

# 051 – The good, the bad and the flat-out liars.

## TRANSCRIPT

**Lori:** Hi English learners! Lori here, your teacher from [betteratenglish.com](http://betteratenglish.com).

Imagine if you will, the following scenario. You've volunteered to take part in a psychology study, say, at your university. All you have to do is show up to the lab, sit by yourself in a little booth and play a very simple game of chance, something like flipping a coin, where there's no skill involved, only luck. You get paid one dollar just for showing up, that's guaranteed. And if you're lucky and win the game, you'll get paid 5 dollars cash. But if you lose, you get nothing.

Here's the kicker: it's up to you to tell the researchers if you won or lost, they won't be able to tell.

So there are three possible outcomes: you can win and get 5 dollars, you can lose and get nothing, or....you can lose, but lie and still get the 5 dollars. And nobody will know. What would you do? What do you think other people would do?

As it happens, a recent study just looked at this, and there was a cunning little twist: those crafty researchers actually DID know if people won or lost. So they also knew if people told the truth about it or if they lied.

The study, called "Cheaters, Liars, or Both? A New Classification of Dishonesty Profiles" is absolutely fascinating. And today you'll hear a conversation – in American English – with some people discussing it. The conversation is from one of my favorite podcasts, The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe. It's a podcast featuring smart people having interesting discussions about science, technology, and critical thinking. If you are at all interested in those topics, I highly recommend it for your English listening practice. This is definitely a show that will make you smarter, and will teach you lots of vocabulary. The episodes don't always have transcripts, but I've transcribed the part you're going to hear today and put it in the show notes, which you can find at [betteratenglish.com/transcripts](http://betteratenglish.com/transcripts).

You know, if you like, you can turn this episode into a more challenging task for yourself. In the show notes you'll also find a link to a New York Times article about the study. In the conversation you'll hear a woman summarizing this same article to her friends. So before you continue listening, you can hit pause and go read the article yourself. Then imagine how you might summarize it for friend and what you might discuss. What language would you use? What vocabulary would you need? Spend a few moments imagining how you might talk about it with a group of friends. Then listen to the rest of this podcast and compare your ideas with what you hear in the conversation.

All right, let's get to it. You'll hear a woman named Cara doing most of the talking. She explains the study's findings to her friends Steve, Bob, Jay, and Evan. They they all discuss what they make of it. Are you ready? Let's go:

## CONVERSATION TRANSCRIPT

**Steve:** All right, Cara, you're gonna tell us about the psychology of lying and cheating.

**Cara:** Right! So this is a field of psychological inquiry that goes back basically to the beginning of experimental psychology, right? Psychologists, psychologists have always been interested in deception. So a new paper said, OK, well, we want to do is we want to see if we can sort of beef up and retest some old concepts in the kind of construct of lying, cheating deception, but we want to go beyond that. And we want to say, Okay, this is not an all or nothing phenomenon, right? Like, you could say, That person's a liar, or that person lied, or that person's a cheater, that person's dishonest, but there are shades of grey, aren't there?

**Steve:** Mm hmm.

**Evan:** Of course, of course.

**Bob:** Yeah, absolutely. Little white lies.

**Cara:** Totally. There lies that actually help us.

**Bob:** There are lies that actually get people killed.

**Cara:** Yep. Lies to get people killed and lies that we can't help but but commit, that's not a good word. But tell? Yeah, because they're the only they're the best of a bad situation we're dealing with or something like that. So they set up, you know, a standard classic laboratory psychology paradigm, which does not necessarily translate to the real world. So let's keep that in mind. And they set up two paradigms. One of them was a coin flip paradigm, and one of them was a die roll paradigm.

And basically, they said, you know, if you roll heads, you get money. If you roll tails, you get no money. Or if you flip heads, if you flip tails, and then on the die paradigm, they went into levels. So they said, you know, if you roll a one, you get \$1, a two, you get \$2, a three \$3. But if you roll a six, that's unlucky, so you get no dollars. So those are basically the two experiments that they ran.

And they found that people by and large, had similar response. There were people who were totally honest. So they would flip the coin, they would hit heads, and they would say, got heads, give me my five bucks. Or they would flip tails and they would say, you know, I flipped tails. I don't get any money. Okay, cool. All right. So you could flip a coin, and you're gonna be lucky enough that you flip heads you're, and that's where you get a \$5 payout, you're probably gonna say, hey, look, I flipped heads, you're gonna be honest about that, because you want the money.

So they decided, let's take all those people out of the equation. And let's just look at the people who flip tails. Because now all the sudden there's incentive, right? You could either flip tails, and not get the money and be honest about it. And that is what 41% of the people in the lab setting where they did it in front of actual researchers said, only 37% of people in a Mechanical Turk situation.

So Mechanical Turk, have you guys ever used that? I think it's Amazon's like survey, study software. And so this is like it's a coin flip simulation online. So it was this slightly lower number, it was 37%. But still, less than half of the people who flipped tails reported honestly that they flipped tails.

Then there was another group that they called the "cheating non liars." I love this. So these people flip the coin got tails, and were like, "Crap, I'm just gonna keep flipping until I get heads," which was breaking the rules, the rules was you flip once, but they said, screw it. I'm just gonna keep flipping. And then when they finally got heads, they were like, Hey, I got heads, let me have my \$5.

So this was 17% of the people in front of researchers. 7% of the people online, and another group were what they called "the liars." So these people flipped the coin got tails, and just straight up, go, "No, I got heads." 23% of people just straight up lied. And then they found a fourth group. And this group is fascinating, you guys. They called them the "radically dishonest people." And this is the group that I'm really interested in, like, can we develop a psychometric tool so that we can test these people and then start learning about them? So these people didn't even bother to flip the coin!

**Group:** Wow! Whoa!

**Cara:** They just go, "Oh, yeah, I got heads."

**Group:** Wow. Whoa.

**Cara:** So it's like, they were like double liars. They lied about participating, and they lied about the outcome.

**Steve:** What about "lying sack of shit?" What group were they in?

**Group:** [Laughter]

**Cara:** I think that's radically dishonest, the lying sack of shits.

**Evan:** Oh, man.

**Cara:** And so this is really fascinating, because I think there are two components here that we we maybe intuitively thought about, just like Bob mentioned earlier, you know, there's the lies that could get you killed. There's also the lies that just feel cruel, or they feel like pathologically dishonest and then there are the lies

where it's like, I understand the ethical or moral reason that this person lied. And I think we can start to dig deep into just this very clean laboratory experiment to tease out some of those issues. For example, you've got your straight-up honest people, you've got straight-up lucky people, then you've got your just straight-up liars.

Okay, those are the three groups that I think we would be pretty comfortable with if we were going to hypothesize what would happen. But the cheating non-liars and the radically dishonest people, again, the cheating non liar said, Well, I didn't get it the first time. So I'm just going to keep trying until I do. So they kind of, yes, broke the rules. That's why they're calling them cheaters. But in a way, it's almost like they, they tested the system until they could get to a place where they felt morally justified in saying, I reached heads, I get the money,

**Steve:** So that they're like looking for a loophole

**Cara:** Yes!

**Steve:** so that they can tell themselves, they didn't lie.

**Cara:** And I think --

**Steve:** They didn't cheat, they were just clever and exploiting a loophole.

**Cara:** I think a lot of us do that in our lives.

**Evan:** Well...

**Cara:** A lot of us.

**Evan:** Looking for shortcuts.

**Cara:** I look back at real world examples of this. You know, I have friends who were in terrible relationships, and they might have met somebody else and started a new relationship on the side. But since they were breaking up anyway, they sort of convinced themselves that they were already broken up before they crossed any line so that they can't call themselves cheaters, for example, and I think there are a lot, or we do it a lot with food, right with cheating on whatever our self-imposed diet restrictions are, or cheating on our self-imposed exercise restrictions.

It's a very common thing that we do, it's like, we figure out a way to contextualize it so that it's no longer a rule-breaking scenario. It's now a function of external circumstance, or a loophole. But then on the flip side of that, you have this radically dishonest group, which not only straight-up just made a bald-faced lie, they didn't even engage in the activity. Fascinating!

**Steve:** Yeah, like, my interpretation of that, my gut feeling, is these are people who don't care about the truth, the truth is irrelevant. What coin did they flip? Doesn't matter. If they they want heads, so they say, they, they make their reality,

**Cara:** Right. Like it's beyond even, I'm going to try to trick you.

**Steve:** Yeah.

**Cara:** It's that I'm going to invent reality. In a lot of ways it speaks to this fundamental kind of philosophy, which is, reality is what I make it, and I need to do everything that I can to induce a reality that serves me the best. So I would be interested – and they did not study this in this particular investigation – to see if certain personality traits like narcissism would feed into a radically dishonest group, for example.

**Steve:** Or psychopathy...

**Cara:** Or psychopathy exactly. Place...umm...the situations where somebody's, maybe empathy is questionable, or it's it's been stressed their, their sense of right and wrong. I mean, this is a really, really interesting outcome of this study. And just to follow up, they did a similar thing with the with the dice because they wanted to look at levels, right nuance to levels, because of course, if you roll a five, you get \$5, if you roll a one, you get \$1. And then if you roll a six, you get no money. So in a way, let's say the one and the six, or the five and the six are the exact same as the coin flip. But are people more likely, for example, to say that they did better than worse.

And the outcome of that was really interesting, because you still have the same groups, the the honest people, the liars, the multiple rollers, or the cheating, you know, liars or whatever, and then the radically dishonest and they sort of matched up in terms of percentages. But this time, because of levels within each of those categories, some people went for the full, full \$5. And other people sort of tempered their response. And they would instead what what the researchers called sub-maximize their response. So they would say like, "Oh, I rolled a three" in...even though they only rolled a one. And it's like, you could have said five, but instead it's somehow less lie-ey [Cara is making up her own word here].

**Steve:** Less, less suspicious.

**Cara:** Less suspicious, maybe.

**Evan:** Oh, I see.

**Cara:** Or they would feel really guilty about it

**Evan:** Don't be greedy.

**Cara:** Exactly. Like somehow it is helping with their own sense of shame, guilt, self-concept, self-worth.

**Evan:** Yeah, we all have, right, our breaking points to that degree.

**Cara:** Right. Like that's beyond the pale. But if I stay just under that line, it's not that bad that I'm doing this. So that's also a really interesting wrinkle that was added to this, this study that shows that human behavior is really, really complex. And it's not just about what other people think. It's about how we have to live with ourselves and judge ourselves when we go home at night. And we come up with all sorts of strategies, of course, to make order out of chaos, but also to I think, moderate modulate maybe our own sense of self worth and self efficacy. Just fascinating.

**Steve:** Yeah, very very cool. And it is always a little surprising. How many people do this, although we all know it, right?

**Cara:** Yeah, it's like, and I get it, like, in a real world setting. You know, we all do things that aren't 100% honest.

**Steve:** Fudge.

**Cara:** Yeah, we fudge. But like, I'm always amazed when somebody does something like when they know they're being videoed. Like, they know that this is for a psych study. It's like Okay, cool. You just, you be you, man.

**Steve:** All right, thanks, Cara.

END CONVERSATION TRANSCRIPT

**Lori:** Hi again! You know, as I was preparing this episode for you I thought a lot about this study, and what I would have done if I had been a subject. I want to believe that I would have been one of the honest people...compromising my moral integrity for five measly bucks? Meh! Doesn't really seem worth it. But then again, I'm just as flawed a human being as anyone else, and of course I've fudged the odd thing here and there. So I can't really be 100% sure, which kind of freaks me out, to be honest.

In any case, I hope you enjoyed this conversation and that it gave you some interesting language as well as food for thought. Please feel free to use the transcript to pick out useful words and phrases to add to your active vocabulary. If you look at the language in detail, I think you'll find loads of goodies there. The link to the New York Times article about the study is there too, as well as links to the Skeptics Guide to the Universe podcast. If you like to follow the science and tech news, I think you'll really love it. And if you are interested in academic English, I think you'll enjoy reading the full text of the study itself, which is also linked in the show notes.

That's all for this time! This is Lori, signing off from Better at English headquarters, wishing you an inspired and productive day! Bye for now!

## LINKS TO SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

PDF transcript of this podcast episode

Link to the Skeptics' Guide to the Universe Podcast episode

<https://www.theskepticsguide.org/podcasts/episode-793>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/science/psychology-dishonesty-lying-cheating.html>

The Good, the Bad and the 'Radically Dishonest' - New York Times article

Link to full text of the actual study "Cheaters, Liars, or Both? A New Classification of Dishonesty Profiles."

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343591254\\_Cheaters\\_Liars\\_or\\_Both\\_A\\_New\\_Classification\\_of\\_Dishonesty\\_Profiles](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343591254_Cheaters_Liars_or_Both_A_New_Classification_of_Dishonesty_Profiles)

Link to the actual game website used in the study. Try playing it yourself!

<http://rollandflip.com>

## GENERAL RESOURCES

### Loserthink

This is a great book by Scott Adams (creator of the Dilbert cartoons) about critical thinking and all the ways our brain tries to fool us by Scott Adams. This link is to the summary version on Blinkist, which contains audio so you can listen as you read. <https://blinkist.o6eiov.net/loserthink>