*The Oxford Handbook of Lying* by Jörg Meibauer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780198736578.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# 1. INTRODUCTION

When I say that everyone lies, I do not say anything shocking or make an overstatement. Probably everyone would agree that everyone who has the capacity to communicate lies, and that they themselves have lied. But what do people mean when they say that we all ‘lie’? And what are the consequences, moral and epistemic, of having ‘lied’ to someone? When one lies, does one assert something one believes to be false, or has one merely misrepresented oneself in some sense? Do all liars intend to deceive? Should we always blame them for their behaviour? Can one lie unintentionally? Can my smile lie? Do numbers ever lie? These are just some of the important questions we have been trying to resolve for centuries now.

Jörg Meibauer’s impressive *The Oxford* *Handbook of Lying*, which belongs to the *Oxford Handbooks in Linguistics* series, offers answers (or informative reviews of answers provided elsewhere) to many of these questions. Fifty-two authors contributed to this edition, which is divided into five parts. Each part deals with a general theme and, as Meibauer’s *Introduction* reveals, each theme has been carefully planned and well thought out. With this book, another impressive volume has been added to the growing body of research on lying and deception. Other works that deserve a mention are Timothy R. Levine’s edited *Encyclopedia of Deception* (2014), Jörg Meibauer’s *Lying at the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface* (2014), Marta Dynel’s *Irony, Deception, and Humour* (2018), Andreas Stokke’s *Lying and Insincerity* (2018), Eliot Michaelson and Andreas Stokke’s edited *Lying: Language, Knowledge, Ethics, and Politics* (2018), and Tony Docan-Morgan’s edited *The* *Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication* (2019).

For me, the Handbook was a very exciting read. Not so much because it introduced me to a great variety of new arguments, which is something a handbook should not do in the first place, but because it provided so many different perspectives on lying. This book reminded me of a commercial I remember from when I was a child in 1980s, a chain of shopping malls had the slogan ‘Everything for someone and something for everyone.’ Likewise, in Meibauer’s Handbook, one can find all kinds of interesting and important things. Someone will find everything they need, while everyone will surely find something they need. However, it is worth pointing out that, because scholars from so many disciplines contributed to this book, and because they use different methodologies, assumptions, working hypotheses, and terminologies, it was sometimes difficult to follow particular scholars’ analyses.

In this review, I will provide a short summary of some of the book’s chapters. The sheer length of the book prevents me from including a short summary of every chapter. My review has the following structure. In the next section, Section 2, I will critically engage with some chapters. In Section 3, I will provide a brief overview of chapters that I think members of the general public or those who have just started to analyse lies should read. Here, I will also present some chapters that I personally find interesting. Finally, in Section 4, I discuss some chapters whose arguments need to be clarified, or whose conclusions should be taken with a grain of salt.

# 2. CHAPTERS THAT I CRITICALLY ENGAGE WITH

Matthew Benton’s *Chapter 9* defends a particularly interesting account of lying according to which liars must assert what they believe that they know is false, rather than what they merely believe to be false, and must represent themselves as knowing that what they assert is true. I am genuinely convinced that this account can explain some cases better than its rivals, the belief- or credence-based analyses, of lying (see below), but I do have some important concerns, of which I will mention three.

My first concern is that this proposal does not count as lying asserting what one believes to be false, if one’s assertion turns out to be true (i.e., unbeknownst to the asserter). Benton appeals to studies that support his view, but these studies are very problematic (see, Wiegmann, Samland, and Waldmann 2016; Marsili 2016: §9.3; Wiegmann and Meibauer 2019: §2.2), and they go against the grain of research, something Benton does not acknowledge. Hence, one can accuse him of cherry-picking the evidence.

My second concern is that Benton’s analysis fails to capture graded-belief lies that I will discuss below when addressing Marsili’s scalar definition of lying (graded-belief lies are those lies in which the liar does not have a full belief or is fully confident that the asserted proposition is false). I do not see why a person who strongly suspects that what she asserts is false should not count as lying as well. For example, George seems to be lying by asserting ‘Iraq has weapons of mass destruction’ when his credence in this proposition is 0.25 but he does not lie according to Benton’s analysis, since he does not believe that he knows that the proposition is false (he still has some credence in the proposition, i.e., 0.25). Establishing that this is not a lie still needs some substantial work and the burned of proof is on the proponents of the knowledge-based analysis.

My final and main concern with knowledge-based analyses of lying (not just Benton’s) is that knowledge requires the relevant justification. If I know that *p*, I must be justified in being in this state, and adding this condition to our analysis of lying sets the bar for being a liar too high. Also, to make things worse, what counts as the relevant justification is still debatable. I will further discuss this problem below.

**Chapter** **12** offers Neri Marsili’s refinement of the standard, full-belief analysis of lying, according to which a liar must have a full belief that what they assert is false. Marsili argues that lying as a phenomenon is much better captured by an analysis that takes into account credence (subjective confidence in a proposition) rather full beliefs, since people believe propositions with various degrees of confidence. According to Marsili’s *Comparative Insincerity Condition*, you lie (only) if you assert that *p* while taking yourself as believing that *p* is more likely to be false than true. On this view, then, George from the above example unequivocally lies by asserting ‘Iraq has weapons of mass destruction’ since he asserts a proposition that he takes to be more false than true (his credence in this proposition is 0.25).

Marsili’s contribution is very important and this chapter discusses many things important for lying: epistemic modals (they mitigate or reinforce assertion), how assertions express graded belief, and so on. I would, however, briefly raise one concern against the analysis put forward in this chapter.[[2]](#footnote-2) This concern is pretty much against all existing knowledge-, belief- or credence-based accounts of lying, not just Marsili’s. The concern is that all of these views struggle to explain Lackey’s (2007) selfless assertions. Consider this case.

**Martin**: a racist, Martin, was called to serve on the jury of a case involving an African American on trial for raping a white woman. Even though Martin accepts that the evidence that the defendant is innocent is compelling, he cannot help believing that the defendant is guilty. However, upon further reflection, Martin realises that it is his racism that leads him to this belief, which he nevertheless still holds with very high confidence – say 0.8 – and which he correctly takes himself as holding it with this very high confidence. Suppose now that his friend asks him ‘Did the guy do it?’

According to the comparative insincerity condition, Martin lies by asserting ‘No, he did not do it (~*p*),’ since his credence in ~*p* is 0.2 and he correctly assesses his credence in ~*p*, and does not lie when he asserts that the guy did it (*p*), since his credence in *p* is 0.8 and he correctly assesses it. However, Martin’s case is a one in which the first-order and second-order credences come apart: his credence in ‘the suspect is guilty’ (*p*) remains 0.8 but his credence in ‘the evidence supports the suspect’s guilt’ (*q*) is something like 0.3 – or maybe even less. That is to say, Martin realises that his conviction in *p* is epistemically unjustified (considering his low credence in *q*), and that the evidence suggests the guy did not do it (hence, the low credence in *q*). And while it is unclear whether he lies by asserting what he takes himself as believing to be more likely to be true than false (*p*), it seems clear that he is *not* lying by asserting the proposition he judges is consistent with the evidence (~*p*), notwithstanding his low credence in this proposition. Marsili’s refinement, thus, generates false positives and if we take it that having credence 0.8 in a proposition counts as fully believing it, then *Martin* becomes a counterexample to the full-belief accounts of lying as well. Finally, *Martin* is also a counterexample to Benton’s knowledge account of lying (Chapter 9) because, even though Martin asserts the proposition he judges is consistent with the evidence, we cannot conclusively say that he believes that he knows this proposition (it is unclear whether he has the right kind or degree of justification).

To be fair, I must say that Marsili’s proposal generates false positives only if one buys Lackey’s description of *Martin*, and her description has been criticised in the literature (e.g., Turri 2015; Milić 2017). I would just briefly reflect on this concern here. One might think that the scale tips in favour of the anti-Lackey explanation (for how could Marin believe that *p* *and* that his belief that *p* is not supported by evidence?); however, this follows only if you think that if I judge that *p* (e.g., ‘The guy is innocent’) is true or supported by evidence, then I necessarily form the belief that *p*. The intuition that judging that *p* entails believing that *p* is the main premise in all replies to Lackey (some, e.g., Milić, are ready to bite the bullet and say that Martin lies). However, there is evidence that one may consciously judge that ~*p* or even know that ~*p* (and that *p* is false) while nevertheless simultaneously, confidently, and consciously believing (or at least thinking that one believes) that *p*. I discuss cases of that kind in Krstić (2020) and offer a plausible theory of thought-evaluation capable of explaining this kind of internal incoherence; I also use this theory to explain cases like *Martin*. Thus, Lackey’s description is not implausible, and cases like *Martin* are indeed possible.

Another way to deal with *Mar­tin* is to say that Martin is not really asserting but is rather performing some other speech act, like ‘speaking in a professional facility, as a juror.’ This reply indeed works well in some other cases of selfless assertion but not regarding *Martin*. Martin is not addressing his friend in the capacity of a juror and the two are in the default context in which Martin is understood as asserting what he says. Alternatively, one may bite the bullet and say that Martin is lying to his friend (Milić 2017). I do not think that this is a legitimate move: Martin is trying to inform rather than misinform his fried. Finally, given that Martin is not trying to misinform his friend and that Marsili does not argue that his *Comparative Insincerity Condition* is sufficient for lying, one may suggest that Martin is not lying because the intention to deceive is necessary for lying. I address this reply below.

Jennifer Lackey’s *Chapter 18* also discusses selfless assertions; that is, cases like *Martin*. Lackey argues that selfless assertions are evidence that liars must intend to deceive their hearer. She thinks that, in understanding deceivingand deception, we should distinguish *deceitfulness*, or aiming to cause a false belief in the victim, from *deceptiveness*, or aiming to conceal some relevant information from the victim, and that the liar’s intention to deceive can be understood in the broader sense of being deceptive or in the narrower sense of being deceitful. According to this proposal, she concludes, Martin does not lie to his friend because he does not intend to conceal any information relevant to whether the guy did it (he does not intend to be deceptive) and he does not intend to cause a false belief in his friend (he does not intend to be deceitful).

So, the proposal is that, on the right account of lying (the one that takes the intention to be deceptive as necessary for lying), *Martin* is not at all problematic. However, what Lackey’s argument fails to notice is that the one who is not being deceptive and deceitful on her proposal may nevertheless be deceitful in the sense we standardly understand deceit (i.e., by lying, I may intentionally cause my hearer to become more confident in a proposition *I believe* is false). And because Martin asserts what he believes to be false with the confidence of 0.8 while intending to cause his friend to believe him (i.e., Martin intends to make his hearer become more confident in a proposition Martin believes to be more false than true), and because being intentionally deceitful also counts as intending to deceive, Martin counts as intending to deceive his friend on the standard analysis of deceit.

True, Lackey’s definition of deceit diverges from the standard analysis in the sense in which, when laws of logic are taken into account, aiming to cause a *false* belief (her proposal) need not entail aiming to cause a *believed-to-be-false* belief (standard analysis); however, this distinction between aiming to cause a *false* belief and aiming to cause a *believed-to-be-false* belief is somewhat difficult to grasp in psychological and epistemological terms. For how can I tell that proposition *p* is false if I do not believe that *p* is false or if I do not believe that ~*p*? On the predominant view, to judge that *p* simply is to believe that *p* (is true). Aiming to cause a *false* belief simply seems to involve aiming to cause a *believed-to-be-false* belief in psychological or epistemological terms; in fact, according to some prominent views (Shah and Velleman 2005), this connection is necessary. This is not necessarily a problem for Lackey, since her cases could be counterexamples to the standard analysis and arguments against it already exist (e.g., Krstić 2020), but the problem is that her examples are not unambiguous and that her argument needs additional theoretical apparatus to support the distinction between the two conceptions of deceit.

What I mean is that, if we are talking about what can happen in real life rather than what is logically possible, it is open to discussion whether Martin *knows* or *judges* correctly that ‘the guy did not do it’ or merely judges that *the evidence* strongly *suggests* this (without judging this proposition to be true). If the latter is the case, the claim that Martin is not aiming to cause a *false* belief in his friend is not as self-evident as the argument requires. The worry, then, is that when we say that Martin is (not) aiming to cause a *false* belief in his friend, what we mean is that he is (not) aiming to cause a *believed-to-be-false* belief. And, if the former is the case, we need (i) an argument to the conclusion that Martin really knows or judges that *p* and (ii) a successful analysis of knowledge or judging that does not involve believing as true what you know or judge is true. This is not an unresolvable problem but it exists, it is not trivial, and it needs to be acknowledged.

The second, and perhaps more important, problem for Lackey’s argument is that, even if her analysis successfully deals with selfless assertions, there are cases of lies not intended to deceive that her analysis does not seem to deal with successfully. Fallis’s (2015) and Krstić’s (2018, 2019) papers, for example, directly address Lackey’s analysis of deception and argue that some lies do not count as involving the intention to deceive even on her analysis.

# 3. CHAPTERS THAT EVERYONE SHOULD READ

Anyone can benefit from reading James Edwin Mahon’s overviewof the views of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on the morality of lying, presented in *Chapter 2*. I was personally intrigued by Plato’s understanding of myths; i.e., stories about gods and matters about which we cannot ascertain the truth, ‘told by those who pretend to know the truth about these things.’ I think that there is a sense in which myth-telling fits well with contemporary definitions of bullshit. The myth-tellers, on Plato’s definition, just as bullshitters on some views (e.g., Stokke and Fallis 2017), are not concerned with the issue of whether their claims are (or even can be) supported by evidence. This is an interesting similarity that does seem to suggest that ancient myth-tellers might have been engaged in what we today, thanks to Frankfurt, call bullshitting.

Now, there is a sense in which my saying that myth-telling might involve bullshitting leans too heavily on ‘pretend.’ Myths are told when people lack knowledge and, because myth-tellers do not know or believe that what they say is false, myths are not lies. It is true that when I am ignorant of something, and I nevertheless tell a story about it (‘There was once a goddess in the sky…’) you could call me a bullshitter but not a liar. However, one may object that bullshitters do not care about knowing the truth even if they can know the truth. A myth-maker cannot know the truth, and so, one may say that a myth-maker cannot be described as someone who does not care about the truth.

The above concern is sensible but being in the position to know the truth is not a necessary condition for bullshitting. Carson (2010: 60), for example, writes: ‘Sometimes we are pressured to answer questions that we do not want to answer. When asked such questions, people often produce bullshit responses that do not directly answer the questions.’ Say that I do not want to answer your question because I am in no position to know the answer but I do want to represent myself as knowing the answer and so I come up with a bullshit answer. Say that the question is important and that I am a president who likes to be perceived as knowing everything and in (successful) control of everything. I would say that my behaviour qualifies as bulshitting and that it clearly suggests that bullshitters need not be in a position to know the truth. Therefore, myth-tellers could have easily been bullshitting for noble reasons; we could perhaps call this bullshit *selfless*. In any case, I found the thought that Greek philosophers may have been aware of the lying/bulshitting distinction long before Frankfurt famously discussed it very much interesting and exciting.

In *Chapter 7*, Stephen Wright discusses the connection between lying and truth (i.e., falsity as a negation of truth), focusing on the issue of whether a lie must be a false or merely a believed-to-be-false assertion. This chapter also analyses various ways in which the speaker may evaluate his or her assertion in a way that may be necessary for lying; namely, one may believe it to be false or not believe it, or believe it not to be true while not believing it to be false, and so on. These distinctions are all relevant for someone who has just started his or her analysis of lying.

In *Chapter 16*, Eliot Michaelson discusses the nature of testimony and testimonial knowledge in connection to lying and to the reliability of our interlocutors in general (i.e., them being prone to simple error). This well-written chapter puts forward a very interesting argument that addresses an important topic. I have greatly enjoyed reading it.

Jörg Meibauer’s *Chapter 19* provides a nice critical overview of the majority of the literature discussing the nature of bald-faced lies, which are lies supposedly not intended to deceive. Discovering the true nature of bald-faced lies is a very important issue, since it reflects on the traditional idea that all lies are intended to deceive, and the debate regarding this issue is still very much heated. Commendably, even though he has a position on the topic, which he subtly defends in the chapter, Meibauer appreciates the opposing side’s arguments and concludes his review in a way that allows the reader to form their own opinion.

*Chapter 21* introduces Jennifer Perillo’s review article on bluffing. This is a very interesting and informative chapter which discusses both theoretical and experimental analyses of bluffing and its connection to lying and deception.

*Chapters 24* and *25*discuss the relationship between lying, on the one side, and quotations and humour on the other. These are all under-investigated research topics; hence, each chapter offers a valuable contribution and I found each of them exciting in its own way.

Matthew S. McGlone and Maxim Barysgevtsev in *Chapter 24* discuss some ways in which quotations (i.e., citing someone else’s words) can be used to misrepresent what the speaker actually said, a strategy commonly used in media outlets or movie review ‘blurbs’ used in advertising, which makes this analysis particularly important and relevant for everyone. We are all constantly subjected to this deceptive strategy.

In *Chapter 25*, Marta Dynel offers an informative classification of ways of engaging in humour by lying. For this purpose, she uses lots of examples from the famous TV show, *House*, involving Dr. House, a perfect choice for this review chapter. Dynel’s analysis is very subtle and – I hate to admit this – it made me realise that I failed to notice some very shrewd uses of lying in this popular TV series.

Samantha Mann’s *Chapter 31* reviews techniques of lie-detection. Mann’s chapter discusses limitations of our lie-detecting strategies but also some ways to improve them (also, see Chapter 34). Of course, no one is denying that there are behavioural differences between liars and truth-tellers. Mann merely correctly points out that these differences are subtle and unreliable as indicators of lying. Finally, the differences are typically not those that we think they are: most people hold stereotypes about how liars behave. Mann suggests that, in most people, it is better to focus on what is being said rather than their non-verbal behaviour. Accordingly, she presents a number of interesting techniques that can make the process of lie-detection more reliable. For instance, we can make lying more difficult by increasing the cognitive load (liars must be engaged in double bookkeeping), asking unexpected questions, or by encouraging people to say more about the topic (truth-tellers will easily comply with this request).

There are three chapters that focus on various experimental approaches to lying; those are chapters 33, 34, and 35.

I was very excited to discover that Bella M. DePaulo authored *Chapter 33*. This author is one of the pioneers of the experimental analysis of lying, white lies especially, and my personal hero. In this chapter she summarises the results of the analyses of lying conducted in the field of social psychology. Here we can see some insights on how often people lie, why they lie, what kind of people are prone to lying, and so on. A very interesting review and a highly recommended read for those who are not acquainted with the topic already.

In *Chapter 34*, Krsitina Suchotzki and Mattias Gamer review some ways in which psychology analyses lies and, thus, their discussion touches on the same topics as the ones of Victoria Talwar (Chapter 30), Samantha Mann (Chapter 31), and DePaulo (Chapter 33). In addition to Mann’s interesting Chapter 31, this chapter also gives a very nice overview of the lie-detecting techniques and ways to improve them.

Giorgio Giani’s *Chapter 35* reviews the neuroscientific approach to lying and deception and its findings. In this approach, we are trying to decompose deception into a number of neural subprocesses or, put differently, we are trying to identify areas of the brain we use when engaged in deception. Related to this endeavour is the question of whether deception is an independent cognitive function with its unique cognitive substrate or a combination of other functions. This chapter reviews the literature dealing with that question.

Stuart P. Green’s *Chapter 37* gives an overview of some ways in which the law regulates lies and deception. The chapter discusses perjury, fraud, and rape by deception (deception regarding sexual consent), arguing that the law’s treatment of deception varies on the role of the person doing the deceiving (e.g., a police interrogator, a witness) and the social context in which deception occurs (e.g., interrogating a suspect, testifying in court). The chapter also involves a critical engagement with the existing discourse, and it discusses some interesting cases. For example, Green offers his analysis of the famous Clinton testimony, arguing that, while misleading, (most of) Clinton’s statements do not amount to perjury, and, in a bit that I particularly liked, he argues that even pieces of information that we now call ‘fake news’ (i.e., demonstrably false information) may be protected by the constitutions of some countries so long as they are non-violent, which is a piece of information every person should have.

*Chapter 38*, written by Marta Serra-Garcia, discusses lying and deception in economics and the idea that people will lie if they think that the expected gain outweighs the loss. This idea assumes that lying is costless (i.e., that people do not have an aversion to lying), but Serra-Garcia nicely shows that this assumption is not correct and that the cost of lying depends on many factors. Her conclusion is important for some game theory analyses and the chapter also offers some strategies of increasing honesty.

Anita E. Kelly in *Chapter 39* discusses student lying and academic dishonesty. The most important insight of this chapter can be found right in the first two sentences (a very effective start!): the increase in student lying and dishonesty is, in part, due to the fact that education, once valued for its own sake, is now seen as a means of obtaining influence, status, and employment. Kelly defends this thesis by way of reviewing relevant experimental studies. She also provides some strategies of reducing academic dishonesty.

# 4. CHAPTERS TO WHICH I OFFER CLARIFICATIONS

In *Chapter 20*, Andreas Stokke analyses the nature of bullshit. This analysis is very nice, it is conducted by way of discussing various proposed definitions, and it might serve as an additional reading to a very successful account of bullshit offered by Stokke and Fallis (2017). There is only one small thing that I would like to discuss and perhaps clarify. Stokke rejects Frankfurt’s famous claim that bullshitting is constituted by asserting that *p* while being indifferent towards whether what you assert is true or false. He uses counterexamples to show that this is not a necessary condition of bullshitting, and then discusses Frankfurt’s example of advertisers who are indifferent towards the truth-value of what they say even when they are saying something they know to be false and agrees with Frankfurt that they are both lying and bullshitting. They are lying because they assert a proposition they know to be false, and bullshitting because they are indifferent towards the fact that the proposition is false: they would have asserted the same proposition even if it were true.

I wonder whether this really is lying by bullshitting. I would rather say that this is a textbook example of the good old-fashioned deceptive lying. I am not claiming that Stokke’s analysis is internally inconsistent. Stokke is not arguing that being indifferent towards the truth of what you say is not sufficient for bullshitting, but only that it is not necessary; hence, the advertisers could indeed be (lying by) bullshitting. However, I wonder why he would in this case just agree with Frankfurt, rather than think that the example shows that indifference towards the truth need not be sufficient either. After all, stereotypical liars assert what they believe to be false not because they want to assert what they believe to be false but rather because asserting this particular proposition brings some benefit for them, they would have asserted it even if it were true, and so, we have a good reason to think that this kind of indifference towards the truth is not a marking sign of bullshitting. There are situations in which one may both lie and bullshitt but the advertisers do not seem to be in one of them.

In *Chapter 40*, Dariusz Galasiński gives a brief overview of lying in discourse analysis focusing on the medical discourse, doctor-patient communication in particular. Discourse here should be understood as a sociolinguistic practice occurring in a particular context (i.e., the doctor-patient context) and the example involves misrepresentations of clinical interviews in psychiatric documentation. This is a very interesting idea, but I would say that the author is not cautious enough in interpreting the results of the study he conducted with Ziółkowska (Galasiński and Ziółkowska 2013). For example, in this chapter, he claims that ‘an expression of despair is recorded as lack of cooperation with the clinician’ (Chapter 40: 524) or that ‘while psychiatrist shows her [the patient] as simply rejecting treatment, the patient shows resignation, despair’ (Chapter 40: 525).

I do understand the concern that the clinicians might be misrepresenting and, more importantly, misunderstanding their patients, and I think that this concern is justified but the above two claims are problematic. Nowhere do the patients actually say ‘I am desperate,’ but rather, they provide elaborate stories of which both the clinician in question and Galasiński and Ziółkowska are providing *interpretations*. Thus, Galasiński can claim only that saying that the patient was exhibiting despair rather than lack of cooperation is *a better explanation* of this part of the dialogue. And even then, I am not sure whether this claim could hold water. The clinician should know that better than us since, unlike the patient’s psychiatrist, all we have is the text of the notes; we even lack the relevant medical expertise, which is a necessary condition to pass judgments on such cases. In fact, some of the dialogues cited in the chapter could indeed be interpreted as an indirect way of avoiding cooperation. This, I think, is a serious concern regarding Galasiński and Ziółkowska’s (2013) study and the claims made in this chapter.

Fumiko Nishimura’s *Chapter 44* is the final chapter in the book. In this chapter, Nishimura offers a cross-cultural review of lying. She first considers different approaches to lying (prototype semantics, cognitive semantics, and pragmatics) and their respective definitions, then motivations underlying the acceptability of lies in various cultures, and finally, discusses how people use lies in everyday situations. This chapter is interesting in part because it shows how unreliable some of our studies are. Allow me to explain.

Nishimura’s analysis is based on the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism. The idea is that collectivistic people (who emphasise group identity) might use lying to maintain harmony within the group, and the group might accept this lie as justified if it is for the greater good. The author then, using her study (Nishimura 2005), compares how (among others) the collectivist Japan and the individualist New Zealand societies understand lying. I think that the results of this study do not really capture the attitudes of New Zealanders.

According to Nishimura (2005), Japanese people are not comfortable talking about personal matters, and thus they might lie about personal matters, whereas New Zealanders (Kiwis, in popular slang) will not lie, since they are more relaxed about sharing personal information. This result should not be understood as meaning that Kiwis actually are relaxed when it comes to speaking about personal matters (saying that I am taller than Tom Cruise does not mean that I am tall). In fact, they are very private as compared to Latin Americans, Slavs, or even Americans or Australians. Therefore, I would interpret this result as saying that Kiwis are less private than Japanese, but are still private. They very often do not say what they actually think. So, does this entail that they engage in lying? The following inconsistency between the results of Nishimura’s two studies might give us an answer.

Nishimura (2005) reports cultural differences between the people from the two countries in the acceptance of lies. She says that the (collectivist) Japanese were relatively lenient towards lies, whereas the (individualist) Kiwis were ‘notably angry and resentful overall’ towards lying. Kiwis claimed that their reason for this attitude is that even altruistic lies hurt, because they imply that the recipients do not deserve the truth. However, Kiwi participants of a Nishimura (2011) study (her PhD) behaved in a way that seems to contradict the above conclusion. The participants were young Japanese and Kiwis who were friends in real life. They were supposed to engage in role-play, such that one person declines the other person’s invitation with an untruthful excuse. Almost a half of the Kiwis used a prior engagement as an excuse to decline the invitation. But, I wonder, if Kiwis really are ‘notably angry and resentful overall’ towards lying, as the previous study suggests (and I too can confirm that this attitude is openly voiced by almost everybody in New Zealand), why did they so easily decide to come up with fake excuses in order to decline their friends’ invitations? One should naturally count fake excuses as lies and, if lies hurt because they imply that the recipients do not deserve the truth, why did the participants of this study agree to lie?

My answer is a bit speculative but not unreasonable: in my experience, Kiwis would not consider fake excuses made in these contexts to be lying, but rather as a socially required practice of not hurting the other person’s feelings. If I am right, Nishimura’s analysis might involve the error of equivocation: the participants from different cultures were using ‘lie’ in different senses. Kiwis are very nice people, but they are not straightforward and direct in their communication. The reason is that the culture of political correctness is extremely strong in New Zealand, and other people’s emotions, and their personal integrity, are highly regarded. Saying what you do not believe to be true, or even believe to be false, in a context in which political correctness demands it, may not considered as lying, because it is what conventions demand. Therefore, Kiwis do not self-report this as lying, due to their own conception of lying.

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1. I thank James Edwin Mahon and Neri Marsili for their help and constructive comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I discuss this problem in more detail elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)