

Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics:
An Empirical Investigation of the Concept of Lying*

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Abstract

There are many philosophical questions surrounding the notion of lying. Is it ever morally acceptable to lie? Can we acquire knowledge from people who might be lying to us? In order to answer these questions, however, we must first answer the question of what, exactly, constitutes the concept of lying. This paper examines three predominate definitions, as well as some cases—bald-faced lies and lies told with warrant-defeating provisions tacked on—that, arguably, pose problems for some of these definitions. Importantly, theorists working on this topic fundamentally disagree about whether these cases are genuine instances of lying and, thus, serve as counter-examples to the definitions on offer. To settle these disputes, we elicited judgments about the proposed counter-examples from ordinary language users unfettered by theoretical bias. We discuss the results of these experiments and the relevance of the data on the philosophical debate about the definition of lying, as well as some implications for further research on the topic. We suggest that the definition offered by Don Fallis (2009) most closely captures the notion of lying utilized by everyday speakers of English. Finally, we offer some further considerations on the moral implications of our investigation into the concept of lying.

There are all sorts of questions one can ask about lying. How can we detect when someone is lying to us? Is it ever okay to lie? Can we acquire knowledge from what other people say, even if they might be lying to us? Answering these questions requires figuring out exactly what lying is. In other words, in order to answer these questions, we must first answer the question: what does it mean to say that somebody lied?

In an attempt to answer this question, a number of philosophers (e.g., Williams 2002, Carson 2006, Sorensen 2007, Mahon 2008, Fallis 2009) have proposed several different and incompatible definitions of lying. Typically, such philosophical debates are settled by appealing to paradigmatic instances of the concept under consideration and seeing which proposed definition best accords with those instances. In the present debate, however, the instances that might be used to adjudicate between definitions turn out to be controversial. That is, the participants in the debate about the definition of lying disagree on whether the decisive cases are, in fact, lies. The debate has become entrenched in theory and, thus, stuck in philosophical gridlock.

The current project aims to extricate the debate from this mire by establishing the status of decisive cases without appeal to any particular philosophical theory, and thereby to adjudicate between the definitions of ‘lying’ on offer without begging any theoretical questions. To achieve this goal, we ran a series of experiments to measure judgments of ordinary language users, who lack any theoretical commitment to one definition or another.

The first section of this paper will lay out the philosophical definitions currently at the center of the debate, as well as the various decisive cases that are sometimes offered as counter-

examples to those theories. Having introduced the participants in the debate, the second section will briefly discuss the role of folk intuitions in philosophical debates. The third section will describe the experiments used to capture folk intuitions about lying, present the results of those experiments, and discuss the relevance of those data on the current debate. The final section will briefly discuss the broader philosophical implications involving the semantic and moral features of lying.

Definitions of Lying

What virtually everyone agrees on is that, in order to lie, you have to say something that you believe is false (cf. Mahon 2008, section 1.2). As George Costanza put it, “it’s not a lie if you believe it.”¹ But this cannot be all that there is to lying. For example, actors on stage say things that they do not believe, but they are not lying. Also, when someone says sarcastically, “Nice job, genius,” she says something that she does not literally believe, presumably without lying.

Amongst philosophers, the traditional definition is that you lie if you say something you believe to be false with the intent to deceive (cf. Williams 2002, 96, Mahon 2008). For example, when Pinocchio explained why he was not in school by saying that “two big monsters . . . tied me in a big sack,” he intended to deceive. According to the traditional definition, it is this intent to deceive that makes Pinocchio’s statement a lie. We will call such statements that are (a) believed by the speaker to be false and (b) intended by the speaker to deceive their audience *straight-forward lies*.²

However, while the intent to deceive may be a regular feature of lies, it is not clear that it is a necessary one.³ For example, what are called *bald-faced lies* (Sorensen 2007) are not attempts to deceive. These are cases where a speaker “goes on the record” with something even though everybody knows that it is false. Take, for instance, Thomas Carson’s (2006, 290) example of a student who, despite having openly bragged about cheating, knows that the dean (out of fear of a lawsuit) will only punish the student if he confesses. Although everyone, including the dean, knows that the student cheated—and the student knows that this is common knowledge—the student denies any wrongdoing when questioned by the dean. This seems to be an instance of lying, yet the student clearly is not intending to deceive anyone.

In the face of such purported counter-examples to the traditional definition, there are two ways that philosophers might respond. First, some (e.g., Mahon 2008) might be inclined just to say that bald-faced lies are not *really* lies, that this is just a loose way of speaking. Bald-faced lies are lies only in the way that decoy ducks are ducks. If such philosophers are right, then the traditional definition may be just fine. A second line of response (e.g., Carson 2006, Sorensen 2007, Fallis 2009), however, allows that bald-faced lies really are genuine lies and offers some alternate definition that can accommodate bald-faced lies as well as lies that are intended to deceive, yet still rules out acting and sarcasm.

The most notable attempt along this second line comes from Thomas Carson (2006), who offers the following conception of lying: You lie if you *warrant the truth* of something that you believe to be false; and you warrant the truth if you implicitly *promise*, or offer a *guarantee*, that what you say is true. Pinocchio, for instance, is offering such a guarantee, while an actor on stage typically is not.

Carson (2006, 296) recognizes, though, that one can be mistaken about whether one is or is not warranting the truth of one’s claim. For example, imagine a busy politician who is running for President and who is giving a series of satellite interviews. This politician might easily get confused and believe that he is giving a comedic interview on *Saturday Night Live* when he is

really appearing on *The Evening News*. Thus, when he tells an anecdote about his opponent having “broken wind” during a meeting with foreign dignitaries, he thinks that it is just a joke and does not expect to be taken seriously. In other words, he does not believe that he is warranting the truth of what he says. However, according to Carson, since the audience of *The Evening News* (quite reasonably) takes the politician seriously, he is, in fact, warranting the truth of a claim that he believes to be false. (Carson endorses a concept of ‘warrant’ whereby whether one is actually warranting is independent of whether one *intends* to be warranting *or* whether one *believes* that one is warranting.) But since Carson (2006, 298) does not think that such cases should be categorized as genuine instances of lying, he includes an additional condition in his definition. In order to lie, it must also be the case that the speaker does *not* believe that she is *not* warranting the truth of what she says. Thus, this mixed-up politician is not lying, according to Carson’s full definition.

Don Fallis (2009) thinks that something along the lines of Carson’s definition is correct, but that the warranting definition, even with the additional condition, is susceptible to two sorts of counter-examples. The first counter-example is a simple variation on the case of the mixed-up politician discussed above. This time, the politician gets confused and believes that he is giving a serious interview on *The Evening News* when he is really appearing on *Saturday Night Live*. Thus, when he tells an extremely unfavorable anecdote about his opponent (that he believes to be untrue), he believes that he is warranting the truth of what he says. However, since the audience of *Saturday Night Live* (quite reasonably) assumes that the politician is joking, according to Carson, he is not warranting the truth of a claim that he believes to be false. Thus, this mixed-up politician is not lying on Carson’s definition.

Fallis (2009, 48), however, takes this revised mixed-up politician case to be a genuine instance of lying. Regardless of what his audience happens to be expecting, the mixed-up politician *believes* that he is warranting the truth of a claim that is false. And this seems to be sufficient for lying.⁴ Call these sorts of statements (where the speaker is not in a warranting situation, but believes that he is and says something that he believes to be false) *confused lies*. If such confused lies are genuine lies, then they are counter-examples to Carson’s definition.

A second potential counter-example to Carson’s definition challenges the necessity of warranting at all. Presumably, when you warrant the truth of your claim, you take responsibility for the truth (or, at least, the defensibility) of what you are saying. However, it is plausible that one could seriously assert something without taking much responsibility for its truth. In particular, one could avoid taking responsibility by adding a proviso that defeats one’s warrant (Cf. Sorensen 2007, 255). For example, you might say “*p*, but I am really bad with dates and times,” or “*p*, but I hope that you will not believe me.” According to Carson’s definition, these cases are not lies, since the speaker is adding a proviso that undermines any warrant of truth. Fallis (2009, 49-50), however, is inclined to think that one is lying even if one explicitly disavows responsibility for the truth of what one says, so these cases should be seen as problems for Carson’s definition. Call such cases of stating *p*, when you believe that *p* is false, along with some warrant-defeating disclaimer *proviso lies*.

We come, then, to another crossroads in our pursuit of an accurate definition of lying, with two options before us. On the one hand, we can preserve Carson’s definition and simply reject the intuitions that *confused lies* and *proviso lies* are genuine instances of lying. On the other hand, we can try to come up with a new definition that includes these purported counter-examples as genuine instances of lying. Fallis pursues the second alternative by appealing to Paul Grice’s work on *norms of conversation*. According to Grice (1989, 26-30), there are several

social norms that govern everyday conversations. For example, “do not say what you believe to be false,” “do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence,” “make your contribution as informative as is required,” “avoid ambiguity,” etc. These norms exist in order to allow us to communicate effectively. Fallis (2009, 34) suggests that you lie if (a) you say *p*, (b) you believe that *p* is false, and (c) you believe that the norm of conversation “do not say what you believe to be false” is in force. Unlike Carson’s definition, this definition says that the mixed-up politician who mistakenly believes that he is warranting the truth of what he says, and the person who disavows responsibility for the truth of what he says, are both lying when they say things that they believe to be false. Both of these people say something that they believe to be false even though they believe they are in a situation where they should not say things that they believe are false.

The following chart provides a case by case breakdown of theoretical commitments for the various definitions under consideration:

	Straight-Forward Truth	Straight-Forward Lie	Bald-Faced Lie	Proviso Lie	Confused Lie
Traditional Definition	No	Yes	No	Yes (?)	Yes
“Warranting” Definition	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Norm-Violation Definition	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Folk Intuitions and Ordinary Usage

The presumed goal of the philosophers discussed above is to find the definition that best captures the *ordinary usage* of the term ‘lying’ (cf. Carson 2006, 285, Fallis 2009, 32). That is, the participants in this debate are not disagreeing about the best way to define a highly technical notion specific to debates amongst philosophers and other academicians (such as *supervenience* or *validity*); nor is each theorist merely laying out his own idiosyncratic conception of lying. On the contrary, the thinkers discussed in this paper are all attempting to uncover the best definition for the same commonsense concept of lying.

As some have argued (e.g., Austin 1956, 8), looking to ordinary usage is often a perfectly reasonable way to get at important phenomena in the real world, especially when the phenomenon we are trying to understand is a feature of our social world (such as knowledge or lying). Moral philosophers, for instance, are not concerned with the moral valence of lying as a purely technical concept; rather, they want to know whether *lying as it is normally understood* is always wrong. So, when philosophers (such as Kant) use the term ‘lying’ without an explicit definition, the default assumption must be that what they have in mind is the ordinary usage of the term and not some technical philosophical notion.

Typically, the procedure for capturing ordinary usage is to test definitions against the intuitions of competent speakers of the language with respect to specific cases. We are justified in appealing to ordinary language users because unless our intuitions were a pretty good guide to

how words are commonly used, we would have a lot of trouble communicating with each other (cf. Jackson 1998). Since they themselves are competent speakers, philosophers engaged in conceptual analysis typically appeal to their *own* intuitions about cases. Unfortunately, however, with lying (as with many other concepts) there seems to be fundamental disagreement amongst philosophers concerning certain central cases. In particular, philosophers do not agree about whether bald-faced lies, confused lies, and proviso lies are in fact lies. Moreover, with lying (as with many other concepts), there is reason to worry that the intuitions that these philosophers possess have been corrupted by their philosophical training or their theoretical commitments.

In order to deal with this kind of problem, several philosophers⁵ have begun to study the way that relevant concepts are used in everyday language by ordinary people (i.e., speakers untainted by any theoretical commitments or formal, academic training; such individuals are standardly referred to as “the folk”). Following this tradition, we designed a study that consults folk intuitions in order to adjudicate between three of the main definitions of lying that have been proposed (viz., the traditional definition, the warranting definition offered by Carson, and the norm-violation definition endorsed by Fallis). In particular, we wanted to find out whether the folk categorize as genuine lies (i) bald-faced lies, (ii) proviso lies, and (iii) confused lies.

Of course, philosophers are not interested in the empirical question of how ordinary people use the term ‘lying’ for its own sake. As suggested above, they ultimately want a definition of lying that will be useful in, for example, moral philosophy and epistemology. The best definition for such purposes might not perfectly match ordinary usage. In fact, ordinary usage of this term might not even be consistent. Thus, we may want to give up some of our intuitions about cases in a process of reflective equilibrium.⁶ Even so, in order to get at lying as it is normally understood, it is necessary to begin by determining what people typically mean when they use this term in ordinary language.

Potential Objections to this Project

It might be objected, at this point, that trying to capture ordinary usage is not a good way to improve our understanding of what lying *really* is. We think that, for many concepts, this objection has merit. Admittedly, looking to ordinary usage would not be an effective way to improve our understanding of many phenomena in the world. For instance, it would not be very helpful to ask ordinary people for their intuitions about something being an instance of *aluminum* or an instance of *supervenience*.

However, as was mentioned in the previous section, if we want to understand features of the social world, ordinary usage is a good place to start. Such an approach has been useful in contemporary epistemology to analyze knowledge.⁷ And given the highly social, interactive nature of lying, we believe it is entirely likely that studying ordinary language will be extremely useful in advancing our understanding of what it means to lie.

It might be objected, additionally, that it is unlikely that the ordinary usage of the term ‘lying’ can be captured with a concise list of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. For example, lying may be a “prototype” or “exemplar” concept rather than a “definitional” concept. That is, there may simply be prototypical instances of lying, with other cases falling closer to or further from this prototype.⁸

We agree that it is entirely possible that ‘lying’ is such a concept. We also believe, though, that it could still be helpful to identify the definition that comes closest to capturing ordinary usage. Doing so can inform our understanding of which features are most central to the concept of ‘lying’ (i.e., features that might pick out what makes a particular lie morally wrong),

and which features might be merely orthogonal to that concept. If nothing else, our study could shed light on which definition most closely approximates the operational folk prototype of a lie.

Finally, it should be noted that, even if it does not perfectly capture ordinary usage, each of the three definitions that we discuss arguably gets at something that is ethically and epistemically important. For instance, people often make utterances that are intended to deceive; and it is typically wrong to make such utterances for the reasons that it is wrong to try to deceive people (cf. Williams 2002, 93). Also, when people make utterances that warrant the truth of something that they believe to be false, it is typically wrong to do so for essentially the reasons that it is typically wrong to make promises that one does not intend to keep (cf. Carson 2006, 292).⁹ Likewise, people make utterances that violate the social norm “Do not say what you believe to be false;” and it is typically wrong to make such utterances for essentially the reasons that it is typically wrong to violate social norms (cf. Fallis 2009, 36-37).

Previous Empirical Research

Interestingly, some empirical work already exists, which supports the hypothesis that people often classify bald-faced lies as genuine lies. Coleman and Kay (1981), for example, asked subjects to read several short vignettes and then to rate on whether a statement made by the main character was a lie (1 = ‘very sure non-lie’ to 7 = ‘very sure lie’). One of the vignettes involved a statement that (a) was false, (b) was believed by the speaker to be false, and (c) was intended by the speaker to deceive (i.e., a straight-forward lie), while the rest of the vignettes involved statements that lacked one or more of those three properties. While subjects did not rate bald-faced lies (i.e., statements that lacked property (c)) as highly as they did straight-forward lies (6.96), such statements were rated well above the midline (4.70). By contrast, statements that lacked property (b) were rated well below the midline (3.48).

In another paper, Taylor, Lussier, and Maring (2003) present data that also suggest that people classify bald-faced lies as lies. In their study, subjects (aged 4 to 7) were read several short vignettes and then asked whether the main character was lying or pretending. In the ‘lying’ vignettes, the main character made a statement that she believed to be false with the intent to deceive. The ‘pretending’ vignettes were exactly like the lying vignettes except that the intent to deceive was removed. For example, a story was changed so that everyone in the story was aware that the main character was not telling the truth. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the children “correctly” identified all of the lying vignettes as involving lying. Interestingly, the children also identified many of the pretending vignettes as involving lying. And when the experiment was repeated using adults instead of children, experimenters got exactly the same results. That is, adults also identified the pretending vignettes as involving lying. It is worth noting that what were initially considered pretending vignettes did not contain prototypical features of pretending (e.g., taking on a role to have fun). However, when the experiment was repeated using vignettes that *did* have the prototypical features of pretending, both children and the adults consistently distinguished cases of lying from cases of pretending.

Although it was not the purpose of the initial study, since the pretending vignettes did not have the prototypical features of pretending, the psychologists had arguably created stories about bald-faced lying rather than pretending. Taken with the Coleman and Kay data, there is a clear experimental foundation for thinking that bald-faced lies are genuine, full-fledged lies. In the next section, we will present data from our own empirical investigation into everyday judgments of bald-faced lies, as well as proviso lies and confused lies.

New Experimental Data

The three definitions of lying discussed in the opening section make clear and distinct empirical predictions about folk intuitions. If the traditional definition is correct that lying requires the intent to deceive, then we should expect the folk to deny that bald-faced lies are lies. If, on the other hand, Carson's definition is correct that lying requires actually warranting the truth of what one says, then we should expect the folk to deny that proviso lies are lies and to deny that confused lies are lies. Finally, if Fallis' definition is correct that lying involves believing one is violating the social norm against saying false things, then we should expect the folk to think that bald-faced lies, proviso lies, and confused lies are all lies. We tested these predictions of the three definitions in two experiments. Experiment 1 tested (a) the traditional philosophical definition's prediction regarding bald-faced lies and (b) Carson's and Fallis' predictions regarding proviso lies. Experiment 2 tested Carson's and Fallis' predictions regarding confused lies.

Experiment 1

The first experiment was designed to test whether the folk classified two of the proposed counter-examples as genuine instances of lying. In particular, we wanted to see whether bald-faced lies (suggested counter-examples to the traditional definition) and proviso lies (suggested counter-examples to Carson's definition) were considered, pre-theoretically, to be the same as straight-forward cases of lying. In other words, we wanted to see if bald-faced lies and proviso lies, on average, were rated as instances of lying to the same extent as instances of straight-forward lies.

Method

Participants

To test these predictions, we recruited 216 undergraduates from an introductory philosophy course at the University of ***** (110 female, mean age = 18.94; 103 male, mean age 19.25; 3 did not respond).¹⁰ Participation was entirely voluntary (no payment or course credit was given to participants) and took place only with informed consent.

Materials

Six vignettes were created, each with a distinct storyline, but all with the same essential structure. Each vignette was written in four different versions: (a) a straight-forward lie, (b) a straight-forward truth, (c) a falsehood followed by a proviso, and (d) a bald-faced lie, for a total of 24 distinct vignettes.¹¹

Each survey included all four versions, counterbalanced for order, with each version being taken from a different vignette. The "straight-forward lie" and "straight-forward truth" versions were used as qualifying questions. Ratings for "straight-forward lie" also established a baseline against which to compare ratings for "proviso" and "bald-faced" versions. Surveys also included a demographic and personality measure.¹²

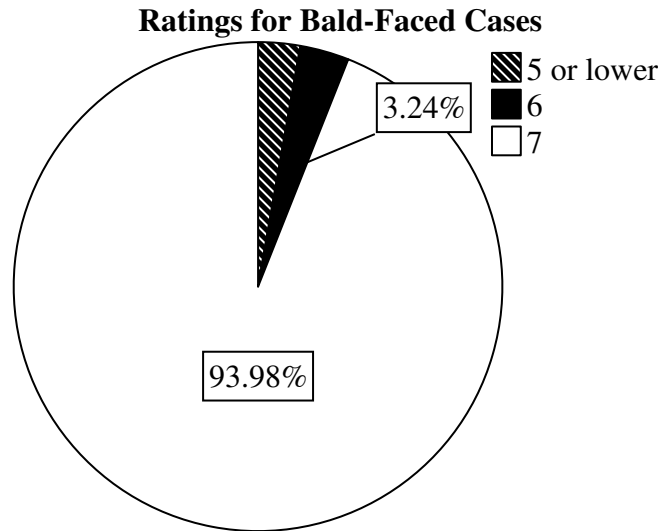
Procedure

Participants were first presented with a personality measure and a standard demographic survey. The final question in the demographic survey asked participants to estimate how many lies they tell in the average week. (This question was included to prime subjects towards thinking about their concept of 'lying'.) Participants were then presented with a series of vignettes depicting (in varying order) a straight-forward lie, a straight-forward truth, a proviso case, and a bald-faced

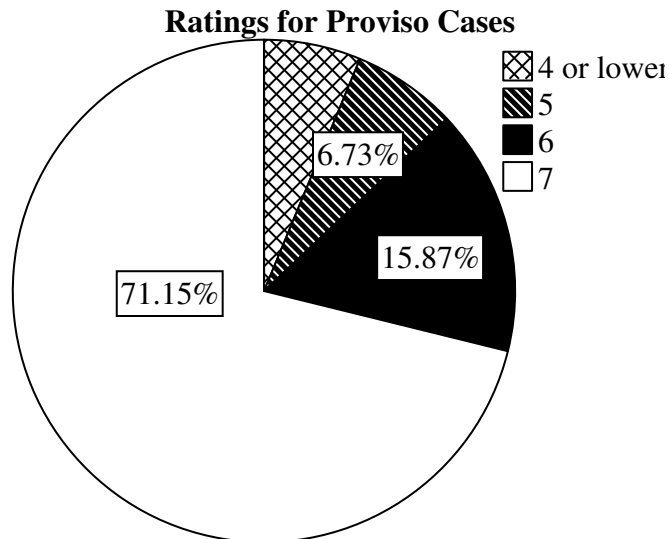
lie. After each vignette, participants were asked whether the person in the story had lied.¹³ Participants provided their answer by filling in a circle on a 7-point Likert scale (1=“Definitely did not lie”, 4=“Not Sure”, 7=“Definitely Lied”). Participants were also asked if the person in the story had done something wrong by saying what he or she had said.¹⁴

Results

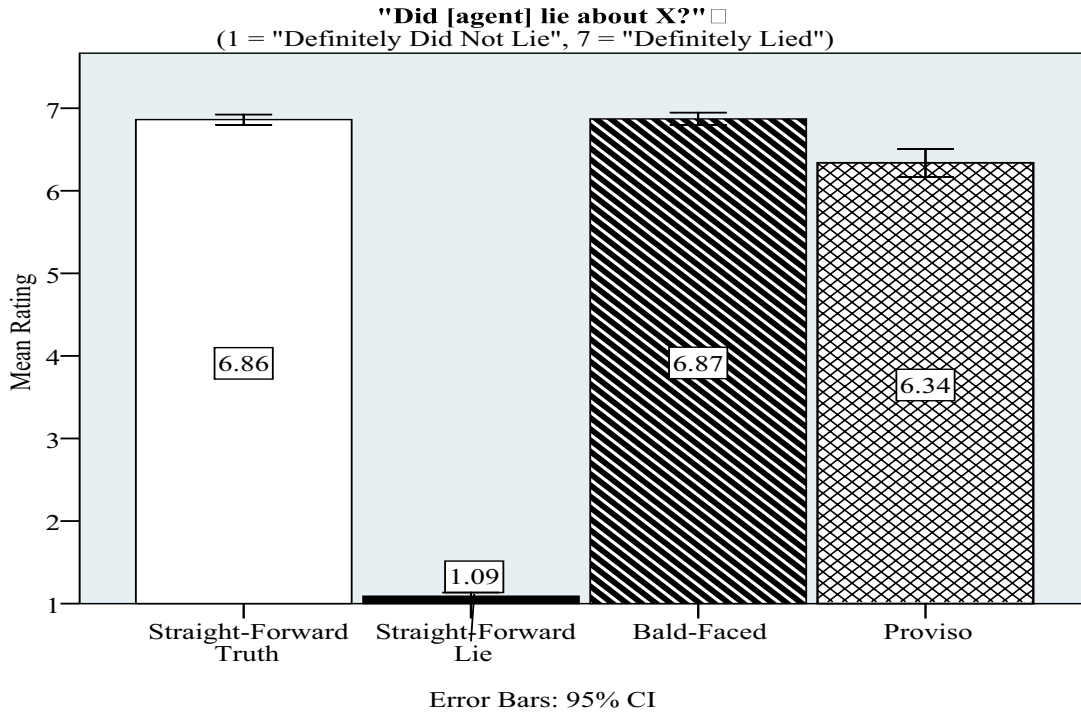
More than 98% of participants rated bald-faced lies at or above 5 (i.e., on the affirmative end of the Lie/Not Lie spectrum), with nearly 94% rating such cases at ceiling (7, or “Definitely a Lie”). The mean score for bald-faced lies was 6.88.



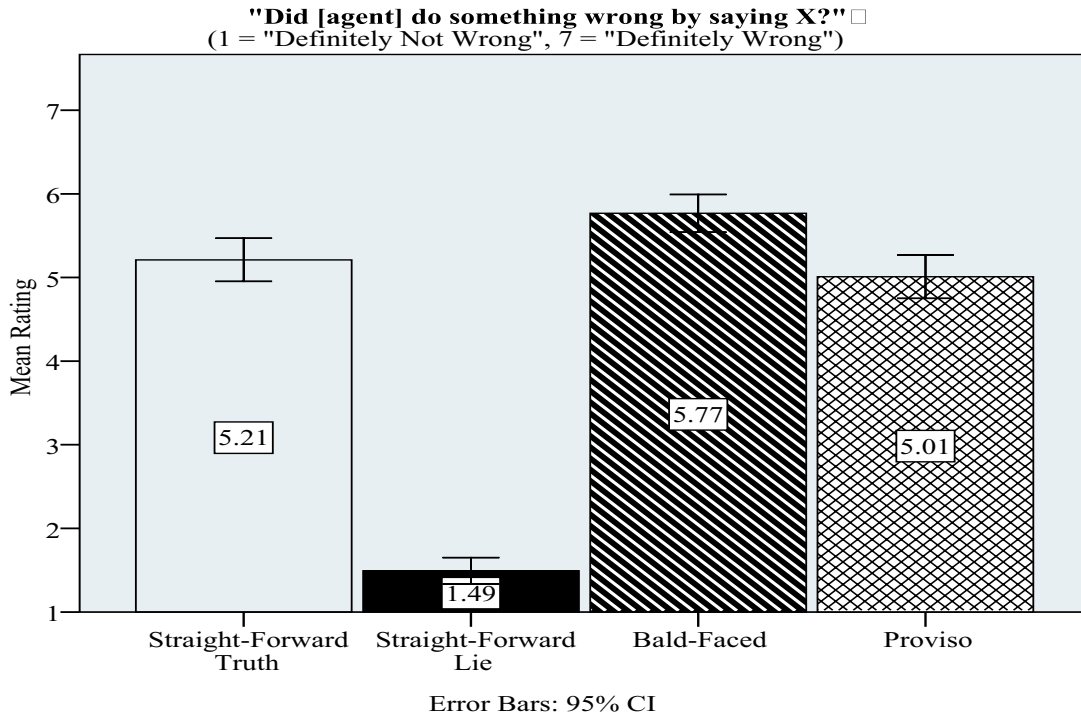
Similarly, more than 90% of participants rated proviso cases at 5 or higher on the 7-point scale, with 68.5% rating them at ceiling. The mean score for proviso cases was 6.34 out of 7.



Ratings for both bald-faced and proviso cases were significantly similar to the ratings for straight-forward lies ($m=6.89$). In fact, there were weak but significant correlations between straight-forward lies and bald-face cases ($r=.277(214)$, $p(\text{one-tailed})<.0001$) and between straight-forward lies and proviso cases ($r=.171(213)$, $p(\text{one-tailed})<.01$).



Looking at the ratings for the moral question, we find that all of the cases that were rated as lies were also judged to be morally wrong.



Discussion

The purpose of this experiment was to quantifiably evaluate whether ordinary usage of the concept “lying” includes cases of bald-faced lies and proviso lies. That is, would everyday

English-speakers, on average, treat (i.e., rate on a Likert scale) instances of bald-faced lies and instances of proviso lies similarly to how they treat instances of straight-forward lies? The data of interest, then, are (i) the average ratings of bald-faced cases and proviso cases on the scale from “Definitely Did Not Lie” to “Definitely Lied”, and (ii) the correlations between average ratings for bald-faced lies and straight-forward lies and between average ratings for proviso lies and straight-forward lies.

Bald-faced Lies

The findings are unambiguously problematic for the traditional definition of lying. Recall that the traditional definition maintains that one lies when one says something that one believes to be false *with the intent to deceive*. Bald-faced lies, however, are falsehoods one tells without intending to deceive one’s audience. (Indeed, since all parties in the bald-faced cases know that the audience knows the facts of the matter, there can be neither deception nor intended deception with respect to the matter.) Contrary to the prediction of the traditional definition, the folk rate bald-faced lies almost exactly the same as ordinary, straight-forward lies. Thus, the traditional requirement that one is lying only if she is intending to deceive seems mistaken.

A defender of the traditional view might contend that our bald-faced cases did not entirely eliminate the possibility that the protagonist intended to deceive. They might argue, further, that the lingering possibility that the agent was attempting to deceive was driving the participants’ judgments of those cases as lies. We do not find this objection particularly convincing. At the very least, our cases presented subjects with instances in which it is not altogether clear that the protagonist is attempting to deceive. As such, we should have found a significant minority who did not interpret the protagonists as intending to deceive; and, if participants were utilizing the traditional definition, we should have found a significant minority who did not rate bald-faced lies as lies. We did not. In order for this objection to carry, it would have to have been the case that 98% of participants judged that the protagonists were attempting deception. Given the design (and variety) of our vignettes—in which all parties knew or had solid physical evidence that the protagonist’s claim was false—this strikes us as highly unlikely.

Proviso Lies

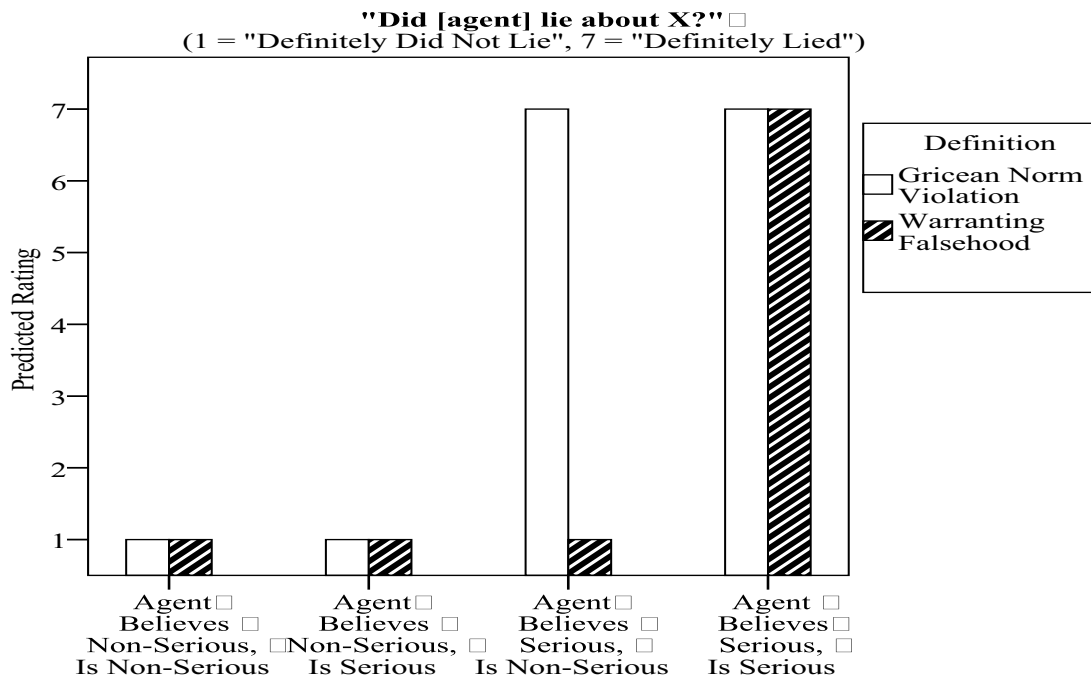
The findings are equally problematic for the warranting definition of lying offered by Carson. Carson, as we understand him, claims that one lies only if one *warrants the truth* of something that one believes to be false. Thus, if one were to preface (or append) their falsehood with a warrant-defeating statement, as in our proviso cases, they would not fulfill Carson’s requirement for lying. However, the folk overwhelmingly rate such cases as lies. As far as the folk are concerned, one can tell a lie despite explicitly denying that one is warranting the truth of a claim.

One might object that, in our proviso cases, the speaker’s warrant was reduced but not eliminated. Thus, the fact that participants rated them to be lies in no way undermines Carson’s definition (since they could have been doing so in virtue of the agent’s still warranting their false claim to some degree). This objection, while based on a logical possibility, does not strike us as particularly likely. Indeed, we think the burden of proof falls on the shoulders of those who would raise this objection to show (i) that the protagonists in our vignettes were still warranting the truth of their claims, and (ii) that this feature was salient in participants’ minds when judging these cases to be lies. Failing that, we see no reason to take the objection as a serious possibility.

Experiment 2

The second experiment was designed to test Carson's and Fallis' claims regarding confused lies. More specifically, the goal was to test whether the folk take Fallis' proposed counter-example of the mixed-up politician to be a genuine instance of lying, and thus a genuine counter-example to Carson's account. Of particular interest is whether an agent's *beliefs* about the context of utterance affect judgments about her utterance being a lie to a greater or lesser extent than do the external *facts* about the context of utterance.

Recall that, in addition to actually warranting the truth of what she says, Carson (2006, 298) also requires that the speaker not believe that she is not warranting the truth of what she says. Thus, when an agent believes that she is in a non-serious context, she is not lying, according to Carson, even if she states something that she believes to be false (and even if she actually warrants the truth of what she says). On this point, Carson and Fallis agree. However, since Carson limits cases of lying to those in which the agent is, in fact, in a warranting situation, his definition rules out as lying those cases in which the agent is not warranting, even if she *believes* she is warranting, the truth of her (false) claim. This is where Fallis and Carson diverge. If Carson is right, then the folk should only judge something to be a lie both when the agent believes she is in a serious context and when, in fact, she is in a serious context. Fallis, on the other hand, takes the Augustinian position that *believing* one is in a serious (i.e., warranting or norm-governed) context is sufficient for lying. If Fallis' objection is sound, then we should expect to find that the folk judge someone to be lying if she *thinks* she is in a serious context, even if, in fact, she is in a non-serious context.



Method

Participants

Of the 216 participants in Experiment 1, 209 also participated in Experiment 2 (108 female, mean age = 18.94; 101 male, mean age = 19.1). Participation remained voluntary (no compensation or course credit) and with informed consent.

Materials

A vignette was created based on Fallis' proposed counter-example of the (revised) mixed-up politician case.¹⁵ In this vignette, a senator is running for President and has scheduled numerous satellite interviews for the same day. Four versions of the vignette were created, varying along two dimensions: the first dimension varied according to what the politician believed about his situation; the second dimension varied according to the situation that the senator actually was in. Paper surveys included one version each.

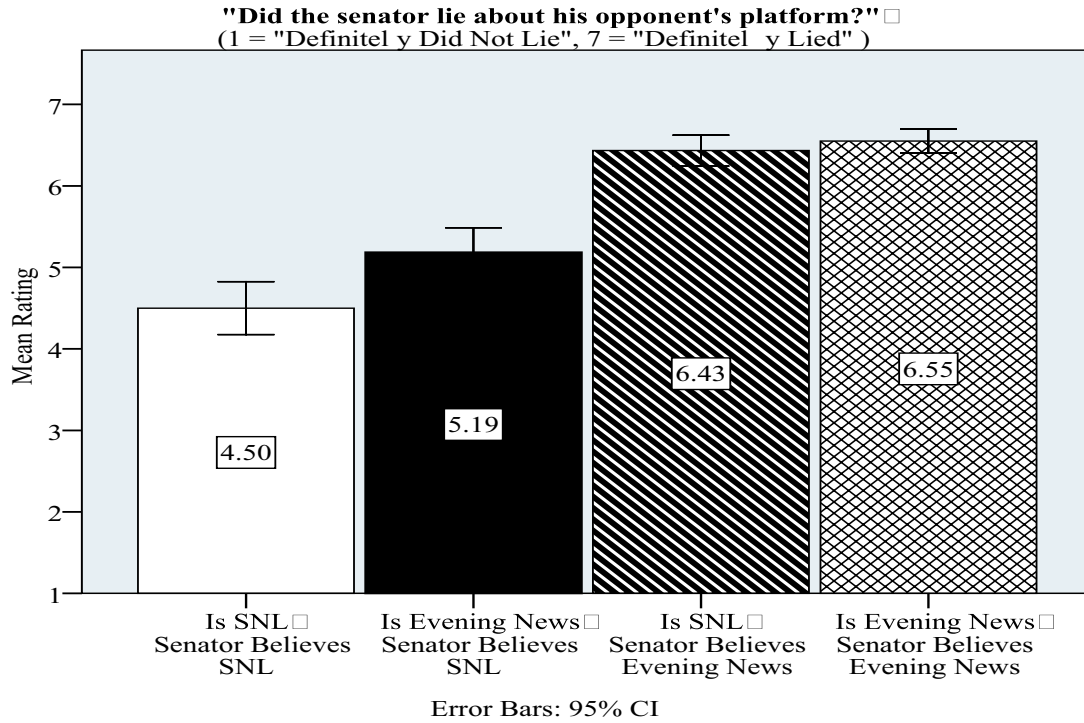
The four versions of the vignette were as follows: the politician believes that he is appearing on *Saturday Night Live*, and he really is appearing on *Saturday Night Live*; the politician believes that he is appearing on *Saturday Night Live*, but he is really appearing on *The Evening News*; the politician believes that he is appearing on *The Evening News*, but he really is appearing on *Saturday Night Live*; the politician believes that he is appearing on *The Evening News*, and he really is appearing on *The Evening News*. [See Appendix B.]

Procedure

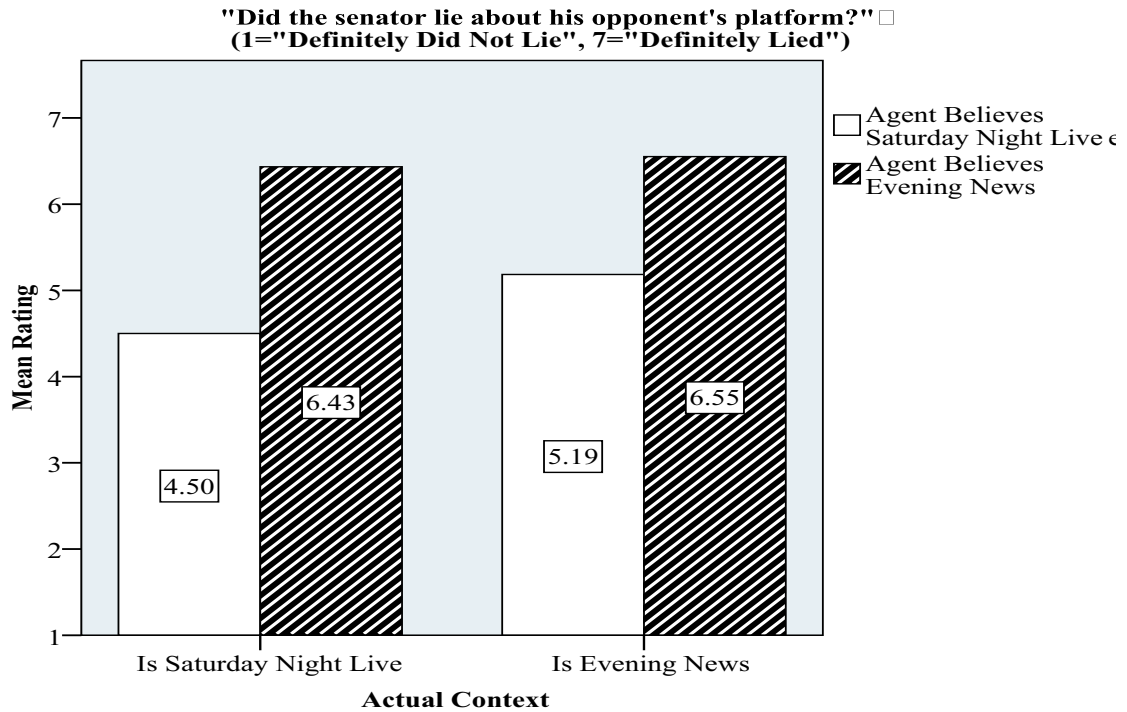
The study was a between-subjects design, with each participant getting just one version of the vignette. After reading the vignette, participants were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale (“Definitely Did Not Lie” to “Definitely Lied”) their response to the question ‘Did the Senator lie about his opponent’s platform?’ Participants were also asked the moral question of whether the politician had done something wrong by saying what he said.

Results

Surprisingly, all four versions of the vignette had a mean above the neutral rating of 4. [See Figure 6 – Did Senator Lie A] However, both versions in which the senator *believed* that he was appearing on *The Evening News* (i.e., both conditions in which he believed he was in a serious, non-joking context) were rated significantly higher than the versions in which he *believed* he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live*. That is, when we compared the two versions in which the senator was appearing on *The Evening News*, we found that participants rated the version in which the senator *believed* he was appearing on *The Evening News* significantly higher on the ‘Lie’/‘No Lie’ scale (6.55) than the version in which he *believed* he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live* (5.19).¹⁶ Similarly, for the two versions in which the senator was, in fact appearing on *Saturday Night Live*, participants rated the version in which he *believed* he was appearing on *The Evening News* significantly higher (6.43) than the version in which he *believed* he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live* (4.5).¹⁷ Statistical analysis revealed that the senator’s belief had a significantly greater impact on ratings than did the actual state of affairs.¹⁸ When we hold the senator’s belief fixed, whether he was on *Saturday Night Live* or *The Evening News* did not significantly affect ratings. But, when we hold the state of affairs fixed, whether the senator *believed* he was on *The Evening News* had a very significant affect on participants’ rating his statement a lie.



Like experiment 1, participants' ratings for the moral question closely tracked their ratings for lying.



Discussion

Looking at the results, it seems that the internal feature of the senator's *belief* is a stronger factor in folk judgments of lying than are the external *facts* of the situation. That is, in judging whether a given statement is a lie, the agent's mental state (i.e., whether or not the agent believes that she is in a serious, non-joking context) is more relevant—to the folk, at least—than the fact of the matter (i.e., whether or not she really is in a serious, non-joking context). So the data seem to straight-forwardly favor Fallis' definition over Carson's.

Yet the data from experiment 2 also seem to be problematic for *all* of the definitions under consideration. *All of the versions* of this vignette were, unexpectedly, rated above the midline. Although the overall trend favors Fallis' definition, none of the definitions under consideration predicted that cases in which the senator believed he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live* would be rated as lies. However, there may be an explanation for this across-the-board escalation in ratings. For instance, if the folk tend to assume that all politicians are liars, we might explain this result as merely a consequence of utilizing politicians as characters in our vignettes. Alternatively, we might explain it as being caused by some confusion amongst the participants as to whether the question was about the senator lying or the senator's character (which happened to be a semi-fictional version of the senator) lying. Yet another possibility is that the claim leveled against the senator's opponent in the *Saturday Night Live* skit was not extreme or funny enough to be recognized by our participants as a merely comedic line; it is possible that participants might have seen the *Saturday Night Live* lines as also being delivered for political effect (i.e., as delivering a genuine political message under the guise of humor). Whatever the case, it will require further research to determine whether the inflated ratings are picking out a genuine feature of our ordinary concept of lying or whether they are simply the product of other, conceptually-irrelevant, features of the probes.

General Discussion

Our experiments were designed to determine whether the ordinary usage of the concept of lying conforms to the traditional definition, Carson's warranting definition, or Fallis' norm-violation definition. The Fallis definition fits most cleanly with our data. However, our experiments did not rule out the possibility that folk judgments about lying might conform to some altogether different definition of lying. As it turns out, the results of our experiments are, in fact, consistent with the folk simply judging all false statements to be lies. Aside from the cases in which the protagonist made a straight-forwardly true statement, all of the cases involved a false statement, and all of those were rated as lies.

There is, however, something very counter-intuitive about 'simply uttering a false statement' being a complete conception of lying. Such a conception is clearly overly inclusive. It would mean that one would be lying even if one made an honest mistake, even if one simply made a verbal slip (e.g., "Dr. Samuel Johnson was an entomologist"). But honest mistakes and verbal slips are clearly not lies. Thus, we think that it is highly unlikely that the folk have this conception of lying.

Moreover, there are existing empirical studies that suggest that this is not the folk conception of lying. For example, Wimmer, Gruber, and Perner (1985) presented subjects with short vignettes that involved either honest mistakes or lies. They found that, while young children do judge all false statements to be lies, adults and older children do not consider honest mistakes to be lies. Further, Siegel and Peterson (1996) found that even fairly young children,

under the right circumstances, distinguish between mistakes and lies. Between the apparent counter-intuitiveness of this conception and the existing data showing a developmental trend towards distinguishing false utterances from lies, we take this potential alternative to be a possible but non-threatening competing definition.

The results of our experiments are also consistent with the folk simply judging all statements that are *believed* by the speaker to be false to be lies. Aside from the cases in which the protagonist made a straight-forwardly true statement, all of the cases involved a statement that the protagonist believed to be false, and all of those were rated as lies.

But once again, ‘uttering something one *believes* to be false’ as a conception of lying is clearly overly inclusive. For instance, actors in fictional performances recite lines that they believe are actually false. Yet we do not normally count such utterances as lies. Likewise, when we facetiously say something false as a means of implying something true, we utter a claim that we believe to be false. But that is not lying; it is just sarcasm.

There are also existing empirical studies that suggest that this is not the folk conception of lying. While young children do judge all statements that are believed by the speaker to be false to be lies, Sullivan, Winner, and Hopfield (1995) found that older children distinguish between jokes (where the speaker says something she believes to be false) and lies. In a similar vein, several other studies found that, past a certain age, children do not consider irony or sarcasm to be lies.¹⁹

Based on this sort of evidence, we suspect that the folk utilize a more nuanced conception than simply judging all false statements, or all statements that are believed by the speaker to be false, to be lies. Of course, these suspicions need to be more explicitly tested. But for now, the data from our experiments suggest that one particular definition on offer in the philosophical literature does much better at capturing the folk conception of lying than the available alternatives. Data from experiment 1 indicate that the folk notion does not comport with the traditional definition (since bald-faced lies and straight-forward lies are treated nearly identically). Data from experiment 1 also suggest that the folk notion does not comport with Carson’s definition (as evidenced by their rating proviso lies and straight-forward lies alike). And, finally, data from experiment 2 suggest that, contrary to Carson’s criterion that one *actually* warrant the truth of a claim, the folk notion of lying places greater weight on the agent’s mental state (i.e., her belief that she is in a serious, non-joking context) than on the external fact of the matter. Of all the candidate definitions of lying discussed above, Fallis’ definition comports best with the folk notion.

Moral Implications

This paper has been concerned with finding out which definition of lying is most central to, and best captures, ordinary usage. Call this the semantic project. According to our results, the feature that is most semantically relevant involves knowingly violating the conversational norm, “Do not say things that you believe to be false.” But philosophical mysteries surrounding lies are not limited to the semantic; there are also moral considerations.²⁰

Our data suggest that the traditional definition of lying is, as the semantic project goes, incorrect. However, it is entirely plausible that what makes a given lie morally bad is that it is an attempt to deceive.²¹ One implication of this possibility is that bald-faced lies, lacking any deceptive intent, would not be morally wrong. Yet, this implication runs contrary to our finding that participants rated bald-faced lies as being just as wrong as straight-forward lies and proviso lies. Why would they do so, if lies are wrong in virtue of the intent to deceive?

Sorensen (2007) argues that the folk are simply making a mistake in their moral judgments of lies:

Strangely, we condemn these bald-faced lies more severely than disguised lies.

The wrongness of lying springs from the intent to deceive -- just the feature missing in the case of bald-faced lies. ... In the end, I conclude that the apparent intensity of our disapproval of non-deceptive lies is a rhetorical illusion.(251)

So, for example, while Carson's cheating student has certainly done *something* wrong by asserting his innocence, according to Sorensen, "what is wrong here is the evasion of just punishment, not ... the bald-faced lie."(261)²²

It may be that the main reason that lying is wrong is that lies are intended to deceive. It may even be that Sorensen is correct and that the folk are mistaken about bald-faced lies being morally bad. If so, it makes sense for moral philosophers to focus exclusively on the sorts of lies (i.e., straight-forward lies) that are captured by the traditional definition (cf. Fallis 2009, 54-55).

However, the results of our experiments do indicate that the folk conception of lying is much broader than the traditional definition. And even though they are not all intended to deceive, many of the statements in this larger category share other morally problematic features. For example, bald-faced lies, as well as straight-forward lies, are akin to insincere promises. Also, proviso lies and confused lies, as well as bald-faced lies and straight-forward lies, involve the intentional violation of an important social norm. Thus, before it is concluded that the traditional definition completely captures the moral wrongness of lying, we need a greater understanding of the moral status of these other features. Also, further empirical investigation is needed to determine exactly which of these features the folk are reacting to in their moral evaluations of lies.

In any event, whatever features turn out to be most relevant to the moral evaluation of a lie, it will inevitably be of relevance whether the speaker has violated the social norm prohibiting statements that one believes to be false. Given that it seems to be the most central defining feature of lying, we think that the philosophical literature needs to give more attention to this social norm, even if intentionally violating this norm is not *the central feature* that makes lying wrong. After all, violating this norm seems to be what makes an utterance a lie.

Appendix A

A. Straight-forward lie

Charlie has a gambling addiction, so he often sneaks away from work to bet on horses. He has just come home after spending another thousand dollars at the racetrack. As he enters the house, his wife Natalie says to him, "I tried calling you at work today, but no one could find you. You didn't skip out of work to go gambling again, did you?" Since Charlie knows that his wife doesn't approve and will likely leave him if she finds out he's been betting again, he responds, "No, Honey, I wasn't gambling."

B. Straight-forward truth

Andre has a mother with Alzheimer's, so he often sneaks away from work to check on her. He has just come home after spending another afternoon at the nursing home. As he enters the house, his wife Martina says to him, "I tried calling you at work today, but no one could find you. You didn't skip out of work to go see your mother, did you?" Although Andre knows that his wife doesn't appreciate it when he visits his mother without her, he responds, "Yeah, Honey, I went to go see Mother without you."

C. Proviso

Maria is a jogger. She jogs every day, usually with her boyfriend Jason. Maria has just finished a quick jog on the park's newest running trail. As she enters the house, her boyfriend Jason says, "Did you just go running without me?" Maria remembers just then that she and Jason had made specific plans to go jogging on the new trail today. She responds, "Admittedly, I wouldn't tell you if I did; but, no, I didn't go running without you."

D. Bald-faced lie

Aunt Jane says to Susan, "Peter was supposed to come over last Friday to clean out the attic. But he said that he had to stay home and help you with your homework. Is that true?" Susan knows that Peter actually decided to go to the baseball game on Friday instead of going to help his aunt. She also sees that Aunt Jane is holding and looking at Peter's ticket stub from Friday's game. Aunt Jane holds up the ticket stub and asks again, "Susan, Did Peter stay home on Friday?" Despite the evidence in Aunt Jane's hand, Susan replies, "Yeah. Peter stayed home to help me with my homework on Friday."

**There were also two vignettes about a broken trophy, varied according to whether the falsehood was self-serving or other-serving:

Straight-Forward Lie version

Last night, during a particularly wild party, Chris found her swimming trophy, one of her most prized possessions, broken, its pieces scattered across the floor. Tonight, Chris is trying to figure out who broke her trophy. Chris says to Jamie, "So, somebody was in my room last night and broke my trophy. Did you see anything?" As it turns out, Jaime *did* see something. In fact, Jamie clearly saw that it was Mel who broke Chris's trophy. Although everyone knows that Mel is always breaking stuff, Jamie responds to Chris, "Yeah, um, I broke your trophy."

Proviso version

Last night, during a particularly wild party, Chris found her swimming trophy, one of her most prized possessions, broken, its pieces scattered across the floor. Tonight, Chris is trying to figure out who broke her trophy. Chris says to Jamie, "So, somebody was in my room last night and broke my trophy. Did you see anything?" As it turns out, Jaime *did* see something. In fact, Jamie clearly remembers that she was the one who broke Chris's trophy. Since everyone knows

that Mel is always breaking stuff, Jamie responds to Chris, "Yeah, um, Mel broke your trophy. But I was kinda drunk, and there were lots of people in there, so I could be wrong."

Appendix B

Believes *SNL*, Actually Is *SNL*

The life of a presidential candidate is a very busy and often hectic one. This past election, for instance, one Senator made four separate appearances via satellite in a single Saturday. One of these appearances was a fake interview with *Saturday Night Live*'s Amy Poehler (as Katie Couric). One of the Senator's aides was careful to remind him that this was not the Katie Couric interview, but the fake interview with *Saturday Night Live*'s Amy Poehler in character as Katie Couric. In this interview, when Poehler (pretending to be Couric) asked the Senator what he felt was the greatest weakness in his opponent's platform, the Senator responded "First of all, Katie, I'm told that he said in one speech that he wants to invade Spain in order to fight terrorism." Now, the Senator knew that his opponent never said any such thing, but he also knew that he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live* and that saying it would fulfill a caricature of himself, as comedic performances are supposed to do.

Believes *SNL*, Actually Is *Evening News*

The life of a presidential candidate is a very busy and often hectic one. This past election, for instance, one Senator made four separate appearances via satellite in a single Saturday. One of these appearances was an interview with *CBS Evening News*' Katie Couric. However, one of the Senator's aides mistakenly told him that this wasn't the Katie Couric interview, but a fake interview with *Saturday Night Live*'s Amy Poehler (as Katie Couric). In this interview, when the real Couric, asked the Senator what he felt was the greatest weakness in his opponent's platform, the Senator responded "First of all, Katie, I'm told that he said in one speech that he wants to invade Spain in order to fight terrorism." Now, the Senator knew that his opponent never said any such thing, but he thought that he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live* and that saying it would fulfill a caricature of himself, as comedic performances are supposed to do.

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Believes *Evening News*, Actually Is *SNL*

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opponent's platform, the Senator responded "First of all, Katie, I'm told that he said in one speech that he wants to invade Spain in order to fight terrorism." Now, the Senator knew that his opponent never said any such thing, but he thought that he was on *CBS Evening News* and that saying it would appeal to his supporters, as politicians are supposed to do when they give interviews.

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¹ "The Beard." Liefer, C. (writer). *Seinfeld*, National Broadcasting Company 9 Feb 1995. By itself, the *Costanza Doctrine* only requires that a liar *fail* to believe that what she says is true (cf. Carson 2006, 298, Sorensen 2007, 256). However, this paper will only consider "lies" that the speaker actually believes to be false.

² Some philosophers (e.g., Carson 2006, 284-85) think that, in addition, a lie has to be actually false. All of the "lies" that we consider in this paper meet this stronger requirement as well.

³ Dictionary definitions typically require that a lie be intended to deceive (cf. Carson 2006, 286). But there can easily be a difference between the way that a word is commonly defined and the way that it is commonly used.

⁴ Fallis is attracted to the Augustinian view that "a person is to be judged as lying or not lying according to the intention of his own mind, not according to the truth or falsity of the matter itself." 1952[395], p. 55.

⁵ Typically called 'experimental philosophers.' Cf., Alexander and Weisberg (2007), Arico (2010), Huebner, Bruno, and Sarkissian (2010), Knobe (2003), Knobe and Prinz (2008), Machery, Mallon, Nichols, and Stich (2004), Nichols, Stich, and Weinberg (2003), Swain, Alexander, and Weinberg (2003), and Sytsma and Machery (2009).

⁶ See Michael DePaul and William Ramsey (1998) for an excellent discussion on the relationship between reflective equilibrium and philosophical intuitions.

⁷ Hilary Kornblith (2002) does claim that knowledge is a natural kind which can and should be studied by using the methods of empirical science. However, see Alvin Goldman (2005) and Tuomas Pernu (2009) for criticisms of Kornblith's position.

⁸ In a similar vein, robins and cardinals are fairly representative of our 'bird' prototype, whereas emus and penguins are not.

⁹ And, Carson argues, it is wrong to make an insincere promise *even if* it is clear to everyone that one is not going to keep it.

¹⁰ Students were enrolled in a "*****" course and had not discussed lying (or cognate topics, such as epistemic and moral norms governing assertions) in the class. Twenty-two were eliminated from the study either for failing to identify ordinary cases of lying as lies, or for identifying instances of straight-forward, true statements as lies.

¹¹ See Appendix A for an example of each version.

¹² The Ten-Item Personality Index (Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann 2003).

¹³ To avoid ambiguity, these questions were specifically worded to focus on the false *p* assertion (rather than, for instance, the proviso that followed the falsehood). For instance, in a vignette about a man who skips out of work to go gambling (but upon questioning tells his wife "No, Honey, I wasn't gambling. Of course, I probably wouldn't admit it if I was."), the question was "Did Charlie lie about gambling?"

¹⁴ This question was partially included to test whether the moral valence of the agents' motivations would impact participants' judgments of whether the statement was a lie, as has been observed with other concepts (cf. Knobe 2003). Interestingly, there did not seem to be a Knobe effect for intuitions about lying.

¹⁵ Given the political nature of the example, and the fact that two U.S. Senators were actually running for President at the time, we wanted to test for possible influences of political bias. To this end, demographic measures included a question about the participant's political affiliation. We then varied the political valence of the falsehood being told by the senator: the senator either accused his opponent of wanting to kill newborn babies in order to promote stem cell research, or of wanting to invade Spain in order to fight terrorism. Counter to expectations, we found no evidence that participants' political affiliations biased judgments of lies one way or the other. (Self-described) Conservative participants were just as likely to rate the falsehood told by (or about) the liberal candidate as a lie as the falsehood told by (or about) the conservative candidate; likewise for (self-described) liberal participants.

¹⁶ $t(101) = 3.95, p < .001$.

¹⁷ $t(107) = 5.075, p < .0001$.

¹⁸ ANOVA revealed a main effect for *belief*, $F(1, 204) = 40.827, p < .0001$, but not for *external conditions*, $F(1, 204) = 2.412, p > .122$. There was also no interaction effect, $F(1, 204) = 1.21, p > .273$.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Taylor Lussier, and Maring (2003, 300-301).

²⁰ Of course, if one takes the stance that lies are morally wrong simply in virtue of being lies, then the semantically-central feature will also serve as the morally-central; but few maintain such a position. Even Kant (2002 [1785]), who argued that lying is *always* morally wrong, argued so not simply on the ground that they are lies, but from the fact that lies are told with the intention to deceive (and from the inherent irrationality of universalizing a maxim allowing assertions that are intended to deceive).

²¹ Indeed, we suspect that the initial plausibility and persistent popularity of the traditional definition, to some extent, can be chalked up to the centrality of moral concerns in considering the phenomenon of 'lying'.

²² Sorensen (2007, 262) does also suggest that bald-faced lies might be considered morally contemptible, not because they are lies, but because they are symptoms of other moral failures.