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A Reply to Obenauer (2025): On the Empirical Distinctions Between Bullshitting and Lying

John V. Petrocelli[1], Kohyar Kiazad[2], Simon Lloyd D. Restubog[3], and Fan Xuan (Jordan) Chen[4]

Kiazad et al.'s (2025) empirical investigation of motives for workplace bullshitting provides valuable insights into when and why employees engage in this behavior. Obenauer's (2025) commentary challenges whether the distinction between bullshitting and lying is meaningful, raising broader ethical concerns. In our reply, we provide substantive empirical evidence bearing directly on their distinguishability, clarify key conceptual and empirical issues, and advance the important scholarly dialogue about the nature of organizational deception. While we share Obenauer's view that both bullshitting and lying deserve serious ethical scrutiny, we diverge in our interpretation of what the evidence reveals about the nature and consequences of these behaviors.

[1]Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, USA
[2]Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
[3]University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA
[4]Talbert House Center for Health and Human Services, Thomas More University, Crestview Hills, KY, USA

Corresponding Author:
John V. Petrocelli, Department of Psychology, Wake Forest University, P.O. Box 7778, Winston-Salem 27109, NC, USA.
Email: petrocjv@wfu.edu

A large and growing body of empirical research demonstrates that bullshitting and lying are not interchangeable forms of deception, but are instead empirically and meaningfully distinct, with important implications for social perception, interpersonal influence, and the construction of shared realities (Petrocelli, Li, et al., 2024). In his commentary, "A Commentary on Kiazad et al. (2025)*: Calling Bullshit on Bullshitting*", Obenauer (2025) challenges this distinction, asserting that differentiation between bullshitting and lying reflects a "jangle fallacy" (Casper et al., 2018; Kelley, 1927). He argues that bullshitting and lying are "seemingly indistinguishable constructs that both comprise deception" (p. 1). We respectfully, but firmly, disagree with this assessment. This reading does not align with a substantial body of empirical evidence, which demonstrates the psychological reality and practical significance of distinguishing between bullshitting and lying.

Defining What's What

According to Frankfurt (1986) and Petrocelli (2018), bullshitting involves communicating claims with little to no regard for truth, evidence, or established knowledge. More importantly, bullshitting is not defined by its content, but by the communicator's underlying motivation. The bullshitter does not care what the truth actually is and is not trying to know or communicate it—what they say may even be true, but they wouldn't know either way. Bullshit is often abstract, lacking in sources and logic, or riddled with acronyms and business-speak jargon (Beckwith, 2006; Duncan, 2016, 2023; Fugere et al., 2005; Law, 2008; Spicer, 2013; Webb, 2006, 2010; Young, 2007).

Conversely, the liar knows the truth and deliberately asserts something contrary to it, believing the assertion to be false. When someone lies to us, they are actually concerned with the truth and believe they know what the truth is. Their objective is to persuade us to accept something they themselves do not believe is true (Frankfurt, 1986). The bullshitter, on the other hand, does not care about the truth at all—they pay no attention to it. Whereas the liar doesn't believe what they say is true, the bullshitter has no idea whether what they are saying is true or false, because they are not attending to truth, evidence, or established knowledge (Frankfurt, 1986; Petrocelli, 2018).

Importantly, a liar and bullshitter can say the exact same statement, such as "*No jobs will be lost during the restructuring of our organization*." The liar knows this claim is false, but asserts it anyway with the intention to deceive. The bullshitter, in contrast, may hope, wish, or even believe that the statement is true, but they do not actually know—and fundamentally do not care—whether it is true. Our stance is that this intention is the essential, epistemic difference in the speaker's mindset that separates bullshitting from lying.

There is also an important distinction in how people perceive and react to liars relative to bullshitters (Petrocelli, Curran, & Stall, 2024; Petrocelli, Silverman, & Shang, 2023). When people lie, the social consequences can be severe—employees are terminated, trust is broken, and relationships are damaged—because people are understandably intolerant of liars. Bullshitting, however, is often dismissed as a minor social offense or harmless indulgence—and this is precisely where social perceivers could not be more mistaken. Bullshit deeply undermines how people work together, share information, and make decisions. It contaminates learning, memory, attitudes, and what people believe to be true (Petrocelli, Li, et al., 2024). Moreover, people are far more susceptible to bullshit than they realize. Empirical evidence shows that the more confident individuals are in their ability to detect bullshit, the more vulnerable they are to its effects (Littrell & Fugelsang, 2024).

The Empirical Foundation of the Distinction

Obenauer (2025) argues that "recognizing this flawed distinction [between bullshitting and lying] fundamentally changes our interpretation of Kiazad et al. (2025)" (p. 1). He further notes that some of Kiazad et al.'s participants admitted "I took my best guess" and believed "what I said could be objectively true," claiming these people were not truly bullshitting but rather lying. Yet, this is what Kiazad et al. argue throughout: a bullshitter often guesses or improvises without certainty of the truth, whereas a liar deliberately communicates a believed falsehood. For instance, when my boss presses me to give an opinion in front of a client on topics I know very little about, I may only guess (perhaps hoping my statement is true), but with no intent to lie (deceive my boss and client as to what I otherwise know, or believe, to be true).

Obenauer's (2025) interpretation is difficult to reconcile with existing empirical evidence. A substantial body of research has established clear, measurable differences between bullshitting and lying across numerous domains. For example, Petrocelli, Silverman, and Shang (2023) demonstrated that bullshitting and lying are evaluated differently by social perceivers, with bullshitting evaluated *less* negatively despite being *more* insidious in its effects. Their mediation analyses further revealed that ignorance, dishonesty, and opinion expression operate as distinct mediators of the bullshit/lie-evaluation link, with ignorance positively associated with bullshitting perceptions, whereas deceptive intentions and dishonesty were strongly related to lying. These distinct statistical patterns empirically validate the argument that

people perceive fundamentally different psychological processes underlying bullshitting versus lying.

Petrocelli, Seta, and Seta (2023) found that bullshit and lies produce different patterns of persuasive influence over time. For example, bullshit appears to produce a stronger *sleeper effect* (i.e., a persuasive influence that increases, rather than decays over time) than lies. Likewise, bullshitting generates a significantly more extreme *illusory truth effect*, providing quantifiable evidence that bullshitting and lying are processed differently and have distinct impacts (Petrocelli et al., in press).

The Deception Distinction

Obenauer (2025) claims that "bullshit and lies are seemingly indistinguishable constructs that both comprise deception" (p. 1). The key distinction between bullshitting and lying, as Frankfurt (1986) first articulated and as empirical research has repeatedly confirmed, lies in the communicator's underlying motivation—this is a conceptual issue about the essential nature of these behaviors. Lying is defined by deception as its primary motive. The liar knows the truth and intentionally communicates something they believe to be false, with the explicit goal of making others believe what the liar does not (Frankfurt, 1986; Petrocelli, Seta, & Seta, 2023). Paradoxically, this means the liar is actually highly attentive to the truth—their deception depends on knowing it and ensuring they avoid communicating it. It is precisely this concern for truth that enables the liar to construct effective and targeted deceptions.

Motives and Ethical Concerns

Obenauer (2025) argues that "lying and bullshitting have shared motives" and that "a person cannot bullshit without also lying" (p. 2). Kiazad et al. (2025) represents the first systematic empirical investigation of bullshitting motives beyond *persuasive* and *evasive bullshitting* (Littrell et al., 2021a; Littrell et al., 2021b), yet we are not aware of any investigations that directly compare the motives underlying lying and bullshitting.

Moreover, by definition, this position is difficult to sustain. The primary motive underlying lying is deception—the liar intends to make others believe something the liar believes to be false (Frankfurt, 1986; Petrocelli, Seta, & Seta, 2023). Bullshitting, by contrast, can serve a range of motives. Kiazad et al.'s (2025) systematic investigation reveals a complex motivational landscape for workplace bullshitting, including self-enhancement, self-protection, impression management, social bonding, and task evasion—

motives that extend well beyond simple deception. This empirical evidence demonstrates that bullshitting serves purposes distinct from lying, including persuasion, evasion, expressing wishes, hopes, or fantasies, testing social reactions, or even the simple desire to speak without regard for truth (Frankfurt, 1986; Littrell et al., 2021a, Littrell et al., 2021a; Petrocelli, 2018). Bullshitting may involve claims that happen to be true but are communicated without sound reasoning or compelling evidence. Although bullshitting can be irresponsible and reflect willful ignorance to truth, it does not require deception as its primary motive. As Frankfurt (1986) observed, both the bullshitter and liar may appear as though they are concerned with truth, but only the liar is engaged with it—the bullshitter simply is not.

Obenauer also argues that "attempting to distinguish between these largely duplicative constructs provides an ethical offramp for us to excuse liars who have enough charisma to portray themselves as bullshitters" (p. 3). We strongly disagree with this assertion, which contains a fundamental logical contradiction. Obenauer appears to express dissatisfaction with the fact that consequences for bullshitting tend to be less extreme than those for lying (e.g., Petrocelli, Silverman, & Shang, 2023)—a concern we share. However, the appropriate response to inadequate sanctions is not to deny the distinction between the behaviors—it is to recognize that they are unique and warrant serious consequences. Consider the logical contradiction: If bullshitting and lying were truly the same thing, liars would have no strategic reason to reframe their lies as bullshit when caught lying. Yet this reframing happens precisely because people recognize meaningful differences between these behaviors and their associated consequences. The very phenomenon Obenauer describes—liars seeking to be categorized as bullshitters to escape harsher judgment—provides evidence *for* the psychological reality of the distinction, not against it.

Regarding the "ethical offramp", Obenauer argues: "In other words, our attempts to distinguish bullshitting from lying may actually protect liars and enable the behavior" (p. 3). We understand this frustration. However, the solution to this problem is not to conflate distinct constructs, thereby obscuring our understanding of both. The solution is to elevate the consequences for bullshitting to match those of lying. Critically, equalizing consequences does not require—nor should it imply—that the behaviors are identical. Rather, it reflects our recognition that bullshitting, despite being psychologically and motivationally distinct from lying, can be equally harmful to individuals and society and therefore deserves comparable moral and social condemnation. We can, and should, condemn both behaviors while maintaining the empirical and conceptual distinctions between them.

Definitional Issues

Obenauer (2025) asks: "Why isn't the definition of bullshitting 'purposefully communicating information as fact despite a lack of knowledge of the truth'?" (p. 3). The answer is that Frankfurt's (1986) conception accommodates special cases of bullshitting that do not involve purposeful communication of information as fact. Kiazad et al.'s (2025) empirical work supports this broader conception—their participants described bullshitting instances that included testing ideas, filling conversational space, and managing impressions, not all of which involved asserting factual claims. Their findings validate Frankfurt's theoretical framework while extending our understanding of bullshitting's motivational complexity in organizational contexts. Bullshitting can also involve simply wanting to know what it feels like to say something without regard for truth or testing out the social reactions one is likely to receive when sharing bullshit (Frankfurt, 1986). In such cases, there is no intention to deceive or to have one's statements taken as fact—rather, the goal is to experiment with communication or explore social dynamics.

Obenauer also claims that "Presuming to know the truth violates a key prerequisite for something to be classified as bullshit (Frankfurt, 1986)" (p. 3). Yet this reading appears to diverge from Frankfurt's framework. If truth is a presumption rather than actual knowledge, sharing it without concern for evidence or established knowledge constitutes bullshit, not lying. This is why Petrocelli's research has argued that an important similarity between bullshitting and lying is that both appear to, or act as if, they know or are concerned with the truth (Petrocelli, Seta, & Seta, 2023; Petrocelli, Silverman, & Shang, 2023). The critical distinction is not whether the communicator presumes to know the truth, but whether they are actually concerned with truth and evidence. The liar is concerned with truth (to communicate something other than it), while the bullshitter is genuinely unconcerned with whether their statements are true or false.

Furthermore, Obenauer references "more inclusive definitions of lying where the requirements are communicating (1) a false statement with (2) deceitful intent (e.g., Jenkins & Delbridge, 2020; Leavitt & Sluss, 2015)" (p. 4). However, lying does not have to involve a false statement—it can involve a true statement. The key determining factor of lying is the intention to deceive, not the truth value of the statement itself (Frankfurt, 1986; Petrocelli, Seta, & Seta, 2023). For example, if someone asks, "Did the Green Bay Packers win the first Super Bowl in 1967?" and you truthfully respond "Yes, they did" while believing/intending your answer would otherwise deceive/mislead the questioner (because you mistakenly believe the Packers did not win),

you have lied with a true statement. The lie consists in the intention to deceive, not in the truth value of the utterance.

Methodological Considerations

Detailing misinformation offered by Donald Trump and Bill Clinton, Obenauer (2025) states: "Clinton and Trump's statements were both (1) false and (2) intended to deceive, and would be considered lies using this broader, more objective definition" (p. 4). This conclusion is difficult to support. Whether a statement is bullshit or a lie depends on the motivation underlying the communication, not the content.

Take Trump's statement that the U.S economy under his leadership was the greatest economy "in the history of the world". Trump may have been lying or bullshitting. Without access to his state of mind, one cannot know. He may have been unaware of the economic data from the 1990s, forgotten it, discounted it, or chose to pretend the late 1990s did not happen. He may also have believed that the economy of the late 1990s was inflated or that the economy during his administration is even better than it appears to be. Only Trump knows what his true motives were. This is precisely why Petrocelli (2018) and Petrocelli et al. (2020) measured bullshitting behavior using a metacognitive approach, having participants rate their own thoughts regarding the degree to which they were "truly concerned with genuine evidence and/or established knowledge." This method allows researchers to capture the underlying motivation from an actor-centric standpoint rather than making assumptions based solely on the content of communications or their truth value.

Obenauer also argues that "it is near impossible for a person to engage in bullshitting without knowledge that they are intentionally communicating inaccurate information" and quotes Frankfurt (1986, p. 96) noting that "Both [the bullshitter] and the liar represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth" (p. 4). However, there are numerous exceptions. For instance, predictions about the future can be bullshit even when the communicator has no knowledge about their accuracy (e.g., "The Cleveland Browns are going to win the Super Bowl this year—I can just feel it"). The speaker is not knowingly communicating inaccurate information—such predictions may turn out to be accurate or inaccurate, but they are bullshit because they are communicated with no genuine care for whether the information is accurate, let alone feasible, rational, valid, or reasonably likely. It is true that both the bullshitter and liar may represent themselves as concerned with or knowing the truth, but this is where the similarities end. The liar actually is concerned with truth—specifically, with ensuring they do not

communicate it. The bullshitter, by contrast, has no such concern and may communicate truth or falsehood with equal indifference.

Does the Bullshitting/Lying Distinction Matter?

Obenauer (2025) questions whether it matters to distinguish between bullshit and lying. It most certainly does—the empirical evidence is both clear and substantial. The research conducted by Petrocelli and colleagues demonstrates multiple consequential differences. First, in terms of social perception, Petrocelli, Silverman, and Shang (2023) found that bullshitting and lying are evaluated differently. Although both elicit negative judgments, bullshitting receives significantly less negative evaluations than lying, despite being more insidious in its downstream effects. The study also identified distinct psychological mediators: perceptions of bullshitting were tied to ignorance, while perceptions of lying were strongly linked to deceptive intentions and dishonesty.

Second, regarding social influence, Petrocelli, Silverman, and Shang (2023) demonstrated that bullshit has a more potent impact than lies on what people perceive to be true and on attitudes formed for novel attitude objects. This finding directly supports Frankfurt's (1986) insidious bullshit hypothesis—while bullshit is evaluated less harshly, it has more harmful consequences for belief formation.

Third, Petrocelli, Seta, and Seta (2023) demonstrated that bullshit and lies follow different trajectories in persuasion over time, particularly through the sleeper effect. In the context of advertisement endorsements, bullshitters produced greater long-term persuasive impact than liars.

Fourth, research on the illusory truth effect demonstrates that bullshit produces significantly stronger effects than lies (Petrocelli et al., in press). Across three experiments, statements from bullshitters led to more extreme increases in perceived truth through repetition compared to identical statements from liars or honest communicators. When participants were informed about false information after initial exposure, the illusory truth effect persisted for bullshit but not for lies, demonstrating that people fail to correct for bullshit in ways they do correct for lies.

Fifth, Petrocelli (2018) identified specific antecedents of bullshitting behavior that differ from those of lying. Bullshitting increases when people lack knowledge about a topic, feel obligated to provide opinions, and face audiences who lack knowledge to evaluate their claims. Moreover, social accountability affects bullshitting in ways distinct from lying.

Finally, Petrocelli et al. (2020) examined self-regulatory aspects of bullshitting and bullshit detection, finding that depleted regulatory resources

increase both bullshitting behavior and receptivity to bullshit. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the bullshit-lie distinction has profound implications for learning, memory, social perception, persuasion, and belief formation.

The Conflation Inconsistency

Obenauer (2025) argues that "participants may present lying as bullshitting because they think it is more acceptable, causing the constructs to become further conflated" (p. 5). There is a logical inconsistency in Obenauer's reasoning here. If bullshitting and lying were truly indistinguishable, liars would have no reason to prefer being categorized as bullshitters. That liars might prefer to be seen as bullshitters demonstrates that they themselves recognize meaningful differences between the two behaviors—specifically, that bullshitting carries less severe social and moral reproach (Petrocelli, Silverman, & Shang, 2023). The strategic reframing from "I lied" to "I was just bullshitting" reflects an understanding that these are distinct behaviors with different social consequences and different underlying psychological states. If anything, this phenomenon provides further evidence for the psychological reality of the distinction rather than evidence of conflation.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Moving forward, this dialogue points to several important avenues for future research. Continued investigation of the boundary conditions distinguishing bullshitting from lying is needed, particularly through comparative studies that employ identical methodologies. The typology of bullshitting motives pioneered by Kiazad et al. (2025) deserves continued refinement. In addition, research on effective detection and response strategies is essential, given that bullshitting may be more insidious than lying precisely because it is often judged less harshly.

From a practical standpoint, organizations should recognize that bullshitting—despite often being dismissed as a minor offense—can be equally or even more harmful than lying. Ethics training and accountability mechanisms should therefore address both behaviors with appropriate seriousness. Since these behaviors stem from different motivations and psychological processes, interventions designed to curb one form of deception may not be effective for the other. Cultivating organizational cultures that value evidence-based communication and intellectual humility may be particularly effective in reducing bullshitting, given its association with overconfidence and low concern for truth (Petrocelli, 2018). In addition, training

programs should equip employees and managers to recognize both forms of deception, especially in light of evidence that individuals are often overconfident in their ability to detect bullshit (Littrell & Fugelsang, 2024).

Conclusion

The exchange among Kiazad et al. (2025), Obenauer (2025), and this reply represents the kind of substantive scholarly dialogue that advances our understanding of organizational deception. Kiazad et al. provide important empirical insights into the motives underlying workplace bullshitting. Obenauer raises legitimate concerns about ethical implications and the potential for the distinction to be exploited. Our reply engages directly with those concerns by examining the empirical evidence bearing on their validity.

Multiple studies using diverse methodologies have demonstrated that bullshitting and lying differ in systematic and consequential ways. Specifically, they: 1) are evaluated differently by perceivers, with distinct psychological mediators; 2) stem from different underlying motivations, with deception central to lying but not necessarily to bullshitting; 3) produce different patterns of social influence and persuasion; 4) generate differential effects on what people come to believe as true; 5) are differentially influenced by social accountability and regulatory resources; and 6) have distinct antecedents and consequences for cognitive processing. Far from reflecting a mere jangle fallacy, the bullshit-lie distinction captures robust and meaningful psychological differences with important theoretical and practical implications. While we share Obenauer's concern that bullshitting is often insufficiently sanctioned, the appropriate response is not to collapse the distinction between bullshitting and lying. Rather, it is to recognize that bullshitting—precisely because of its distinctive characteristics—may be equally or even more harmful than lying and therefore deserves comparable social and moral reproach.

Frankfurt's (1986) insidious bullshit hypothesis has received repeated empirical support: although bullshit is evaluated less negatively than lying, it exerts more insidious effects on belief formation, memory, and social influence. This dynamic makes preserving, not collapsing, the distinction between bullshitting and lying essential. Only by clearly understanding how these communicative acts differ in motivation, perception, and consequence can scholars and practitioners design effective strategies to detect, challenge, and mitigate the harm each produces. Recognizing this distinction is therefore not merely a theoretical exercise, but a practical necessity for combating the spread of misinformation in contemporary society.

ORCID iDs

John V. Petrocelli https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2827-468X
Kohyar Kiazad https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0238-3143
Simon Lloyd D. Restubog https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1602-2530

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