

Sugar-coated or Bullets-hided: An Analysis of the Types of Children's Lie-telling under the Influence of Parents' White Lies

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Abstract. This study explores the different types of lying behavior among children within a Chinese family under the influence of parents' white lies. This study aims to explore the connection between parents' white lies and the various types of lying behavior children exhibit. Data was obtained through an online questionnaire that was completed by young adults between the ages of 19-30 who had experienced white lies from parents during their childhood. Our study found a negative correlation between parents' use of white lies and their children's tendency to lie. The results of the study provide valuable insight into the relationship between parental white lies and children's lying behaviors and possibly offer effective parenting strategies.

1. Introduction

White lie as a special type of lie-telling can be generally regarded as a strategy to solve a politeness dilemma "in which telling a blunt truth is likely to hurt the feelings of another"¹ (Ma et al., 2011). Although the study of white lies developed so well, most researches chose to just discuss the behavior of children's lie-telling, ignoring the role of their parents. For example, few researches ascribed children's lie-telling to the influence of their parents, such as their different parenting styles. Among that, the influence of parents' lie-telling on that of their children was not attached importance to, only studied by a small number of researchers.

In this essay, we aim to reveal the underlying link between parents' white lies and their children's lie-telling, showing the power and magic of white lies in parenting and helping us better the use of white lies when facing young children in family education. We decide to design an online questionnaire based on the previous mature models to investigate the situation of young adults' lie-telling in their childhood and whether and how it is influenced by their parents' white lies. Here are two major questions this essay tries to figure out:

Question 1. Whether parents' white lies lead to children's lie-telling?

Question 2. How do parents' white lies influence the types of children's lie-telling?

2. Literature Review

2.1 White Lie

White lies are those untruthful statements without malignant intention compared to other threatening lies, not morally wrong and socially harmful. The use of white lies seems so common that they gain their own protective coloring. Therefore, the refusal of using them might even give the impression of an indifference² (Bok, 1979).

The study of white lie started with and always focused on children. Early researchers preferred to figure out why and how children succeed in own gaining their own benefits by telling lies on purpose. The type of lie-telling of this kind can be called "black lie", as the opposite of white lie. This particular term mostly appears in Chinese essays with the emergence and introduction of white lie. However, the study of white lie itself is still not popular in China.

Around the 1980s, the concept of white lie was gradually being discussed. After that, children's cognition of white lies and ability to tell white lies began to be studied. From the 1980s to the 2000s, psychological theories and sociological paradigms flourished, making the study of white lie more explainable. Researchers paid more attention to children's psychological cognition and moral evaluation of white lies. Besides, all kinds of social rules of politeness were taken into consideration. Until now, most researches related to white lie have often adopted scenario approach, mainly showing a story to let children evaluate and predict the behaviors of the characters, by which their cognition of white lie can be

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analyzed. In addition to just analyzing children's behavior of telling white lie, many studies turned to pay attention to the reason and influence of it and some even analyzed children's lie-telling from the perspective of their parents^[3,4,5] (Liu & Hua, 2020; Ding et al., 2021; Setoh et al., 2020). Besides, with the economic rise of East Asian countries and the prominence of education problems after the 20th century, many culture-based and background-based researches came out. All in all, the underlying value of white lie is still waiting to be exploited.

2.2 Parents' Lie-telling

Sweetser (1987) posits that white lies are frequently employed to maintain harmonious relationships, as the use of blunt words may potentially harm the listener⁶. Despite their untruthfulness, white lies are driven by altruistic intentions⁷ (Broomfield, 2002). Within families where parents possess a high level of education, it is customary for them to instruct their children on the utilization of euphemistic language to articulate their emotions, rather than prioritizing complete honesty. This approach seeks to shield children from emotional and psychological distress that may arise from the truth, as well as prevent negative behavioral reactions when the child becomes aware of the truth⁸ (Talwar & Lee, 2002). Consequently, this approach fosters emotional stability, bolsters self-confidence, nurtures a positive mindset, and augments social adaptability in children.

Nonetheless, scholarly investigations have demonstrated that promoting the practice of falsehood among young individuals can have a detrimental impact on their ability to develop a truthful perspective on life, morality, values, and social obligations as they progress into adulthood. Moreover, children who are exposed to deceptive behavior from their parents are more likely to emulate such behaviors and face challenges in adapting to societal norms

Although the behavior of parents engaging in white lies is typically driven by good intentions with regards to their purpose and motivation, research indicates that the frequent utilization of such lies is linked to diminished satisfaction within the parent-child relationship and a decrease in autonomy support⁹ (Cargill & Curtis, 2017).

When a child becomes aware of a noticeable disparity between their parent's statements and the information they have been provided, it can result in self-doubt and a mixture of emotions. The trust between the child and parent begins to erode as the falsehoods employed by the parent become evident

2.3 Children's Lie-telling

In relation to the causes of children's white lies, three primary factors exhibit a close correlation with the individual child: their moral judgment of white lies, empathy, and the ability to anticipate false beliefs¹⁰ (Zhang & Liu, 2014).

According to Bussey (1999), children's moral judgment of white lies strongly influences their behavior¹¹. Preschool and elementary school children, while

harboring a negative perspective on white lies, still exhibit a lesser aversion towards them in comparison to lies in general. Keltikangas-Jaervinen and Lindeman (1997) discovered that individuals aged 11-17 rated lies concerning positive aspects of friendships, such as aiding, safeguarding, and caring for friends, as moderately favorable¹².

Consequently, children's acceptance and evaluation of white lies tend to augment over time¹³ (Liu et al., 2016). When children grasp the positive impact and ethical nature of white lies, they develop a genuine appreciation for this form of deception. Consequently, they become more at ease employing white lies in social situations. Popliger et al. (2011) suggest that individuals who frequently engage in white lies tend to endorse others' white lies and believe that they can yield more favorable outcomes than telling the truth¹⁴.

Research findings indicate that interpersonal relationships also play a crucial role in shaping white lie behavior. The purpose of white lies is to alleviate tension and social embarrassment during face-to-face interactions, thereby fostering positive social relationships. In social environments, individuals often resort to white lies to maintain a favorable perception of their friends and provide positive and amicable feedback, thus establishing and nurturing friendships.

3. Methodology

Quantitative research can be applied to test and understand relationships through empirical investigation¹⁵ (Babbie, 2010). It is also a strategy to verify the hypotheses that predict behavior in a way of exposing patterns¹⁶ (Martin and Bridgmon, 2012). Muijs (2004) figures out that Likert scale is an effective instrument to explain quantitative data, which makes quantitative research somewhat flexible, although not enough educational phenomena can be explained with direct quantitative data¹⁷.

This research employed quantitative research methodology to collect data with online questionnaire. The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between parents' white lies and the types of children's lie-telling. Correlations analysis and statistical hypothesis testing are the main statistical methods carrying out in this research. The survey consisted of 6 multiple-choice questions and 8 questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The goal is to collect survey responses from 205 young adults aged 19-30 who experienced parents' white lie during their growth, the data are then analyzed with statistical software SPSS. We choose convenience sampling in which the sample is taken from the population that is close to hand. Because it allows academics to quickly obtain data when time is of the essence. Furthermore, snowball sampling helps enhance the number of responses. Concerned with the anonymity of the Internet, participants may feel free to present honest answers. Questionnaire link is shared in social platform and we invite target participants to our survey.

This questionnaire contains two parts that are parenting by lying questionnaire and lie-telling questionnaire. The questionnaire for parenting by lying

made a reference to Heyman’s questionnaire (2013) and we made some revisions to form the final version¹⁸. Two categories of lies that parents tell to their children are surveyed: other lies (question 1-3) and white lies (question 4-6). For each question, participants are asked to answer if they have been told such lies by selecting yes, no or don’t remember. And final score was calculated by adding all “yes” response. The higher the score, the more parental lying exposure during childhood. There are eight questions in lying to parents questionnaire with Likert-type rating scale ranging from 1 for never to 5 for always. Higher scores shows higher likelihood to tell a lie. This was developed from Engels et al. (2006) and measured the current frequency of lie-telling¹⁹. It concerns two dimensions: black lies and white lies, with each four questions. The value for Cronbach’s Alpha for the 12 items is $\alpha = .85$. And the KMO value is 0.83 and Bartlett’s result is significant ($\chi^2(91) = 1285.254, p = .000 < .05$).

3.1 Study model and hypotheses

The study aims to identify the relationship between parents’ white-lie and types of children’s lie-telling, so we propose a research model and formulate two hypotheses. As shown in Figure 1, we call the opposite of white-lie “black-lie”, for better telling the difference. It gives the variable description in the following:

A. Parents’ white lie here refers to the benign untruth from parents who do not intent to hurt children during their growth.

B. The variable parents’ black lie stands the opposite of variable A, which means parents tell the lie deliberately.

C. Children’s white lie refers to a kind of lie-telling behavior to avoid hurting other’s feelings.

D. The variable children’s black lie stands the opposite of variable C, which means children tell the lie to protect themselves for their own sake.

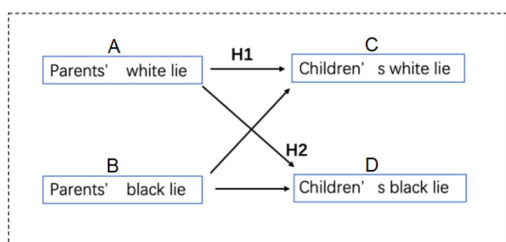


Figure 1: Parental Model

H1: Parents’ white lie has a positive impact on children’s white lie.

H2: Parents’ white lie has a positive impact on children’s black lie.

3.2 Data findings and analysis

Firstly, we use SPSS to test both in the questionnaire and then T-test and ANOVA are adapted to test the correlation among variables.

3.3 Confirmatory factor analysis

As shown in Figure 2, in confirmatory factor analysis, item A1-A3 and B1-B3 correspond with the questions 1-3

(parents’ black lie) and 4-6 (parents’ white lie) while item C1-C4 and D1-D4 correspond with the questions 7-10 (children’s black lie) and questions 11-14 (children’s white lie). Following table shows a good model fit as the value of factor loading exceed 0.7.

Construct	Items	Factor Loading
Parents’ black lie	A1 <- Parents’ black lie	0.757
	A2 <- Parents’ black lie	0.735
	A3 <- Parents’ black lie	0.753
Parents’ white lie	B1 <- Parents’ white lie	0.831
	B2 <- Parents’ white lie	0.718
	B3 <- Parents’ white lie	0.727
Children’s black lie	C1 <- Children’s black lie	0.791
	C2 <- Children’s black lie	0.706
	C3 <- Children’s black lie	0.749
	C4 <- Children’s black lie	0.726
Children’s white lie	D1 <- Children’s white lie	0.789
	D2 <- Children’s white lie	0.758
	D3 <- Children’s white lie	0.739
	D4 <- Children’s white lie	0.667

Figure 2: Different types of lie

The Table 1 revealed that χ^2/DF ratio is 1.131; GFI is .948; RMSEA value is .025; CFI value is .991. The model has a good fit when we take the recommended value as reference.

Table 1: analysis of index

Fit Index										
Index	χ^2	df	p	χ^2/df	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	CFI	NFI	NNFI
Recommended value	-	-	>0.05	<3	>0.9	<0.10	<0.05	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
value	80.320	71	0.210	1.131	0.948	0.025	0.027	0.991	0.932	0.989

3.4 The relationship between parents’ white lie and types of children’s lie-telling

In the model, we assume that parents’ white lie has a positive impact on children’s black lie. A Pearson’s correlation is run to assess the relationship between parents’ white lie and types of children’s lie-telling. The Table 2 shows that there is negative relationship between parents’ white lie and all the lies, which is statistically significant, $r_s = -0.307^{**}, p < .05$ for black lie and $r_s = -0.311^{**}, p < .05$ for white lie. As parents tell more white lies, the frequency children tell a lie accordingly decrease.

These findings are somewhat surprising given the fact that other research shows “extensive exposure to parenting by lying in childhood was associated with greater use of deception toward parents in adulthood”(Setoh et al, 2020). A possible explanation for this is that black lie might be the key point contributing to the lie-telling whatever white lie or black lie. It is interesting to discover that there is positive relationship between parents’ black lie and all the lies, which is statistically significant, $r_s = 0.440^{**}, p < .05$ for black lie and $r_s = 0.370^{**}, p < .05$ for white lie. When parents tell more black lies, children tell more lies whatever black lies or white lies.

Table2: Pearson Correlation
 Pearson Correlation

		Black lie	White lie
Parents' white lie	Person Correlation	-0.307**	-0.311**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000
	N	205	205

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Pearson Correlation

		Black lie	White lie
Parents' black lie	Person Correlation	0.440**	0.370**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000
	N	205	205

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

3.5 The influence of parents' white lie on children's lie-telling

In this study, one-way ANOVA is conducted to determine if children's lie-telling varies due to different experience on parents' white lie. The questionnaire lists the most common seen white lies from parents and if participants choose 'no' for all 3 questions, we believe they don't be told white lie in their childhood. As shown in Table 3, the data is categorized into two group: group 1: people who were told white-lie (n=28); group 2: people who never here white lie from their parents (n=177). Homogeneity of variance was confirmed when $p > 0.05$, so there is a statistically difference in mean score of black lie between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA ($F = 28.821$, $p = 0.000$); there is statistically difference in mean score of white lie between groups as determined by Welch's test ($F = 10.427$, $p = 0.003$ **).

Table3: test for variance

Test of Homogeneity of Variances				
		sig		
Black lie	Based on Mean	0.459		
White lie	Based on Mean	0.000**		

Welch's test for unequal variances					
		sample average	sd	Welch F	p
NO	28	2.74	1.21		
white lie YES	177	1.98	0.73	10.427	0.003**
Total	205	2.08	0.85		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Based on the data analysis result, we admit parents' white lies lead to children's lie-telling but we reject the hypothesis H1 and H2.

4. Conclusion

This essay inspired by the term "white lie" and related researches in the past tries to analyze children's lie-telling

from the perspective of their parents. We have solved the two questions posed before in the introduction: whether parents' white lies lead to children's lie-telling and how parents' white lies influence the types of children's lie-telling. Our team designs a questionnaire to collect data online based on quantitative research method to investigate the link between parents' white lies and the types of children's lie-telling. In the research, we propose a research model and formulate two hypotheses that parents' white lie has a positive impact on children's white lie and black lie.

The results show that there exists negative relationship between parents' white lie and all the lies of children, which means when parents tell more white lies, children may tell decreasingly fewer lies. The surprising findings lead us to pay more attention to the role of white lie in family education, especially the way of parenting. The use and style of whit lie actually have some influence on children's development. However, this research is still in need of further study due to the lack of consideration of some other factors like age and gender which may affect the results. The supplement of qualitative research method will also be useful to help us understand more of people's lie-telling behavior and delve into the reasons.

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