

Secrecy and Lies: Widely Condemned and Widely Used

Probably the most obvious, direct way in which ignorance is "socially constructed" is when people impose it on one another. As is often the case with ignorance, the idea of imposing it on other people tends to bring up negative images of detrimental acts with sinister motives. This is quite understandable. The world contains innumerable examples of unethical secrecy, lies, and other outrages by which powerful agents keep the less powerful "in the dark." Withholding information from others who have a right to know is high-handed at the very least, and lying to them is even worse.

My interest in this subject, however, begins with the observation that despite the fact that most of us dislike having information withheld from us and dislike being lied to even more, both secrecy and lying are very widespread practices. So there's a strong asymmetry here: We dislike it being done to us but we're quite willing to do it to others. Moreover, information withholders and liars usually believe they have sound moral justifications for their actions. I venture to say that nearly all of us have kept at least temporary secrets or lied for what we believed were good reasons (I certainly have). Given these observations, it shouldn't be too surprising to find social norms advocating withholding or concealing information and even lying.

Let's begin with a fairly uncontroversial and benign example of a social norm for temporarily withholding information in the service of a desirable event: Creating pleasant surprises. Receiving gifts, watching movies, and reading novels are activities that can be ruined if some miscreant gives away their hidden contents. A social norm has it that we don't reveal the contents of a gift-wrapped birthday present to its intended recipient, or the ending of a movie we've seen to a friend who hasn't. So here is an agreement between the knower and the ignoramus; most of us want our birthday presents to be surprises and we don't want to know how a movie ends before we've seen it.

Information-withholding norms often are purpose-built. A fascinating example can be found in experimental research on humans and other animals, in the method called "blinding." Research participants are "blinded" by not knowing which experimental condition they have been placed in (e.g., are they getting the new wonder drug or a placebo?) Experimenters are "blinded" when they don't know which experimental condition each participant is assigned to. The idea of blinding the experimenter goes back to [Claude Bernard](#), the great 19th century French physiologist and medical scientist. A "double-blind" experiment is one that fulfills both of these conditions.

Norms and rules for enforcing selective ignorance pervade ordinary social life. Many occupational roles not only require specialized knowledge but also specific ignorance--restrictions on access to information specified by one's role. A well-known case in point is the military concept of the "need to know," whereby even personnel with appropriate security clearances must require information for the performance of their official duties in order to be granted access to it.

Organizational norms enforcing restricted access to information can have a downside, even when such restrictions are central to the organization's purposes. The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks revealed difficulties due to the strongly compartmentalized information silos produced by the strict "need to know" culture of American intelligence agencies. The 9/11 Commission recommended a shift in the intelligence community from the "need to know" culture to a "responsibility to provide" approach, later implemented in the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Protection Act.

Confidentiality is another social norm for withholding information that is premised on a moral injunction. Being asked and agreeing to treat information confidentially brings a moral responsibility not to reveal it to others. At times, confidentiality can collide with other moral principles. A researcher or journalist interviewing heroin addicts about heroin usage will want to guarantee interviewees anonymity and confidentiality. After all, the interviewees are going to be admitting to illegal acts. But what if an interviewee reveals that they have murdered someone? Duty-of care principles would compel the interviewer to report the crime to the authorities. Ethical principles regarding confidentiality also can come into conflict with the law. Returning to our researcher or journalist, what if the researcher's data or the journalist's tapes are subpoenaed by a court of law? The human research ethics committee on which I've served at my university forbade researchers to promise research participants absolute confidentiality-- They could promise only "confidentiality as far as the law allows."

Moral injunctions regarding selective ignorance abound in childrearing. Responsible parents have to deal with the question of what children should and should not know, or at least when. This issue is perennial and mundane, but it can be an ethical and moral minefield nevertheless. When should children find out about reproduction? When should they know about illicit drugs? For a more agonizing case, consider children of a parent who has a heritable disease: When should they take a genetic marker test to determine whether they have inherited it, and when should they know the result? A [recent news story](#) about Ugandan draft policy recommending that HIV positive children be informed of their illness at age 10 has understandably generated heated debate.

Now let us venture onto thinner ice: Social norms that promote lying. There is a large philosophical literature on lying, perhaps the most well-known sourcebook being Bok's (1978) masterwork. Bok takes a rather severe position about lying and liars, concluding that lies seldom can be justified. Even a pragmatist who disregards ethical and moral arguments against lying still would have to admit that lying is risky—One's reputation can suffer irreparably damage. On balance, evidence points to a widespread belief that omitting to disclose information is not as bad (or at least, not as risky) as lying. For instance, Burgoon, Callister, and Hunsaker's (1994) investigation of equivocation or omission versus falsification in doctor-patient interactions found that about 85% of the participants admitted to omission but only 34% admitted to falsification. Likewise, Brown and Levinson's (1987) pioneering anthropological work on politeness suggests that people intending to be polite to one another will resort to what they consider to be ambiguity or vagueness more than outright distortion or deception.

Nevertheless, lying is common enough to suggest that many of us are willing to take the risks. As social psychologist W. P. Robinson (1996: 207) puts it, “The more competitive the situation and the more serious the consequences of winning or losing, the more likely it is that deception will be normative or required.” Examples in the social order where deception is normative or required abound: Competitive games, political and military conflict are the most obvious examples, with business not far behind. And so liars can be romantic heroes. Lioneled liars include spies, military commanders who outwit their foes, superheroes with secret identities, detectives who not only uncover deceit but deceive criminals, and even successful con artists.

However, competition is far from being the only justification for lying. Perhaps the most common norms encouraging deception are those guiding polite conversation, in particular, tact. Much tactfulness amounts to omission (avoiding saying impolite things), but it can readily extend to distortion as well. Tactful dissembling ranges from “softening” utterances that might offend their recipient to outright lies. To soften a phrase, we replace it with a less potent alternative (e.g., “not terribly good” instead of “really bad”). In one of my many failed attempts at phrase-softening, the colleague who had received my gentle critique remarked “I must remember from now on, Mike, that when you say something is ‘not quite true’ you actually mean it’s utter rubbish.”

Parents frequently have to deal with the question of whether to lie to their children. Should children be led to believe in Santa Claus, and if so, when and how should they find out he doesn’t exist? Even just permitting a child to believe in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy requires tacit complicity with falsehoods. But plenty of responsible, well-intentioned parents who love their children go further by actively sustaining these illusions. In fact, parental lying is widespread and it goes far beyond Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. In the third episode of the recent [Politically Incorrect Parenting Show](#), a TV series aired in Australia and New Zealand, Dr. Nigel Latta discusses parental lying with the aim of openly discussing its pros and cons. Interestingly, this practice has received hardly any attention from researchers studying childrearing practices. [Here's](#) a recent news story about University of Toronto studies investigating how and why parents lie to their children. The most common reasons parents gave were to influence children's behavior and emotional states.

And finally, information concealment and lying play roles in many kinds of humor. For instance, one version of “taking the Mickey” requires the jokester to lie initially and only eventually let the victim in on the joke. I’d just arrived in the department where I now work when I was approached by one of my new colleagues. Our conversation started off like this:

Colleague: I understand your name is 'Michael.'

Me: Yes, it is.

C: Well, my name also is 'Michael.' Both of us can't be called 'Michael,' it will cause confusion.

Me: What, really?

C: Yes... I was here first. You'll simply have to be called something else.

Me: I often go by 'Mike,' would that do?

C: Yes, perhaps. But you'll have to insist on being called that, you know... I didn't realize my leg was being pulled until a couple of remarks further along. My colleague's dry wit and deadpan delivery had me completely fooled. We became good friends, although I did tell him that he was such an effective liar that I'd have to keep an eye on him.