

# You Liar! Attributions of Lying

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## Abstract

Language is vastly important in shaping cognitions. The word “liar” is used in a variety of social contexts and deception literature, eliciting numerous images, and is rarely the object of research. Two studies explored how people think of the social cognitive label of “liar.” In Study 1, the actor-observer difference in the liar attribution was examined, in how people view their own lying compared to others’ lies. Additionally, attitudes and acceptability of self and others’ lies were investigated. In Study 2, the liar attribution was examined across various types of lies. Results indicated that people judge others to be more deserving of the liar label than one’s self and others lie based on their disposition. Additionally, people held more negative attitudes toward others who lie but were more accepting of others who lie.

## Keywords

liar, lying, attribution, actor-observer difference, attitudes, acceptability

When asked to think about a “liar” a variety of images or words may come to mind. One image that may not immediately come to mind is your own. Words and cognitions are closely connected, with thoughts shaping the words people use and language influencing thinking (Beck, 2011; Whorf & Carroll, 1998). The label of “liar” is likely to be used when thinking about others’ lying behaviors. For example, when other people tell lies, they are “liars.” On the other hand, attributions about one’s own lying behavior may be situationally explained not as lying but rather doing good for others or sparing others’ feelings. Thinking of oneself as a “liar,” after having told a lie, may

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elicit cognitive dissonance and disrupt the positive self-image of being a good and moral person (Aronson, 2019; Festinger, 1957). Thus, the term “liar” may be more easily attributed to others rather than one’s self.

There has been a vast amount of deception research and literature focused on understanding lies and liars (see Levine, 2020; Vrij, 2008). Vrij (2008) advanced a definition of deception, in that it is “a successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue” (p.15). To discern lying from deception, Hart (2019) defined lying as “a successful or unsuccessful deliberate manipulation of language, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue.” Both of these definitions focus on behavioral components of deceit and lying rather than the sender.

The term “liar” has often been used as a classification in deception literature rather than an object of study. The Global Deception Research Team (2006) discussed beliefs and stereotypes of “liars,” referring to the beliefs held about others who lie. Sometimes deception literature categorizes people as liars or truth-tellers based on whether the person tells a lie within an experimental manipulation (e.g., Ask et al., 2020; Deck & Paterson, 2020; Leal et al., 2018). However, other authors have referenced “people who lie as senders-recognizing that they do not invariably lie. Often, they tell the truth” (Bond & DePaulo, 2008, p. 478). The word “liar” is used to mean many things, from a person who has been experimentally asked to lie to categorizing people who volitionally lie across situations.

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to discussing the lexical and conceptual semantics and perspectives of lying and liars (see Bok, 1999; Martin 1970; Meibauer, 2018). The Liar paradox has been a specific area of interest for philosophy, psycholinguistics, and logic, in examining the apparent contradiction of statements such as, *this statement is false* (Martin, 1970). Martin (1970) credits the Liar paradox to the writings of Paul, stating “One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons’” (Titus 1:12, English Standard Version). Martin’s (1970) concern is that a Cretan who is always a liar is stating that Cretans are always liars, which ostensibly negates the claim. Martin (1970) appears to assume that always being a liar means that one is lying always. However, the aforementioned could very well be a classification used to explain the nature of group of people who lie with a relatively greater frequency, as liars. Being a liar does not necessarily mean that lies are spewed out every time a person’s mouth opens. Some authors conflate the number of people who lie with the relative frequency of lying behavior, erroneously concluding the ubiquity of deceptive behavior (see Curtis et al., 2021).

The one general commonality found in using the term “liar” is that it usually refers to others. Only thinking that others are “liars” showcases moral hypocrisy (Batson & Thompson, 2001; Batson et al., 1999). Most people have told at least one lie in their life, lying for the first time usually around the age of three (Sodian, 1991; Talwar & Lee, 2002). If “liars” are distinguished by whether someone has ever told a lie, then most people would be “liars.” Though it is not clear that most people would refer to themselves as “liars.” However, if people are deemed “liars” based on the relative

frequency of lying behavior, then most people may not be viewed as “liars.” Research on lying frequency has offered some insight into categorical distinctions that help classify types of “liars.” Serota et al. (2010) and Serota and Levine (2015) distinguished normative lying from prolific liars, with the latter being a smaller group of people who tell five or more lies within a 24-hour period. Building upon the prolific liar distinction, a recent study revealed pathological lying as another classification (Curtis & Hart, 2020). Pathological liars told an excessive number of lies, like prolific liars, but unlike prolific liars, their lying resulted in impaired functioning, distress, and put them or others in danger (Curtis & Hart, 2020). The specificity in language and categorical classifications help improve conceptual representations of lying behavior and types of “liars.”

Lies and “liars” have a deep history, often viewed very negatively. The code of Hammurabi deemed liars who made false accusation worthy of death (King, 2008). Biblically, the Lord hates a lying tongue and the devil is referred to as a liar and the father of lies (Proverbs 6:16-19, John 8:44, English Standard Version). Even Aesop’s (1793) *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* conveys the moral imperative of honesty and liars deserving of being eaten by wolves. Many philosophers have dedicated substantial time and writings over the use of deception and warnings against lying and liars (e.g., Aquinas, 1485/1947; Aristotle, 1941; Bok, 1999; Kant, 1797/1996). It is not surprising that thinking of “liars” may elicit a “cultural stereotype of liars as cold and exploitative” (DePaulo et al., 2004, p. 147). People hold negative attitudes toward others who lie (Curtis & Hart, 2015). Lie acceptability, which has been defined as attitudes toward lying, can fluctuate based on the type of lie told, seriousness of the lie, and relational context (Dunbar et al., 2016; Oliveira & Levine, 2008). Dunbar et al. (2016) distinguished intergroup and interpersonal deceptions and found that people rated altruistic and less serious lies as more acceptable than self-serving serious lies. A study that asked 1,345 participants across seven countries to rate acceptability of other people telling lies in vignettes found that other-oriented lies in private life contexts were rated as the most acceptable (Cantarero et al., 2018). However, when asked to rate the acceptability of being the target of deception, Hart et al. (2014) found that people are less accepting of being told lies than telling lies within intimate relationships. Thus, people may be accepting of others’ lies when it situationally produces good and when they are not the target.

When evaluating the beliefs, attitudes, and acceptability of lies or “liars” the focus is often on others. There has been ample evidence that demonstrates people tend to judge others’ behaviors differently than their own, more likely to attribute behavior of others to dispositional factors (Kelley, 1967; Ross, 1977). People are less likely to think of themselves as “liars” and may hold fewer negative attitudes about their own lies and greater acceptability for telling a lie if it were situationally influenced or believed to result in a favorable outcome. Relatively little research has explored social cognitive attributions related to lying behavior. O’Sullivan (2003) is among the first to examine how the fundamental attribution error (FAE) affected people’s judgments in detecting deception. Her results indicated that the FAE heuristic is employed by less accurate observers when detecting deception, in that attributing dispositional

attributes of trustworthiness to others leads to judgments of honesty. While O'Sullivan examined social cognitive aspects of deception, it was primarily with the goal of advancing detection literature.

How people generally think about lying behavior, specifically their own and others, has largely remained unexamined. Much of the lie acceptability and attitudes toward deception research has asked participants to evaluate others' deceptive behavior, directly or through vignettes, or rate general acceptability of lying (e.g., Curtis & Hart, 2015; Dunbar et al., 2016; Oliveira & Levine, 2008). The Revised Lie Acceptability Scale was constructed to assess general attitudes toward lying through a message selection task to rate other's lying (Oliveira & Levine, 2008). Some deception literature has found discrepancies between self and others with regards to lying. For example, parents tend to strongly teach their children to be honest while they lie (Heyman et al., 2009). Within intimate relationships, people tend to view their own deception as more justified than their partner's use of deception (Hart et al., 2014). Thus, a discrepancy is evidenced between how people think about others' lying behaviors and their own behavior.

Jones and Nisbett (1972) suggested an actor-observer difference, in which people tend to make a FAE toward others' behaviors and explain their own through external causes. As an actor a person would view their own behavior as situationally influenced, lying to avoid a socially awkward situation. As the observer a person may view others' lies as dispositional, or lying because they are malicious. While literature has alluded to differences in how people view the use of lying, an experimental manipulation of self or other as "liar" has remained unexamined when investigating how people use the label of "liars."

## Study I

The purpose of the current study was to explore the actor-observer difference in attributions made about lying behavior, exploring how people view their own lying compared to others' lies. The first research question investigated whether the attribution of "liar" was attributed to others more than oneself, predicting that people would rate others more as "liars" compared to their self. Additionally, whether participants attribute the motivations to lie (e.g., self-oriented, other-oriented, and relational) differently when thinking about others lying compared to evaluating one's own lying was explored. It was predicted that people would rate others as telling lies for self-oriented reasons. The second research question examined whether dispositional attributions would be made more for others' lying compared to one's own lying behavior, predicting that people would judge others' lying behaviors to be more dispositional and harmful than their own behavior. The last research question explored the attitudes and acceptability of lying for others compared to oneself, predicting that people would hold more negative attitudes toward others who lie and judge their own lying behavior as more acceptable compared to others' lying behavior.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at a southwestern university. A total of 215 participants were recruited. Two participants did not complete any information beyond the demographics and were removed from analyses, resulting in 213 participants. Participants ranged in age, from 18 years old to 46 years old ( $M=19.74$ ;  $SD=3.28$ ). Most participants were female (72%) and slightly over half (54%) were classified as freshmen. The majority of the sample was Caucasian (49%) or Hispanic (34%).

### Measures

The current study utilized five instruments: Demographics Questionnaire, Liar Attribution Form-Self (LAF-S), the Liar Attribution Form-Other (LAF-O), Revised Global Attitudes of Deception (RGAD), and the Revised Lie Acceptability Scale (RLAS; Oliveira & Levine, 2008). The LAF-S and LAF-O included items based on correspondent inference theory (Jones & Davis, 1965) and Revised Casual Dimension Scale (McAuley et al., 1992), which were designed to measure attributions made about self and others and when lying (see Appendix A). Internal consistency reliability for the LAF-S ( $\alpha=.79$ ) and LAF-O ( $\alpha=.76$ ) was acceptable. The RGAD scale included 11 revised items adapted from the Therapists' Attitudes Toward Deception scale-Global Attitudes (TATDS;  $\alpha=.65$ ; Curtis, 2013). The items were revised to read as attributes for self (you are 1=not very successful, 7=very successful) or others (this person is 1=not very successful, 7=very successful). The internal consistency reliability for the RGAD was acceptable ( $\alpha=.78$ ). The lie acceptability items from the RLAS ( $\alpha=.83$ ) were modified in the current study to read for self or others with acceptable internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha=.66$ ).

### Procedure

The study was approved by an institutional review board. Based on the IRB, participants have been deidentified and data is available upon request. A link to the study was posted through a departmental research administration system. Participants were able to select a link that took them to the study and presented them with an informed consent. After providing consent, the participants were asked to complete the demographic questionnaire. Then participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: self-condition or other-condition. The self-condition had a prompt that read *you tell a lie to another person*, whereas the other-condition prompt stated *a person tells a lie to another person*. Participants assigned to the self-condition were asked to complete the LAF-S, RGAD, and adapted RLAS. Participants assigned to the other-condition were asked to complete the LAF-O, RGAD, and adapted RLAS. Following the completion of the measures, participants were debriefed.

## Results

### *Self or Other as “Liar”*

An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare ratings of self or others being “liars.” A statistically significant difference was found between conditions ( $t(209) = -2.94, p = .004, d = 0.40$ ). Participants indicated that another person who lied is a “liar” ( $M = 4.90, SD = 1.66$ ) more so than referring to their self as a “liar” ( $M = 4.17, SD = 1.96$ ). Further, a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted across the three motivational items, with self-condition and other-condition as the between groups variable, revealing significance ( $F(2,207) = 3.54, p = .031, \eta_p^2 = .03$ ). Univariate analyses revealed significance only with the relational motivation question ( $F(1,208) = 6.06, p = .015, \eta_p^2 = .03$ ). Participants indicated that motivation to lie for relationships was greater for others ( $M = 4.72, SD = 1.57$ ) compared to self ( $M = 4.17, SD = 1.64$ ).

### *Attributions*

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted across attributional items comparing the LAF-S and LAF-O, finding a statistically significant effect ( $F(15,171) = 4.81, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$ ). Univariate analyses revealed that others’ lies were attributed more to being freely chosen, an aspect of who they are, being influenced by others, accidental, and more socially undesirable (see Table 1).

### *Attitudes and Acceptability*

An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare the differences between ratings of attitudes on the RGAD. A statistically significant difference in participants’ attitudes was found between conditions ( $t(202) = -2.25, p = .03, d = 0.32$ ). Participants held more negative attitudes toward others who lie ( $M = 48.63, SD = 7.84$ ) compared to participants’ attitudes toward their own lying behavior ( $M = 45.91, SD = 9.35$ ). Contrary to the hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test revealed that lying was more acceptable for others ( $M = 27.34, SD = 4.57$ ) than the self ( $M = 23.11, SD = 8.46; t(160) = -4.46, p < .001, d = 0.59$ ).

## Discussion

The current study directly speaks to O’Sullivan’s (2003) call for more research exploring the role of cognitive heuristics within deception. Findings indicate the social cognitive label of “liar” is attributed more to others than the self. Moreover, participants made more dispositional attributions for other people who lie compared to evaluating one’s own lies. Thus, the current study found the actor-observer difference (Jones & Nisbett, 1972) in people’s attributions about lying behavior. Specifically, others are more likely to be labeled as “liars” and others’ lying behaviors tend to be attributed to dispositional factors (e.g., personality; selfish; manipulative). In turn, the FAE may be

**Table 1.** Univariate Analyses of Attributional Items Comparing Conditions.

Item	Cond.	Mean	SD	N	Sig.	$\eta_p^2$	Diff.
Your lie reflects an aspect to yourself.**	Self	3.41	1.05	95	<.001	.07	O>S
The person's lie reflects an aspect to themselves.	Others	3.67	0.80	92			
Other people influenced you to lie.**	Self	2.77	1.06	95	.005	.04	O>S
Other people influenced this person to lie.	Others	3.37	0.96	92			
You accidentally lied.**	Self	2.69	1.07	95	.01	.04	O>S
The person accidentally lied.	Others	3.21	1.07	92			
Your behavior is considered socially undesirable.**	Self	2.28	0.96	95	.01	.04	O>S
The person's behavior is considered socially undesirable.	Others	2.49	1.10	92			
Your lie was freely chosen.**	Self	3.49	1.02	95	.02	.03	O>S
The person's lie was freely chosen.	Others	3.86	1.12	92			
You intentionally lied.	Self	3.67	1.08	95	.34	.01	Ns
The person intentionally lied.	Others	3.67	1.05	92			
If your lie was accidental, then it was due to the situation.	Self	2.95	1.10	95	.36	.01	Ns
If the person's lie was accidental, then it was due to the situation.	Others	2.69	1.19	92			
You lied in order to benefit yourself.	Self	3.23	1.25	95	.06	.02	Ns
The person lied in order to benefit themselves.	Others	3.08	1.06	92			
Your lie is something you have no power over.	Self	3.54	0.94	95	.10	.01	Ns
The person's lie is something they have no power over.	Others	2.02	1.05	92			

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

Item	Cond.	Mean	SD	N	Sig.	$\eta_p^2$	Diff.
Your lie was caused by something outside of yourself	Self	3.06	1.05	95	.12	.01	Ns
The person's lie was caused by something outside of the person.	Others	3.17	1.23	92			
Your lie was caused by something about you.	Self	3.74	0.91	95	.68	.001	Ns
The person's lie was caused by something about them.	Others	3.45	1.12	92			
Other people made you lie.*	Self	2.99	0.91	95	.04	.02	S>O
Other people made this person lie.	Others	2.50	1.09	92			
If your lie was intentional, then it was due to your personality.**	Self	3.82	0.97	95	.001	.05	S>O
If the person's lie was intentional, then it was due to his or her personality.	Others	3.74	1.01	92			
You lied in order to harm others.**	Self	3.16	1.16	95	<.001	.20	S>O
The person lied in order to harm others.	Others	3.05	1.21	92			
You lied in order to have an impact on others.**	Self	3.51	1.04	95	<.001	.08	S>O
The person lied in order to have an impact on others.	Others	3.28	1.15	92			

Note. S = self condition; O = other condition.

\*Significance at  $p < .05$ . \*\*Significance at  $p < .01$ .



made when determining the veracity of others' statements, as people may have a difficult time discerning when a trustworthy person is lying or when an untrustworthy person is being honest (O'Sullivan, 2003).

Half of lies told are self-oriented, 25 percent are other-oriented, and 25 percent are both (or relational; DePaulo et al., 1996). In the current study, the perceptions for motivations did not differ for each group across the three categories. Between groups there was one area of discrepancy, in that participants indicated others were more likely to lie for the relationship (self and others) compared to participants who evaluated their own lies. It could be that others, viewed more as "liars," would be more likely to lie for multiple people (self and others) due to their disposition.

People also held more negative attitudes toward others who lie than toward the self. These findings may be related to lying being generally judged as immoral and the negative attitudes that people hold toward others who lie (Curtis & Hart, 2015). Another possibility of holding more negative attitudes toward others who lie could be due to the costs of telling lies or that lies tend to affect trust within a relationship (DePaulo et al, 2003; Möllering, 2009; Schweitzer et al., 2006). The consequences of being the target of deception can be perceived more negatively than rationalizing one's own use of deception.

Contrary to the hypothesis about acceptability, participants were more accepting of others telling lies compared to their self. This may be indicative of a standard that people have for themselves about telling lies, in which people generally view themselves as good, honest people. Thus, telling lies would be less acceptable for an honest person than for others, who are judged to be "liars." Another possibility is that others' lies may be permissible in some situations, where it serves a public good or protects other people (Lindsay & Walters, 1983). Participants in the current study were asked to rate the acceptability of lying for others and not asked to rate the acceptability of being lied to by others. Specifically, the prompt for the other-condition stated that *a person tells a lie to another person* rather than *a person tells a lie to you*. Being the target of deception may have altered the acceptability. Acceptability of others' lying behaviors may depend on the situational and relational context. Future research may explore this area to determine what situational factors change lie acceptability. This finding also has implications for using the revised lie acceptability scale, in that researchers may want to consider using the respective RLAS for studies based on people evaluating their own acceptability of lying or the acceptability of others' lying behavior.

While this research contributes to understanding of how people think about the label "liar," there are some limitations. As previously mentioned, participants were intentionally asked to rate either their own lies or others who lie to another person. A manipulation of self as target was not introduced. Having people think of others lying to themselves may have led to more of an attribution of "liar" for these individuals and less acceptability of those lies. Another limitation of the current study is that not all types of lies (e.g., white lies, falsifications, etc.) were presented. While the intent of the current study was to broadly ask people to think of self or others telling a lie and assess attributions of "liar," how people think about specific types of lies could shed light on more nuanced aspects of the social cognitive label of "liar."

## Study 2

A second study was conducted to specifically address some of the limitations from Study 1. A manipulation of self as the target was created to evaluate others' lying behavior, speaking to the limitation from Study 1. To examine the other limitation in Study 1, attributions were examined across types of lies, consequences of lies (serious versus not serious), and lying in various relationships. It was predicted that participants would indicate that others are more deserving of the "liar" label than oneself across lie types. As white lies and less consequential lies are generally deemed more acceptable (Dunbar et al., 2016) than other types of lies or serious lies, it was predicted that the label of "liar" would less likely be attributed to white lies compared to other types of lies. The third research question consisted of whether the "liar" label was more likely to be attributed to serious lies, predicting that "liar" would be attributed more to others who tell serious lies. Lastly, attributions of "liar" was explored for people telling lies across various relationships. There is mixed evidence about the frequency of lying behavior across relationships. Some research indicates that people tell fewer lies to those who are emotionally close (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), other findings suggest more lies are told to family members and friends compared to strangers (Serota et al., 2010; Serota & Levine, 2015), and some research indicates no difference on relationship type (Dunbar & Johnson, 2015). Due to people believing that total honesty is a vital and virtuous component of romantic relationships (Boon & McLeod, 2001) and the negative consequences of telling lies within close relationships (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), it was predicted the label "liar" would be attributed more to those who lie to family members compared to other types of relationships.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 213 participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at a southwestern university. There were 23 participants who did not complete information beyond the demographics information and were not included in analyses, resulting in 190 participants. Participants ranged in age, from 18 years old to 52 years old ( $M=20.32$ ;  $SD=4.00$ ). Most participants were female (84%) and representing various academic classifications: freshmen (31%), sophomore (31%), junior (21%), and senior (16%), and post-baccalaureate (1%). The majority of the sample was Caucasian (50%) or Hispanic (36%).

### *Measures*

The study used some of the instruments from Study 1: the demographics questionnaire, Liar Attribution Form-Self (LAF-S), the Liar Attribution Form-Other (LAF-O). Additionally, these forms were used across various types of lies. The types of lies used, along with corresponding definitions, were: white lies, exaggerations, omissions/concealment, commission/fabrications, and embedded lies (see Verigin et al., 2019). Along with types of lies, participants were asked to make attributions about serious

**Table 2.** Attribution of “Liar” across Types of Lies between Conditions.

Condition	Types of lies	Mean	Std. error
Self	White lie	3.25	0.17
	Exaggerations	3.26	0.17
	Omissions/ Concealment	3.58	0.18
	Commission/ Fabrications	3.60	0.18
	Embedded lies	3.75	0.17
	Others	White lie	4.25
Exaggerations		4.25	0.18
Omissions/ Concealment		5.64	0.19
Commission/ Fabrications		6.00	0.19
Embedded lies		5.54	0.18

and non-serious lies. Lastly, participants were given prompts about lying in various relationships: family, friends, work or business contacts, people not known but seen occasionally, and total strangers (see Serota et al., 2010; Serota & Levine, 2015).

### Procedure

The study was approved by an institutional review board. The procedures were similar to that of Study 1, in which participants were randomly assigned to self-condition or other-condition. The self-condition was the same as in Study 1, where the prompt was *you tell a lie to another person*. However, to address the concern of rating others' deceptive behavior with self as target, the other-condition prompt read as *someone lies to you*. Participants were asked to rate how much the target is a “liar” (e.g., I am a liar or this person is a liar) and motivations for lying in both conditions. Following the completion of the measures, participants were debriefed.

## Results

### Attributions across Lie Types

A repeated-measures MANOVA was conducted to examine attributions across lie types, with types of lies as the repeated measures variable and condition (self and other) as the between groups variable. Results revealed a statistically significant change across types of lies ( $F(4,179)=21.28, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.32$ ) and between conditions ( $F(4,179)=7.82, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.15$ ). Pairwise comparisons revealed that the attribution of “liar” was greater for the other-condition ( $M=5.14; SE=.13$ ) compared to the self-condition ( $M=3.49; SE=.13; p<.001$ ). Partially supporting Hypothesis 2, the “liar” label was attributed less to white lies and exaggerations for both conditions (see Table 2).

**Table 3.** Means and Standard Deviations of Attributions of Motivations.

Motivation	Lie type	Cond.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Self-oriented	White lie	S	4.28	1.58	98
		O	4.57	1.45	84
	Exaggeration	S	3.69	1.79	98
		O	4.75	1.51	84
	Omissions/Concealment	S	4.05	1.92	98
		O	5.79	1.30	84
	Commission/Fabrication	S	3.65	2.04	98
		O	5.88	1.26	84
	Embedded lie	S	4.06	1.85	98
		O	5.67	1.24	84
Other-oriented	White lie	S	4.70	1.59	98
		O	4.61	1.37	84
	Exaggeration	S	3.87	1.63	98
		O	3.83	1.49	84
	Omissions/Concealment	S	3.81	1.81	98
		O	3.96	2.13	84
	Commission/Fabrication	S	3.24	1.81	98
		O	3.67	1.95	84
	Embedded lie	S	3.66	1.75	98
		O	3.73	1.93	84
Relational-oriented	White lie	S	4.62	1.58	97
		O	4.90	1.44	86
	Exaggeration	S	3.74	1.62	97
		O	4.12	1.48	86
	Omissions/Concealment	S	3.78	1.86	97
		O	4.31	1.89	86
	Commission/Fabrication	S	3.15	1.79	97
		O	4.22	1.77	86
	Embedded lie	S	3.70	1.73	97
		O	3.87	1.83	86

A repeated-measures MANOVA, with types of lies and orientation as the repeated measures variables and condition as the between groups variable, revealed statistical significance ( $F(8,166)=3.35, p=.001, \eta_p^2=.14$ ). Significance was found for self-oriented lies across types of lies and between conditions ( $F(4,177)=12.07, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.21$ ). Overall, participants indicated that self-oriented lies were told more by others ( $M=5.33; SE=.13$ ) than their self ( $M=3.95; SE=.12; p<.001$ ). Commission/fabrications and omissions/concealment were rated more as self-oriented than other types of lies (Table 3). Significance was also found for relationally-oriented attributions ( $F(4,178)=3.40, p=.01, \eta_p^2=.07$ ). White lies were attributed as the most relationally-oriented (Table 3). No significance was found in rating other-oriented lies across lie types and between conditions ( $F(8,166)=3.35, p=.001, \eta_p^2=.14$ ).

**Table 4.** Pairwise Comparisons of "Liar" Attribution for Relationships.

Relationships	Mean	SD		Mean diff.	Std. error	Sig.
Family	4.74	1.74	Friends	-0.13	0.09	.14
			Work	0.187	0.09	.04
			Acquaintance	0.615	0.13	<.001
			Strangers	0.402	0.13	.002
Friends	4.86	1.73	Family	0.13	0.09	.14
			Work	0.314	0.10	.002
			Acquaintance	0.741	0.11	<.001
			Strangers	0.529	0.12	<.001
Work	4.54	1.95	Family	-0.187	0.09	.04
			Friends	-0.314	0.10	.002
			Acquaintance	0.427	0.10	<.001
			Strangers	0.22	0.12	.07
Acquaintance	4.12	2.02	Family	-0.615	0.13	<.001
			Friends	-0.741	0.11	<.001
			Work	-0.427	0.10	<.001
			Strangers	-0.212	0.09	.02
Strangers	4.33	2.07	Family	-0.402	0.13	.002
			Friends	-0.529	0.12	<.001
			Work	-0.22	0.12	.07
			Acquaintance	0.212	0.09	.02

### Serious Lies

A mixed ANOVA was conducted to examine seriousness, with serious lies as the repeated measures variable and condition (self and other) as the between groups variable. Results revealed a statistically main effect across seriousness of lies ( $F(1,185)=27.08, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.13$ ). Additionally, an interaction effect was found across seriousness of lies between conditions ( $F(1,185)=30.98, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.14$ ). Specifically, the label of "liar" was attributed mostly to others who tell serious lies ( $M=6.28, SD=.99$ ), compared to others telling non-serious lies ( $M=4.78, SD=1.61$ ), one's self telling serious lies ( $M=4.01, SD=2.34$ ), and one's self telling non-serious lies ( $M=4.06, SD=1.84$ ).

### Attributions across Relationships

To examine attributions made in relationships a repeated-measures MANOVA was conducted, with relationships as the repeated measures variable and condition (self and other) as the between groups variable. A statistically significant change across relationships was found ( $F(4,178)=11.17, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.20$ ), with an interaction between conditions ( $F(4,178)=4.09, p=.003, \eta_p^2=.08$ ). Overall, the "liar" label was attributed to others ( $M=5.14, SE=.17$ ) more than the self ( $M=3.97, SE=.17; p<.001$ ). Thus, "liar" was attributed to family and friends more than other relationships (see Table 4).

## Discussion

Study 2 provided further evidence of attributional differences in rating self and others as a “liar.” Overall, other people were deemed “liars” more so than rating one’s own lying behavior across various types of lies, consequences of lies, and within different relational contexts. The consistent attributional label of “liar” for others more than oneself when evaluating lying behavior supports the notion of an actor-observer difference (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). Even when others use white lies and exaggerations, which receive the “liar” label less than other types of lies, they are still judged as a “liar” more than when a person evaluates their own use of white lies. Thus, a person who uses white lies, typically seen as less serious and more acceptable (Dunbar et al., 2016; Oliveira & Levine, 2008), is still regarded as a “liar.”

The attribution of motivational orientation varied for some types of lies. While DePaulo et al. (1996) found that half of lies told tend to be self-oriented, people tend to attribute some lies as self-oriented over other types of lies. Specifically, lies of commission/fabrication and omission/concealment were judged as more self-oriented, whereas white lies were attributed to be told for both parties. Thus, outright telling a fabrication or hiding information tends to be regarded as more self-oriented. White lies, such as telling someone you like their new haircut when you do not, tends to be thought of as a means to benefit a relationship. However, research has indicated that white lies are negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Kaplar, 2006; Kaplar & Gordon, 2004).

The seriousness of a lie revealed the same findings, in that others were rated more as “liars” specifically when the lie was serious. Others may be judged as “liars” more so when telling serious lies because of the consequences that serious lies tend to have on relationships, as they are often told in close relationships, less forgivable, and damage trust (DePaulo et al., 2004; Möllering, 2009; Schweitzer et al., 2006).

Lastly, relational context evidenced the same pattern of others receiving the label of “liar” more, specifically when others lied to family and friends. This finding may be related to the value of honesty within intimate relationships and emotional closeness compared to social or vocational relationships (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Robinson et al., 1998; Vrij, 2000). When people think about others lying to friends and family, they may think about being on the receiving end of a lie and judge others as more deserving of label of “liar.”

## Conclusion

Bok (1999) eloquently stated that “there is an initial imbalance in the evaluation of truth-telling and lying. Lying requires a reason, while truth-telling does not.” (p. 22). Thus, when someone lies, there must be a reason. For others, the reason is that they are simply “liars.” However, the reasons that someone thinks about why they lied could involve a number of situational nuances, typically serving others or a situation. Additionally, “liar” has a longstanding history with negative connotations (e.g., Aesop, 1793; King, 2008; Proverbs 6:16-19, English Standard Version). In fact, Study 1 revealed that while negative attitudes are held more for others who are “liars” it was also more acceptable for others to tell lies than oneself. Thinking of oneself as a “liar”

would produce a moral hypocrisy, cognitive dissonance, and a discrepant perspective (Batson & Thompson, 2001; Batson et al., 1999; Bok, 1999; Festinger, 1957).

Most interactions are honest and most people hold a default position of honesty toward others (Levine, 2014; Vrij, 2000). However, people refer to others as “liars” when they tell a lie, making dispositional trait attributions to describe a situational experience. In the current studies, when asking people to think about self or others telling a lie, the “liar” label was ascribed to others more so than the self across lies, seriousness of lies, and within relational contexts. The attribution of others as “liar” is strong. Researchers and scholars who use the label of “liar” should be more intentional in communicating whether they mean a sender of a lie, a person who has lied at least once, a prolific liar, or pathological liar. Parsing out these differences and keeping in mind that people think differently about the word “liar” will benefit research and scholarship.

The actor-observer difference in attributions about lying behavior offers reasons for lying behavior, others lie because they are “liars” and you lie for some good reason. While arguably more cognitively taxing, thinking of other reasons people lie may be useful. Bok (1999) made a case for people to learn to shift back and forth from the perspective of “liar” and the perspective of the deceived to think more clearly and to guide decisions about truth-telling made in everyday life.

## Appendix A

### *Liar Attribution Form-Self*

- 1—Very untrue of what I believe
- 2—Untrue of what I believe
- 3—Somewhat untrue of what I believe
- 4—Neutral
- 5—Somewhat true of what I believe
- 6—True of what I believe
- 7—Very true of what I believe

### *You tell a lie to another person*

1. You are a liar.
2. You lied for yourself.
3. You lied for the other person.
4. You lied for yourself and for the other person.

Based on telling a lie to another person, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements based on the scale provided:

- 1—Strongly disagree
- 2—Disagree
- 3—Neither agree nor disagree
- 4—Agree
- 5—Strongly agree

Your lie was freely chosen.  
 You intentionally lied.  
 If your lie was intentional, then it was due to your personality.  
 You accidentally lied.  
 If your lie was accidental, then it was due to the situation.  
 Your behavior is considered socially undesirable.  
 You lied in order to benefit yourself.  
 You lied in order to harm others.  
 You lied in order to have an impact on others.  
 Your lie reflects an aspect to yourself.  
 Your lie is something you have no power over.  
 Other people made you lie.  
 Other people influenced you to lie.  
 Your lie was caused by something outside of yourself  
 Your lie was caused by something about you.

### *Liar Attribution Form-Other*

1—Very untrue of what I believe  
 2—Untrue of what I believe  
 3—Somewhat untrue of what I believe  
 4—Neutral  
 5—Somewhat true of what I believe  
 6—True of what I believe  
 7—Very true of what I believe

#### *A person tells a lie to another person*

1. This person is a liar.
2. This person lied for their self.
3. This person lied for the other person.
4. This person lied for themselves and for the other person.

Based on a person telling a lie to another person, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements based on the scale provided:

1—Strongly disagree  
 2—Disagree  
 3—Neither agree nor disagree  
 4—Agree  
 5—Strongly agree

The person's lie was freely chosen.  
 The person intentionally lied.  
 If the person's lie was intentional, then it was due to his or her personality.  
 The person accidentally lied.



If the person's lie was accidental, then it was due to the situation.  
The person's behavior is considered socially undesirable.  
The person lied in order to benefit themselves.  
The person lied in order to harm others.  
The person lied in order to have an impact on others.  
The person's lie reflects an aspect to themselves.  
The person's lie is something they have no power over.  
Other people made this person lie.  
Other people influenced this person to lie.  
The person's lie was caused by something outside of the person.  
The person's lie was caused by something about them.

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