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## The truth about lying

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## ABSTRACT

The standard view in social science and philosophy is that lying does not require the liar's assertion to be false, only that the liar believes it to be false. We conducted three experiments to test whether lying requires falsity. Overall, the results suggest that it does. We discuss some implications for social scientists working on social judgments, research on lie detection, and public moral discourse.

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He may say a true thing and yet lie, if he thinks it to be false and utters it for true, although in reality it be so as he utters it. For from the sense of his own mind, not from the verity or falsity of the things themselves, is he to be judged to lie or not to lie.

[Augustine, *On Lying*]

## 1. Introduction

Lying is an important social category. We tend to react negatively to “lies and the lying liars who tell them” (Franken, 2003). We expend considerable effort and resources developing techniques to detect lies and liars, both as a practical matter when, say, developing technologies to screen for terrorists at airports (Wild, 2005), and as a moral matter when assigning blame and evaluating character. These efforts all assume a conception of lying. A defective conception will lead to inappropriate moral evaluation of assertions and confound the effort to systematically detect lies. So there are moral and practical

benefits to a complete and accurate conception of lying. And improving our understanding of the concept of lying improves our understanding of important social and moral judgments implicated by lying.

What is it to lie? The standard view in social science and philosophy is that a lie is a dishonest assertion. You lie if you say something which you think is false in order to deceive your audience into believing it. Lying does not require your assertion to be objectively false, only that you believe it is false. This has long been the standard view in philosophy (e.g. Augustine 395; Aquinas, 1273, II.II, Question 110, Article 1; Bok, 1978; Chisholm & Feehan, 1977; Fallis, 2009; Frege, 1948, p. 219; Grotius, 1625: p. 258, n. 8; Williams, 2002). Social scientists adopt the same basic definition. For example, a widely cited textbook on lying says that it is “defined solely from the perspective of the deceiver and not from the factuality of the statement. A statement is a lie if the deceiver believes what he or she says is untrue, regardless of whether the statement is in fact true or false” (Vrij, 2008, p. 14; see also Battigalli, Charness, & Dufwenberg, 2013; Bucciol & Piovesan, 2011; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Erat & Gneezy, 2012; Kraut, 1980; Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981).

Several studies have shown that lying requires deceptive intent. Both children and adults view deceptive intent as necessary for lying (Lee & Ross, 1997; Lindskold & Han,

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1986; Peterson, 1995; Taylor, Lussier, & Maring, 2003). But no empirical studies have shown that lying does not require objective falsehood. Instead, philosophers and social scientists reject a falsehood requirement by appealing to their intuitions about thought experiments (Mahon, 2008; Vrij, 2008; for a similar appeal to the opposite conclusion, see Carson, 2006, p. 301). The one empirical study of the issue found some evidence that falsity is one of several features associated with a prototypical lie (Coleman & Kay, 1981). But falsity was judged to be the least important element of the prototypical lie, most participants attributed lying even when the assertion was true, and the study had several methodological flaws. In particular, the conditions were not minimally matched, so we cannot be confident that a difference in truth-value is responsible for observed differences in people's judgments; participants knew the purpose of the study, which raises the possibility of socially desirable responding; and no steps were taken to avoid agreement bias or order effects. The studies reported below avoid all these problems.

We conducted three experiments to test the standard view of lying. Our investigation was motivated by the lack of empirical support for one essential aspect of the standard view and by an intrinsic interest to better understanding the important social category of lying. In line with previous empirical work on attributions of lying and truth-telling, we adopted a vignette-based paradigm. We asked people to read short stories and evaluate whether the protagonist lied. We used simple stories based on thought experiments proposed by advocates of the standard view (Vrij, 2008, p. 14; see also Sartre, 1937; Siegler, 1966). The results from Experiment 1 seem to support the standard view, but an alternative interpretation is available. According to the alternative, the results are an artifact of the mode of questioning and should not be taken at face value. The alternative predicts that if people are given sufficient flexibility options for responding, then the response pattern will indicate that lying does require objective falsity. More specifically, the key is to allow people to acknowledge *intent* to lie while separating that judgment from an attribution of lying. Experiments 2 and 3 provide evidence that the alternative interpretation is correct and, moreover, that lying does require objective falsity. Our main conclusion is that, contrary to the standard view, falsity is a necessary component of lying and, thus, that lying has an important non-psychological element. We discuss the implications for psychological work on social judgments, the conceptual foundations of research on "lie" detection, and public moral discourse.

## 2. Experiment 1

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.2.1. Participants

One hundred seventy U.S. residents were tested (aged 18–72 years, mean age = 31 years; 96% reporting English as a native language; 56 female). Participants were recruited and tested (using Amazon Mechanical Turk and Qualtrics) and compensated \$0.30 for approximately

2 min of their time. Repeat participation was prevented. We excluded data from eleven recruits who failed comprehension questions, but including them does not affect the results reported below.

#### 2.2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Intent: Honest/Dishonest) × 2 (Probe: Lie/Tell) between-subjects design. Participants in each condition read a single story modeled after thought experiments which have motivated the standard view of lying in psychology and philosophy. The stories all featured Jacob, whose friend Mary is being sought by the authorities. Federal agents visit Jacob and ask where Mary is. Mary is at the grocery store but Jacob thinks that Mary is at her brother's house. In Honest conditions, Jacob tells the agents that Mary is at her brother's house, so that what he says is false despite his intention. In Dishonest conditions, Jacob tells them that Mary is at the grocery store, so that what he says is true despite his intention. After reading the story, participants were asked the key test question. In order to avoid agreement bias contaminating results (Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990; Krosnick, 1999), we probed for lying attributions in two different ways. It is widely assumed, often implicitly, in the literature that *lying* and *truth-telling* are opposite categories (e.g. Feeley & Young, 1998; Kraut, 1980; Vrij & Mann, 2003; Xu, Bao, Fu, Talwar, & Lee, 2010). This implies that *lying* and *not telling the truth* might be viewed as equivalent, which in turn could provide a basis for counteracting agreement bias. So we asked some participants whether the agent *lied*, and we asked others whether the agent *told the truth*: in Lie conditions the key test question was, "Did Jacob lie about Mary's location?" and in Tell conditions it was, "Did Jacob tell the truth about Mary's location?" (Yes/No). Participants were then taken to a separate screen and asked three dichotomous comprehension questions. As a manipulation check, participants were then taken to another screen and asked, "Did Jacob intend to deceive the agents?" (Yes/No). Questions were always asked in the same order and response options were rotated randomly. The supplemental material contains the full text for all stimuli used in this experiment. After testing, participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire.

### 2.2. Results

The Intent manipulation was effective: 98% of participants in Honest conditions (85 of 87) said that Jacob did not intend to deceive the agents, and 98% of participants in Dishonest conditions (81 of 83) said that he did intend to deceive the agents.

For purposes of analysis, we reverse-coded responses to the test question in Honest conditions so that, on the one hand, answering that Jacob told the truth receives the same score as answering that Jacob did not lie (=0) and, on the other, answering that Jacob did not tell the truth receives the same score as answering that Jacob did lie (=1). We did not expect an effect of (reverse-coded) Probe and included it as a robustness check against agreement bias.

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