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Adolescent Deception:  
The Use of Deception, Family Dynamics,  
and Gender of Parents and Adolescents

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COM 301: Communication Research

Open and clear communication between adolescents and parents is very important. Researchers have found that clear communication creates better relationships. However, it doesn't always occur; adolescents often feel the need to create their own sense of self and have autonomy and may engage in deception. While the research has addressed the use of deception by adolescents, little research has acknowledged the role of family dynamics and gender in the process. Factors such as family intactness, cohesiveness, and control may have an effect on whether or not an adolescent engages in deception. Previous research has shown a relationship between the prevalence of deception and family intactness, cohesiveness and control. The gender roles that are established in early childhood might also have affect the likeliness an adolescent may use deception. This paper will discuss what deception is, the relationship between family dynamics and deception, and the relationship between the gender of the parents and adolescents and their use of deception.

## Review of the Literature

### *Adolescence and deception*

Depending on the study being done and/or the researcher, the definition and interpretation of deception will vary. O'Hair and Cody define deception as "the conscious attempt to create or perpetuate false impressions among other communicators," (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994, p. 183). O'Hair and Cody also describe deception as "purposeful, often goal directed, and frequently functions as a relational control device," (p. 181).

Different studies have identified different categories of deception. O'Hair and Cody (p. 184) found five categories of deception in a study including the following: providing contradictory information that distorted the truth, exaggeration, half-truths to minimize the actual impact of the truth, keeping secrets or remaining silent, and diversionary responses (changing the subject). For example, if a parent asked their child if they had finished their homework, the child could be deceitful in many different ways. The child could simply remain silent or could change the subject. The child could also give a half-truth by saying that the homework isn't finished yet, which could be true even if the homework hadn't even been started yet. The child could distort the truth and say that there was only class work for the day, but no homework, even if the child had not yet finished the class work and had taken it home to do as homework. Lastly, the child could exaggerate that there is little homework to do, even if there is a lot to do. Another study identified two categories of deception: concealment and falsification (O'Hair & Cody, p. 185). Concealment consists of hiding information and falsification is constructing a lie or giving information that is not entirely true.

DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, and Epstein (1996) found that lying is a part of everyday life. This is certainly true, but the majority of everyday lies are not serious. They may be diversionary responses in order to avoid answering an uncomfortable question or half-truths in order to avoid hurting another's feelings or to avoid conflict. DePaulo, et. al. found that college students told an average of two lies daily and lied to 38% of the people involved in their lives.

Many studies have been done on the aspect of deception, and several have been aimed toward adolescent-parent relationships. Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, and Cauffman (2004) found that college students had lied at least one time to their parents in the past year, but college students lied less than high school students. Jensen et al. found that adolescents did not strongly approve of lying. Despite this, they often think that lying is justifiable. They feel that they have the right to make their own decisions. They also would like to avoid conflict with their parents. Autonomy was the number one motive for justifying lies to parents (Jensen et al., 2004).

Perkins and Turiel (2007) found that adolescents believed that deceiving parents about moral and personal issues was acceptable, but deceiving them about prudential issues was not. Moral issues may concern religious beliefs and subjects controversial such as premarital sex. Personal issues could relate to an adolescent's social life, clothing choices, or personal feelings such as depression. Prudential issues, which were found as unacceptable to deceive about, concern issues in which a person may be put into danger.

Adolescent conflict with parents about privacy, control over the body, and friendship choices often resulted in deception in order to avoid punishment or restrictions, avoid upsetting parents, or to retain their sense of autonomy (Perkins & Turiel, 2007).

Marshall, Titon-Weaver, and Bosdet (2005) found that the kinds of deception used by adolescents were mostly offering limited information or

remaining silent and offering no information. Adolescents interpreted not disclosing information in order to avoid harming the parent as not lying.

Adolescents may have a different definition of lying than parents. Seiter, Brushke, and Bai (2002) noted that “the average person may also consider some acts of deception to be a form of competent communication,” (p. 171). While Seiter, et. al. did not directly refer to adolescent behavior, some adolescents may consider some types of deception, such as divisionary responses, as competently communicating with their parents. With a divisionary response, they are not lying directly to the parents. They are just changing the subject to avoid further discussion.

Sometimes deception is used in order to avoid talking about a topic (Mazur & Hubbard, 2004). The adolescent deceives the parent by not disclosing certain information, but still appears to be open. They will disclose partial information while still concealing information that they do not want their parents to know. This creates an illusion to the parents that their adolescent is being open and that boundaries have been expanded, when really the boundaries are the same and deception is occurring (Mazur & Hubbard, 2004). This may lead to more deception in the future.

DePaulo, Ansfield, Kirkendol, & Boden (2004) found that people most often told serious lies about subjects they were ashamed of, felt were immoral, knew were to be illegal, or would cause distress to others. Telling serious lies distresses the liar, even though the lies are generally more carefully planned. If

caught, the liar is usually remorseful and the person being lied to is angry.

Serious lies also affect relationship closeness and trust.

People will lie in order to get what they want, do what they want to do, and avoid punishment (DePaulo, et. al., 2004). They also may lie if the truth will have a negative affect on the relationship or possibly harm another person.

#### *The effect of family dynamics on adolescent deception*

Family dynamics have been shown to affect the acceptability and prevalence of lying. Family dynamics can include several factors such as family cohesiveness, family control, and whether or not the family is still intact.

In cohesive families, lying was less acceptable and occurred less often (Jensen et al., 2004). Jensen et al. found that the more controlling parents were, the more likely that their children would lie to them.

Deception was more prevalent in homes in which the adolescents' parents were still married (Knox, Zusman, McGinty, & Gescheidler, 2001). An adolescent may need to deceive more often in this situation because there are two parents, with two different points of views. There also may be stricter rules in an intact family.

Deception has been associated with adolescent depressive mood and delinquency (Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005). Control has also been linked to depressiveness (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Adolescent depressiveness is reported more often in single parent families than in intact families (Feldman, Rubenstein, & Rubin, 1988). It was also found that in less cohesive families, adolescents are more depressed. Clark and Shields (1997) found that for

adolescents that were from nontraditional families, younger adolescents, and females, communication was less important in the prevention of delinquency.

*The effect of gender on adolescent deception*

In several studies, gender has had an affect on deception and its likeliness and success. In a study by Gervais, Tremblay, Desmarais-Gervais, and Vitaro (2000) in which 2,000 kindergarten students, half male and half female, were studied, males lied more frequently than females. This may be because males find lying to parents as more acceptable than females (Jensen et al., 2004). Males also lie more when the subject pertains to money or alcohol and drugs. Knox et al. found that males were significantly more likely to deceive their mothers, while females were significantly more likely to deceive their fathers (2001). Boys have more open communication with their fathers than girls (Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, & Bosma, 1998). In general, boys and girls both had more open communication with their mothers than with their fathers because the adolescents saw their mothers are more accepting of their opinions (Jackson et al., 1998). But, this does not explain as to why an adolescent male is more likely to lie to their mother, and actually contradicts the study by Knox et al.

There also is the consideration of an adolescent trying to deceive both parents at the same time. The gender of the adolescent and the parent is likely to affect the likeliness of deception. It also may affect the motives for deception and the form of deception.

Several studies have found differences between males and females when deception is concerned. Women view lies as less justifiable than men (DePaulo,

et. al., 2004). They also feel more distressed when telling serious lies, and had a more negative attitude towards lying. Kashy and DePaulo (1996) found that relationships in which both people were of the same gender, the relationships were of a higher quality and there were lower rates of lying. Feldman, Tomasian, and Coats (1999) found that “observers were able to distinguish when males were lying more easily than when females were lying,” (p. 247), but having the ability to lie was more important to males. Feldman, et. al. (1999) said that this may be so because “covering up, exaggerating, and other types of lying may serve important social goals,” for men (p. 247). Keltikangas-Järvinen and Lindeman (1997) found that adolescent males accept immoral acts, such as lying, more easily than adolescent females. Women also tell more lies in order to avoid harming others and less self-centered lies than men (DePaulo, et. al., 1996).

Although clear communication with their parents would create a better parent-adolescent relationship, adolescents will often engage in deceptive behaviors because they would like to create their own sense of self and retain autonomy. An adolescent’s gender and the dynamics of their family in relationship to how, why, and how often they deceive has not been thoroughly studied. The intactness, cohesiveness, and control exerted in the family will have an affect on the adolescent and quite possibly their use of deception. Also, the gender roles that are established early in life may affect the occurrence of deception during the adolescent years. Therefore, the following research

question is posed: Is there a relationship between the use of deception, family dynamics, and the gender of the parents and adolescents?

### Method

#### *Participants*

For this study, a nonrandom volunteer sample of male and female subjects, between 13 and 19 years of age, will anonymously complete a three-part survey. It is preferable to use 50% male and 50% female from public schools and universities. With an even amount of males and females, gender differences may be analyzed more completely. Public schools and universities need to be used in order to get a more diverse sample of backgrounds.

#### *Procedure*

The surveys will be administered at the beginning of a class period in order to ensure that students fully complete them rather than quickly completing them in order to leave class. Extra credit or other incentives will also be used.

The first part of the survey will be for demographical purposes. Students will record their age, sex, and the family dynamics of their home (separated parents or married parents). If their parents are separated, they will also need to record the sex of the parent in which they live with.

The second part of the survey will assess their use of deception to their parents within the past 12 months. A 10-point Likert scale will be used to measure their use of deception (1=never, 10=ten or more times). They will rate how frequently they have used deception on nine subjects: dating, sexual behavior, friends, school/grades, alcohol use, drug use, parties, money, and

where they have been or were going. The scale will be used twice, once for the male parent and once for the female parent. If there is only one parent, only one scale may be completed. This will not only measure the level of deception the adolescent is involved in, but also which parent is deceived most often.

The third part of the survey will measure family cohesion and control. Two subscales from the Family Environment Scale will be used. "Each subscale consists of 9 items with a 2-point scale (1 = *true*, 2 = *false*). The family cohesion scale assesses the degree of commitment, help, and support that family members provide for one another" and the "family control scale assesses the extent to which set rules and procedures are used to run family life," (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004, p. 105).

### *Threats to Validity*

Sensitization may be a threat to validity in this study. Participants may become overly sensitive to the third part of the survey, after completing the second part. After reporting on how often they lie to their parents, they may feel that their family is less cohesive and more controlling than they did at the beginning of the survey. Selection may also be a threat. Public schools in an urban area may have different results than those in a rural area. In a classroom setting, interparticipant bias will be a threat. Participants will be asked to keep silent and their eyes on their own papers, as if it were a test, in order to minimize this. If they do not do so, they will not receive the incentive.

### Conclusion

This paper has addressed the subject of adolescent deception and the affect that gender and family dynamics has on adolescent deception. For the research, family dynamics have been classified as family intactness, cohesiveness, and control.

The proposed research method is to survey a nonrandom sample of male and female adolescents from public schools and universities. Demographics will be surveyed first to record the participant's basic information such as age, gender, and family intactness. Two surveys will follow to measure deception to parents on a variety of subjects and to measure family cohesion and control. Possible threats to validity comprise of sensitization, selection, and interparticipant bias.

There is clearly a relationship between adolescent deception, gender, and family dynamics, but further research is needed to analyze the extent of this relationship and factors related to it.

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