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? More fundamental, however, is the question of what, exactly, constitutes the concept of lying. According to one traditional definition, lying requires intending to deceive (see Augustine 1952 [395]). More recently, Thomas Carson (2006) has suggested that lying requires warranting the truth of what you do not believe. This paper examines these two prominent definitions and some cases that seem to pose problems for them. Importantly, theorists working on this topic fundamentally disagree about whether these problem 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. The data suggest that everyday speakers of English count bald-faced lies and proviso lies as lies. Thus, we claim that a new definition is needed to capture common usage. Finally, we offer some suggestions for further research on this topic and about the moral implications of our investigation into the concept of lying.
1. Introduction

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 have proposed several different and incompatible definitions of lying (See, Augustine 1952 [395], Williams 2002, Carson 2006, Sorensen 2007, Mahon 2008, Fallis 2009, Stokke forthcoming). 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, examples of lies.

The current project aims to help extricate the debate from this situation 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 two prominent 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 definitions. The second section will briefly discuss the role of folk intuitions in philosophical debates about concepts. 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.

2. Definitions of Lying

What virtually everyone agrees on is that, in order to lie, you have to say something that you believe is false (see Mahon 2008, section 1.2). As George Costanza put it, “it’s not a lie if you believe it.” 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 assert something that you believe to be false with the intent to deceive (see Augustine 1952 [395], 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 assertions that are (a) believed by the speaker to be false and (b) intended by the speaker to deceive their audience straight-forward lies.

However, while the intent to deceive may be a regular feature of lies, it is not clear that it is a necessary one. 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, Stokke forthcoming), 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 and only 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 assert 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 (2006, 296-98) 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, while something along the lines of Carson’s definition is correct, 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. Call these sorts of statements (where the speaker is not in a warranting situation, but believes that he is and asserts 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. For instance, Roy Sorensen (2007, 255) points out that one might say, “*P,* but I am not inviting you to agree with me.” Similarly, Fallis (2009, 49) points out that one might say “*P,* but you know I am really bad with dates and times.” 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 (especially if one intends to deceive), 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 asserting *p* along with some warrant-defeating disclaimer, while believing that *p* is false, *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 well as *bald-faced lies*) as genuine instances of lying.

Several philosophers, pursuing the second option, have recently proposed new definitions that arguably accommodate these problem cases. For instance, according to Sorensen (2007,
255-56), you *lie* if you say something with *narrow plausibility* that you do not believe. According to Fallis (2009, 34), you *lie* if you say something that you believe to be false when you believe that a *conversational norm* against doing so is in effect. And according to Andreas Stokke (forthcoming), you *lie* if you say something that you believe to be false and you propose that it become part of the *common ground*.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Straight-Forward Truth</th>
<th>Straight-forward Lie</th>
<th>Bald-Faced Lie</th>
<th>Proviso Lie</th>
<th>Confused Lie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Definition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson Definition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Definitions</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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3. **Folk Intuitions and Ordinary Usage**

The goal of the philosophers discussed above is, apparently, to find the definition that best captures the *ordinary usage* of the term ‘lying’ (see 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 or theoretical construct specific to debates amongst philosophers and other academics (such as *supervenience* or *validity*); nor is each theorist merely laying out his own idiosyncratic
conception of lying. Only some of these philosophers—namely, Carson (2006, 285) and Fallis (2009, 32)—are explicit that they are after ordinary usage. But none of these philosophers offer any criteria for whether particular cases count as lies beyond their own intuitions as competent speakers of the language. So, we presume, they 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. And if we are interested in capturing ordinary usage, this is an appropriate procedure. After all, 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 (see 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 philosophers 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”). Admittedly, the philosophical utility of experimental philosophy, in general, remains a topic of some debate. The current project, however, is not meant to offer a full-throated defense of the experimental philosophy movement. As such, we will set aside the meta-philosophical issues surrounding experimental philosophy and proceed on the assumption that it has relevance for the present debate.

In fact, Carson (2010, 37) himself admits that work in experimental philosophy could potentially force him to “concede that my definition is inadequate.” In this spirit, we designed a study that consults folk intuitions in order to test the empirical predictions implicit in the two main definitions of lying that have been proposed (viz., the traditional definition and the warranting definition offered by Carson). 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 ultimately want to give up some of our intuitions about cases in a process of reflective equilibrium. 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.

4. 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. And given that lying is a common and salient feature of the social world, we believe it is entirely likely that studying ordinary language will be extremely useful in advancing our understanding of what it means to lie. Presumably, almost everyone has lied and been lied to often enough to be extremely familiar with the phenomenon and to have a sense of what is involved in lying. While a competent speaker could be mistaken about the metallurgic reality of aluminum, it is less clear how one could be similarly confused about social reality. For instance, unlike with the term ‘aluminum’, there is no extrasocial court of appeals for determining the meaning of the term ‘lying’. Given its fundamentally social basis, lying does not seem to be the sort of thing about which people can be systematically mistaken.
Thus, an empirically-informed understanding of how the notion of lying is typically utilized in everyday language can usefully inform our understanding of what constitutes the concept of lying. Moreover, while there may well be a highly-sanitized and sophisticated conception of ‘lying’ with which some philosophers are concerned, as was noted earlier, the philosophers involved in the existing debate are clearly (and often explicitly) concerned with the common-sense notion at play in everyday psychology.

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 (See Coleman and Kay 1981). That is, there may simply be prototypical instances of lying, with other cases falling closer to or further from this prototype.\(^{13}\)

We agree that it is entirely possible that ‘lying’ is such a concept. We also believe, though, that it is still useful 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’ (e.g., features that might pick out what makes a particular lie morally wrong), and which features are more peripheral. Thus, our study is intended to shed light on which definition most closely approximates the operational folk prototype of a lie.

Finally, it should be noted that philosophers who engage in conceptual analysis are not always interested in capturing ordinary usage for its own sake. Even if it does not perfectly capture ordinary usage, each of the 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 (see 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 (see Carson 2006, 292). And indeed, identifying such philosophically useful ramifications may often require the greater expertise of trained philosophers.

However, while the features of lying identified in the traditional definition and in Carson’s definition may be of philosophical interest and import due to their ethical or epistemological ramifications, those features may not be constitutive of the concept (everyday or otherwise) of lying. Investigating the everyday concept of ‘lying’ has the potential to help us identify the feature (or set of features) that does constitute lying. And this constitutive feature (or set of features) may end up revealing new and interesting implications of lying for ethicists and epistemologists.

5. Previous Empirical Research

Interestingly, some empirical work already exists that 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 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 et al. (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. However, what were initially considered pretending vignettes did not contain prototypical features of pretending (e.g., taking on a role to have fun). 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. Indeed, Fallis (2009) interprets this data as evidence of people treating *bald-faced lies* as genuine instances of lying. 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*.
6. New Experimental Data

The 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 one of the new definitions of lying is correct, 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 various definitions in two experiments. Experiment 1 tested (a) the traditional definition’s prediction regarding bald-faced lies and (b) Carson’s prediction regarding proviso lies. Experiment 2 tested Carson’s prediction regarding confused lies.

6.1 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. 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 Arizona (110 female, mean age = 18.94; 103 male, mean age 19.25; 3
did not respond). 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.

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.

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. 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.\footnote{21}

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.

![Figure 1 – Bald Faced Ratings (percentage)](image)

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.

![Figure 2 – Proviso Ratings (percentage)](image)
Ratings for both bald-faced and proviso cases were significantly similar to the ratings for \textit{straight-forward lies} ($m=6.89$). In fact, there were weak but significant correlations between \textit{straight-forward lies} and bald-face cases ($r=0.277(214)$, $p$(one-tailed)$<.0001$) and between \textit{straight-forward lies} and proviso cases ($r=0.171(213)$, $p$(one-tailed)$<.01$).

Figure 3 – Did Agent Lie (mean ratings)

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.

Figure 4 – Did Agent Do Wrong (mean ratings)
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 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.

Following the examples of bald-faced lies in the literature (e.g., Carson 2006, 290, Sorensen 2007, 252), we constructed vignettes where it is clear to both the protagonist and his listener that he is saying something false. For example, the protagonist says to his listener that
he was not at a particular place while his listener is openly staring at a ticket stub or a parking receipt that establishes that the protagonist was there. Thus, the protagonist cannot reasonably hope to deceive his listener about his whereabouts. Instead, the protagonist must have some motivation other than deception for saying something false.

Admittedly, the bald-faced lie vignettes did not explicitly state that the falsehoods were uttered without any intent to deceive. If we had, we essentially would have been asking subjects whether the traditional definition is correct; we would have been eliciting intuitions about the definition itself rather than intuitions about cases. But since we are concerned with identifying the concept of lying commonly deployed by English speakers and not with everyday judgments of philosophical definitions, making the lack of intent to deceive explicit would have served only as a potential experimental confound.

However, since the bald-faced lie vignettes did not explicitly state that the protagonists had no intent to deceive, it is possible that the experimental participants understood the false utterances as attempts to deceive. After all, someone might harbor some small hope of deceiving someone else, even in the face of incontrovertible evidence that he is saying something false. Thus, it might be suggested that our results are consistent with lying, in ordinary usage, requiring an intent to deceive.

Yet, it seems unlikely that all, or even most, of the 98% of participants who judged bald-faced cases to be lies did so in virtue of seeing them as attempts to deceive. 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, seeing them as involving attempted deception is certainly not the most obvious reading. Moreover, our bald-faced lie vignettes are cases in which, at the very least, it is not clear that the protagonist is attempting to deceive. So, while some percentage of
participants might have interpreted the cases as involving attempted deception, it is unlikely that the vast majority of participants interpreted them that way. Thus, our results cast serious doubt on the traditional definition of lying.

Nevertheless, defenders of the traditional definition might still insist that the slim possibility that the protagonist was attempting to deceive was driving the participants’ judgments of these cases as lies. Further studies, in which an intent to deceive is even more clearly ruled out, are needed to more definitively establish that the folk count bald-faced lies as lies.

**Proviso lies**

The findings are equally problematic for the warranting definition of lying offered by Carson. Carson 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.

Much like with the bald-faced lie vignettes, the proviso lie vignettes did not explicitly state that the main character is not warranting the truth of what she says. Instead, following the examples of proviso lies in the literature (e.g., Sorensen 2007, 255, Fallis 2009, 49), we constructed vignettes where the protagonist clearly is not promising that what she says is true. For example, the protagonist denies having done a particular thing by saying something like “I did not do it. Of course, I would not admit it if I had,” or “I did not do it. But I was kinda drunk. So, I could be wrong.”

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Even so, Carson might contend that, while the speaker’s warrant was reduced, it was not eliminated. In that case, the fact that participants rated them to be lies does not undermine Carson’s definition (since they could have been doing so in virtue of the speaker still warranting their false claim to some minimal degree). Further studies, using vignettes in which the speaker’s warrant is even more clearly eliminated, would be needed to more definitively establish that the folk count proviso lies as lies.

However, just as with the *bald-faced lie* vignettes, it seems unlikely that *all*, or even *most*, of the 95% of participants who judged *proviso* cases to be lies did so in virtue of seeing them as involving warranting to some minimal degree. Seeing the proviso vignettes as involving warranting is certainly not the most obvious reading, and, at the very least, it is not clear that the protagonist is warranting. Thus, our results cast serious doubt on Carson’s definition of lying.

### 6.2 Experiment 2

The second experiment was designed to test Carson’s claim regarding *confused* *lies*. More specifically, the goal was to test whether the folk take Fallis’ case 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’s definition and the other definitions of lying 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 Carson’s definition diverges from the other definitions. If Carson’s 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 she really is in a serious context. If the other definitions are right, 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 she is really in a non-serious context. The figure below illustrates the relevant predictions tested in experiment 2.

Figure 5 – Experiment 2 Predictions
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. 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.

![Figure 6 – Did Senator Lie A](image)

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). 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). Statistical analysis revealed that the senator’s belief had a significantly greater impact on ratings than did the actual state of affairs. 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.

Figure 7 – Did Senator Lie B

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 count against Carson’s definition.
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. But 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.

7. 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 the new definitions of lying. The new definitions fit most cleanly with our data. However, our experiments did not determine which of these new definitions comes closest to capturing ordinary usage. In addition,
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 straightforwardly 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 et al. (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. 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.

In addition, someone might worry about whether the intuitions of *our subjects* about *our cases* (e.g., *bald-faced lies* and *proviso lies*) can really tell us anything about the correct definition of lying. As noted above, it is not possible that competent speakers of the language are commonly and systematically incorrect about the ordinary usage of everyday terms like ‘lying’ and ‘knowing’. Even so, someone might worry that the subjects that we selected for our experiments are not competent speakers and, thus, might have incorrect intuitions about ordinary usage. However, there is no particular reason to think that (randomly-selected) undergraduates are not competent speakers of the language. They are unlikely to be competent with respect to
the usage of technical philosophical terms. But again, the project here is to identify a definition of ‘lying’ that best captures the ordinary usage of the term, not the necessary and sufficient conditions of a highly-refined philosophical concept.

Finally, someone might worry that the particular cases that we looked at are marginal or borderline instances of lying about which competent speakers might easily disagree (e.g., because it does not really matter in daily life exactly how such cases are classified). However, our data suggest that there is extremely widespread agreement amongst competent speakers about bald-faced lies and proviso lies. Also, it does seem to matter to people how these cases are classified. Not only do people think that these cases are lies, they think that the liar in such cases is doing something morally wrong. In fact, according to Sorensen (2007), people seem to find bald-faced lies more objectionable than straight-forward (i.e., deceptive) lies.

Thus, the data from our experiments suggest that the new definitions of lying on offer in the philosophical literature do much better at capturing the folk conception of lying than the traditional definition or Carson’s definition. Data from experiment 1 indicate that the folk notion does not comport well 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 well 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. As such, the new definitions of lying seem to comport better with the folk notion than either the traditional definition or Carson’s definition.
Admittedly, our results do not rule out the possibility that lying is a prototype concept. It may be that nothing, strictly speaking, is necessary for lying. That said, while our results suggest that neither intending to deceive nor warranting are necessary for lying, the data leave open the possibility that lying can yet be captured with a concise list of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. In any event, further experiments will be needed to determine which of the new definitions, if any, comes closest to capturing ordinary usage.

8. 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. But philosophical mysteries surrounding lies are not limited to the semantic; there are also moral considerations.32

Our data suggest that the traditional definition of lying is, as the semantic project goes, incorrect. However, it is entirely possible that what makes a given lie morally bad is merely that it is an attempt to deceive.33 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).  

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 (see 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 it may yet be that, *pace* Sorensen, the statements in this large category *are* morally bad simply by virtue of being lies. Even though they are not all intended to deceive, statements that count as lies under the folk conception share other morally problematic features. For instance, according to Carson (2006, 292), bald-faced lies, as well as straight-forward lies, are akin to *insincere promises*. Also, as Marcia Baron (2003, 52) points out, lies can *manipulate* people’s behavior by means of social pressure as well as by means of deception. 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 of lies. Also, further empirical investigation is needed to determine exactly which of these features the folk are reacting to in their moral evaluations of lies.
Appendix A: Sample Materials (See https://sites.google.com/site/lyingexps/ for all stimuli)

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

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 stay home and help her with her homework on Friday instead of going to help his aunt. Susan replies, "Yeah. Peter stayed home to help me with my homework on Friday."

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

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?” Charlie knows that his wife doesn’t approve and will likely leave him if she finds out he’s been betting again. Before Charlie can say anything, Natalie reaches into his coat pockets and pulls out betting tickets from that afternoon’s races. Despite the evidence, Charlie responds, “No, Honey, I wasn’t gambling.”

**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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References


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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 (see 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.
Dictionary definitions typically require that a lie be intended to deceive (see 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.

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.

Carson (2010, 37) has subsequently suggested that his definition might be revised to simply require intending to warrant the truth of what is said. Confused lies would count as lies on such a definition, but proviso lies (see below) still would not.

Carson (2010, 38) has subsequently claimed that, if a speaker does not warrant truth of what is said at all, then she is not lying. But this is just to insist, without argument, that his definition is correct. In a similar vein, defenders of the traditional definition might simply insist that, if a speaker is not intending to deceive at all, then she is not lying.

The traditional definition arguably counts confused lies and proviso lies as lies. But as noted above, it does not count bald-faced lies as lies.

James Mahon (personal communication) essentially agrees that we are concerned with the notion of ‘lie’ as it is used by competent speakers of the language (though he seems to reject that all speakers who use the term are competent).


Alvin Goldman (2007), Antti Kauppinen (2010), Ernest Sosa (2007), and Timothy Williamson (2007), for instance, have all offered strong defenses of philosophical intuition against the apparent challenge of experimental philosophy. In turn, experimental philosophers such as Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols (2008), Thomas Nadelhoffer and Eddy Nahmias (2007), and Stephen Stich (2009), have defended experimental philosophy and offered plausible responses to these criticisms.


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.

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

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.

Similar results have been found in other cultures. In fact, Karol Hardin (2010, 3206) found that, among Spanish speakers in Ecuador, the intent to deceive is, if anything, even less important to whether something counts as a lie.

See his footnote 47.

Students were enrolled in an introductory philosophy 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.

See Appendix A for an example of each version.
The Ten-Item Personality Index (Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann 2003).

To avoid ambiguity, these questions were specifically worded to focus on the false 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?”

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 (see Knobe 2003). Interestingly, there did not seem to be a Knobe effect for intuitions about lying.

In fact, Sorensen (2010, 614) defines bald-faced lies as “lies in which it is common knowledge that the speaker does not believe what he is saying is true.” It is not explicitly part of his definition that such lies are not intended to deceive.

See Appendix A for an example of our bald-faced vignettes.

The only way to completely eliminate this possibility would be to build the definition itself explicitly into the vignette.

Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this potential objection.

One anonymous referee raises the worry that these statements are not adequate, warrant-defeating (or –diminishing) provisos. According to this referee, in order for a proviso to work, the speaker would have to say, e.g., “I would tell you that I didn’t even if I did; and with that said, I didn’t.” This strikes us as an inordinately demanding notion of proviso. Given that proviso cases are meant to be counterexamples to the definition of ‘lying’ as ‘warranting, or guaranteeing, the truth of something that you believe to be false,’ so long as the speaker utters something that precludes a guarantee that their statement is true, it counts as a proviso. It is not necessary for being a proviso that the utterance be a direct contradiction—only that it undermine the warrant of the statement. In other words, a proviso is any utterance attached to the statement P that gives the audience some reason for thinking that P might not be true. We think that “I wouldn’t tell you if I had…” meets that standard.

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.

ANOVA revealed a main effect for belief, $F(1, 204) = 40.887, p < .0001 (MS_{error}=3.579)$, but not for external conditions, $F(1, 204) = 2.412, p > .122$. There was also no interaction effect, $F(1, 204) = 1.21, p > .273$. All p-values adjusted (Sidak) for multiple comparisons.

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

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).

33 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.’

34 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.