

# Parental deception: Investigating the effects of deception on parent-child relationships

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## Abstract

Deception occurs in everyday life and is an under examined area of research within parental-child relational contexts. Thus, the current study investigated the role of deception as it occurs within parent-child relationships. The study recruited 197 college students and asked them to complete several measures related to their satisfaction with their parents and the frequency and types of deception that their parents have used. The results indicated that most people have been lied to by their parents, most lies told by parents were white lies, and parental satisfaction is negatively related to the amount of deception that parents use. Implications for parent-child relationships and future research will be discussed.

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## Introduction

Lies are a familiar part of our lives; we tell them and are told them. Scholars have long wondered the reason people deceive others, what benefits and consequences this deception entails, and even what constitutes deception. Deception can be defined as “a successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue” (Vrij, 2000, p. 6).

Lies can serve a variety of functions in different situations and in various relational contexts (Peterson, 1996; Vrij, 2008). In some situations particular lies, white lies, can be seen as necessary for successful social interactions (Bryant, 2008). On the other hand, blatant or aversive lies can cause damage to relationships (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Schweitzer, Hershey, Bradlow, 2006). Lying can also cause people to lose trust in others (Sagarin, Rhoads, and Cialdini, 1998).

Research and literature has extensively discussed the different types of deception, its consequences, and dynamics within relational contexts (Peterson, 1996; Sagarin et al., 1998; Vrij, 2008). Recently, increased attention has been given to deception within the context of parent-child relationships, specifically focusing on child deception (Williams, Kirmayer, Simon, & Talwar, 2013). However, parental deception appears to be an under examined variable of relational deception.

Some of what has been found in the scant literature is that parents do lie to their children, even though they promote honesty (Heyman, Luu, & Lee, 2009). Further,

these findings indicate that parents deem lying to be acceptable in particular situations. In fact, lies were commonly used to control behavior and emotion. Parental deception appears to be a cross-cultural phenomenon, in which parents lie to their children to influence behavior (Heyman, Hsu, Fu, & Lee, 2013).

Scholars have conducted research into the repercussions of different kinds of lies (Sagarin et al., 1998), but little has been done on the consequences of parents lying to their children. This area lacks empirical investigation. Thus, the current study examined parental deception and its effects on the parent-child relationship. Specifically, examining frequencies of which parents use deception, what type of deception is used, what effect it may have on relationship satisfaction, and how it was discussed throughout childhood. It was predicted that the majority of participants would report that their parents have lied to them and that white lies and lies of omission would be reported as being told more frequently than other types of lies. It was also predicted that there would be a negative correlation between the frequency of reported parental lies and parent-child relationship satisfaction. Lastly, it was predicted that participants would report that, as growing up, deception was morally unacceptable and punishment was the consequence for its use.

## Method

### *Participants*

The current study recruited 197 participants ranging in age from 17 to 57 years ( $M = 20.09$ ,  $SD = 4.19$ ). Most participants were women (76%) and largely identified as Caucasian (48%). Most participants indicated that they grew up with their biological mother (95%) and a large percentage grew up with their biological father (75%).

### *Materials*

The current study used four instruments: Demographics Questionnaire, Perceptions of Parents Scales, Types of Parental Communications Questionnaire, and Frequencies and Perceptions of Deception Questionnaire.

*Demographics questionnaire.* The questionnaire asked participants to provide information about age, sex, gender, ethnicity and race, education, parents, and parental education. Subsequently, the questionnaire asked participants to indicate their satisfaction with their relationship to their parent(s) on a Likert-type rating scale (1 = Extremely unsatisfied, 5 = Extremely satisfied).

*Perceptions of parents scales-College student scale.* The Perceptions of Parents Scales-College Student Scale was developed by Robbins (1994) to investigate parental involvement, autonomy support, and warmth. The measure consists of 42 items: 21 for mothers and 21 for fathers. The measure contains 6 subscales which include: (a) Mother Autonomy Support, (b) Mother Involvement, (c) Mother Warmth, (d) Father

Autonomy Support, (e) Father Involvement, and (f) Father Warmth.

Types of parental communications questionnaire. The Types of Parental Communications Questionnaire was adapted from Peterson (1996) and consisted of participants being asked to read a series of scenarios and respond to questions regarding how often their parents have or would use that type of communication and how they perceive the type of communication. The scenarios and questions were similar to those used in another study that explored deception in intimate relationships (Peterson, 1996). The scenarios retain the type of deception used but have been changed to reflect content of parental deceptions.

Frequencies and perceptions of deception questionnaire: The Frequencies and Perceptions of Deception Questionnaire consists of 29 items that ask participants to report their perceptions of the frequencies of parental deceptions and whether they deem being told about some mythical characters as parental deceptions. The questionnaire begins with a statement indicating that the investigators do not condone or condemn deception. Then, participants are asked questions about whether their parents have ever lied to them and the frequency of use on a Likert-type rating scale (1 = Never, 5 Often). Next, participants were asked to indicate their opinions on five items that asked about how morally acceptable lying was and their consequences for lying on a Likert-type rating scale with a no difference anchor point (1 = Significantly agree, 3 = No difference, 5 = Significantly disagree).

### Procedure

The study was initially approved by the Institutional Review Board. The study was conducted completely online through a secure research host site, Psychdata. The study's link was posted in Angelo State University's Sona-Systems. Participants were able to select the study, if they chose to participate, from Sona as a research component of a course for extra credit in a course.

Once participants selected the link to the study they were presented with an informed consent. After providing consent, participants were asked to complete the Demographic Questionnaire. Next, participants were provided with the Perceptions of Parents Scales-College Student Scale (Robbins, 1994). Then, participants were asked to complete the Parental Communications Questionnaire followed by the Frequencies and Perceptions of Deception Questionnaire. Lastly, participants were provided with a debriefing form.

### Results

Descriptive statistics revealed that most participants indicated that their parents have lied to them (90%); however, only a small percentage (5%) endorsed that their parents lied often. In support of the hypothesis, a strong negative correlation was found between reported parental satisfaction and perceived parental deception ( $r(188) = -.48, p < .001$ ). This finding was present when analyzing parental deception individually,

for perceived mother deception ( $r(189) = -.45, p < .001$ ) and father deception ( $r(185) = -.32, p < .001$ ). Further, a strong negative correlation was found between amount of deception perceived from the mother and the mother's involvement, autonomy support and warmth ( $r(195) = -.43, r(195) = -.48, r(195) = -.49, p < .001$ ). Also, a strong negative correlation was found between amount of deception perceived from the father and the father's involvement, autonomy support and warmth ( $r(191) = -.46, r(191) = -.39, r(191) = -.47, p < .001$ ).

A repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to test types of lies, as a repeated measures variable, across the measures of parental use and the likelihood to use. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the types of lies across all measures,  $F(20, 159) = 23.44, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .75$ . Univariate tests also indicated statistically significant differences among the type of lies used by mothers, ( $F(5,178) = 106.74, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .38$ ) and fathers ( $F(5,178) = 85.33, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .32$ ). Also, the likelihood to use particular types of lies differed for mothers, ( $F(5,178) = 104.86, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .37$ ) and fathers ( $F(5,178) = 80.36, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$ ). Pairwise comparisons revealed that mothers ( $M = 4.03, SD = 1.13$ ) and fathers ( $M = 3.83, SD = 1.20$ ) used white lies more often than all other types ( $p < .001$ ) and omissions were reported as least used by both mothers ( $M = 1.65, SD = 1.09$ ) and fathers ( $M = 1.74, SD = 1.11; p < .001$ ).

A repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to test types of lies, as a repeated measures variable, across the measures of how affective, serious, and honest they are. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the types of lies across all measures,  $F(35, 138) = 29.90, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .88$ . Univariate tests also indicated statistically significant differences among the type of lies used and their seriousness, ( $F(5,172) = 31.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .16$ ), how affective ( $F(5,172) = 160.57, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .48$ ), blameworthy, ( $F(5,172) = 141.72, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .45$ ) destructive, ( $F(5,172) = 138.71, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .45$ ), and honest ( $F(5,172) = 72.66, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$ ). Also, the type of lies differed by preferred use ( $F(5,172) = 165.38, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .49$ ) and use instead of an argument ( $F(5,172) = 88.49, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .34$ ). Pairwise comparisons revealed white lies were least serious ( $M = 2.17, SD = 1.33$ ), more positive ( $M = 4.28, SD = .85$ ), more praiseworthy ( $M = 1.92, SD = 1.03$ ), more helpful ( $M = 1.86, SD = .89$ ), more honest ( $M = 3.05, SD = .92$ ), more likely to be used ( $M = 4.24, SD = .89$ ), and preferred to an argument ( $M = 4.23, SD = .95$ ).

One-sample t-tests were conducted on the acceptableness, morality, truthfulness, parent values, and parental consequences of deception in the participants household (Bonferroni correction = .01) compared to a no difference anchor of three. Results revealed statistically significant differences for all items from the no difference anchor. Lying was deemed unacceptable ( $M = 4.05, SD = 1.07$ ),  $t(193)=13.63, p < .001$ , and morally wrong ( $M = 4.21, SD = .99$ ),  $t(193)=17.08, p < .001$ . Participants were told to always be honest and truthful ( $M = 4.66, SD = .64$ ),  $t(192)=36.00, p < .001$ , were punished for lying ( $M = 4.40, SD = .94$ ),  $t(191)=20.64, p < .001$ , and not rewarded for lying ( $M = 1.17, SD = .50$ ),  $t(192)=-51.44, p < .001$ .

## Conclusion

The current study found that many people report that their parents have lied to them. Also, there was a negative correlation between the amount of perceived lies told and satisfaction within the parent-child relationship. Participants indicated that as the number of lies they thought their parents told them increased, their satisfaction with the relationship with their parents decreased. However, a correlation was not found between the perceived severity of the lies told and relationship satisfaction. Therefore, it seems that regardless of the perceived threat, the more lies told are related to less relational satisfaction.

Types of lies told appeared to differ for parents, mother and father, as they told more white lies than any other type. Majority of participants also felt like this kind of deception had a positive effect on them and stated that they would be more likely to use this kind of deception with children than the other types. This was an interesting find because even though there was a negative correlation with parental deception and relationship satisfaction, the participants rated white lies as the type of lie perceived as most told and that it had a positive effect. One possibility is that when participants were asked to report the frequency of parental deception, they were not thinking of or counting white lies. Another possibility is that people may be unaware of the effects of white lies. This explanation may be more plausible based on the findings from Kaplar (2006), revealing that white lies were negatively correlated with romantic relationship satisfaction. Also, in romantic relationships, people who are willing to tell their significant others white lies prefer to not be told white lies (Hart, Curtis, Williams, Hathaway, & Griffith, 2014). Lastly, telling little white lies has been shown to lead to more negative experiences (Argo & Shiv, 2011).

In the current study, it was reported that parents encouraged honesty and punished lying behaviors. This find parallels with other research (Heyman et al., 2009). The dynamics between the parent-child relationship may elicit what is deemed as moral hypocrisy (Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, & Strongman, 1999; Batson & Thompson, 2001). It has been suggested that moral hypocrisy can be found in telling white lies within romantic relationships (Hart et al., 2014). Parents may send mixed messages by telling their children to not lie and then encourage them to lie to uphold social status. Continuing and refining this research is encouraged to strengthen the current research on parental deception. Future studies could examine the same aspects in this study from a parent's point of view instead of the child's. Also, a limitation of the current study was that participants were largely a university convenience sample. It may be worthwhile to examine parental deception with children who are in early childhood stages. This may promote research within the area of parental deception. In conclusion, parents are perceived to lie, often through white lies, and deception affects the parent-child relationship.

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