

# True lies: People who lie via telling truth viewed harshly, study finds

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

The ability to deceive someone by telling the truth is not only possible, it has a name—paltering—it's common in negotiations and those who palter can do serious harm to their reputations, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"To date, research has primarily focused on two types of [deception](#):

Lying by commission—the active use of false statements - and lying by omission—the passive act of misleading by failing to disclose relevant information," said lead author Todd Rogers, PhD, of Harvard University. "In this study, we make a novel contribution to the deception literature by identifying a third, and common, form of deception. Rather than misstating facts or failing to provide information, paltering involves actively making truthful statements to create a mistaken impression."

Paltering is used by politicians commonly, according to Rogers. "Politicians often palter when the truthful answer to a question would be harmful," he said. "When candidates get questions they don't want to hear, they often focus on continuing to make truthful statements, but try to mislead listeners."

One famous example Rogers cited was when President Bill Clinton said "there is not a [sexual relationship](#)" between him and former White House intern Monica Lewinski. The Starr commission later discovered that there had been a sexual relationship but it had ended months before Clinton made that statement - thus, it was technically true but clearly misleading.

Rogers and his colleagues conducted two pilot studies and six experiments involving over 1,750 participants.

The first [pilot study](#) confirmed that people in general could distinguish paltering as a distinct form of deception, different from lying by commission or omission. In the second pilot study, the researchers determined that it is a common form of deception, with over 50 percent of business executives enrolled in an advanced negotiation course at Harvard Business School admitting they had paltered in some or most of their negotiations.

In the experiments, the researchers discovered that people preferred

paltering to lying by commission, but the results of being found out can be just as harsh. While palterers tended to think of their actions as more ethical because they essentially told the truth, when the deception was revealed, they were graded as harshly by their counterparts as if they had lied by commission.

"When individuals discover that a prospective negotiation partner has paltered to them in the past, they are less likely to trust that partner and, therefore, less likely to negotiate with that person again," said Rogers.

"Taken together, our studies identify paltering as a distinct and frequently employed form of deception." Rogers postulates that people palter because they have a flawed mental model. Palterers think it is OK because they are telling the truth but their audience sees it as lying.

The results were published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

**More information:** Todd Rogers et al, Artful Paltering: The Risks and Rewards of Using Truthful Statements to Mislead Others., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000081](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000081)

Provided by American Psychological Association

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