LYING AND DECEIVING

Selections from Chapter Five of
The Ethical Lives of Clients - Transcending Self-Interest in Psychotherapy
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Therapists since the time of Freud have been more focused on clients' self-deception than their deception of others. But there is little obvious self-deception in the following case:

> *The client doesn't want to switch kid weekends with her ex-husband whose parents will coming to town in a few months and would like to see the grandkids. The client says that there difficult ex rarely accommodated her requests and she didn't feel like going along with his. She decided to make up a story that she had already book nonrefundable airline tickets to a beach resort for that weekend. The ex-husband relented immediately instead of pressing his case.*

As she told the story, the client seemed to be proud of herself. If you see yourself as an empowerment-oriented therapist, particularly with women who have been manipulated and controlled by an ex-husband, then perhaps you would see her response as a healthy sign that she was setting clear boundaries. Or perhaps you would see her deception as a risky way to set a boundary because the husband would eventually realize that no trip was going to occur, leading to a confrontation worse than if she had just said "no" at the outset, with no excuses.

Nowhere (that I know of) in the therapy literature is there a method of addressing this kind of situation on ethical terms. The philosopher Sissela Bok (1999), one of few philosophers to address the social implications of lying, maintains that being able to count on the other's truthfulness is a foundation of social relations among human beings. It's the basis of trust, without which relationships and social institutions collapse. A lie, according to Bok, is "an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement." It's telling you something I believe is untrue in order to deceive you. It's an active process rather than hiding something from you. If this wife had said, "I'm not sure yet what our plans are for that weekend, and I don't want to give it away," she would not have been lying. Lying, according to Bok, is different from maintaining one's privacy. Truthfulness does not require the revelation of all of

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one's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. How much to reveal to another person depends on the relationship and the person's claim on that revelation.

In the above case, two traditional ways for the therapist to respond are to either affirm the client's self-empowerment or to offer a pragmatic caution of how the lie could backfire on her. The first one implies that being trustworthy is not important in her coparenting relationship (therapists sometimes side so fully with divorced clients that they do not see an ex as having ethical claims in the coparenting relationship). The second one limits the scope of the conversation to the client's self-interest, as if there are no other stakeholders in the decision to lie.

The book goes into the exchange I had with this client to help keep her boundaries and her integrity. For me, the clinical and the ethical dimensions of therapy are seamless.

Truthfulness and Human Flourishing

In the world of mental health, chronic lying and deceit are considered pathological and a potential marker of antisocial personality disorder. My interest here is how therapists address the ethics of lying among clients who understand the importance of honesty (they have a conscience) but who sometimes resort to lying as a way to avoid conflict, disapproval, embarrassment, or other reasons not connected to psychopathology.

From a humanistic psychology perspective, lying to maintain one's self-image or to avoid interpersonal unpleasantness is a form of inauthenticity (Rogers, 1961). Because the self is inherently relational, being true to oneself means acting responsibly towards other people in one's life, and that involves being truthful and not deceiving them. Being truthful creates trustworthiness in relationships, whereas deceiving others compromises relationships and leads eventually to inauthentic living based on not facing truths about oneself. There is no sharp dividing line between intrapsychic truth telling and interpersonal truth telling.

Skills for Dealing with Client Lies

When the client expresses concern or remorse about lying, the basic ethical consultations skills come into play: Listen, Explore, Affirm, offer Perspective. Help the client see the consequences of the lie on others, and to look for alternative ways to address self-needs while avoiding deception that compromises oneself and others. A key is to not avoid ethical terms such as "lie" out of fear that the client will see you as guilt inducing: they already come with guilt and we are just naming what's going on.

References:

Rogers, C. R. (1961). *Client-centered therapy.* Houghton Mifflin.

Doherty, W. J. (2022). *The ethical lives of clients: Transcending self-interest in psychotherapy.* American Psychological Association.

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