consumers discount them (Preston 1977). However, research indicates that puffery claims are effective and influence consumers (Oliver 1979; Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1980; Wyckham 1987). Furthermore, the consumer tends to keep believing the claims of puffery after purchasing the product, even if the claims are unjustified (Oliver 1979). People need to believe that they made the right choice

in buying a product, so they deceive themselves into believing that the product is superior!

Bait-and-switch techniques. *Bait and switch* is a common advertising gimmick. One well-known national retailer has been publicly censured for using this practice to bring potential consumers into its stores. There are two basic variations of bait and switch. An advertisement may offer a product (e.g., a vacuum cleaner) at a certain price. When potential buyers arrive at the store, they may be told 1) that the advertised price was for a "stripped-down" model and that for a few more dollars, a much higher quality product is available, or 2) that the advertised product has been sold out, but other models (at a higher price) are still available. The bait-and-switch technique in marketing is so prevalent that it is doubtful that any American consumer has escaped an encounter with it at least once.

Subtle implication. One of the most insidious forms of advertising is that which subtly implies that possession or use of the product will bestow certain desired characteristics on the purchaser. For example, the upscale consumer is told that purchase of a certain make of automobile will tell the world that one has "arrived," whereas advertisements for ocean cruises imply romance.

Implications (including deceptive messages) about products are frequently delivered through nonverbal communication (P. J. DePaulo 1988; Edell 1988; Stewart et al. 1987). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, these nonverbal cues are often more effective than just words because they evoke more associative thoughts and fantasies than words alone. Among the nonverbal messages found in advertisements are pictures and music. Mitchel and Olson (1981) found that constructing a visual advertisement of a kitten next to a box of facial tissue was more effective in communicating a message of "softness" than were words that described the facial tissue as soft. Music can also be used to manipulate associated ideas and moods (Stout and Leckenby 1988). For example, music can be used to associate happy social occasions with the consumption of a certain brand of beer. Deceptive advertising, by using nonverbal messages to create false implications, can be remarkably effective. Cigarette advertising provides an interesting example of nonverbal message techniques.