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Careers

He Lied, She Lied

Kiri Blakeley, 08.26.09, 5:30 PM ET

Any woman who has been online dating for awhile can tell you the story of meeting a man whose profile, which said he was 6-foot tall, ended up being several inches short of the truth. And most men can tell you about the woman whose reality was about 10 years older than her online photos.

And while the reverse might happen, it's much less likely. That's because most studies conclude that men and women lie with equal regularity, but in general, why, how and what they lie about are very different.

"One [female] client is 47, she looks 40, and her profile says 35," says Dr. Jonathan Alpert, a psychotherapist and *Metro* newspaper advice columnist who says one-third of his clients use online dating sites. "Men tend to lie about their height or how much money they make. In the old days, men might have said they were an investment banker when they weren't. I don't know if that helps much anymore."

Both men and women will shave a few pounds off their weight, however.

Part I: Why We Lie

"Men tend to lie to gain career or professional status," says Dennis Reina, author of *Trust & Betrayal in the Workplace*. "Women tend to lie to gain social status."

So while a man is busy underestimating operating costs or bloating sales figures, Reina says their female colleagues are more likely to be spreading office gossip that may not be true, or making up excuses not to attend a co-worker's dinner party.

While the men's Enron-like corporate fibs might seem, on the surface, much more harmful, Reina, who consults on trust issues with companies like American Express, Boeing and Ben & Jerry's, says that catty back-biting shouldn't be dismissed: "Gossip within the office is the No. 1 killer of communication, trust and teamwork."

Women, says Reina, also have a tendency to pull the old "I'm sick" routine to get out of a deadline or an early-morning meeting more often than men, who are likely to fabricate a more macho scenario that doesn't cast them as weak: "A woman might say she has a headache, a guy will say he has to be in court because somebody rear-ended him."

Part II: How We Lie

"Men are more blatant about it," says Dr. Craig Fabrikant, a psychologist at the Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey. "If you ask him if he went to the track last night, he'll say, 'Absolutely not. I wasn't anywhere near the track.' Women tend to skirt around a lie, or reroute it or tell a partial truth. They might admit they went to the mall, but be more coy about who they were with."

Fabrikant says that men are also more likely to lie by omission: "If someone doesn't know about it, then it didn't happen," he says, explaining a man's thinking.

These days, say experts, men and women seem to be lying with equal frequency about affairs. (In the past, more men had them and lied about them.) In terms of mismanaging money, both genders lie, but men's fibs tend to cover up bad investments or financial decisions, while women (even if they make as much or more money than the man) will misrepresent their buying habits.

"Guys see it unnecessary to buy five pairs of shoes, and women know that so they'll keep it from their boyfriends," says Alpert. "Rarely will a man lie about shopping, especially when it comes to shoes."

While lying often results in behavioral signs that are consistent across genders (nervous energy, touching the face, increased blinking), there are some differences. Fabrikant says that men tend to look you in the eye and lie straight to your face; women will look away or down. Men tend to mumble, while women will speak more rapidly.

Part III: What We Lie About

Bella DePaulo, a professor of psychology at UC Santa Barbara, has been studying deception for three decades. Lies, she says, tend to fall into two categories: "self-serving" lies that make the fibber look better or avoid embarrassment; and "altruistic lies," which are told to spare someone else's feelings.

Men and women both tell twice the amount of self-serving lies as altruistic lies, except in one sub-category: when women are talking to other women. Then the amount of altruistic lies doubles. "Sometimes telling the truth clashes with something else we value more in that moment, like friendship or loyalty," she says.

According to one 30-year-old executive assistant, truth always takes a backseat when it comes to her nephew. The 7-year-old boy is, in her opinion, "spoiled, uninteresting, not creative and a little jerk." But when the assistant discusses the boy with her sister, who is his mother, he becomes, "really amazing" and "cute" and "smart."

When the boy wrote the assistant a "letter," which consisted of just his scrawled name, the assistant told her sister that the boy's scribble was "so advanced" for his age.

"It's like if I'm going to lie, I have to lie big," she sighs. "What do you say? 'His penmanship is that of a disturbed three-year-old?'"

DePaulo herself regrets the time she conducted a little experiment and went on a "truth-telling kick." When her mother offered her one of her rings, DePaulo told her the truth--which was that the ring just wasn't her style. She still feels bad about it. "Why did I get on this high horse of honesty at the expense of being kind to a well-meaning gesture?" she asks.

Part IV: When We Lie

Women are also more likely to express exaggerated appreciation. Office hallways rebound with women complimenting each other on their outfits, hairstyles and work; men tend to keep it to a simple, "Good job, man." Part of that, says Michal Ann Strahilevitz, a marketing professor at Golden Gate University who studies gender differences, is that women not only tend to talk more, but they are more socially oriented, and therefore more sensitive to others' feelings of insecurity.

Additionally, women are more likely to be self-deprecating and express falsely negative evaluations of themselves in order to either fish for a compliment or seem less threatening. Even if a woman thinks she kicked butt in a presentation, she's likely to say, "I didn't do so well."

A man, no surprise, is more likely to aggrandize his achievement. "Men and women are both more critical of a woman who comes across as over-confident than a man who does," says Strahilevitz. "So she might say, 'I wasn't so good,' even though she secretly thinks she was awesome."

Part V: Sexual Lies

While men will say pretty much anything they need to in order to get a woman's attention, says Fabrikant, women have long been the sex well-armed in the accouterments of physical deception. A brunette becomes blonde; a flat-chested woman gains a few cup sizes with her push-up bra; a wrinkly forehead is wiped Botox-smooth.

But Mark Frank, a professor of communication at the University of Buffalo, says that these "feminine wiles," rather than being deliberate, misleading lies, are small deceptions necessary for procreation and social survival. "A tiger has stripes that coat its back and blend it into the high grass," he says. "It doesn't wake up one day and say, 'Shall I put on spots?' It doesn't have a deliberate say in the process. In some environments lying is socially essential."

Ladies, don't throw out those push-up bras.

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