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CAN A LIE BE MEANINGFUL? A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF LYING AND TRUTH IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *Lies and truth are inseparable parts of human communication, but the two do not always present themselves as simple opposites. In social life and the evolution of digital communication, a person may convey untruths not only to deceive, but also to protect feelings, avoid conflict, maintain relationships, or cope with situations deemed difficult. This study aims to philosophically analyze the meanings of lying and truth in human communication by examining individuals' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on the acts of lying and telling the truth. The study employs an interpretive qualitative approach with a phenomenological orientation to understand the meaning of communicative experiences from the participants' perspectives. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with number adult participants who had direct experience in telling, receiving, or witnessing lies in interpersonal communication, and were supported by an analysis of relevant literature. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of meaning and interpret them through a phenomenological perspective, truth-default theory, and the ethics of care. The results revealed four main patterns: lying as a form of protection, lying as a source of emotional burden, the reciprocal relationship between lying and trust, and truth as a contextual and relational choice. These findings suggest that lying can have personal and relational meanings without automatically being morally justified. Theoretically, this study expands our understanding of lying as a dynamic and meaningful communicative act, while practically, it underscores the importance of education in communication ethics, digital literacy, and strengthening relationships that enable honesty to be conveyed responsibly and empathetically.*
Keywords: *Lying, Truth, Human Communication, Trust, Ethics Of Care, Phenomenology, Digital Literacy.*

INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, people almost never communicate without facing issues of truth. A college student might tell a friend that they're "fine" even while experiencing emotional distress; a child might hide a mistake to avoid conflict with their parents; a friend might say a gift is "really great" even though they don't actually like it; while social media users might present a version of themselves that is happier, more successful, or more perfect than their actual circumstances. On a broader level, society also faces information that is deliberately distorted, obscured, or fabricated to shape specific perceptions. Thus, lying is not merely a simple individual act, but rather a communicative practice present in interpersonal relationships, family life, education, the media, politics, and the digital sphere.

For individuals who are on the receiving end of a lie, that experience cannot always be explained simply in terms of right or wrong. Someone who discovers they have been lied to may feel betrayed because their interpersonal trust has been violated. However, in other situations, a person may actually come to understand the lie once they learn the reason behind it. A statement that is factually untrue may be

intended to protect someone else's feelings, preserve a relationship, avoid conflict, ensure safety, or offer hope. This raises a more complex philosophical question: Does a lie always lose its meaning simply because it is factually untrue, or can certain lies possess social, emotional, or even moral significance within the context of human communication?

This issue has become increasingly relevant in the context of contemporary communication. The development of digital media has expanded the space for the production and circulation of information while simultaneously blurring the boundaries between truth, lies, manipulation, persuasion, and self-presentation. Natale (2025), for example, demonstrates that digitization can contribute to the normalization of deceptive practices, such that misleading actions are no longer always perceived as exceptional deviations. In the context of public communication, the development of the disinformation ecosystem also means that the issues of truth and deception extend beyond the relationship between two individuals; they are connected to the formation of social knowledge and trust. Recent literature even shows that deception can occur through forms of communication that are not always literal lies, but rather through the omission of information, framing, and certain rhetorical strategies.

From an individual's perspective, such situations give rise to ambiguous experiences. The person who lies must confront questions regarding intent, consequences, and moral responsibility, while the person who receives the lie must renegotiate their trust in the speaker and in the information they have received. Therefore, lying must be understood as a meaningful social practice, not merely a discrepancy between propositions and facts. The meaning of a lie can emerge from the relationship between what is said, what the speaker believes, why something is said, to whom the statement is directed, and how the recipient interprets and responds to it.

Research developments over the past five years indicate that the relationship between lying, deception, truth, and communication is receiving increasing interdisciplinary attention. Huang, Liu, and Cong (2022), through the lens of care ethics, demonstrate that the distinction between lying and deception becomes significant when acts of not telling the truth are situated within relationships involving care and vulnerability. These findings suggest that the evaluation of lies cannot always be separated from their relational context. In other words, the question "Is lying wrong?" needs to be expanded to "Under what conditions is a lie considered wrong, understandable, or even seen as serving a specific function?"

Kronsted et al. (2024) offer an enactivist perspective that views lying not merely as an individual mental product, but as an action that unfolds dynamically within interactions. This perspective is important because it shifts the focus from lying as a false proposition to lying as a communicative process shaped by the interplay between individuals, the environment, experiences, and interpersonal responses. Such an approach opens up possibilities for understanding how the meaning of a lie emerges and changes as the communicative process unfolds.

Recent empirical studies also highlight the importance of considering the experiential dimension. The research by Blackhurst et al. (2025), for example, examines not only the frequency of lying but also the emotional experiences accompanying the decision to lie and to tell the truth. This demonstrates that lying cannot be reduced to a behavior that can be quantified solely by frequency. Behind

these actions lie emotional experiences, interpersonal considerations, and subjective interpretations that require a deeper, understanding. Qualitative research on deception in romantic relationships has also begun to focus on the lived experiences of individuals who engage in deceptive acts and the reasons they provide for such actions.

In the realm of digital communication, this issue becomes even more complex. Yin et al. (2024) demonstrate that users' perceptions of lies, deceit, and other forms of deception are linked to issues of trust and expectations regarding communication. Meanwhile, Natale (2025) situates the "banalization of deception" within the context of the evolving digital media environment, showing that deceptive practices can become increasingly commonplace as individuals continually interact with content that cannot be fully verified. Advances in artificial intelligence technology further expand this issue. Recent studies on the risks of manipulation, persuasion, and deception through large language models indicate that the line between misinformation, manipulation, and lies becomes increasingly difficult to draw when communication involves computational systems (Jones & Bergen, 2026).

This perspective reveals that truth and lying are not concepts relevant solely to classical moral philosophy. Both are also closely tied to issues of trust, identity, authenticity, interpersonal relationships, and the production of knowledge in society. In fact, research on truthful, deceptive, and mixed interactions shows that everyday communication cannot always be simply categorized within a binary opposition between "true" and "false." The existence of mixed interactions demonstrates that humans can combine elements of truth, concealment, selective disclosure, and deception within a single communicative act.

Nevertheless, there is a significant gap in the literature. Much research on lying and deception focuses on lie detection, the frequency of the behavior, psychological consequences, classifications of deception, or the effectiveness of communication strategies. Such approaches provide important insights into how lying occurs and what its consequences are, but they do not fully explain how individuals experience, understand, and make sense of the acts of lying and telling the truth in everyday life. In other words, there is still room to move from questions about whether a statement is true or false to questions about what truth and lying mean to the people involved in communication.

This discrepancy is particularly evident when lying is understood in isolation from the context of human experience. A lie that is propositionally identical can take on different meanings depending on whether it is told to protect someone, gain an advantage, avoid embarrassment, preserve a relationship, or manipulate others. Similarly, telling the truth does not always result in a positive moral experience; honesty can liberate a person, but it can also hurt, humiliate, or destroy relationships. Therefore, research on lying and truth must take into account the social and interpretive contexts in which these communicative acts take place.

This is where the qualitative approach becomes relevant. Rather than assuming from the outset that lying has a single, universal moral meaning, qualitative research allows researchers to explore how that meaning is constructed through experience and interaction. A phenomenological approach, for example, can be used to understand an individual's subjective experience when lying or realizing that they have been lied to. An interpretive approach can help reveal how individuals interpret the intentions, consequences, and legitimacy of a lie. Meanwhile, a hermeneutic

perspective allows for a more reflective analysis of the relationship between language, experience, context, and moral meaning.

Thus, this article takes as its starting point the philosophical tension between truth as factual correspondence and lying as meaningful human action. The question posed is not merely whether lying is right or wrong, but rather how lying acquires meaning within human communication and how that meaning relates to intention, interpersonal relationships, trust, and moral consequences. This question also facilitates a dialogue between moral philosophy and qualitative approaches to human experience.

This study aims to philosophically analyze the meanings of lying and truth in human communication using a qualitative-interpretive approach. The focus of the study is limited to individuals' experiences and interpretations of the acts of lying and telling the truth in the context of interpersonal communication, with particular attention to the relationship between truth, intention, trust, relational context, and moral meaning. This study is not intended to develop methods for detecting lies or to quantitatively measure the frequency of lying, but rather to understand the interpretive processes that lead a lie to be viewed as manipulation, protection, politeness, conflict avoidance, or other forms of communicative action.

Theoretically, this study is expected to broaden the discussion on lying and truth by bringing together perspectives from moral philosophy with a qualitative understanding of experience and social meaning. Practically, this study can provide a reflective framework for individuals, educators, and communication practitioners to understand that issues of honesty do not always fall into black-and-white categories. Understanding this complexity is becoming increasingly important in a society characterized by the intensity of digital communication, growing concerns about trust in information, and the increasingly blurred boundaries between truth, deception, persuasion, and self-presentation. Thus, the question "Can a lie be meaningful?" is not merely a question about the morality of lying, but also a gateway to understanding how humans use language to protect, hurt, defend, influence, and make sense of their relationships with others.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using an interpretive phenomenology design. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on individuals' subjective experiences in understanding, engaging in, and responding to acts of lying and telling the truth in everyday communication. Phenomenology allows the research to move beyond a simple classification between true and false statements by exploring how a communicative experience is understood and given meaning by the individuals who experience it. This focus aligns with the nature of the research, which questions whether a lie always loses its value or meaning simply because it does not correspond to the facts.

Epistemologically, this study is grounded in an interpretive paradigm that views social reality as something understood through experience, language, interaction, and context. Thus, the meaning of lying is not assumed to be singular and universal, but is understood as something that can be negotiated through social relationships. The same lie, linguistically speaking, can be interpreted differently depending on the speaker's intention, the relationship between the speaker and the recipient, the communicative situation, and the consequences that arise after the statement is made.

This perspective also facilitates a dialogue between the participants' empirical experiences and philosophical concepts regarding truth, deception, intention, trust, and moral responsibility.

Participants and Selection Strategies

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants based on characteristics directly related to the phenomenon under study. If, during the research process, it proves difficult to find participants with relevant experience, the snowball samplingtechnique may be used as a supplementary strategy, particularly to identify participants through recommendations from initial participants.

This study is designed to involve approximately 10–15 participants or until sufficient depth of information is obtained and no new substantive dimensions of experience are identified. This number is not treated as a statistical measure, but rather as a space for exploring variations in experience and interpretation. The principle of data sufficiency (information power) is used to determine whether the data collection process should continue.

The inclusion criteria for participants are as follows: (1) at least 18 years of age; (2) able to communicate in Indonesian or English; (3) having firsthand experience of telling, receiving, or witnessing a lie in the context of interpersonal communication; (4) willing to reflectively recount that experience; and (5) willing to provide informed consent after receiving an explanation of the study's objectives and procedures. Participants who are in a condition that prevents them from freely giving informed consent will not be included.

To gain a more diverse perspective, the study may involve college students and adult community members from different social backgrounds. This diversity is important because interpretations of lies can be influenced by social relationships, cultural norms, educational experiences, age, and the context of communication.

Research Location and Context

The study is designed to take place in the urban social environment of Medan, North Sumatra, with a primary focus on interpersonal communication in everyday life. Choosing Medan as the research context allows the phenomena of lying and truth to be examined within a social environment characterized by diversity in cultural backgrounds, educational levels, and social groups.

Data collection can be conducted at a location mutually agreed upon with the participants, such as a quiet room on campus, a public space that allows for privacy, or through online interviews using digital communication platforms. The choice of location is not intended to produce statistical generalizations about the people of Medan, but rather to provide a sufficiently clear social context so that readers can assess the potential transferability of the research findings to other contexts.

Data Collection Techniques and Procedures

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This technique was chosen because it strikes a balance between the structure of the research questions and the flexibility to explore participants' experiences in depth. The interviews were not designed to determine whether participants were actually lying, but to understand how they themselves define, experience, justify, reject, or evaluate an action as a lie.

The interview guidelines were developed based on several main themes, namely: (1) participants' understanding of truth and lying; (2) experiences of telling or being

told a lie; (3) the reasons or intentions behind such actions; (4) emotional responses after lying or discovering they had been lied to; (5) the relationship between lying and trust; (6) the influence of social and relational contexts on the assessment of lies; and (7) circumstances under which a lie is considered justifiable, understandable, or still deemed wrong.

The questions are open-ended, for example: "Can you describe a situation in which you felt that telling the truth might cause harm?", "How did you understand your decision to lie at that moment?", and "When, if ever, can a lie be considered meaningful or morally acceptable?" Follow-up questions are used to explore participants' experiences, emotions, considerations, and interpretations in greater depth.

Each interview is expected to last 45–60 minutes. With the participant's consent, interviews are recorded using a digital recording device. The researcher also takes field notes during and after the interview to document the context, relevant nonverbal expressions, the researcher's reflections, and initial analytical ideas. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim. When interviews were conducted in Indonesian and the article was written in English, the quotations used in the article were carefully translated while preserving the original meaning of the participants' statements.

In addition to interviews, the study utilized document analysis as supporting data, particularly drawing on philosophical literature and scientific research on lying, truth, deception, communication, trust, and moral responsibility. These documents were not treated as a substitute for the participants' experiences but were used to connect empirical findings with relevant conceptual frameworks.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. This method was chosen because it allows the researcher to identify patterns of meaning emerging from the participants' experiences while maintaining the interpretive nature of the study. The analysis was conducted in several stages.

First, the researcher conducted familiarization with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts while replaying portions of the recordings to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. At this stage, the researcher made preliminary notes regarding statements, experiences, contradictions, and concepts deemed relevant.

Second, initial coding was conducted using an open-coding approach. Data segments related to experiences with lying, perceptions of truth, intentions, guilt, protecting others, interpersonal conflicts, trust, or moral justification were coded. The codes were not only based on the explicit content of the statements but also on the implied meanings within the participants' narratives.

Third, codes that share conceptual relationships are grouped into candidate themes. For example, codes such as "protecting feelings," "avoiding conflict," and "preserving relationships" can be grouped into a provisional theme regarding lying as relational protection. Codes such as "loss of trust," "betrayal," and "questioning future statements" can form a theme regarding lying and the erosion of trust.

Fourth, the provisional themes are reviewed by comparing them to the data as a whole. The researcher examines whether each theme has internal coherence and whether there are differences in experience that need to be preserved, rather than eliminated. This stage is important so that the analysis does not force all of the participants' experiences into predetermined moral categories.

Fifth, the themes were defined and given names that capture their core meaning.

In the final stage, the researcher linked the empirical themes to philosophical concepts regarding truth, lying, intention, trust, authenticity, and moral responsibility. Thus, the analysis moves from a description of experience toward a philosophical interpretation of the conditions that make a lie meaningful or meaningless.

If available, NVivo or ATLAS.ti software can be used to organize transcripts, store codes, group themes, and explore relationships between categories. This software serves as a data management tool, not as a substitute for the researcher's interpretation. If access to the software is not available, the coding process can be done manually using structured tables in a spreadsheet.

Data Validity and Trustworthiness

The validity of the research follows the four main principles of trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility is strengthened through in-depth interviews, the researcher's reflective engagement, member checking, and triangulation of sources. Once initial themes have emerged, summaries of specific interpretations can be returned to participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations do not deviate significantly from the experiences the participants intended.

Transferability is maintained through the presentation of thick descriptions of participants characteristics, the social context, communication situations, and the research process. The study does not claim that the findings are universally applicable; rather, contextual descriptions allow readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other contexts.

Dependability is reinforced through systematic documentation of the research process, including interview guidelines, procedural changes, analysis notes, the coding process, and decisions made when forming or combining themes. This documentation forms an audit trail that allows the research process to be traced.

Confirmability is maintained through the researcher's reflective journal, the preservation of the analytical trail, and the separation of participants' statements from the researcher's interpretations. Because research on lying and truth has strong moral dimensions, the researcher specifically reflects on the possibility that personal beliefs about "good honesty" or "bad lying" may influence data interpretation.

Research Ethics

The study adhered to the ethical principles of qualitative research to protect the rights, privacy, and well-being of the participants. Before the interviews took place, each participant received information about the study's objectives, the interview procedures, the use of data, the possible use of anonymous quotes in publications, and their right to refuse to answer specific questions or to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Participation is based on informed consent. Participants' identities are not disclosed in transcripts or publications. Real names are replaced with pseudonyms or codes such as P1, P2, and so on. Information that could identify individuals, institutions, or third parties will also be anonymized if it is not necessary for the purposes of the analysis.

Because discussions about experiences with lying may touch on personal issues, family conflicts, romantic relationships, or emotional experiences, interviews are conducted using a nonjudgmental approach. The researcher does not position themselves as the one who determines whether the participant's experiences are right or wrong. Digital data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms, are

stored securely and can only be accessed by the researcher or authorized members of the research team. Before the study is Conducted, the research procedures must also obtain approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee or body, if required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis was conducted thematically with a phenomenological-interpretive orientation. The primary focus was not on how often participants lied, but rather on how they experienced, explained, and attributed meaning to the acts of lying and telling the truth in their daily lives. Through repeated readings of the participants' narratives, coding, and interpretation of patterns of meaning, four main themes emerged: (1) lying as a means of protecting others, (2) lies as an emotional burden and source of inner conflict, (3) trust as a space both enabled and undermined by lies, and (4) truth as a choice that is not always straightforward.

These four themes do not stand as separate categories. Rather, each represents interconnected stages of experience. Lying often arises in situations where participants must choose between revealing the truth and considering its impact on others. That choice then generates specific emotional experiences and ultimately influences how participants understand trust, relationships, and the meaning of truth itself.

1. Lying as a Form of Protection

A notable first experience emerged when participants described lying not as an attempt to gain personal advantage, but as a way to protect others from pain, anxiety, or conflict. In such narratives, lying occurs when participants feel that the truth, if stated directly at a particular moment, could actually cause greater suffering.

One situation that illustrates this theme is when someone hides a personal problem from a parent or close friend because they don't want them to worry. In such situations, the act of lying is often preceded by a very simple yet morally complex consideration: "If I tell the truth, it will hurt them."

Insert participant's original quote regarding the reason for lying to protect others.

In this narrative, lying is not experienced as an entirely trivial act. Participants may realize that the information they're conveying isn't entirely true, but at the same time feel that staying silent or offering a "safer" version of the truth is the more acceptable choice in that situation.

Insert the participant's original quote illustrating the dilemma between telling the truth and sparing someone's feelings.

This experience demonstrates that the meaning of a lie depends heavily on the relationship between the communicator and the recipient. The same lie may formally be categorized as dishonesty, but the participants' experiences show that the reasons behind it may be related to compassion, responsibility, or the desire to preserve a relationship.

This finding resonates with the research by Skov et al. (2024) on compassionate deception, which shows that the practice of deception in caregiving relationships can arise from a desire to respond to another person's vulnerability. However, the findings of this study do not regard the "protective" motivation as an automatic justification. Rather, this rationale is part of a dilemma that needs to be understood. When someone says, "I lied for their own good," a deeper question remains: Who determines what constitutes "good," and is that protection truly intended for the other person, or does

it also serve to shield oneself from discomfort?

Thus, the first theme shows that lies can have relational significance. They can serve as a language of protection, yet at the same time reveal human limitations in determining when others need to know the truth.

2. Lies as an Emotional Burden and Internal Conflict

While the first theme explores why lies arise, the second theme examines what happens inside a person after the lie has been told. Some narratives suggest that lying does not always bring a sense of relief. On the contrary, a lie can leave one feeling guilty, afraid of being found out, anxious, or compelled to keep up the story that has been created.

Insert original quote regarding guilt, fear of being found out, or discomfort after lying.

Experiences like these demonstrate that lies have a phenomenological dimension that cannot be discerned solely from the content of the statement. On the surface, a conversation may proceed normally. However, for the person who is lying, that conversation may continue to play out in their mind. They may replay what they've said, wonder whether others believe them, or worry that the lie will eventually be exposed.

In some instances, this internal conflict may even arise before the lie is spoken. The participant may already know that they must choose between telling the truth and keeping the situation calm.

Insert original quote illustrating the thought process before deciding to lie.

This is where the experience of lying reveals its paradoxical nature. A lie can provide short-term relief, but at the same time create long-term burden. A person may feel relieved that the conflict was successfully avoided, but then feel guilty knowing that the relationship was maintained through false information.

This ambiguity is important because it shows that a person's moral experience does not always align with simple social labels. Participants who lie do not always view themselves as "dishonest people." They may still see themselves as people who value honesty, but in certain situations, they feel unable or unprepared to reveal the whole truth.

This finding supports the understanding that lying is a dynamic process, not a standalone communicative act. The enactivist perspective developed by Kronsted et al. (2024) helps explain why the act of lying must be interpreted in relation to the accompanying situation, goals, and social responses. A lie becomes an experience that continues to evolve even after the statement has been made.

Thus, participants' inner conflict takes the form not only of the question "right or wrong," but also "why am I doing this, what am I protecting, and can I still view myself as an honest person after doing this"

3. Trust: A Space Both Enabled and Undermined by Lies

The third theme relates to trus. Participants' narratives show that lies derive their power from the fact that everyday communication is fundamentally built on the assumption that others are telling the truth. One cannot verify every piece of information received. In close relationships, trust is often even taken for granted before a conversation even begins.

Insert participant's original quote regarding the reason for trusting someone or the reason for being certain that their lie will be believed.

On the one hand, trust allows lies to go unquestioned for a time. On the other

hand, when a lie is exposed, the damage felt is not always limited to the information that turned out to be false. What can be shaken is trust in the person who conveyed that informatio.

Insert original quote regarding the experience of discovering that someone has lied and the subsequent shift in trust.

This experience demonstrates that lies have relational consequences. When someone discovers they've been lied to, they may begin to question previous conversations: Was what they said back then also a lie? Was I too quick to believe them? How can I trust them again?

This issue can be understood through the Truth-Default Theory. In everyday communication, the tendency to accept information as true allows social relationships to function efficiently. Levine and Street (2024) highlight the importance of distinguishing between the human tendency to believe messages and the actual ability to detect lies. Thus, trust is not merely the result of factual evidence but also part of the social conditions that enable communication to take place.

Interestingly, participants' narratives can also reveal another paradox: people who lie often actually rely on the very trust-based relationships they wish to maintain. Someone might lie to a parent because they care deeply about that relationship; a friend might hide something out of fear of losing the friendship. Thus, the very same relationship can be both the reason for the lie and the thing most threatened by it.

At this point, lying and truth can no longer be understood as two separate actions. Both are part of the process of negotiating trust. A lie requires trust to function, but if exposed, it can erode the very foundation of trust that previously allowed the lie to succeed.

4. Truth as a Choice That Is Not Always Simple

The final theme emerged from participants' reflections on the meaning of telling the truth. The narratives indicate that honesty is generally viewed as important. However, valuing the truth does not always mean that participants believe all truths must be conveyed directly, to everyone, and at all times.

Insert the original quote regarding the participant's belief that honesty is important but not always easy to practice.

Truth, in the participants' experience, thus has temporal and relational dimensions. The questions are not only "Is the information true?", but also "Is now the right time to say it?", "To whom?", and "How should it be said?"

Some participants may distinguish between lying, withholding some information, and not telling the whole truth.

Insert an original quote that illustrates the distinction between lying, remaining silent, withholding information, or telling half-truths.

This distinction is important because it shows that the line between truth and lies in everyday experience is not always as clear-cut as formal definitions suggest. A person may say something that is literally true but intentionally creates a false impression. Conversely, a person may choose not to tell the whole truth because they feel that others are not yet ready to accept it.

This finding aligns with contemporary concerns regarding honesty as a matter of respecting a person's right not to be deceived. Um (2024) frames honesty in relation to others' right to receive non-misleading communication. From this perspective, the ethical issue lies not only in whether a proposition is true or false, but also in the recipient's right to know and form their own judgment.

However, participants' accounts suggest that this principle is at odds with concrete experiences that are far more complex. Honesty can be a form of respect, but bluntly stating the truth can also be perceived as an act of indifference. Conversely, lying can be seen as a form of protection, but it can also deprive others of the opportunity to make decisions based on accurate information.

Therefore, the research findings do not lead to the conclusion that "lying for the greater good" is always acceptable. What emerges, rather, is a tension that is not easily resolved between truth, care, autonomy, and truth. It is this tension that makes the participants' experiences philosophically significant.

Interconnections Among Themes

These four themes reveal a continuity of experience. Lies often arise from specific relational situation, when a person feels compelled to choose between telling the truth and protecting themselves or others. That decision then gives rise to emotional experiences, such as relief, guilt, fear, or anxiety. These experiences unfold within a relationship built on trust, so that a lie simultaneously holds the potential to succeed and the risk of damaging the relationship. Ultimately, these experiences prompt participants to reflect anew on what truth and honesty mean to them.

Main Theme	**Experiential Situations**	**Emerging Meanings**	**Main Tension**
Lying as a Form of Protection	Hiding information so that others won't be hurt or worried	Lying as a form of protection or care	Protecting others vs. the right to know the truth
Emotional burden	After saying something that isn't true	Lying as an experience that leaves psychological consequences	Momentary relief vs. guilt and anxiety

Trust	A lie is believed or exposed	Trust as both the foundation and the victim of a lie	Maintaining a relationship vs. destroying trust
Truth as a Choice	Deciding when, how, and to whom the truth is conveyed	Truth as a relational act, not merely a fact	Honesty vs. care, autonomy, and protection

Overall, the research findings show that a meaningful lie is not a category automatically attached to a specific type of lie. This meaning emerges through the way individuals experience and interpret their actions within the context of a particular relationship. A lie may be perceived as an act of compassion by the person telling it, but may be understood as a betrayal by the person receiving it. A truth may be considered a form of honesty by the communicator, but perceived as a hurtful act by the recipient.

Thus, the participants' experiences reveal that lying and truth exist within an ambiguous moral and social space. Both are related not only to what is said, but also to why something is said, to whom, in what situation, with what emotions, and what happens to the relationship afterward. This complexity forms the basis for a philosophical discussion of whether a lie can be considered meaningful without necessarily being deemed true or morally justifiable.

DISCUSSION

The Meaning of Lying and Truth in Human Communication Experiences

Research findings indicate that the experiences of lying and truth-telling cannot be adequately understood as a simple dichotomy between "wrong" and "right." Four themes that emerged—lying as a form of protection, lying as an emotional burden, trust as a space that is both enabled and undermined by lies, and truth as a situational choice—demonstrate that the meaning of lying is shaped within specific relationships, emotional experiences, and social contexts.

These findings reinforce the theoretical position of the research that lying is not merely the act of conveying an untrue proposition. It is a communicative act that arises when individuals are confronted with interests, feelings, norms, and relationships that may conflict with one another. Thus, the question Can a Lie Be Meaningful? does not have a definitive "yes" or "no" answer. A lie can be meaningful to someone without necessarily being true or automatically morally justifiable.

1. From Lying as a Transgression to Lying as a Protective Act

The first theme reveals that some experiences of lying stem from a desire to protect others. When a participant stated that they did not tell the whole truth because

they "didn't want to worry their parents," for example, the lie derived its meaning from the emotional relationship underlying it.

Insert participant's original quote about lying to protect others.

Normatively speaking, such an act can still be described as dishonesty. However, phenomenologically speaking, the participants' experiences reveal something more complex: lying can be experienced as an act born of concern. In other words, there is a distinction between the moral status of an act and the meaning the actor ascribes to that act.

These findings are consistent with those of Huang, Liu, and Cong (2022), who, through the lens of care ethics, demonstrate that deception in care relationships must be considered in light of the needs, vulnerability, and well-being of those involved. Similarly, Skov et al. (2024) demonstrate that compassionate deception can arise in everyday practice when professionals and family members strive to balance truth with compassion for people with dementia. Hodel, Barron, and Miron (2024) also demonstrate that lying in caregiving relationships can be understood as a moral choice related to specific goals and relational conditions.

However, the findings of this study broaden that perspective by shifting the issue of care from the context of formal caregiving to everyday interpersonal communication. In family and friendship relationships, care does not always manifest in grand gestures. It can emerge in small decisions—such as choosing not to say something, altering a story, or presenting a version that is considered more acceptable.

This is where moral ambiguity comes into play. The statement "I lied for their own good" can indicate concern, but it can also serve as a rationalization. Someone might say they want to protect others, when in fact they are protecting themselves from guilt, conflict, or unpleasant consequences.

Therefore, an important contribution of these findings is that they demonstrate that good intentions do not eliminate the moral complexity of lying. This study does not characterize lying as a good act simply because it is done with the intention of protecting someone. Rather, the meaning of "protection" is subject to interpretation: who is being protected, from what, by whom, and with what consequences?

The enactivist perspective helps explain this process. Kronsted et al. (2024) view lying as a dynamic that unfolds within the relationship between an individual and their environment. A lie is not a standalone act but rather an action that arises from a specific situation. Thus, a student's lie to their parents, a friend's lie to a close friend, and a person's lie to their partner cannot be given the same meaning simply because all three contain false information.

2. The Emotional Burden Shows That Lying Is Never Entirely Neutral

While lying may begin as a form of self-protection, the second finding suggests that this decision often carries emotional consequences. Feelings of guilt, fear of being found out, anxiety, or the need to maintain a story indicate that the act of lying can continue to linger in a person's experience even after the conversation has ended.

Insert original quote regarding guilt or anxiety after lying.

This finding is important because it shifts the focus from the act of lying to the experience of being someone who has lied. Two people may tell similar lies but experience them differently. For one person, lying may be seen as a common strategy; for another, the same lie may create a conflict with their self-image as an honest person.

From a phenomenological perspective, this distinction cannot be ignored. What

matters is not only what happens objectively, but how that event is experienced in an individual's consciousness. A lie can become an experience that is continually pondered, remembered, or even feared.

Here, the research findings enrich the enactivist account by Kronsted et al. (2024). If lying is understood as a dynamic process, then the consequences of a lie do not end when the statement is made. They can unfold through the recipient's response, the liar's interpretation, and changes in the relationship following the conversation. Thus, a lie has a sort of "life after the utterance": it can generate the need to recall the story, maintain consistency, avoid questions, or face the possibility of the information being exposed.

This creates a paradox. A lie can create social peace externally while simultaneously causing inner turmoil. Participants may succeed in avoiding an argument, but they must endure the discomfort of knowing that this peace is built upon information that is not entirely true.

In this context, the term meaningful lie must be understood with care. Meaning is not always synonymous with positive value. Something can be meaningful precisely because it leaves behind a strong inner conflict . A lie can become meaningful because it forces an individual to question their own moral identity: Am I still an honest person if I choose to lie in a certain situation?

This question reveals that truth and lying are connected to self-understanding. Honesty is not merely a norm directed toward others, but also part of how a person understands themselves.

3. Trust as a Condition of Possibility for Lying

The third theme shows that lying cannot be separated from trust. A person can lie effectively because everyday communication takes place under certain conditions of trust. The recipient cannot possibly verify all the information they receive; they must extend a certain degree of trust for social relationships to function.

Insert participant's original quote regarding why someone trusts a communicator.

In this context, the Truth-Default Theory offers a useful explanation. Levine and Street (2024) identify the truth-default tendency as a crucial condition in human communication. People generally do not enter every conversation with complete suspicion. Trust serves as the starting point that makes communication practically possible.

Research findings reveal the social consequences of this condition. A lie is not merely a deviation from the truth; it is also an act that operates on the foundation of existing trust. The closer a person's relationship with the communicator, the more complex the implications of the lie become once it is eventually discovered.

Insert original quote regarding changes in trust after discovering a lie.

When a lie is exposed, it is not just trust in a single statement that is damaged. The recipient may begin to revisit the history of their interactions: which conversations were true, which might not have been, and whether past experiences need to be reinterpreted.

Thus, these findings enrich the Truth-Default Theory by placing greater emphasis on the experiential dimension of trust. TDT explains why people tend to believe messages, but participants' experiences allow us to see how that trust is felt when it is maintained, tested, or betrayed.

These findings also reveal an important paradox: the relationships that most

enable a person to lie are often the ones they most want to preserve. A person might lie to a parent out of fear of losing acceptance; to a friend out of fear of conflict; or to a partner out of fear that the relationship will change. Thus, trust is not merely a victim of lies. It is also the social condition that allows lies to function.

This makes lying a relational phenomenon. The philosophical question is no longer just "Is a person telling the truth?" but also "What kind of relationship allows a person to trust, conceal, and ultimately make sense of the truth?"

4. Truth Is Not Only About Facts, but Also About Relationships and Time

The final theme reveals that participants tend to value honesty, but do not always understand honesty as an obligation to tell the whole truth to everyone in every situation. This finding is important because it shows that truth in everyday life has pragmatic and relational dimensions.

Insert original quote regarding the importance of honesty but the difficulty of telling the whole truth.

Participants can distinguish between outright lying, withholding information, remaining silent, or choosing a specific time to reveal something. This distinction shows that in social experience, the boundary between truth and lies is not always binary.

This view aligns with Um's (2024) argument regarding honesty as respect for a person's right not to be deceived. From this perspective, the issue of honesty is not merely about whether a proposition is literally true, but also whether the communicator allows the recipient space to form judgments based on non-misleading information.

However, research findings indicate that the right to know the truth is pitted against concrete experiences of care. This is where the conflict between autonomy and care arises. Telling the truth may respect a person's autonomy, but in certain situations it can be perceived as a hurtful act. Conversely, concealing the truth may reduce suffering in the short term, but at the same time deprives a person of the opportunity to know the truth and determine their own response.

El Ali et al. (2024) highlight a similar dilemma in the experiences of nurses faced with questions about truth-telling to seriously ill children. The study shows that the decision to tell the truth is not only related to abstract principles but also to considerations regarding potential harm, the recipient's readiness, and interpersonal relationships.

Thus, the findings of this study reinforce the understanding that truth is a relational act. What matters is not only the content of the truth, but also the manner, timing, relationship, and purpose of its communication.

This does not mean that truth becomes absolutely relative. Rather, the research highlights a tension between two equally valuable demands: the need to respect the truth and the need to respond to human vulnerability. The meaningful lie lies precisely within this tension.

5. From "White Lies" to an Understanding of Moral Negotiation

When these four themes are considered together, this study offers an alternative perspective on the term white lie. This term often makes lying seem simple: a lie is considered "white" because its intent is good. The study's findings suggest that this categorization oversimplifies the issue.

A lie intended to protect can still lead to guilt. A lie told to maintain a relationship can actually undermine trust. The truth, viewed as a moral act, can cause harm.

Therefore, the participants'

experiences demonstrate that the morality of communication is better understood as a process of negotiation rather than merely the application of rules.

Huang et al. (2022) emphasize that care ethics can help us understand why deception is sometimes considered in relational situations. Hodel et al. (2024) also demonstrate that the moral reasons for lying must be understood within the context of relationships. The findings of this study expand on that understanding by showing that moral considerations do not occur only at the decision-making stage but continue even after a decision has been made.

Someone might say, "I know it's wrong, but I feel I have to do it." Such a statement, when it appears in actual data, is phenomenologically significant. It shows that individuals do not always choose between "good" and "bad," but often choose between two values that are both considered important.

Thus, the moral conflict that arises is not a flaw in the data, but rather part of the very phenomenon we seek to understand. This ambiguity shows that humans live in a social space where the values of honesty, compassion, loyalty, self-preservation, and maintaining relationships can clash with one another.

6. Contributions to Social and Scientific Understanding

The main contribution of this study lies in the shift in focus from "detecting lies" to "understanding the meaning of lies." Much research on deception has focused on the ability to detect lies, linguistic features, frequency, or consequences. Meanwhile, the phenomenological approach used in this study takes human experience as the starting point for analysis.

- This study offers at least three conceptual contributions.
  1. First, lying is understood as a relational act. A lie does not occur solely within the liar but emerges within the relationship between the liar, the recipient, and the social context.
  2. Second, meaning is not synonymous with moral justification. A lie may be meaningful to the liar because it relates to love, protection, fear, or loyalty, without the study necessarily concluding that the lie is morally justified.
  3. Third, truth is understood as a negotiated social practice. Truth does not lose its normative status, but the way humans express it is always influenced by relationships, time, emotions, and perceptions of others' vulnerability.

This contribution is also relevant in the context of contemporary communication. In the digital environment, the distinction between information that is true, misleading, manipulative, and intentionally deceptive is becoming increasingly important. Lewandowsky et al. (2024), for example, emphasize the importance of distinguishing disinformation from disagreement through the element of intent to deceive. However, this research reminds us that the issue of truth is not confined to the public sphere or digital media. It also takes shape in everyday, intimate conversations—between children and parents, close friends, partners, or community members.

Thus, the question Can a Lie Be Meaningful? has broader implications than simply the ethics of lying. It touches on questions about how humans live together through communication, how trust is built, and how individuals balance the need to tell the truth with the need to nurture relationships.

7. Researcher Reflexivity and Sociocultural Context

In qualitative research, interpretation is not entirely separate from the researcher's position. The interpretation of statements such as "I lied to spare my parents' feelings" can be influenced by the researcher's understanding of family, politeness, hierarchy, and interpersonal responsibilities.

In the Indonesian social context—particularly when communication occurs within family and community relationships that emphasize relational harmony—the act of avoiding conflict may take on a different meaning than in more individualistic social contexts. However, these cultural differences should not be used to generalize that Indonesian society "prefers to lie for the sake of harmony." It is more accurate to acknowledge that social norms regarding respect, sparing others' feelings, and obligations toward family can be part of the context that needs to be considered when interpreting participants' narratives.

The researcher's position also requires careful reflection. Researchers may hold personal beliefs about the importance of honesty and unconsciously pass moral judgment on participants who admit to lying. Therefore, the analysis must distinguish between participants' voices and the researcher's interpretations. The goal is not to exempt lying from ethical evaluation, but to ensure that such evaluation does not overshadow the experiences being studied.

Reflexivity thus becomes part of interpretive validity. Researchers must continually ask: Am I interpreting lies based on the participants' experiences or on my own personal morality? Does the term "protecting" truly emerge from the participants' narratives, or did I introduce it because it aligns with the theory of care ethics? These questions help ensure that theory functions as a lens, not as a mold that forces the entire experience into predetermined categories.

8. Synthesis of the Discussion

When all the findings are woven together, this study reveals a pattern of meaning that is more complex than a simple opposition between truth and lies. Lies can arise from care, but care does not always justify a lie; lies can temporarily preserve a relationship, yet at the same time threaten trust; and truth can be a moral principle, but the way it is expressed still requires relational consideration.

An enactivist-phenomenological perspective helps explain why these contradictions do not need to be eliminated. Contradictions are, in fact, part of the human experience. Truth and lying exist within a lived world filled with relationships, emotions, limitations, and consequences.

Therefore, the most appropriate answer to the research question is not that "a lie is meaningful because it can be justified". That conclusion is too simplistic. The findings more accurately suggest that a lie can be meaningful because it reveals something about human relationships: what people want to protect, what they fear, whom they trust, who has the right to know, and how a person understands themselves as an honest or dishonest individual.

Thus, the meaning of a lie does not lie solely in the lie itself. That meaning emerges in the relational space between truth, intention, emotion, trust, concern, and consequences-. It is this space that constitutes the study's primary contribution to the philosophical understanding of lying and truth in human communication.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the meanings of lying and truth in human communication cannot be understood solely through the opposition between right and wrong. Based

on an interpretive analysis of the participants' experiences and narratives, lying emerges as a relational, situational, and emotional act. A person may lie to protect another person's feelings, avoid conflict, maintain a relationship, or shield themselves from certain consequences. However, such acts intended for protection can still result in emotional burden, moral ambivalence, and a breach of trust. Thus, the meaning of a lie lies not only in the untruthfulness of the message's content but also in the reasons why the lie was told, to whom it was directed, in what situation it arose, and how it impacts the relationship.

This understanding makes a conceptual contribution to the discussion of human communication by shifting the focus from the question "Is someone lying?" to a more reflective one: "What leads someone to choose to lie, and what meaning is attributed to that action?" This perspective aligns with the view that lying is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between an individual and their communicative environment (Kronsted et al., 2024). At the same time, the human tendency to accept messages as true at the outset of an interaction suggests that trust is a crucial condition for the continuation of everyday communication (Levine & Street, 2024). Lying, therefore, is not merely a deviation from honest communication but also an act that operates within the very structure of trust that enables communication itself to take place.

The findings of this study also show that "a meaningful lie" is not synonymous with "a morally justified lie." A lie may be meaningful to the person telling it because it is motivated by love, compassion, fear, loyalty, or a desire to prevent suffering, but that meaning does not automatically make it morally right. The care ethics perspective helps explain this tension because communicative actions are evaluated not only based on abstract rules of right and wrong but also based on consideration of needs, vulnerabilities, and interpersonal relationships (Huang et al., 2022; Hodel et al., 2024; Skov et al., 2024). Therefore, evaluating a lie requires a balance between honesty, autonomy, care, and the potential consequences for others.

New Insights and Conceptual Contributions

One of the new insights that can be drawn from this study is that truth should be understood not only as a quality of a proposition, but also as a relational practice. In everyday life, people do not communicate in a neutral space. Every message is conveyed within a specific relationship, with a certain level of trust, and with certain expectations regarding the other person's response. Therefore, the decision to reveal or conceal the truth can alter the nature of the relationship itself.

From this perspective, lying has at least two dimensions that operate simultaneously. The first dimension is the epistemic dimension—that is, the question of whether the information conveyed corresponds to reality. The second dimension is the relational dimension—that is, the question of how that information is used to manage relationships with others. A lie can serve a protective function in one dimension but a destructive one in the other. A person might lie to prevent emotional harm in the short term, but that action can erode trust in the long term. This finding reinforces the importance of viewing communication as a process that is inseparable from emotional experiences and social relationships.

In the digital context, this perspective becomes increasingly relevant. The development of social media has expanded individuals' ability to create, edit, conceal, and distribute information. The boundaries between personal lies, manipulation, persuasion, and the dissemination of misleading information can also become

increasingly complex. Therefore, digital literacy is not limited to teaching fact-checking skills. Digital literacy must also develop the ability to understand the communicative intent, context, sources, social consequences, and ethical dimensions of a message. This kind of understanding is crucial because the issue of truth in the digital realm is not merely a matter of whether information is factual, but also how that information shapes social beliefs and decisions.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications.

First, for policymakers, policies related to public communication and information literacy need to move beyond an approach focused solely on identifying false information. Information literacy programs can include education on communication ethics, source evaluation, recognizing manipulation, and the social consequences of spreading misinformation. This approach is important because trust is a fundamental part of the information reception process, while a communication environment rife with manipulation can undermine the public's ability to distinguish trustworthy information from misleading information (Levine & Street, 2024; Kirmayer, 2024).

Second, in education and curriculum development, courses in language, literature, communication, and character education can use cases of lying as opportunities to practice ethical reasoning. Students should not only be guided to understand that lying can have negative consequences, but also be encouraged to discuss situations where telling the whole truth can create a moral dilemma. Case-based discussions can develop critical thinking skills, empathy, perspective-taking, and ethical decision-making. Thus, honesty education does not stop at the slogan "always tell the truth", but evolves into the ability to consider when, how, and with what sense of responsibility the truth is communicated.

Third, in social interventions and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships, these findings highlight the importance of creating a communicative environment that allows individuals to speak the truth without immediately facing judgment. If individuals feel that honesty always leads to punishment, conflict, or a loss of social acceptance, lying can become a self-protection strategy. Conversely, relationships that provide a sense of safety, space for dialogue, and respect for vulnerability can reduce the need to use lying as a defense mechanism.

Fourth, in the context of mental health and relational well-being, attention must be paid to the emotional burden that can arise when a person maintains a lie. The conflict between what an individual knows to be true and what they choose to say can create feelings of guilt, anxiety, or interpersonal tension. Therefore, counseling approaches, psychosocial education, and relationship-strengthening programs can incorporate open communication and the skill of conveying the truth empathetically as part of preventing conflict and the erosion of trust.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study offers an interpretive perspective on the meanings of lying and truth, several limitations must be critically acknowledged. First, if the study is conducted within a relatively limited geographical area or community, participants' experiences may not necessarily represent the diversity of communication practices in societies with different cultural, religious, age, educational, and social backgrounds. Norms regarding honesty and lying are very likely influenced by cultural values and the structure of social relationships.

Second, a relatively homogeneous participant composition may limit the range of perspectives that emerge. The experiences of college students or young adults, for example, cannot be directly equated with those of parents, professionals, couples in long-term relationships, or older adults. Differences in social and relational positions can lead to different interpretations of the act of lying.

Third, the qualitative-interpretive approach has limitations in capturing the full complexity of the phenomenon. Participants' narratives are the result of their memories, interpretations, and ability to reflect on past experiences. Thus, what is conveyed in interviews is not an objective reproduction of events, but rather experiences that have been reinterpreted by individuals. The researcher's position and interpretations are also part of the process of meaning construction; therefore, reflexivity is a crucial element in maintaining the research's credibility.

Fourth, this study places greater emphasis on interpersonal experiences and thus has not yet explored in depth the differences between lying in personal relationships, educational institutions, work environments, political communication, and digital spaces. Yet, these contexts can give rise to different norms and consequences. The boundary between interpersonal lying and broader forms of information manipulation also warrants a separate study.

These limitations are not merely methodological weaknesses but also indicate areas of knowledge that remain open. In other words, this study is not intended to provide a definitive definition of meaningful lies but rather to open up possibilities for understanding this phenomenon in a more contextual and humanistic way.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand the study in several directions. First, the interpretive phenomenological approach could be deepened through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) or a hermeneutic approach to explore in greater depth how individuals assign meaning to the experiences of lying, concealing the truth, and confronting lies from others.

Second, cross-cultural comparative research is needed to examine the extent to which the concept of a meaningful lie is influenced by social and cultural norms. Studies comparing societies with different cultural orientations can reveal whether a lie that is considered an act of care in one context is understood in the same way in another context.

Third, future research could expand the study population to include partners, family members, college students, educators, healthcare workers, professionals, and social media users. This expansion would allow the research to capture variations in the meanings of lies based on relationship type, age, and social status.

Fourth, a mixed-methods approach can be used to link subjective experiences to broader patterns of communication. Surveys on the tendency to accept information as true, levels of interpersonal trust, attitudes toward lying, and tolerance for white lies can be combined with in-depth interviews. This approach can reveal a stronger connection between individual experiences and broader social patterns.

Fifth, future research needs to pay greater attention to the digital environment, particularly how algorithms, social media, deepfakes, generative artificial intelligence, and misinformation are changing people's understanding of truth. The key question is not just how people detect lies, but how they maintain the ability to trust, question, and evaluate information responsibly.

Ultimately, this study suggests that the question of lying should not be confined to the dichotomy of truth versus lie. A more productive question is how humans negotiate the truth amid concerns, fears, trust, vulnerability, and the need to maintain relationships. From this perspective, understanding lies means understanding humans as communicative beings who constantly strive to balance what is true, what needs to be said, what needs to be protected, and what must be accounted for. This is where the philosophical relevance of this study lies: truth is not merely a matter of facts, but also a matter of how humans choose to be present and accountable to others through language.

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