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# Trusted to Deceive: A Case Study of 'Strategic Deception' and the Normalization of Lying at Work

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## Abstract

Lying is an endemic feature of social life but has remained under-researched in organization studies. This paper examines the case of VoiceTel, a market leader in the high-quality virtual reception business that practised 'strategic deception' (Patwardhan et al., 2009). Receptionists concealed that they were not physically located in their clients' premises and lying was an intrinsic and enduring feature of their work. We adapt and extend Ashforth and Anand's (2003) 'normalization of corruption' framework to develop a new model of the 'normalization of lying'. We examine how lying becomes institutionalized, rationalized and socialized into the structure and culture of an organization such that it becomes embedded, maintained and strengthened over time as a legitimate and integral part of the job. Our model of normalization integrates organizational and group levels to examine the significance and interaction of 'bottom-up' as well as 'top-down' processes. Employees gained recognition from their proficiency in deception and drew considerable satisfaction, self-esteem and status as employees who are 'trusted to deceive'.

## Keywords

call centre work, deception, lying, normalization, sociology of work, strategic deception

'We lie all the time, but if everyone knows we are lying, is a lie really a lie?' (Jackall, 2010, p. 127)

## Introduction

Despite the ubiquity of lies in everyday life, Barnes (1994, p. 4) asserts that 'most social scientists and philosophers have given lying comparatively little attention'. Within organization analysis specifically, deception is rarely afforded centre stage (Shulman, 2007, p. 10). Indeed, lying is so

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commonplace in corporations that it often passes without comment. For example, Jackall's (1988/2010) study of moral life in organizations makes no explicit mention of workplace deception. For Shulman (2007, p. 13), this omission is typical as deception is often implied but rarely examined overtly in organizational analysis. When lying at work has been researched, most studies have had a specific focus on the episodic nature of lies within distinct occupations and the underlying motivations for lying among these particular employees. Studies include how doctors sometimes lie to protect patients (Jackson, 1991), police officers lying to suspects (Alpert & Noble, 2009), and flight attendants lying to calm passengers (Scott, 2003). By contrast, this paper deals with a case where lying is routine and widespread throughout the organization; indeed, it is integral to the strategy of the organization and the workplace experience of all employees.

As a market leader in virtual reception services, VoiceTel's strategy was founded on providing a high-quality, discreet professional service for its customers. The organization exemplifies what has been labelled 'strategic deception' (Patwardhan et al., 2009); a central feature of the business was that receptionists concealed that this was a sub-contracted operation. Hence deception was a cornerstone of the business from its establishment and key to its ongoing success. VoiceTel's requirement for deception to be intrinsic to the job role is therefore unlike the intermittent and episodic forms of lying evident in many jobs. Few studies have examined how deception becomes normalized within an organization such that it is embedded into the everyday nature and conduct of work. To explain how processes of normalization influenced deception, we adapt and extend Ashforth and Anand's (2003) 'normalization of corruption' framework and draw on Palmer's (2012) insights into organizational wrongdoing to assess the maintenance and strengthening of deception through the interactions of 'top-down' senior management actions and 'bottom-up' group-level processes. Ashforth and Anand's model was initially developed to examine a process of organizational change such that corrupt behaviour moves from being unacceptable to normal. We should be clear in stating that deception in this case is not analogous to corruption; the organization is doing nothing illegal. We produce a model of the *normalization of lying* in order to examine how strategic deception at the organizational level becomes accepted and endorsed by employees such that the group engages in lying as an intrinsic feature of work. At the time of the research the organization was expanding rapidly and employees played a pivotal role in maintaining and reinforcing deception as the organization grew, they took 'ownership' for the deception such that group-level processes contributed to the maintenance, reproduction and strengthening of lying at the organizational level. We deduce from the receptionists' descriptions of their experiences that their initial discomfort and reservations about lying were overcome over time through the processes of institutionalization, rationalization and socialization. The normalization of lying was sustained by both symbolic and material rewards.

The paper offers three key contributions to our understanding of deception. First, this study examines an under-researched phenomenon in organization studies: the practice of strategic deception wherein lying was accepted by employees as an intrinsic work feature that was central to the commercial success of the organization from its establishment. Second, we develop a model of the normalization of deception by extending Ashforth and Anand's (2003) framework to explain how lying becomes embedded, maintained and strengthened over time. We demonstrate that strategic deception requires a closer alignment and integration of the processes of institutionalization, rationalization and socialization than is evident in studies of corruption. Our extension of the Ashforth and Anand model of corruption examines both the organizational and group-level processes involved, embracing both 'top-down' processes driven by or endorsed by senior members of the organization and the processes created and sustained by individuals and small groups which act to normalize deception from the 'bottom-up'. Under strategic deception, a circle of mutually reinforcing behaviour is required to normalize lying. Our study combines both organizational and

group features to explicate how the ongoing normalization of deception was maintained and reinforced through multi-level social interactions between management, employees and customers. Finally, we extend understanding of the experiences of organizational members engaged in lying and demonstrate the range of rewards derived from collective and individual deception. The requirement for deception created opportunities for shared experiences as a group, a degree of discretion and autonomy over individual work roles, and allowed employees to act creatively and inventively to take joy from lying for a living.

## Lies at Work

Moral philosophers (Barnes, 1994; Bok, 1980) assert that lying involves the intention to mislead and that this is undertaken consciously: ‘when we undertake to deceive others intentionally, we communicate messages meant to mislead them, meant to make them believe what we ourselves do not believe’ (Bok, 1980, p. 13). However, as Goffman (1957, p. 67) reminds us, ‘society, is in fact built upon the need for constructive lying, as when good manners and tact require us to compliment someone even though we do not feel what we say – to hold “face” to sustain the social order’. Hence, deception is a central feature of both private and public life yet the subject has received scant attention within organization studies. Where lying has been afforded scrutiny it has tended to be from the perspective of psychology and business ethics. Psychologists (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendall, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Groer, 2005) have done much to examine the behavioural models of lying. Yet, as Trevino, Weaver and Reynolds’ (2006, p. 952) review of the literature of behavioural ethics acknowledges, much of this work is inspired by ‘moral psychology rather than the organizational sciences’. For organizational researchers, a significant limitation of the behavioural ethics model is that the social context is often underplayed and organizational actors are presented as atomized individuals (Palmer, 2012; Trevino et al., 2006). Indeed, Palmer (2012, p. 124) goes as far as to suggest that ‘the ethical decision literature might be more relevant to decision making in the laboratory than to decision making in work organizations’.

Our study adopts a sociological examination of workplace deception which, as Shulman (2007) outlines, is not so much concerned with individual employee motives for lying *but the way lying becomes woven into the fabric of specific workplace and occupational cultures*, i.e. the organizational context and social relationships of lying. In this case of ‘strategic deception’ (Patwardhan et al., 2009), we examine how lying became normalized as part of the routine and intrinsic job features of an organization. ‘Strategic deception’ is defined as ‘the practice of lying to and deceiving customers by subtly or actively allowing them to form false impressions in order to build long-term relationships by having employees portray themselves to be something they are not’ (Patwardhan et al., 2009, p. 320). In this case, lying became embedded in the structure and culture of the organization. To analyse this we draw on Ashforth and Anand’s (2003, p. 3) framework of normalization which was developed to assess corruption in organizations and focuses on what they describe as three ‘pillars’: (1) *institutionalization*, the process by which corrupt practices are enacted as a matter of routine, often without conscious thought about their propriety; (2) *rationalization*, the process by which individuals who engage in corrupt acts use socially constructed accounts to legitimate the acts in their own eyes; and (3) *socialization*, the process by which newcomers are taught to perform and accept the corrupt practices.

Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 15) state that ‘institutionalization is about embedding practices in organizational structures and processes’. As institutionalization sets in, individuals perform the corrupt actions without giving significant thought to the reasons for those actions; indeed, the actions may come to seem like the right and only course to take. As Fleming and Zyglidopoulos’ (2008, p. 844) assessment of Enron, WorldCom and Arthur Andersen demonstrates, ‘once lying is

institutionalized within the structures and unofficial norms of the organization, it directly and indirectly affects much of the day-to-day procedure'. At VoiceTel, institutionalization centred on the management's development of a familial workplace culture which fostered the values of reciprocity and trust. The nature of trust/control relations ensured that employees were provided with considerable space to enact deception and thereby trusted to deceive. Of particular relevance are the situational and relational features implicated in the 'norm of reciprocity' (Gouldner, 1973) which 'obligates people to treat others in ways commensurate with the ways that others have treated them in the past, regardless of whether people expect to obtain favourable treatment in the future as a result' (Palmer 2012, p. 155). Reciprocity, argues Gouldner, is a trust building mechanism that can provide stability for social systems as power relations become institutionalized. Reciprocity also obscures exploitative relations based on power asymmetries, thus there emerges a complicated balancing (or otherwise) of trust and control. As Granovetter (1985, pp. 499–502) notes, relational ties that generate trust and control also provide members with opportunities for deceit and misconduct. Further, as Möllering (2009, p. 152) comments, trust relationships can help explain why deception occurs; trust and deception have an ambivalent relationship such that 'trust and deception both enable and prevent one another'. Reciprocity was integral to the familial organizational culture and the case shares similarities with earlier studies of strong organizational cultures (for example, Kunda, 1992). Alongside institutionalization, the influence of rationalizing ideologies which legitimate corrupt practices is also important. Ashforth, Anand and Joshi's (2004) examination of the techniques of neutralization (based on Sykes & Matza, 1957) focuses on ideologies which develop within social groups. The primary ideological support to rationalize deception at VoiceTel was based on the appeal to high-quality customer service; the denial of harm to others was also relevant. As Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 17) assert, these ideologies rationalize acts so that members of a culture are able to 'explain' questionable behaviours and reconcile them with societal norms.

Finally, the socialization process is critical in normalizing wrongdoing. Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 25) refer to Van Maanen (1976) in stating that 'the process of socialization involves imparting to newcomers the values, beliefs, norms and skills, and so forth that they will need to fulfil their roles and functions effectively within the group context'. In the case of corruption, groups often create a 'social cocoon' (Greil & Rudy, 1984) whereby newcomers are encouraged to affiliate and bond with veterans and to eventually accept corrupt behaviour. The socialization process is also crucial in explaining how employees learn to lie. Taking an organizational focus, rather than centring on the individual traits of employees, allows a more detailed examination of contextualized social relations within which lying occurs. For example, Scott's (2003, p. 322) research into flight attendants demonstrates the influence of organizational cultures on how workers are socialized into lying by the behaviour of co-workers; when employees are required to lie they do so because they are 'selected, trained, or encouraged by organizational characteristics'. Additionally, Schein's (2004, p. 270) evaluation of moral behaviour asserts that, across a range of occupational subcultures, 'truth' is not an absolute but is defined by 'cultural and sub-cultural norms', so that organizational actors learn the norms of what is moral and immoral in the context of their specific occupational community (Schein 2004, p. 262). Further, the informal socialization contributed to receptionists gaining a great deal of satisfaction from lying for a living. The VoiceTel case allows an examination of the significance of organizational context to these processes. We utilize Palmer's (2012) integrated assessment of wrongdoing to examine the situational, contextual and relational features of lying at work. For instance, Granovetter (1985) demonstrates how organizational wrongdoing is embedded within social relations in specific contexts while Vaughan's (1999, p. 283) examination of the 'dark side' of organizations illustrates how 'the environment of organizations, organization characteristics (structure, processes and

tasks) and the cognitive practices of individuals are integrated to explain organizational non-conformity within organizational settings'.

To account for 'bottom-up' group-level features, our assessment pays particular attention to the influence of employee agency in the maintenance, reproduction and strengthening of the normalization of lying. Palmer (2012, p. 174), who praises the work of Ashforth and Anand (2003) for integrating a cultural perspective with an understanding of administrative systems and situational social influences, reaffirms the importance of taking agency seriously by viewing organizational actors as capable of making rational decisions to engage in deception. Our research focuses on the experiences and attitudes of those who routinely engaged in lying, enjoyed the experience of deception and accrued organizational rewards for learning to lie professionally. This departs from the studies of large-scale corporate deception which tend to concentrate on the serious and negative consequences. There are a number of normative assumptions made regarding the corrosive impact of lies leading to corporate failure (Fleming & Zyglidopoulos, 2008), individual anxiety and stress (Grover, 1993) and even eventual societal collapse (Bok, 1980). In this study, we do not take a normative position but rather we note Goffman's perspicacious comments on the complexity and elusiveness of social truth.

## The Study

This research is based on a single, exploratory case study of VoiceTel (a pseudonym), a multi-client call-centre which provides personalized, high-quality outsourced message and reception services to a range of businesses across the UK. Although the nature of work is characteristic of a call centre – it involves integrated telephone and computer technology which enters and retrieves information to manage service interactions (Taylor & Bain, 1999) – the experience of work has many distinct features which are not associated with conventional high-volume call centres. Rather, the work organization is reflective of Frenkel's (2005, p. 358) model of 'mass customized services' which prioritizes quality and value added services and uses high commitment management practices to meet this end. Partly due to its unique technological innovation on which the work process is based, the organization has been extremely successful. Since its inception in 2000, VoiceTel had grown rapidly from just four employees to 97 at the time of the research in 2007. This growth has continued subsequently and the company has won many business awards for its 'high performance' and enjoys a leading market position within the outsourced reception services sector.

We conducted the research over a nine-month period, making several visits to the workplace (not including the initial access meeting and our presentation of the final findings to the owners). Semi-structured interviews were the primary method for data collection. Interviews were conducted with 66 respondents (75 percent of the workforce): 3 senior managers, 48 receptionists and 15 support staff. All of the receptionists are female, two senior managers are male and one female and all the support staff are female apart from two male IT managers. The average length of interview with receptionists was 49 minutes and they were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interview schedule reflected a variety of themes including the nature of work, skill and controls, the experience of work including emotional management, the experience of working in teams and identifications to the organization. In addition, periods of observation were used as a preliminary phase of data collection; one of the research team 'shadowed' a receptionist for a day to gain an insight into the work process and the team spent some time observing how receptionists handled calls before the interviews commenced. This enabled us to design an interview schedule that reflected the experience of work. Finally, focused observation of the recruitment assessment day was undertaken. This involved spending time observing how the owners

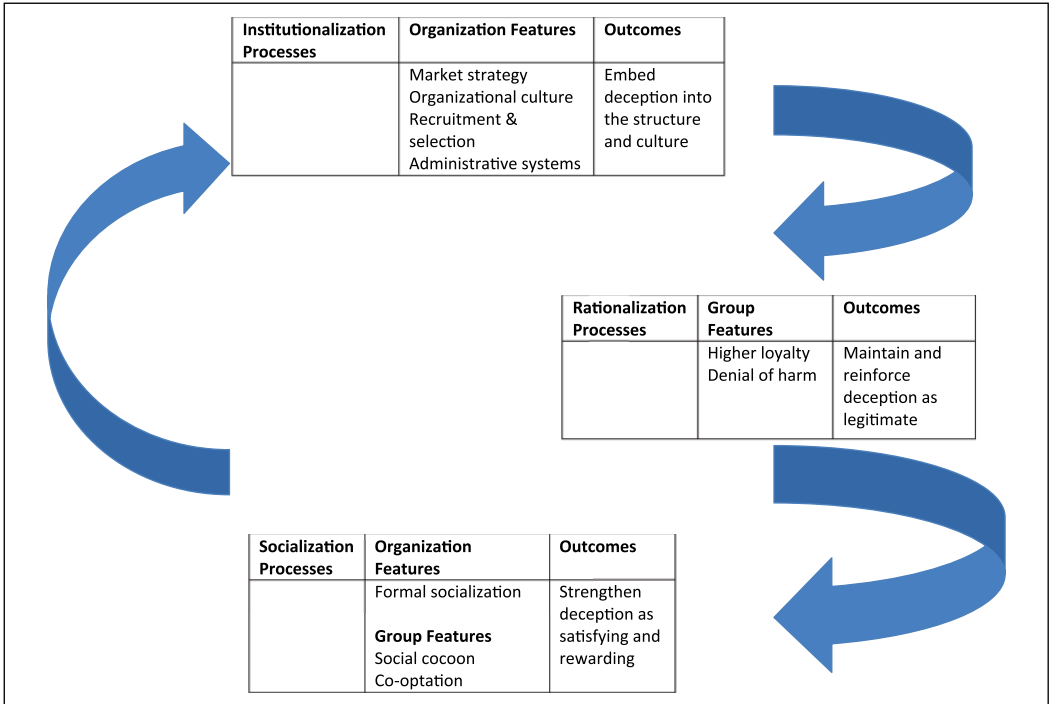
introduced the company, the setting of recruitment tasks and attending the selection meeting that decided the hiring of successful candidates.

The study aimed to analyse the nature, content and experience of work in a high-quality customer service call centre; an under-researched sub-section of the call centre sector. The case company was not selected to examine deception at work as this aspect of the organization was not known prior to the fieldwork. As the research team had not anticipated that workplace deception would be a research theme, the interview schedules did not initially reflect this issue. However, as the interviews progressed it became apparent that this was a significant feature of work and it was incorporated into our interview schedules. Consequently, the examination of workplace deception proceeded inductively from preliminary findings. In seeking to analyse strategic deception within an organization, our approach has some limitations because we did not originally intend to assess the normalization of deception. However, we have captured something of the experiences of normalization from our interviews. Interviewees reflected on how they first incorporated lying into their work routines, learnt how to lie, became increasingly proficient and eventually gained considerable enjoyment from lying for a living. Additionally, employees discussed openly their rationalizations for lying as an intrinsic job feature. Out of interviews with 48 receptionists, 30 (62 percent of the sample) discussed lying as part of their work role.

As the topic developed inductively, the data analysis proceeded through a number of iterations. The approach is influenced by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method which has a series of phases. Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 66) note how coding involves 'interacting with the data (analysis) using techniques such as asking questions about the data, making comparisons between the data, and in doing so deriving concepts to stand for that data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions'. The first phase of the analysis involved comparing the different accounts of workplace deception. Then there was an attempt to find the appropriate cases and to assess the different accounts which involved learning to lie. The key issues included learning to lie, the different legitimations for lying and the consequence of deception including satisfaction and rewards. Finally, these categories were developed into more general analytical frameworks such as socialization, institutionalization and rationalizations for lying. Given the context-specific nature of this case study the findings are not intended to be empirically generalized to the broader population of middle-range call centres. Instead we present the findings to make an analytical contribution to our understanding of workplace deception in organization studies.

## **The Normalization of Deception**

We adapt and extend Ashforth and Anand's (2003) framework to produce a multi-level model of the ways in which an organization which practised strategic deception normalized lying as an intrinsic work feature. To summarize this we have set out the processes in the figure below (Figure 1). The owners and senior managers, at the organizational level, established the business based on strategic deception, promoted a culture that emphasized reciprocity and formulated a number of administrative systems and HR practices to embed deception. At the group level, employees played a significant role in embedding, maintaining and strengthening deception through their interactions with clients, constructing rationalization and neutralization techniques to legitimize lies and by informally socializing recruits to experience deception as satisfying and enjoyable. Importantly, as the organization grew and became increasingly successful, employees gained both material and symbolic rewards from their abilities to lie effectively. Gradually, institutionalization developed as employees enacted deception as this seemed like the right and only course of action to take (Ashforth & Anand 2003, p. 15). The dynamic interaction of organizational and group-level influences reinforced a positive cycle of deception through the organization.



**Figure 1.** The normalization of deception framework.

The framework should not be read as if these three processes are distinct and separate. For example, aspects of the process of institutionalization also link to processes of socialization, while administrative systems promote rationalization. As Ashforth and Anand (2003) acknowledge in their model of corruption, there is a degree of porosity across their pillars of institutionalization, rationalization and socialization.

### Institutionalization

Institutionalization is about embedding practices in organizational structures and processes such that they can survive the turnover of generations of employees (Ashforth & Anand, 2003, p. 15). We combine Ashforth and Anand’s (2003) depiction of institutionalization with Palmer’s (2012) assessment of organizational wrongdoing to set out how the market strategy, organizational culture, recruitment and selection processes and administrative systems embed deception within the organization (see Figure 1).

### Market strategy

VoiceTel had grown rapidly from a small business with just four staff in 2000 to approximately 100 staff by the time fieldwork was completed seven years later. The owners of the organization were a brother and sister, Laura and Tim, and they had formulated the innovative technological system on which the business was based, re-routing calls without the caller knowing that they were being re-directed to VoiceTel’s offices. Indeed, to protect the innovation, the owners bought the intellectual property rights for the technology and have continued to develop and innovate the system.

Crucially, the technical systems facilitated the organization's market leader position: its reputation for assuring a professional service to clients so that their customers would be deceived into thinking that the receptionists were physically located in their offices. As such, VoiceTel's reputation as a high-quality and discreet provider of virtual reception services was central to its ongoing commercial success and hence 'strategic deception' was the cornerstone of the business. Interviews with Tess, the HR manager, indicated that not divulging that they were a remote sub-contracted service to their customers' clients was essential:

And one thing we can't give away is that we're an answering service.

Interviewer: Is that something which is a secret then?

Yes, it is yeah...That's exactly what VoiceTel's all about. I mean...most of our clients, don't tell their clients...that they use an answer service. There's no need to...you know, we answer the calls as well as any other receptionist would. We've got more technology than any other reception area would have and yeah they've no need to know really.

Consequently, VoiceTel staff concealed the fact that they were working as remote virtual receptionists. The organization was able to secure this promise by imparting to its employees that they were providing high-quality customer service. This was underpinned by the organizational culture, the key features of which are set out below.

### *Organizational culture*

In Ashforth and Anand's (2003) framework, culture is examined in terms of the emergence of deviant sub-cultures which normalize and rationalize corrupt practices. By contrast, VoiceTel exemplifies many characteristics of a 'strong' organizational culture (Kunda, 1992). The owners set out to manage the culture by promoting values which helped to embed the requirement to lie for a living as both an intrinsic and positive feature of work in order to uphold 'strategic deception'. Consequently, the requirement to deceive was presented by the owners as being synonymous with the provision of high-quality, professional customer service.

So actually when we set up the business all we knew was how to be a client...we just had very, very strong ideas about customer service...it was just something that we inherently shared and also, you know, there was an inherent belief that it would be the quality of our people that would deliver the service and that therefore the company had to be somewhere that people would want to work and progress in and the work had to be enjoyable. (Laura)

In VoiceTel, the founders crafted a familial organizational culture and developed a number of positive employment practices which valued and acknowledged the contribution of their employees both symbolically and materially. The owners took time getting to know all recruits, taking them to lunch and becoming acquainted with personal features of their staff and their families. They operated an open-door management policy and were present and engaged in the workplace. This created a sense that VoiceTel was a different type of workplace to a usual telephone call centre; it was friendly, informal, personal and relaxed. The value system transmitted that employees were cared for and trusted to deceive. In return, employees were expected 'go the extra mile' in their interactions with clients and their clients' customers. As Laura noted,

That's the culture and as much it's our job as leaders of this company to make sure that our people act and think and walk and talk as if they're part of that company [the client]. Therefore, they [receptionists] are



the first impression of the company; they by nature have to be cheery, bubbly, professional and very accommodating of our clients' customer's requests. So in order to achieve that we have to create that environment...A very high team spirit...Everybody knows that if we're forecasting six inches of snow tomorrow, we want people to actually come in rucksacks and walking boots to get here. And we had someone last year when it snowed like hell, she walked three miles to get here...and you just don't get that in another company...It's that kind of culture that we have or we have to maintain and manage.

VoiceTel represented a very different place to work compared to employees' previous employment experiences and there was strong evidence of how they identified with the organizational value system. As Andrea noted,

It is just little things, to show that they do care, and I think that they do care as people, I mean e-mails come around saying 'We think that you are fantastic, you are doing a fantastic job'...[In] a lot of companies you are just a number or a name, you are not a person, but I feel here that you are a person, you are an individual and you are appreciated for what you do and I think that that carries a lot of clout.

As Joy expresses it, lying is part of what creates the reciprocal relations between employees and the owners; receptionists deceive and the organization values them for doing so:

I think I get paid very well for what I do...sitting on the phone and lying [she laughs]. No, I think we are well paid, they look after us very well.

Nathalie spoke for many of the receptionists when she described her feelings:

Because it is not just a company, you feel a part of a family...because they [the owners] are always very approachable... People generally are proud to work here, cos it is genuinely a good company to work for.

Reciprocity was central to the familial culture; employees were treated well and respected, but they were expected to reciprocate in their relations with their customers and employers. As Laura commented,

To have good people doing this job, the job had to have responsibility and accountability cos otherwise people would see it as a really tedious job if you didn't have that relationship with your clients. I mean if we're trusting people to look after our clients' calls, we should be able to trust them.

Reciprocity imbues employees with rights but also obligations; employees were valued and trusted, and in return they were expected to adhere to the values of discretion, trust and professionalism and work responsibly to deliver a high-quality service. As Gouldner (1973) identified, reciprocity embodies a delicate balancing of trust and control. Employees were aware that organizational practices conveyed that they were trusted but that this also entailed an obligation, as Harriet notes:

I think obviously they [the owners] have realized that they had a winning combination...It is just a nice place to work, because it is relaxed. Yes, it is still professional...it is quite hard to explain, but because it is relaxed you tend to get more from your workers, because they enjoy coming to work, they want to come to work and they are prepared to go that extra mile for you because they know that they are going to get something out of it.

Roberta explained how the 'norm of reciprocity' instilled employees with a sense of loyalty to the organization:

How many companies can you go to your boss and ask for a loan interest free and pay it back over two years? It just doesn't happen. And all the little things like 'We are taking you out for the night to the races, paying for your meals, paying for your drinks', for all of us that would cost an absolute fortune, but they still do...and I came home one day with a £50 note, they had hidden them under all of our chairs...It does make it worthwhile, it also makes you think that is why so many people don't phone in sick so often, cos you think they give me all these benefits I don't want to let them down.

The organizational culture which extolled the virtues of high-quality customer care was extremely important in supporting the normalization of lying. As Grey and Garsten (2001, p. 242) argue, customer rhetoric is not merely a con trick or an example of false consciousness but a language that can 'provide a notion of moral community'. The importance of being an effective deceiver was wrapped in the discourse of quality customer service – the hallmark of the organization. Hence, from the early stages of its establishment, the organization successfully married the need to deceive with the promotion of a high-quality discreet customer service. Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe's (2008) notion of an 'ethical infrastructure' is significant here as the employers were able to promote deception as ethically legitimate in order to provide high-quality service. Further, it is evident that such notions also chimed with employees' own values:

I think the client relationship is key purely because you have got to have a really good relationship with them to be able to give them the service that they have come to VoiceTel for...It is important that you have that relationship with your clients because they trust you in taking their calls and handling them professionally and giving their company a good image, giving it a good reputation. (Lowrie)

The norm of reciprocity imbued employees with positive identifications to the organizational value system, their employers and customers as well as a sense of obligation to providing a professional service. Deception was therefore conceived as crucial to perpetuating a high-quality service.

The next aspect of institutionalization focuses on how deception became embedded into the workplace through recruitment and selection practices; this was particularly significant given the rapid growth that the organization experienced.

### *Recruitment and selection*

As studies of culture management (Kunda, 1992) indicate, to sustain strong cultures, organizations develop normative forms of control to manage the feelings and values of employees. The primary criterion for selection was on the basis of value congruence; whether candidates demonstrated a strong sense of customer service and would 'go the extra mile' to provide a high-quality service. Laura reported:

What mistakes I made when I recruited people for their skills and not their attitude...if somebody walks in and they've got the right attitude, I will take them on, even if they've never seen a computer in their lives or can't type.

As VoiceTel was expanding rapidly, it was important to ensure that new recruits would accept lying as an intrinsic job feature. This was achieved through a number of mechanisms. First, the organization had not advertised for two years and instead relied on gaining recruits from the informal social ties with the family and friends of existing employees:

If you recommend someone you get a £250 bonus. So that is quite a big incentive for people. But also they are not recommending people that they wouldn't want to work with...so it's got its own sort of quality control. (Laura)

As Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 25) stress, newcomers are often pre-socialized into corruption through recruitment practices based on social networks. To some extent, VoiceTel engaged in a degree of pre-socialization, as new recruits may have been aware of the requirement to lie as part of the work role. We did not investigate the extent to which newcomers knew of this feature of work but it was evident from the interviews that the majority of employees found lying a strange and demanding activity in the early stages of their employment. This would suggest that even if they were aware of this requirement, organizational work was needed to ensure employees accepted this as a legitimate activity.

Second, the recruitment day involved candidates 'shadowing' receptionists while they interacted with customers. Through this observation period, new recruits would have been aware of the importance of concealing their location and the centrality of the offer of a discreet service to the market strategy of VoiceTel. For example, in response to a question about the requirement to lie as part of the job, Melissa commented:

Yeah, but it is bred into you from the beginning... I think it is what makes VoiceTel what it is, because there are lots of messenger centres.

The decision to hire candidates was informed by the views of receptionists who had been shadowed; they offered their views about whether candidates would 'fit in' to the culture, as Elsie notes:

Sometimes you see people on the assessment day and they are walking around and we judge them on their smile and things like that...cos you can tell instantly I think if people are going to fit.

As Ashforth (2001, pp. 209–215) states, 'Newcomers may partially define themselves in terms of a role because they are attracted to what the role is thought to represent – its goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles.' At VoiceTel, it was evident that working for the organization bestowed social status to employees; the organization had a good reputation within the local community for its excellent working conditions, and those who were selected to work at VoiceTel considered themselves fortunate. Hence, there was a degree of reflected glory expressed by employees who spoke highly of the organization and their satisfaction in working for VoiceTel which helped make the company an attractive prospective employer.

The recruitment and selection processes were thus important parts of embedding lying into the culture of VoiceTel. These worked alongside the administrative systems in the organization.

### *Administrative systems*

Palmer (2012, p. 144) asserts that explanations of wrongdoing that are founded on the administrative systems of organizations conceive of employees as embedded in their situational contexts. An important facet of this explanation is the types of controls which organizations utilize to facilitate wrongdoing – either explicitly through obtrusive or implicitly through non-obtrusive controls. VoiceTel exercised non-obtrusive normative forms of control which sought to direct employees' feelings and values to identify positively with and commit to the organization (Kunda, 1992). Consequently, when employees identified with the organizational values they could be trusted to exercise a high degree of autonomy to enact deception. For example, the owners made the conscious decision not to engage in individual monitoring or use performance measures relating to call handling times despite having surveillance-capable technology. The degree of freedom and discretion which receptionists were afforded over their work reflected many of the features of Friedman's (1977) 'responsible autonomy' rather than the more typical

forms of direct controls evident in the labour processes of high-volume call centres. Trust was conveyed through a number of working practices. Receptionists enjoyed free tea and coffee, took breaks when they wanted, read books, magazines or browsed the internet during quiet periods and wore the clothes they chose.

Significantly, the requirement to deceive was not enforced or prescribed by the owners; hence they were not 'tainted' by enforcing lying as a work feature. Instead, lying became routinized through the actions of employees who had considerable freedom in negotiating the degree of deception required by their clients. Relations between employees and their clients developed organically as employees were afforded the space and discretion to negotiate the nature of the service with their clients. Receptionists undertake an introductory 'welcome call' with their new clients to 'get to know' them and to discuss the type of service required. These negotiations could involve the specific emotional performances clients desired. For example, some clients required receptionists to be 'bubbly', 'chatty' and have an enthusiastic telephone manner, whereas other clients such as solicitors and accountants required a more sober, reserved and mature manner. Some clients engaged in counselling and personal advice and desired receptionists to be caring and empathetic in their interactions (Jenkins, Delbridge, & Roberts, 2010). Additionally, other clients wanted receptionists to familiarize themselves with the products and services the business offered so that they could communicate knowledgeably with their customers.

As a consequence of the varied client base, employees had a high level of latitude in the extent to which they chose to use deception to uphold customer service. As Kirsty describes,

The clients that you tend to know the best, or say if you have met them or something, then you tend to feel more comfortable lying for them.

Interviewer: So what sort of stuff would you say?

Oh, well 'He has just popped away from his desk at the minute, he has gone to make a cup of tea', and things like that.

The willingness to deceive the customers of clients rested on the nature and depth of the social relations developed between individual receptionists and their clients. Administrative systems facilitated lying because the owners relied on normative controls to ensure that employees were trusted to use their discretion to develop appropriate norms of behaviour in conjunction with their clients. Normative forms of control shape values but also allow employees the space to develop their own schemas and scripts through their on-the-job experience (Palmer, 2012, p. 140).

Despite initial misgivings, the receptionists interviewed learnt to lie effectively and readily. The fact that employees did not have to lie face to face with customers was also a feature in their relative comfort. Lying became experienced as a normal job feature and one which employees took ownership of. As Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 12) note, 'routinizing blunts awareness that a moral issue is at stake. If a moral issue is not recognized, moral decision-making processes cannot be engaged.' The scope that management allowed for employee agency was therefore an important factor in explaining how lies became embedded in work routines. This account demonstrates how the owners shaped the organizational context and this was supported by the way work was organized and controlled through normative features which trusted employees to deceive. Employees reciprocated by positively engaging in deception over time.

This assessment of institutionalization outlines the contextualized, situated and relational features which embedded lying into the structure and culture of the organization. Of relevance are

both the external and internal contextual features which contributed to the institutionalization of lying. Market success reinforced why the organization promoted deception as part of its business strategy; the culture emphasized the positive values of high-quality professional customer care; the owners were visible and deliberate in their approach to leadership, promoting key organizational values which were reinforced by the processes of recruitment and selection; employees were trusted and cared for; and the administrative systems provided the space for employees to negotiate the degree of deception in their interactions with customers. Employees developed their own schema and scripts, and reinforced lying to protect their clients and provide a professional service as the social relations with them developed. As receptionists positively identified with the organizational values, as well as with the owners and their clients (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2014), lying became perceived as normal, habituated into practice and, as we shall see, not just conceived as morally acceptable but positively enjoyed.

## **Rationalizing Deception**

This section sets out how the rationalization techniques used by employees served to maintain deception as a legitimate feature of work and hence how group-level processes led by employees ensured that lying became and remained an enduring and intrinsic aspect of work. As Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 24) note, 'rationalizations are particularly potent when they become the property of the group: as individuals socially construct rationalizations'. In examining this in more detail, as Figure 1 denotes, we examine two particularly relevant 'techniques of neutralization' (Ashforth et al., 2004): appeal to higher loyalties and denial of harm.

### *Higher loyalty*

The most significant technique of neutralization was the appeal to 'higher loyalty'; this refers to the commitment to the company and to providing customers with a discreet and high-quality professional service over the expectation of being truthful to callers. As employees were recruited on their propensity for customer service, the ability to lie well was interpreted by receptionists as protecting their clients and ensuring professional service delivery. As Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 21) note, 'the group construes that universalistic ethical norms have to be sacrificed for more important causes'. Here the 'more important causes' were the business success of their employer and the reputation of their clients. VoiceTel receptionists had to engage in deception in order to maintain the client's image and give an authentic impression that they were physically located in the same office, as this comment from Delia illustrates:

I think that it is the high standards that they have set [employers]. You want to make sure that you get all the information correct for the client, for all the callers that are coming in for them, and you have got to sort of pretend that you are in their office, that's what they like, they like us to pretend, so if someone says 'Oh, I am down the road from you, where are you?' You have got to say, 'Oh, I am new to the area', that is my famous line, but to give the initial caller the actual feeling that you are a part of the office and you are giving a good customer service to them.

Receptionists also engaged in more significant acts of deception to protect their clients and the material interests of their organization. Some acknowledged that they deliberately misled callers in how they presented their clients, as April explained:

We have clients that want us to put across that they're a large company.

Interviewer: And they're not?

For example I've got a one-man-band who has got a fantastic website and he would like his callers to think he's a bigger company, so we give the impression that he has a sales team and all their lines are busy at the moment.

Vanessa also revealed that she had done this for specific clients:

We are lying, we are lying [laughs]. I think I've got three or four clients that want us to put across that they're a bigger company and that is a reason for some of them to want to use an answering service cos they want to come across as though they've got this reception desk and that they quite like the office sound in the background cos it sounds as though their company's bigger.

In these cases, receptionists' decisions to deceive callers rested on the close working relationships and commitments developed between them and their client. The stronger the relationship and the more the receptionist identified with the client, the more likely they were to engage in serious acts of deception and to rationalize this as appropriate in the context of that relationship. Indeed, individual receptionists' willingness to act in line with their loyalty to their clients sometimes took them beyond the expectations of their employer, which shows the strength of the higher loyalty that was felt by some. Examples included accepting payments for clients and paying these into the bank during their own time, not a service offered by VoiceTel.

The higher loyalty to the interests of VoiceTel and their clients over those of the callers, alongside the notion of customer care as a rationalizing ideology of deception, combined to neutralize the negative connotations of lying. The complex three-way group features of the relationships between clients, the owners and employees are particularly relevant. The social relations that developed between receptionists and their clients mediated the organizational requirement to lie while simultaneously they protected the owners' personal integrity and authority. This loyalty was actively cultivated by the owners. As Kathleen indicates,

We work for VoiceTel, we do what VoiceTel wants us to do, but we also do what the clients want us to do, but we also do what fits with the team as well. So it's a natural fit, it's not anything that is forced, it is not anything that is uncomfortable, it is just really, really natural....I really do respect the way that they [the owners] treat us, and vice versa, we treat them with the same respect they treat us with. I don't feel as though they are my bosses, I feel as though I work alongside them...They don't view themselves as being any higher or better than anybody else...and it is genuine, and you know that when they say thank you, they genuinely mean it. Whereas where I came from before it was all false promises...I mean here, day in day out, it is constant praise and thanks and that goes a long way, a hell of a long way, and everybody who says that they can live without it are liars [laughs].

Ironically, Kathleen views her previous employers as deceitful while VoiceTel is seen as a trusting, trustworthy and morally superior employer.

For these female employees, the objective of providing a high-quality, caring service for their clients resonated with their personal values and provided a source of pride in their work. Further, in reinforcing the familial culture of the organization, notions of the 'family' and 'care' extended to how the receptionists related to their clients. Elsie spoke for many when describing the clients as her 'babies':

They [the clients] are your babies! And that's a maternal instinct, that's what you do think that it is....I mean we are very personal with the clients, we send them cards when they are getting married, or when they are ill and all that.

Ella was one of many receptionists, who reported cultivating friendships:

I am quite close to some of my clients, so I see them as friends shall we say, so I feel like I am letting them down if I don't give them a good service.

In sum, the commitment felt by receptionists to their employer and their clients provided a basis for rationalizing their deception of their clients' customers. These loyalties were developed as a consequence of the interplay at group level between receptionists, managers and the clients.

### *Denial of harm*

The acceptance of lying as an intrinsic job feature was reinforced by the notion that 'protecting' and gate-keeping for the 'boss' was an established role of receptionists. As such, employees did not perceive that any harm was done to customers. This is explained by Ruth:

I mean the majority of the time it is just like 'I'd like to speak to Mr Smith', 'He is not available at the moment, shall I ask him to get back to you, what was it regarding?' You wouldn't have to pretend that you are his receptionist, or act as if you are the receptionist, cos really you are the receptionist, even though you are not based in that office. You would just be doing the job as normal.

Receptionists upheld that their dishonesty was not done to harm customers but to deliver a better-quality service. Pat emphasized how she ensured the correct information was relayed to the customer as this provided a good service to the client:

Yes, you do have to lie, you do feel like you are a professional liar, not a receptionist, a professional liar. Because obviously you are having to bend the truth because you are saying you are not in the office, you are saying you are based in their office and you are not, and you are trying to give them as much information as possible and you want to make sure you have given them the correct information because that could turn into a complaint from that particular client.

More generally, receptionists identified their roles as analogous to regular receptionists and personal assistants who will engage in deception to protect or support their bosses under traditional working arrangements. In such circumstances, lying was perceived as an essential feature of delivering a better form of interaction rather than being detrimental to customers.

Lying became normalized partly because there were organizational expectations on employees to do so, but also because employees rationalized the requirements to lie as a legitimate and important feature of work. These rationalizations maintained deception through the situational social relations between receptionists and their employers and their clients and reinforced deception as a normalized and worthy activity. The evaluation demonstrates the power of a quality service discourse as a rationalizing ideology within service work. This is all the more interesting when we consider that these strong social bonds were experienced virtually; most receptionists never physically met their clients. Lying in this socially cohesive context contributed to receptionists' positive social identity of engaging in work which was performed professionally and conceived as a desirable and meaningful work activity.

### **Socialization**

The final feature of the model examines how socialization which combined both formal and informal processes contributed to strengthening deception as a normalized work feature. Significantly,

socialization into strategic deception involved the interaction of 'top-down' organization practices as well as 'bottom-up' group practices.

The formal organizational process of socialization involved an approximately six-week training period during which new recruits worked initially alongside an established receptionist; this involved listening in to calls, recording messages and navigating the technological system. Therefore the socialization process involves learning on the job by listening to receptionists taking calls and interacting with clients, as well as learning to take messages and complete diaries accurately and efficiently. Recruits are only placed in a team and given their own clients to handle when it is felt by the established workforce that they are ready to do so. Then recruits will observe three 'welcome calls' with new clients before they are given their own client and conduct their own welcome call. Their first welcome calls are observed by the team leader. This formal process of socialization into the organization promotes a more informal, group process through which recruits continue to learn their role as part of their team. The new receptionists' learning (and the socialization into the organization's values) progresses through listening to how their team mates and team leader interact with clients. As Iris notes,

I am still constantly learning after all. I mean I listen to Eva and others and they sound absolutely amazing and I am thinking 'oh!' But it is just the experience, it is just talking to clients and learning the way that their telephones work.

Part of the socialization process involved new recruits learning how to lie, particularly techniques to enable them to conceal that they were not physically located in their clients' premises. This was often facilitated by the team leader communicating tips on to how to lie proficiently:

Eleanor [team leader], she is very good at telling you what to say, and she is very entertaining on our team, so I learn from her. (Jessica)

As socialization into the organization continues, it is increasingly centred on how the work group creates a 'social cocoon' (Greil & Rudy, 1984) in which the normalization of deception was promoted and sustained and within which receptionists were co-opted into group norms. To ensure strategic deception is enacted, the organization has to select the appropriate recruits but, once recruited, it is the group which ensures that lying is conceived as a legitimate part of the work role, as well as a joyful experience. We consider these group processes of socialization in more detail below.

### *Social cocoon*

As Ashforth and Anand (2003) explain, a group creates a social cocoon when existing employees engage in specific practices (in their case, corruption) and new recruits identify with these practices to affiliate with the existing employees and receive strong reinforcement for displaying the espoused behaviour. This is consistent with the situation in VoiceTel where, as discussed above, word-of-mouth recruitment helped promote value congruence between employee and employer. Identification with a role in the organization and a sense of belonging to a particular group are important features in strengthening deception as an intrinsic work feature but also in terms of the pleasure workers derived from lying for a living. Receptionists were open about 'lying for a living', comfortable with their roles and linked this to their positive identifications with the organization. For Ashforth (2001) this translates into new recruits believing in their group or organization which, in turn, leads to them enacting job roles positively, creating a degree of affinity and belonging. But this takes time. The quotes from receptionists below show



how they initially experienced deception as difficult and uncomfortable as it transgressed their personal sense of self:

I found that [lying] really hard in the beginning. I found it awful because you just have to lie. Just have to...a lie just has to come out from somewhere. (Delia)

Sometimes I found it difficult because we are not telling the truth most of the time because you are not in their [the clients'] offices and we are not actually working for them. I do find that hard sometimes that you do constantly have to you know...it doesn't feel real sometimes. That is one thing I find quite hard. Especially when you start, it is really hard to get your head around it...it is fine now but there are some times when you think I wish I could have given that gentleman directions properly to our office and I really was there and you do realize you are trying to help people as much as possible, but you don't really have that much of a clue so you are lying really. That is one thing that is a bit hard. (Phillipa)

Group processes of co-optation help explain how receptionists overcame their unease at lying for a living.

### *Co-optation*

Receptionists experienced the social relationships of the group (or cocoon) very positively and this led to a key element of socialization: co-optation, that is employees are induced to behave in certain ways through rewards. In the literature, the rewards relate to financial benefits accrued from enacting corruption but, in this study, the rewards related to work satisfaction and from being part of a socially supportive work environment. First, lying made work more enjoyable, it was experienced as satisfying and empowering as receptionists used their creativity and inventiveness. Becoming proficient at lying was also an important dimension in receptionists' positive identifications with their job; working experiences were varied and interesting and receptionists considered themselves as skilful and 'professional':

You have to be professional at lying, in a nice sense I always say. People ask me what I do for a living, and I say I am a professional liar, you know, cos I am really, I mean having to think on your feet, and I think that is why I have stayed so long, cos every day is different and every scenario is different. (Eve)

This positive experience (and hence the degree of co-optation) deepened as receptionists learned to become more skilled and proficient at the deception their jobs required. Workers explained the techniques they acquired to lie convincingly, successfully and more professionally over time. Maeve explained how she presented an authentic image of sharing the same physical location as the client:

Oh, bear with me I'll just see if he is at his desk, oh he is not there at the moment, I'll ask him to call you, I can see that his keys are there so he must be here!

Others talked about how they drew on acting techniques such as a trained imagination and improvisation to help with the performance of lying convincingly,

I sort of put myself in her office and I think of what I would do if I was there, yeah you know I try and picture it...I mean you sort of get an impression of that client in your head, and before you ring somebody, and you talk to them, you sort of get an image, a picture in your head of what they are going to look like. Well you know, just in general, so I'll get a picture or an image in my head of like their office and I think to myself that I have got to be in there. (Joy)

Well to be honest it is lying in a way isn't it... basically you're telling people you're somewhere that you're not, and you've got to try and make it sound as convincing as you can, so really you've got to improvise on every call. (Iris)

Philippa explained how she enjoyed the work *because* of the opportunity to draw on her acting skills:

I was attracted to VoiceTel because I like doing amateur dramatics.

In these ways, lying was both a normal work feature and experienced as a spontaneous and empowering act; a rewarding performance which required creativity and imagination and that presented a learning opportunity and the development of new skills and capabilities.

Second, lying brought social endorsement from the work group and further enhanced the strong sense of group belonging. Receptionists achieved high social status from becoming seen as an 'expert liar' by their peers. This boosted individuals' reputations and socially sanctioned the lying as a positive, fun and creative experience which enhanced a shared identity, and reinforced group cohesion.

Ruth's the best one... She comes up with some corkers: 'I've just walked in, you couldn't have spoken to me this morning'. I use that quite a lot and 'oh, I'm just temping here today'... And, 'I'm helping out on the front desk as a temp, so I don't know the answer to your question so I'll get someone from the office to call you back', you know, something like that. I use those quite a lot. (Debbie)

Receptionists gained respect within the workplace for their inventiveness in developing lies, with some stories taking on mythical status:

Apparently a client rang up and asked for directions and they were going on and on and called her several times even though she had already said 'I am sorry I don't know. I am new to the area' and she was saying are you stupid or something, why don't you know where you work? In the end she said that she was blind!... That was quite funny. Probably the funniest one I have heard. Her client was fine about it, she called them up and told him and he thought it was hilarious. (Frances)

For some, the experience of daily deception was not just considered a positive work feature but they felt it had also affected their identities outside of work:

It changes you as a person as well, it makes you more outgoing, more chatty, more responsive to people [laughter], and I mean, yeah it does, it changes you as a person massively I think.

These comments reinforce our observations earlier about how the receptionists collectively rationalized their actions as being harmless. Though one receptionist did report that her husband was increasingly concerned about her ability to lie so convincingly!

Through these processes of socialization, the normalization of strategic deception was strengthened over time. Informal social relations promoted the view that lying proficiently was a creative and skilful pursuit; individual receptionists drew personal rewards from developing their skills. Engaging in deception collectively also enhanced the group affiliation and social bonding (creating and sustaining the cocoon). Consequently, the initial discomfort of lying was reported to subside over time, as these two typical quotes from Roberta and Melissa illustrate:

The lies, they just sort of roll off my tongue, so you know, you might say like they are in a meeting when they are actually not, it just comes naturally now, whereas before I had a stutter because I knew that I was lying, and I'd feel really awful, but now it sort of just like rolls off your tongue.

Yeah, I think when I first tried it was a bit like panic stations cos you are trying to think, you are trying to concentrate on the call, you are trying to act like you are in the office, you are trying to think about what you are trying to say to them, but now, once you have done it for a while, it just comes naturally [she laughs]. You can just lie naturally now!! [She laughs].

For Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 34), the social cocoon is 'a localized, self-referential world where skewed behaviours and ideologies are presented as normal and acceptable – if not desirable'. However, at VoiceTel, since the senior managers of the organization themselves endorsed deception as a legitimate and an integral feature of work, there is a more widespread and holistic set of identifications evident, bridging between an individual's own work group and the wider organization. Workers identify with the organizational values, the owners and their work group. Strategic deception has thus become normalized and embedded in workplace behaviour since it is mutually reinforced through the processes of institutionalization, rationalization and socialization operating at organizational and group levels.

## Discussion

The issue of deception in organizations has been 'overly neglected and viewed too narrowly, in direct contrast to its importance' (Shulman 2007, p. 157). This paper has contributed to addressing the paucity of research and in so doing we advance three key contributions to the study of workplace deception. First, we have made an empirical contribution through providing one of the first detailed studies of an organization operating 'strategic deception'. The concept of strategic deception is an important addition to our understanding of contemporary business models, particularly in the service sector, and the evidence reported here provides new insights into the inner workings of such organizations. Moreover, this empirical case provides a rare opportunity to examine lying that is an integral and intrinsic feature of the roles of employees throughout an organization rather than being selective, episodic and associated with a specific occupational group. The empirical setting is therefore well suited to an examination of the organizational levels and processes at and through which deception takes place, and to an assessment of how it becomes normalized within an organization.

To analyse how lying became embedded into the organization's culture, structure and processes, such that deception became an intrinsic job feature, we have adapted and extended Ashforth and Anand's (2003) normalization framework and drawn on Palmer's (2012) integrated assessment of organizational wrongdoing. Our second contribution is to have developed a novel model of the normalization of deception which demonstrates that, particularly in cases of strategic deception, this normalization of lying requires a close alignment and integration of the processes of institutionalization, rationalization and socialization operating across group and organizational levels. The study reveals how an organization which practised strategic deception from its inception embedded and maintained lying as it evolved and grew; and it explains the group-level processes that meant employees were central to the sustaining and strengthening of this normalization of deception. To appreciate these processes, our examination linked together the multi-level and mutually enforcing interaction of both organizational (top-down) and group (bottom up) features which were involved in the normalization of deception such that it endured over time (see Table 1 below).

Interactions at both work group and senior management levels across the organization are important facets of this new model of the normalization of deception, as our examination of the rationalization and socialization processes has shown. Rationalizing ideologies were multi-faceted and employees demonstrated strong identifications with the values of the organization, with their clients, and mutual reciprocity to their co-workers and their employers. Socialization involved group-level processes as the group created a social cocoon in which receptionists formed strong peer relations and developed shared norms and values over their roles. These relationships laid the basis for processes of co-optation that further strengthened the culture of deception as normal and

legitimate. Recruits initially learnt how to lie from experienced receptionists, then they shared tips on how to become more proficient and professional at lying, and effective lying was associated with a high degree of social status in the workplace. As a consequence, our explanation emphasizes that employees' agency is enacted within structural and situational contexts. For lying to become normalized in an organization, these norms have to be 'owned' by the employees; and this is only likely to become the case over periods of time that allow group-level social processes to complement and reinforce organizational processes of institutionalization. This dynamic interplay is represented schematically in Figure 1.

While we have drawn on a model of corruption it is important to be clear that corruption and deception are not equivalent nor analogous. Beyond this fundamental point, our examination is distinctive from descriptions of how employees rationalize morally questionable acts, as theorized in the model of corruption produced by Ashforth and Anand (2003). Their model focuses on the emergence of deviant sub-cultures which gradually normalize corruption at localized levels within the organization. In contrast, by addressing strategic deception at an organizational level, we have developed a model that operates to explain developments at both group and organization levels, and illustrates how these are interrelated. The model explains how individuals and work groups gain status and increased self-esteem from lying for a living, by being open about dishonesty and emphasizing the professional nature of their work. The embedding of lying as a routinized practice such that it became habituated into the work role was maintained and strengthened through social interactions at multiple levels: between employees and their co-workers, their clients and their employers. Ultimately, in this case, these interactions resulted in a positively reinforcing cycle of deception. Palmer's (2012, p. 145) exhortation to see 'organizations as systems of localized social interaction and view organizational participants as by nature or necessity attentive to the attitudes and behaviours of those in their immediate environment' is central to our analysis. Future research will allow for an examination of the model's efficacy in cases where deception is emergent rather than strategic.

It is important to retain a complex understanding of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up', and of the labels 'formal' and 'informal', in understanding these interactions. A significant factor in the nature of deception at VoiceTel was that employees did not feel coerced into deception by the owners. Under normative forms of control when employees identify with the organizational value system, they are provided with the space to enact these values in their interactions with clients without much direct management interference. Employees demonstrated a high degree of latitude in determining the extent they were prepared to lie for their clients. Crucially this was associated with the relative depth of the client-employee relationship (with the client as main beneficiary along with the employing organization). Networks of social relationships are particularly important in creating the context for trust as well as deceit, and these features helped to explain the deepening of the normalization of deception. The owners maintained their high reputation by not becoming morally tainted by determining the nature of the actual lies employees told. Power relations were more dispersed than one might expect in a conventional employment relationship because of the degree of employee autonomy and the fact that the employer provided the space for deception to become enacted. As such, employee agency was an important factor in explaining how lying was maintained and reinforced.

The importance of agency is further developed in the third contribution of the paper: a fuller examination of the subjective experience of employees who lie. This point is often either omitted from studies or lying is assumed to result from role conflict and to lead to anxiety (Grover, 1993). Recent studies of corporate scandals have mused on the corrosive impact of lies (Fleming & Zyglidopoulos, 2008). At VoiceTel, receptionists actively engaged in lying, took knowledgeable choices over how and to what extent they would deceive their clients' customers, and generally enjoyed the experience. The case illustrates the rewards that were bestowed on employees who gained the status of 'expert liar'. To some extent this was endorsed formally by the organization but it was also socially promoted within the work group. The benefits and rewards for lying in this

context were wide-ranging and significant. Deception provided a sense of fun and ensured that employees were able to exercise a degree of discretion and autonomy over their work roles, allowing them to act creatively and inventively. A final dimension was that the experience of lying led to positive social identities within the workplace. A positive cycle of autonomy and self-esteem resulted from acts of deception and their social reinforcement. As Vaughan (1999) anticipated, employee characteristics explain the strength of the socialization process in ensuring employees freely engaged in lying even when many conceded that they initially felt uncomfortable in doing so. Hence, a significant part of our explanation for the normalization of deception rests on the importance of conceiving employees as knowledgeable and capable actors who actively engaged in lying as a satisfying and joyful experience. This lends further support to Palmer’s (2012) argument that wrongdoing is not (only) institutionalized from the top down in organizations. Actors throughout the hierarchy had a degree of agency in how they responded to the processes involved in the normalization of deception.

Our study bears some comparison with that of ‘dirty workers’ by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) in the way VoiceTel employees engaged in rationalizing techniques to neutralize their lying behaviour. However, in our study, the organizational context plays a crucial part in explaining the positive meanings and identifications employees held about their work and employer which legitimized workplace deception. Employees’ social identities, as well as their identification with the organization, are significant in understanding their positive responses to lying as an intrinsic job feature. For instance, gender and class relations were relevant features of the social identities of the receptionists who readily identified with the values of the organization to provide a high-quality service, as well as how they came together as a cohesive work group to share the joys of lying. In this way multiple identifications positively reinforced deception in the workplace. The existing research on dirty workers focuses on the occupational group as the unit of analysis in isolation from their situational settings. Our study highlights the significance of work-group processes within an organizational setting. It also suggests that the label of ‘dirty workers’ (in the sense of ‘moral taint’) could be applied to service employees increasingly required to conceal their identity and engage in a range of deceptions (from white lies to more seriously fraudulent activities) as an intrinsic work feature.

**Table 1.** A Summary of the Key Contributions of this Paper.

<b>Ashforth and Anand’s model</b>	<b>Jenkins and Delbridge’s model</b>
Explains processes in the normalization of corruption	Explains processes in the normalization of deception (Corruption and deception are not equivalents nor wholly analogous)
Describes an emergent process of change that is localized in one or more sub-culture	Addresses a strategic process that is organization-wide, operating at different hierarchical levels of the organization
Model is made up of ‘pillars’ that are inter-related	Model is represented as a reinforcing cycle that is dynamic and constituted by an ongoing interplay of processes
Corruption is seen as ‘deviant’ beyond the group	Deception is seen as ‘legitimate’ across the organization
<b>Existing literature on lying</b>	<b>This paper</b>
Largely centres on occupational groups and neglects organizational context	Centres on a specific organization, assesses organizational context and processes and explores organization-wide deception
Lying is episodic	Lying is routine and intrinsic to the role
Explores individuals’ motivations	Deception is strategic and central to the organization’s business model
Consequences and experiences are generally seen as negative	Range of positive benefits are reported by individuals

## Limitations

One of the challenges we encountered in our case study was that the full extent of strategic deception was not realized until we had started to collect data. It is not uncommon for qualitative case studies to develop in unexpected ways when researchers are in the field and, indeed, we would suggest that this is particularly common for researchers of the 'dark side' of organizational behaviour who are highly unlikely to gain access to study such aspects explicitly. Nonetheless, as a consequence, the research was inductively developed and we did not set out to 'test' a specific theory of workplace wrongdoing. Our application and subsequent extension of Ashforth and Anand's (2003) framework was thus post-hoc and we were unable to interrogate all aspects of the model systematically. A further limitation of our research is that we did not interview the customers in order to understand how they felt about being lied to. Subsequent studies of strategic deception will have the opportunity to explore these questions further.

The specific features of this case do not support the simple transferability of our findings to other contexts. However, when considering future research and the relevance of our study, it is important to observe that the phenomenon of organizations that operate 'strategic deception' is not just limited to virtual reception services. While the concept was developed by Patwardhan et al. (2009) to examine the way outsourced call centres in India required their employees to deceive their customers about the geographical location of the organization, in an increasingly globalized and virtual world, we might expect to witness more organizations practising strategic deception. Additionally, even if businesses founded so directly on strategic deception are empirically rare, many service organizations offer customers what might be considered 'false' aspirations about the particular service or entertainment experience being sold. As such, we could speculate that an increasing number and range of employees are likely to engage in deception in a more or less strategic manner. Hence, our model of the normalization of deception could be developed further to assess how other types of organizations encourage their employees to engage in deception. In assessing how employees may respond differently to lying for a living, further research might expand Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) categorization of 'morally tainted' to those employees who are required to lie as a job feature. The recognition of organizations that engage in deceitful practices and operate strategic deception could represent an extension of the label of 'dirty' to organizations that are perceived as morally tainted.

## Concluding Comments

We have set out our framework for understanding the normalization of workplace deception by examining the contextual, situational and inter-relational processes within an organization that practised 'strategic deception'. This study demonstrates how the integration of levels of analysis, combining organizational and group features, mutually reinforced deception and explains how deception was maintained and strengthened from the outset of the company to become an accepted, legitimate and positive feature of work for employees.

This research leads us to a final observation on the wider moral and ethical implications of this case. Although the aim of this article was not to speculate on the moral character of employees who engaged in deception for a living, we can reflect on a number of factors raised. On the one hand, not all of the examples of deception could be considered wrongdoing per se; some cases could be described as 'constructive lying' and as such an inevitable feature required to sustain the social order (Goffman, 1957). None the less, it was also the case that some acts of deception were more serious than others. Some employees clearly articulated how they engaged in deceiving the customers of their clients and were open and honest about their dishonesty. Rather than attributing

blame or labelling individuals ‘morally dubious’, we would highlight that the study raises questions about the ethical implications of organizations that require their employees to deceive. While the organization in our study was widely held to be a ‘good employer’, the fact that managers created the spaces for employees to deceive meant that the boundaries and limits to deception could not be controlled. As Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008) explain, the organization promoted an ‘ethical infrastructure’ by appealing to the positive virtues of customer care to support lying as legitimate. This is potentially worrying because the power of the ideology of customer service in increasingly ‘consumer driven’ societies leads us to speculate on how far employees may go in the name of quality customer service.

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