

The Many Faces of Lies

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It is rarely difficult to interest the American public in the topic of lying. Occasionally, though, the interest becomes obsessive. The talking heads on television start screaming, every newspaper and magazine is stuffed with stories, it is the buzz around the water cooler and the dinner table, and for a while, it seems that no one can get enough of it. One profoundly important instance of this national preoccupation with lying occurred as the Watergate story unfolded and a stunned citizenry learned that a massive campaign of lies, crimes, evasions, and cover-ups could be orchestrated from the highest office in the land. The Watergate scandal may have marked the end of American political innocence, but it did not mark the beginning or the end of lying in public life.

Lying famously reemerged as political spectacle in the fall of 1998, when President Bill Clinton, under increasing suspicion of having had an affair with the young intern, Monica Lewinsky, looked into the camera and sternly declared, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky.”

At that time, one of the nightly television programs hosting impassioned discussions of the issues of the day was “Hardball with Chris Matthews.” I sat next to former Governor Lowell Weicker as he insisted that “one thing that really has to be thrown out with the rest of the garbage here is people that think that all politicians lie. They do not.” Referring to Clinton’s response to his accusers, Weicker added, “If we accept what’s going on here we’ll admit that lying is a normal part of life in this country.”

In so proclaiming, former Governor Weicker revealed two fundamental beliefs about lying. The first is that people can be separated into those who lie and those who do not. The second is that lying is abnormal, unacceptable, and wrong. Many ordinary citizens share these beliefs with Governor Weicker. A long line of philosophers and theologians over the centuries have also weighed in with dark views of liars and their lies. A contemporary example is the philosopher Sissela Bok (1978), who has proclaimed, “Deceit and violence—these are two forms of deliberate assault on human beings. Both can coerce people into acting against their will” (p. 19).

What was not clear when I first started studying lying as a graduate student in the mid 1970s was whether, from a scientific perspective, either of Weicker’s assumptions was true. There were, of course, plenty of writings about lying in the professional literature and the popular press. In addition to philosophers and theologians, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, educators, and scholars from many other disciplines had also had their say. Within my own field of experimental social psychology, there was a growing stack of published reports on clues to deception and on laypersons’ obliviousness to many of the lies that other people tell them (reviewed early on by DePaulo, Zuckerman, & Rosenthal, 1980, and Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981, then later by many others—e.g., DePaulo, Lindsay, Malone, Muhlenbruck, Charlton, & Cooper, 2003; Vrij, 2000—as the literature continued to grow). But no one had yet laid an empirical glove on the more fundamental questions about the nature of lying in everyday life. How often do people lie? To whom do they tell their lies? Do people lie

more often about some topics than about others? Do certain kinds of people lie more often than other kinds of people?

I began my research on lying in everyday life with a bias—my belief that telling the whole truth is neither possible, nor desirable if it were possible. Even the simplest of questions (e.g., so what did you do today?) can be answered in any number of ways, in any level of detail. That means that all of our presentations of self in everyday life are necessarily edited in some way (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2002). When we are interacting truthfully, we choose the aspects of ourselves to present that are most relevant to the ongoing conversation and our current goals, without any attempt to mislead. Deceptive interactions are often motivated by the same goals as truthful ones. For example, we may want to exchange pleasantries or opinions, create particular impressions of ourselves, reassure others, win friends, or influence people. When these goals can be accomplished without misleading anyone—for example, when the impressions of ourselves that we want to convey are consistent with what we really do think of ourselves, or when the targets of our influence attempts have no reason to want to resist those attempts—then there is no need to deceive. Under less auspicious conditions, however—for example, when we want to claim familiarity with the topic of discussion when in fact we have none, or when the targets of a sales pitch would turn and run if they knew the truth, then it becomes tempting to lie. From this perspective, I expected lying to be a part of everyday life, rather than an extraordinary event. But I still needed the data to show it.

I set out with my students and colleagues to conduct some of the first studies about the place of lying in day-to-day life (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996). In our wildest dreams, we wanted to recruit a nationally representative random sample of Americans. But considering that we were going to ask the participants to write down all of their lies, every day for a week, and turn them in to a team of psychologists, we realized right away (clever researchers that we were) that we would have to begin more modestly. We sought instead to recruit two very different samples of participants, neither of them representative of any definable group, and look for patterns of results across the two samples that might suggest the beginnings of some generalizable understandings about lying.

The people in the first group were 77 college students, 30 men and 47 women who received partial course credit for participating. The participants in the second sample were 30 men and 40 women recruited from the community. They responded to advertisements posted at a local community college, or to letters we sent to people whose names we selected randomly from the telephone directory or from lists of people enrolled in continuing education courses. They were paid for their participation. As we had hoped, the community members were very different, demographically, from the college students. They ranged in age from 18 to 71, and a third of them had no more than a high school education. Most were employed, more than half were married, and nearly half had children.

In a lengthy introductory session, we explained to participants that “a lie occurs any time you intentionally try to mislead someone.” Any deliberate attempts to mislead, whether verbal or nonverbal, were to be recorded. Motive was not to be considered; they were to record even those lies they told for a good reason. We gave them little notebooks to carry with them at all times so that they could make a note of their lies soon after they told them.

The most important entries in the diaries that participants turned in to us were the participants’ descriptions, in their own words, of the lies that they told and their reasons for telling them. For each of their lies, the participants also completed a set of rating scales indicating, for example, how they felt about telling the lie, how much they planned the lie, and the degree to which they regarded the lie as serious. They also recorded the initials of the persons to whom they told their lies.

We tried to create conditions that would encourage participants to tell us all of their lies. For example, we asked them not to include their names on any of their materials. Instead, we collated the materials using identification numbers of the participants’ own choosing. We also noted that if there were any lies or reasons for lying that they did not wish to describe, even anonymously, then they could simply write “rather not say.” That way, we could count the lie without needing to know its precise content. Participants rarely used that option.

It is difficult to make sense of the number of lies people report without also knowing about the number of opportunities they have to tell lies. If, for instance, participants reported telling more lies to friends than acquaintances, we would want to know whether this occurred simply because participants interacted with friends so much more often than they interacted with acquaintances. Therefore, we also asked participants to keep records of all of their social interactions, regardless of whether they had told any lies during those interactions. (To keep the task manageable, we only asked them to record interactions that lasted at least 10 minutes.) Our most important measure of lying was the number of lies told per social interaction.

How Often Do People Lie?

By the end of the week, the 147 participants had recorded a total of 1,535 lies in their diaries (see Table 1). This amounted to two lies a day for the college students, or one lie in every three of their social interactions, and one lie a day for the people in the community, or one lie in every five of their social interactions. Of all of the different people with whom they interacted over the course of the week, the college students lied at least once to 38%, and the community members lied to 30% .

Of the 77 college students, only one claimed to have told not a single lie. Of the 70 people from the community, only six claimed complete honesty during that one week. I thought I knew how many people could make that claim if they recorded their lies for a much longer period of time. And, although the participants in these studies were not politicians, I knew I had a response to Governor Weicker’s insistence that we should

throw out with the rest of the garbage the idea that all politicians lie. Indeed. We should replace it with the presumption that all people lie.

But was Governor Weicker and so many others correct in implying that lying is wrong and unacceptable? Is it reasonable to construe lying as one of the "forms of deliberate assault upon human beings," as did Bok? To consider these question in an informed way, it is important to look closely at the specifics of the lies that people tell.

What Do People Lie About?

The contents of the everyday lies that we collected fit into five categories (see Table 2). People lied about (1) their feelings and opinions; (2) their actions, plans, and whereabouts; (3) their knowledge, achievements, and failings; (4) explanations for their behaviors; and (5) facts and personal possessions.

Of these five topics of lies, the lies about feelings and opinions were the most commonplace for both the college students and the members of the community. Some of the lies in this category that participants recorded in their diaries included the following:

"I told him I missed him and thought about him every day when I really don't think about him at all."

"I told her that she looked good when I thought that she looked like a blimp."

"Exaggerated how hurt I was by a comment."

"Took sides with her when I really thought she was also at fault."

"I was asked whether it bothered me that I am the only one left in the infertility support group who is still trying to get pregnant and I said no."

Aside from lying about their feelings, both the college students and the community members lied most often about their actions, plans, and whereabouts. Here are some examples of such lies:

"Lied about where I had been. Didn't tell them all of the places."

"Told the person collecting for the Heart Association that I had already given that day."

"Said I had been true to my girl."

"Said I sent the check this morning."

Lies about knowledge or lack of knowledge, achievements and accomplishments, and failings and shortcomings also appeared frequently in participants' diaries. Examples included the following:

"Led him to believe I had been a daring ski jumper."

"Tried to appear knowledgeable about operating room procedures when I only knew a little about them."

"I told him I had done poorly on my calculus homework when I had aced it."

"I said I had gained five pounds this weekend and I was fat."

Lies about the reasons or explanations for actions accounted for about ten percent of all of the lies told by the college students and community members. Here are some examples:

"I told everyone at work I was late because I had car trouble."

"Told her I had to quit because my parents want me to."

"Told professor I shouldn't be disturbed while typing due to needing to keep a rhythm. Said I was eccentric that way."

"I told him I didn't take out our garbage because I didn't know where to take it."

Finally, lies about facts and possessions were the least commonplace among the college students, but the community members told such lies more often than they told lies about the reasons or explanations for their behaviors. Examples included the following:

"I said that I did not have change for a dollar."

"Told him my motorcycle belonged to my sister."

"Told him my father was an ambassador."

The lies I have presented so far are just a sampling of the hundreds of lies participants recorded in their diaries, but they are not unrepresentative of the entire pack of lies that we collected. There was a smattering of lies more serious than these, but they were the exceptions. I will present many more of our findings before returning to the question of the acceptability of lying. My first impression upon reading all of the diaries, though, was that it would be a stretch to equate these kinds of lies with violence or evil.

How Do Liars Justify Their Lies?

Our participants seemed untroubled by their lies. Although they did report feeling a bit more distressed while telling their lies than they had felt just before, their overall levels of discomfort were low. They did not put much planning into their lies, they generally did not regard their lies as serious, and they claimed that it was not all that important to them to avoid getting caught telling their lies. Participants thought that the targets of their lies were fooled by the lies at the time that they heard them. A week later participants reported that, so far as they knew, most of their lies remained undetected. At that point, the participants also noted that if they could relive the interaction in which they told their lies, they would still tell more than 70 % of them. In fact, participants even suggested that they were protecting their targets (as well as themselves) with their lies, by claiming that both they and their targets would have felt worse if the truth had been told instead of the lie (see Table 3).

Participants' claims about protecting the targets of their lies were recorded on the rating scales we provided. Even more telling indications of the ways in which participants justified their lies were their open-ended descriptions of their reasons for telling each of their lies. These reasons could potentially be coded into innumerable categories, and at first, we preserved many distinctions. Ultimately, however, our judgments were

consistent with those of scholars dating back centuries, who underscored the distinction between self-serving motives and other-oriented motives as the most important one.

Self-centered lies are lies told to protect or enhance the liars psychologically, or to protect or promote the liar's interests. Self-centered lies told for psychological reasons are often told to protect the liars from embarrassment, disapproval, or conflict, or from getting their feelings hurt. The more instrumentally oriented self-centered lies are told in the service of the liar's personal gain or convenience. Both the college students and the people from the community told more self-centered lies for psychological reasons than for reasons of personal gain or convenience. Here are some examples of self-serving lies and the corresponding reasons recorded in participants' diaries:

Lie: "Lied about why we moved back to Virginia. I said we decided for my husband to leave his last job. Actually, he was fired."
Reason: "Embarrassment."

Lie: "Saw some people while running. They were impressed with my running. I appeared nonchalant, while actually I was quite proud."
Reason: "To impress them."

Lie: "Told her I couldn't babysit for her because I had to go somewhere."
Reason: "Did not want to babysit. Her kids are brats."

Other-oriented lies are the complement of self-centered lies. They are also told for reasons of psychological protection or advantage, but the person protected or advantaged is not the liar. Liars telling other-oriented lies are trying to spare other people from embarrassment, disapproval, conflict, or from getting their feelings hurt. They also tell such lies in the service of other people's gain or convenience. At least from the liars' point of view, these are kind-hearted, altruistic lies. Here are some examples:

Lie: "Told her she looked well, voice sounded good, when in fact, she looks less well than a few weeks ago."
Reason: "Not to add worry as she undergoes chemotherapy treatments."

Lie: "After sex, I pretended to have experienced orgasm."
Reason: "Didn't want to hurt my husband."

Lie: "I told her she should have a lot of confidence because she was pretty."
Reason: "Because she was in a depressed state because she broke up with her boyfriend."

Are liars serving their own interests with their lies? Overall, the participants in both samples were about twice as likely to tell lies that were self-serving than to tell lies that were other-oriented (see Table 4). However, this telling of disproportionate numbers of self-serving lies occurred only when men were involved as liars or targets. When

women lied to other women, they were just as likely to be telling kind-hearted lies as self-serving ones.

What Kinds of People Tell Lies Most Readily?

I have claimed that Governor Weicker was wrong in suggesting that people could be tossed into one of two moral bins, one for the people who are honest and the other for the liars. However, I do think that people can be placed on a continuum of readiness to lie. Over the course of the week of self-observation, the college students told up to 46 lies, and the community members told as many as 30. Perhaps, then, the people who lie more readily than others are the ones who should be thrown out with the garbage.

Debby Kashy and I did think that people who told greater numbers of lies may indeed be different kinds of people than those who told fewer lies, and so we asked the participants in both samples to complete a variety of personality scales before they recorded any of their lies. To test the dark view of liars as unsavory sorts, so we included two scales measuring manipulateness, Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970) and Social Adroitness (Jackson, 1976), as well as a scale assessing the converse characteristic of Responsibility (Jackson, 1976). If people who lie more readily than others are in fact willing and able schemers, then we should find that manipulative people tell relatively more lies, and responsible people tell fewer. Our self-presentational perspective is a bit less damning. Rather than claiming that people who lie a lot are people who just do not care about others, we instead maintain that they do care, perhaps a bit too much. What they care about is what other people think of them. To test this, we included scales measuring Public Self-Consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) and Other-Directedness (Briggs, Cheek, & Buss, 1980). We also thought that people who tell a lot of lies may be especially sociable, because some of the goals that motivate lying, such as making a good impression and flattering others, may be especially important to people who like to spend time with other people. Therefore, we also included scales assessing Extraversion (Briggs et al., 1980) and Social Participation (Jackson, 1976).

Our results showed that liars come in all of the predicted varieties (see Table 5). People who tell many lies are in fact more manipulative and irresponsible than people who tell few lies. They also care deeply about what other people think of them, and they are more extraverted.

Rush Limbaugh Finds the Root of Our Society's Moral Decay, and I'm It

One day in the summer of 1998, the conservative and highly opinionated talk show host, Rush Limbaugh, opened a segment of his television show with the following proclamation:

“I made a prediction not long ago in the heat of one of the controversies surrounding the President. I said, look, over the course of this year we’re going to hear

how everybody lies, it ain't any big deal. Therefore, Clinton is nothing special. And I'm making a joke! I make joke predictions about these people all the time. And they come true!"

He then held up an issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, in which one of my diary studies was published, and elicited derisive laughter from his studio audience as he quoted me as saying, "Most people think lying is manipulative and exploitative...but those lies are not the most common ones. More often, people lie to enhance their self-esteem, to get others to like them or respect them and to spare other's feelings...Being honest all the time is not a great idea because the truth often hurts." Actually, he had the wrong issue of the journal, and those words never appeared in it, but as a paraphrase of what I really did think, it was close enough.

Continuing, he added, "I don't know if this is coordinated with, with the Clinton administration, I doubt that it is. But this is just the classic example of the moral decay and the evaporating fiber of our society... It's what Moynihan called 'defining deviancy down'. We got all sorts of problems out there and after fighting them for years and years and we decide we can't solve it, we'll just say, hey, that's normal!"

Lowell Weicker wanted to toss me out with the rest of the garbage for believing that all politicians lie. Now Rush Limbaugh was holding me up as a classic example of the moral decay and evaporating fiber of society. It was turning out to be a rough year.

Much as I dislike Rush Limbaugh and virtually all of his opinions, I must admit that the question he raised is not unfair. If everyone lies (as I believe they do), then does that mean that lying is acceptable?

Is It OK to Lie?

The question of whether it is acceptable to lie is a difficult one for someone such as myself who has worked for several decades as a social scientist. I like to answer questions with data, and this question demands something more. I will get to that something more, but first, I want to see whether I can squeeze some hints out of the data my colleagues and I have collected. Because the studies I have described so far are not experiments, hints are all they can provide.

One way to approach the acceptability issue is to ask whether lying seems to be linked to good or bad outcomes. The diary studies offer some tentative answers to this question. The participants in those studies recorded all of their social interactions, regardless of whether or not they had lied during those interactions. They also rated the pleasantness and meaningfulness of each of their interactions. Participants generally described their interactions as pleasant, and as slightly more meaningful than superficial. However, these positive qualities were less in evidence in social interactions in which the participant had lied than in those in which the participant had told only the truth. In this way, then, the little lies of everyday life did seem to leave a bit of a smudge.

The participants in the diary studies also noted that they felt a bit more uncomfortable while they were telling their lies than they had just beforehand. Again, levels of discomfort were slight, even when participants were lying. But the faint stain left by the lies was still discernible.

There was another hint from the diary studies that participants were not completely at ease with the telling of their lies, however mundane those lies may have been. Participants seemed to shy away from telling their lies in face-to-face interactions. When we looked at the percentage of all conversations in which no lies were told that were conducted face-to-face, and compared it to the percentage of all dishonest conversations that were conducted face-to-face, more of the honest conversations than the dishonest ones were in person. However, when we looked at a more distant modality (i.e., telephone), we found the opposite: A greater percentage of the dishonest conversations than of the honest ones took place out of sight of the other person.

If people are not completely at ease with the telling of even the little lies of everyday life, then we might find that they allot their lies accordingly, doling out fewer to the people they care about the most. That is in fact what we did find. Both the college students and the community members told fewer everyday lies (per social interaction) to the people to whom they felt closer (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998).

We found that closeness was linked to lower rates of lying when we averaged across all of the different kinds of everyday lies that our participants had told. When people talk about issues of honesty, however, they often distinguish between their altruistic lies and their self-serving lies. In fact, in our introductory sessions with our participants in the diary studies, in which we tried to explain to them what kinds of communications should count as lies, we found that it was especially important to underscore the point that altruistic lies are indeed lies. Those participants, like so many other people with whom I have had engaging conversations about lying, sometimes argue that if they told a lie for a good reason, then it wasn't really a lie. Although I disagree with them on definitional issues, I do think it is worthwhile to ask whether people are as reluctant to tell altruistic lies as self-serving ones to the people they care about the most.

They are not. When we looked separately at the rates of telling self-serving compared to altruistic lies, we found, for example, that people told fewer self-serving lies to friends than to acquaintances or strangers (the same pattern we had found when we did not distinguish among types of lies) but that they told more altruistic lies to friends than to acquaintances or strangers.

It is to our close relationship partners, then, that we are especially likely to claim, falsely but reassuringly, that they did the right thing and we know just how they feel. We are relatively more likely to tell puffed up tales of our own accomplishments, or devious untruths designed to dodge obligations and unpleasanties, to those outside of our close social circles.

All of the suggestions I have offered so far about the nature and acceptability of lying have been based solely on my studies of lying in everyday life. In those diary

studies, participants described each of their lies, and reasons for telling their lies, in just a sentence or so. Most of the lies they recorded did seem to be of little moral consequence, perhaps undeserving of any extended discourse. But interspersed here and there in the diaries were some lies that seemed much more ominous, and I wanted to know a whole lot more about those.

Are Serious Lies Different From Everyday Lies?

The next set of studies, then, would focus specifically on the most serious lies in people's lives. My colleagues Matthew Ansfield, Susan Kirkendol, Joe Boden, and I wanted people to tell us, in their own words, about the most serious lie anyone ever told to them and the most serious lie they ever told to anyone else. (We let them make their own judgments as to seriousness.) Then we wanted them to answer a long series of questions about the experiences they described. As with the study of everyday lies, we would have loved to recruit a random sample of Americans to participate, but we were no more deluded about the prospects this time than we were before. So we again set out to recruit college students, who described 128 serious lies, and people from the community, who described 107 such lies (DePaulo, Ansfield, Kirkendol, & Boden, 2003). Once again, the community members were, demographically, a more diverse set of people than were our college students. They ranged in age from 19 to 84. Sixty percent were married, ninety percent were employed, and twenty-nine percent had no more than a high school education.

The 235 serious lies seemed to us to cover a wide spectrum of seriousness, but there was little doubt that these lies, on the whole, were far more serious than were most of the lies described in the diary studies. By their own ratings, the participants agreed. The mean rating on a 9-point scale (with 9 indicating greatest seriousness) was 6.8 for these serious lies, compared to 3.2 for the everyday lies.

The content of the serious lies was telling, too. In categorizing the lies by content, we did not try to retain the same categories used in the everyday lies studies, but instead used the categories that emerged from the data. We identified eight content categories (see Table). Among the most common varieties of serious lies were lies about affairs or other romantic cheating. These ranged from a lie about time spent with a former girlfriend to a lie maintained by a clergyman, professor of religion, and father of five about an affair with a secretary that lasted 15 years. Nearly as common as lies about affairs were lies about misdeeds, such as the lies told by the participant who denied giving out drugs on a high school field trip, then lied on his college application about having been suspended for it. Other serious lies were about feelings or personal facts (e.g., a lie about a miscarriage); forbidden socializing (e.g., describing plans to spend the night babysitting instead of attending the forbidden school dance); money or jobs (e.g., investing money in the stock market after promising to save it for a down payment on a home); death, illness, or injury (e.g., a parent or grandparent's serious illness is misrepresented to a teenager); identity (e.g., lies about frequenting a bar for gay men); and violence or danger (e.g., a lie told by a commanding officer who claimed that there were no enemy in a village he knew to be heavily defended). Even when the categories

were similar across the two sets of studies, the specific entries in those categories were markedly different. In the everyday lies studies, for example, the category of lies about feelings included the lies told to hide the offense taken at a casual comment, and feelings of fatigue feigned to excuse an early departure from a boring party. In the serious lies studies, the category was more likely to include the profession of love declared in wedding vows.

We were able to sort the serious lies into the same two broad categories of motives, self-centered and other-oriented, that we used to classify the everyday lies (see Table 7). The proportions of these two kinds of motives, however, were vastly different in the two sets of studies. Whereas about 25% of the everyday lies could be categorized as kind-hearted (or other-oriented), only 10% of the serious lies fit the same description. The other 90% of the serious lies were self-serving (compared to about half of the everyday lies; the other everyday lies were neither kind-hearted nor self-serving).

I noted earlier that in our studies of everyday lies, we found that people are reluctant to tell their boastful, though largely inconsequential self-serving lies to the targets of their fondest affections. Perhaps it should then follow that people will also want to spare those close relationship partners from the most serious and shattering lies. Maybe the most hurtful lies are volleyed at the most despised persons known to the liars. Before my co-authors and I had collected people's stories about their most serious lies, some colleagues had argued for that possibility, citing, for example, the vicious lies told by cutthroat competitors in the workplace. We did find a few such lies in the stories we gathered. But they were far outnumbered by the serious lies hurled to and from the closest of relationship partners. Nearly two-thirds of the most serious lies that participants recounted were told either to or by parents, spouses or other romantic partners, best friends, or children.

Why spare the people we care about from the usually insignificant self-serving lies of everyday life while stunning them with the most serious ones? A big part of the answer, I think, can be found in what it is that people are trying to hide with their lies. In the everyday lies studies, participants filled their diaries with ordinary concerns, such as failing to win the enthusiastic praise of a teacher or finding themselves out of the loop about an interesting new development at work. Hiding such minor setbacks, or feelings about them, from a close relationship partner would probably be a greater threat to the relationship than would telling the truth about them. Owning up to them could even add to the feelings of closeness in the relationships.

The truths that are hidden by serious lies, however, are made of sterner stuff. The lies that our participants regarded as the most serious ones in their lives were often told to conceal matters such as affairs, car accidents, excessive drinking, shoplifting, and injuring a child in a fit of rage. Admitting these truths could threaten valued relationships, including relationships with the persons to whom the truths are acknowledged. These truths, if revealed, could also endanger the liar's reputation and livelihood.

Lies are told to close friends, lovers, parents, and children, and by Presidents to the entire American public, not because the liars do not care about the targets of their lies or what those targets think of them, but because they do. In fact, the higher the expectations of others for our own virtuous behavior, and the more important it is to us to maintain our honor in their eyes, the more likely it may be that we will lie to them to cover our failings (cf. Millar & Tesser, 1988).

We say that we do not want the most important persons in our lives to lie to us. But more than that, I think we want them to refrain from behaving in ways that would tempt them to lie to us (cf. McCornack & Levine, 1990). We want the people we care most about to be people who do not cheat, do not make promises they cannot honor, do not claim more than they deserve, and do not squander our investments or our trust. We want them to be free of the frailties that make all of us human. This is a wish that can never come true.

We can try to behave in ways that bring out the best in others, so that they will only infrequently be tempted to lie. When they do fall short of our expectations, though, their honesty in admitting as much may depend on the reactions they expect from us (cf. Saxe, 1991). If we characteristically play the role of the wounded victim or the enraged tyrant, they may well be hesitant to own up to the truth. We can thereby protect ourselves from hearing about their bad behavior at the cost of being the target of their lies. The challenge is to be sufficiently understanding of ordinary human failings that others can admit to them, while still maintaining standards of integrity and discernment.

Should We Refrain From Telling Even Kind-Hearted Lies?

Morally, the domain of serious lies is in many ways the least ambiguous. Personally, I know I would like to avoid behaving in ways that would tempt me to tell serious lies, and I would like others to do the same. Most often, we do succeed. Lies that people regard as serious seem to be told infrequently.

The little self-serving lies of everyday life are a bit stickier. They are just so easy to tell, and yet not quite as easy to justify. Feeling embarrassed about sleeping through your alarm? Say you got stuck in traffic. Did you get caught saying something controversial or just stupid? Clarify what you “really” meant. Questions from my research life about the acceptability of these kinds of lies have set up shop in the rest of my life and won’t go away. I used to tell these kinds of lies without a whole lot of thought or regret. Now, I more often catch myself before I do, and tell the truth instead. Sometimes I will admit to embarrassing truths even before I am backed into a corner. A few years before I started my diary studies, during a semester when I was teaching a graduate course in research methods, I called my dentist to tell him about an especially bad toothache. He asked me if the gum was swollen. I touched it, and reported that I wasn’t sure. He then suggested that I touch the gum on the other side of my mouth for comparison. Then I died of humiliation. Or would have, had he known that I taught a graduate course in research methods. I remember thinking how mortified I would have

felt if any of the students in my course overheard that conversation. Now when I teach that course, I tell that story on the first day. It usually gets a laugh. But telling those kinds of truths does have its costs. The students may conclude that I am indeed stupid. So in these kinds of situations, in which I am tempted to tell a small self-serving lie, neither the truth nor the lie automatically wins. It is always a battle.

For a while, I had similar internal skirmishes over the telling of altruistic lies. Compared to the time in my life that preceded my career as a scholar of lying, I became much more aware of my inclination to say something untrue in order to spare someone else's feelings. I also saw more clearly that it was I who was presuming to know what the other person would want to hear. This particular lesson was hard to escape. Sissela Bok emphatically underscored the differences between the liar's point of view and that of the target of lies in her philosophical writings on lying (Bok, 1978), and Anne Gordon and Art Miller built a similar argument with data (Gordon & Miller, 2000). So I tried to figure out how to tell tactful truths instead of reassuring lies. In the midst of this personal honesty project, my mother wanted to give me a ring of hers that was beautiful, but too ornate for my own tastes. I told her, truthfully, that I thought it was beautiful but that because it was so ornate, I did not think I would wear it very often. My mother successfully survived the adolescent years (and all of the other ones) of her four children, so I doubt that she was scarred by my rejection of her ring. But the memory still bothers me. I continue to be more aware of my supposedly altruistic lies than I was in my pre-research life, but I probably do not tell them any less readily than I did before. I am a fan of David Nyberg and his wonderful book, The Varnished Truth. In a chapter entitled, "Truth-telling is morally overrated," he poses these questions: "Your two closest friends offer to tell you, with unchecked candor and without regard for your feelings, everything they think about you. Would you want them to do it? These two friends ask you to do the same for them. Would you?" (1993, p. 8-9). Case closed.

Not everyone agrees. When I tell people that I study lying, some reply, with great pride, that they simply do not lie. Some will back off from that claim once I explain that any communication meant to mislead is a lie, even if, ironically, it is literally true. A few others will offer concessions when I add that there are no exemptions for good intentions, that altruistic lies are still lies. For those who do not concede even then, I might tell my story about the ring. If that fails, I bring up the lie (described earlier) told to the person undergoing chemotherapy treatments. Would they really tell that person that she looks less well than she had two weeks before? They try to convince me of the value of being the person others know they really can trust to tell them the truth. It is a standoff. After a few such conversations, it became clear to me that it was time to collect some data.

Kathy Bell and I tried to recreate in the laboratory just the sort of situation that would cast participants into a lie-telling dilemma: one in which they might not want to lie, but telling the truth could hurt another person's feelings (Bell & DePaulo, 1996; DePaulo & Bell, 1996; see also Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990). The way we did this was to bring a participant into a room we had set up like an art gallery. The participant, with no one else present, was asked to look at the paintings and choose the two she liked the most and the two she liked the least. Then she indicated, in writing,

what she liked and disliked about each of the four paintings. Only after she had done so did she learn that she would then discuss some of the paintings in the gallery with a woman who was introduced as an art student (but who, in two of the three studies, was actually a confederate). We also told the participants that we would never show the art student the comments they had written about the paintings, and in fact we never did.

The most telling moment occurred when the art student referred to one of the two paintings the participant hated the most, and said, "This is one that I did. What do you think of it?" In each session, the art student also claimed that one of the participant's favorite paintings was her own work. The participant's other two choices (one liked and one disliked painting) were attributed to other artists and were also discussed.

The first thing we wanted to know was how often the participants would tell outright lies. In the psychologically easy situation, in which the art student claimed to have created a painting that was one of the participant's favorites, we did not expect any of the participants to do anything so perverse as to claim that they disliked the painting. And in fact, no one did. Nor did anyone claim to dislike the painting they really liked when it was created by a different artist. Instead, about 80% of the participants honestly and explicitly stated that they liked the painting that they really did like, regardless of whether it was the art student's work or the creation of a different artist (see Table 8).

But what about the more interesting situation in which the participant really hated the artist's work? If the participants were to be as forthcoming about their feelings about the disliked paintings as they were about their feelings about the paintings they liked, then they should honestly and explicitly say that they disliked the paintings about 80% of the time. Instead, when the paintings the participants despised were the art student's own work, they only admitted explicitly to disliking the work half that often. Sixteen percent of the time, they told a bald-faced lie: They explicitly claimed to like the painting of the art student's that they actually loathed.

The 16% of the participants who told an outright lie about the painting they disliked to the creator of the painting who was sitting right in front of them were the only participants to tell blatant lies. In a sense, then, maybe all of those people who insist that they would not lie in this situation (or any other) are correct--if, and only if, lying is defined very narrowly as explicitly stating the exact opposite of what you really believe is so. But I think that any communications deliberately designed to mislead should count as lies, and by that criterion, there appeared to be plenty. What the participants in the art studies seemed to be doing was finding ways to mislead the artist that could be defended as truthful. They were trying to get by on technicalities.

The strategy we least anticipated is one we now think of as conveying positive evaluations by implication. Participants seemed to use what they said or did not say about the other artist's work, relative to what they said or did not say about the present artist's work, to imply a relatively positive evaluation of the present artist's work. Here's an example of what I mean. I have already noted that only 40% of the participants explicitly admitted that they disliked a painting that was the artist's own work. In comparison, 64%

of them explicitly said that they disliked a painting that was the work of a different artist. Analogously, whereas 16% of the participants told a kind-hearted outright lie about a painting they hated that was the work of the artist right in front of them (claiming that they liked it), no one did the same when the painting had been created by some other artist. Many of the artists who may be wondering what the participant really does think of their paintings can say to themselves, “Well, she said that she disliked the other painting that I did not create, and she did not say that she disliked mine.” The artist can then infer that the participant likes her work, but the participant lets herself off the moral hook on the technicality that she did not actually say as much.

The strategy Kathy Bell and I did expect participants to use was to exaggerate or understate the aspects of the paintings that they really did like or dislike. In fact, that is why we asked participants to write down the aspects they liked and disliked before they even knew they would be meeting an art student—so we would have the evidence we needed to catch them in the act. (Also, less interestingly, we wanted to be sure they listed equal numbers of liked and disliked aspects of the paintings that would be described as the artist’s own work, compared to the paintings to be described as the work of another artist. Fortunately, they did.) When participants discussed paintings they disliked that were not created by the artist with whom they were interacting, they mentioned an average of four aspects they liked and five they disliked. They thereby indicated that they disliked those paintings more than they liked them. However, when the paintings they disliked were the work of the artist in the room, participants mentioned only three disliked aspects, but twice as many liked ones. This strategy of amassing misleading evidence also nicely fits the criterion of defensibility, at least in participants’ minds. They could tell themselves that they were not lying when they mentioned all of those liked aspects of the paintings they disliked; after all, there were some aspects of the disliked paintings that they really did like. They could also reassure themselves that there was nothing dishonest about not mentioning all of the aspects of the paintings that they disliked; after all, they were not claiming to like those aspects, they were simply refraining from mentioning them. I don’t buy it. By mentioning so many more liked aspects than disliked ones of the paintings they hated when they were the artist’s own work, at the same time that they mentioned more disliked than liked aspects when the paintings they hated were the work of another artist, the participants were, I believe, deliberately trying to mislead the artist. They were subtly lying.

There are many interesting implications of the ways in which participants handled the sticky situation we created for them as they interacted with the art students. Here I will mention two of my favorites. First, I think the participants’ strategy was quite impressive, and far more imaginative than any my conversationalists and I ever dreamed up as we argued over whether anyone ever really does negotiate such situations without lying. I think what the participants did was to give the artist the choice as to what to believe. If the artist wanted to believe that the participant really did like her painting (the one the participant actually hated), she could note that the participant mentioned twice as many aspects she liked about the painting than ones she disliked. She might also notice that the participant never explicitly said that she disliked the painting, when she may have done so when discussing one of the other paintings (the disliked one painted by the other

artist). However, if the artist was willing to hear what the participant really did think, she could have figured it out. She could have noticed, for example, that even though the participant did not explicitly say that she disliked the painting, she did not say that she liked it, either. Chances are, the artist did hear the participant say quite explicitly that she did like two of the other paintings that were discussed (the two she really did like). Further, the lopsided listing of six liked aspects, compared to only three disliked aspects, would not have been so convincing when compared to the even more lopsided listings ticked off in the descriptions of the paintings the participant really did like. In those discussions, the participants described even more liked aspects and even fewer disliked ones.

The second implication is for our understanding of former President Clinton's infamous denial: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." Rush Limbaugh notwithstanding, I have never had any conversations with President Clinton, nor have I ever coordinated my research with him. But I do have a guess as to what he was doing with that statement. He was saying that only a particular act "counts" as sexual relations, and he did not perform that act with Monica Lewinsky. Therefore, his statement was defensible as the truth and he was not lying. This sort of verbal ploy has since been dubbed "Clintonesque," but I think it is "humanesque." In spirit, it is no different from the strategy used by the participants in the art study who mentioned twice as many aspects they liked than aspects they disliked when discussing a painting they hated with the artist who created it. Both Clinton, and the participants in the art studies, were deliberately misleading their audiences. In my eyes, they were all lying, but in theirs, they were not.

It Is Not Just About Lying

With our cynical words and soft hearts, we seem to cry out for honesty from our political leaders. There is a popular joke about how we can tell when politicians are lying ("they are moving their lips") that may have been mildly amusing the first time but by now is more like a cliché. We sneer at that witticism at the same time that we fall for the movies and television shows about the fictional candidates who really do tell the truth.

But consider this snapshot from the aftermath of the presidential election of the year 2000. That, of course, was the election that was not definitively decided until months after Election Day. Vice President Al Gore won the popular vote, but Governor George W. Bush was declared the winner of the critical electoral vote after legal brawls clamored all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court.

Just days after the resolution of the long, bitter, contentious, and still-controversial process, Richard Gephardt, the leader of the House Democrats, appeared on the widely watched NBC Sunday morning news program *Meet the Press*. Here is an excerpt from that show (in Barry, 2000, p. 4):

"So George W. Bush is the legitimate 43rd president of the United States?" asked the host, Tim Russert.

“George W. Bush is the next president of the United States,” Mr. Gephardt answered.

“But is he legitimate?” Mr. Russert pressed. “Is he?”

After some momentary filibustering, Mr. Gephardt answered: “He is the president of the United States.”

Days later, Gephardt clarified what he really believed—that Bush was indeed a legitimate president (Barry, 2000). I do not believe he really felt that way. But the pressure was on. Tim Russert was pushing him, and then public sentiment was doing the same. What they were pushing him to do was to lie. Lie so the nation can heal. Lie so we can all move forward.

The same public that snickers at the joke about the politicians moving their lips, the same public that laps up fanciful tales of political candidates who cannot tell a lie, was now insisting that Gephardt do just that.

Are we all just hypocrites or intellectual lightweights who cannot keep straight what we really *do* want? I don’t think so. It is easy to condemn lying when we ponder it as if it were an independent moral issue, in a world apart from all others. But it is not. Yes, we care about honesty. And we should. But we also care about healing, and we *should* care about that, too. We can disagree about whether a particular lie or a particular truth will mend our wounds, but we are likely to agree that somehow, our wounds should be tended so that we can face the future with less pain.

When people tell even more altruistic lies to their friends and intimates than to acquaintances and strangers, I do not think they are (just) saying that certain kinds of lies really are acceptable, and even worthy, when told to the people they love. I think they are saying that sometimes other values matter more than scrupulous honesty. Showing that we care about other people’s feelings, that important people in our lives have earned our loyalty, and that we value the sentiments that motivate their ill-conceived attempts at kindness (e.g., the disappointing gifts) are all, to some people, legitimate contenders for the moral high ground. We can argue about whether those other values really do trump the value of honesty. In doing so, we have already won, by opening our minds.

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Table 1

Number of Everyday Lies, Social Interactions, and Interaction Partners

	College (N = 77)	Community (N = 70)
Total number of lies (across all participants)	1,058	477
Mean number of social interactions per day	6.6	5.8
Mean number of lies per day	2	1
Mean number of lies per social interaction	.3	.2
Mean number of interaction partners	15	14
% of partners to whom at least one lie was told	38	30
Number of participants who told no lies	1	6

Note. From DePaulo et al. (1996). Copyright 1996 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted by permission.

Table 2

Contents of Everyday Lies: Percentages in Each Category

	College	Community
Feelings and opinions	37	30
Actions, plans, and whereabouts	27	28
Knowledge, achievements, and failings	16	17
Explanations for behaviors	10	11
Facts, personal possessions	9	15

Note. Entries are the percentage of all lies that fit into each category (e.g., of all of the lies told by the college students, what percentage were lies about feelings and opinions?). For the college students, the standard deviations were 26 for feelings and for actions, 17 for knowledge, 15 for explanations, and 13 for facts. For the community members, the standard deviations were 30 for feelings, 27 for actions, 25 for knowledge, 15 for explanations, and 23 for facts. From DePaulo et al. (1996). Copyright 1996 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted by permission.

Table 3

Participants' Descriptions of Their Everyday Lies

Description	College	Community
Discomfort before the lie	3.6	4.1
Discomfort during the lie	4.1	4.7
Discomfort after the lie	4.0	4.5
Planning of the lie	3.0	3.1
Seriousness of the lie	3.3	3.1
Importance of not getting caught	4.0	4.1
Target seemed to believe the lie	6.7	6.8
Liar is protecting the target	5.8	6.0
Liar is protecting her/himself	5.5	5.5
Was the lie discovered? (%)		
No	59	57
Don't know	16	23
Yes	23	15
Would the liar tell the lie again? (% yes)	73	82

Note. The first nine items were rated on 9-point scales, with higher ratings indicating more of the quality. All ratings were made by the liars (participants). The percentages in the three subcategories of discovery (no, don't know, yes) do not sum to 100 because the percentages were computed for each participant and then averaged across participants. From DePaulo et al. (1996). Copyright 1996 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted by permission.

Table 4

Reasons for Telling Everyday Lies: Percentages in Each Category

Liars and targets of lies	College		Community	
	Self-centered	Other-oriented	Self-centered	Other-oriented
Men lying to men	66	8	57	19
Men lying to women	58	18	51	23
Women lying to men	50	22	59	18
Women lying to women	35	35	43	42
Overall	45	26	57	24

Note. Entries are percentages within each category (e.g., among men lying to men in the college student sample, 66% of the lies were self-centered and 8% were other-oriented). Not included in the table are the percentages of lies that were neither self-centered nor other-oriented. From DePaulo et al. (1996). Copyright 1996 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted by permission.

Table 5

Personality Correlates of the Rate of Telling Everyday Lies

		College		Community		
Personality Characteristic		r	p	r	p	Combined p
Manipulativeness						
	Machiavellianism	.12	.31	.23	.06	.039
	Social adroitness	.30	.01	.24	.05	.001
Responsibility		-.16	.17	-.16	.20	.058
Concern with self-presentation						
	Public self-consciousness	.12	.29	.26	.03	.023
	Other-directedness	.08	.51	.40	.001	.004
Sociability						
	Social participation	.10	.39	.14	.24	.15
	Extraversion	.18	.11	.20	.10	.023

Note. From Kashy & DePaulo (1996). Copyright 1996 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted by permission.

Table 6

Content of the Serious Lies: Percentages in Each Category

	College	Community
Affairs	23	22
Misdeeds	20	23
Personal facts or feelings	21	16
Forbidden socializing	15	6
Money, job	2	21
Death, illness, injury	9	3
Identity	4	7
Violence, danger	6	4

Table 7

Percent Who Explicitly Said That They Liked or Disliked the Paintings

	Disliked Paintings		Liked Paintings	
	Professed liking	Professed disliking	Professed liking	Professed disliking
Not special (other artists' work)	0	64	83	0
Special (artist's own work)	16	40	79	0

Note. Entries are from DePaulo and Bell (1996), the condition in which participants received no special instructions as to honesty. Copyright 1996 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted by permission.