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Real Lies, White Lies and Gray Lies: Towards a Typology of Deception

Erin Bryant

Despite its aversive label, deception is an extremely common social behavior that the average person performs on a daily basis (Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Turner, Edgley, & Omstead, 1975). In fact, the use of white lies is so widespread they are often viewed as a form of communication competency that is necessary to successfully negotiate social interactions (Camden et al, 1984; Di Battista, 1994; Knapp & Comedena, 1975; Knapp, Hart, & Dennis, 1974). This study aimed to explore how college students perceive white lies and differentiate them from other types of lies using in-depth interview and focus group data. Participants' evaluations of deception indicate three main types of lies: real lies, white lies, and gray lies. In order to differentiate between the three types of lies participants reported considering the intention, consequences, truthfulness, acceptability, and beneficiary of the lies. It was concluded that participants' perceived real lies as being unacceptable, malicious, self-serving, complete fabrications of the truth that held serious consequences. White lies were perceived as altruistic lies that were trivial, partially true, lacking malicious motives, and generally acceptable to use. Gray lies were said to consist of lies that were ambiguous in nature or held the characteristics of a real lie yet were still viewed as justifiable given the circumstance. These results, their practical and theoretical implications, and areas for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Deception, Lying, White Lies, Interviews, Focus Groups

White Lies, Real Lies and Gray Lies:

Despite its aversive label, deception is an extremely common social behavior that the average person performs on a daily basis (Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Turner, Edgley, & Omstead, 1975). To group all lying into one category is misleading, however, because it is generally understood that some lies are less severe than others (i.e. Seiter et al., 2002; Turner et al., 1975). Some lies, often referred to as white lies, are even considered acceptable because they are trivial and may even prevent someone from being hurt by an unnecessary truth. These harmless white lies have been called a communication competence or "social lubricant" (Saxe, 1991, p. 414) because they allow people to censor negative thoughts and truths.

The extent to which society condemns lying yet accepts the use of white lies is an interesting phenomenon that has received minimal attention from scholars. The majority of extant deception literature has instead focused on understanding the cognitive and behavior processes involved in both telling

and detecting lies. These studies have examined how deceivers signal they are lying through verbal cues such as sequencing and temporal fluctuations (i.e. Burgoon & Qin, 2006; Granhag & Stromwall, 2001) as well as nonverbal cues such as body language (i.e. Burgoon & Buller, 1994; White & Burgoon, 2001). This literature has provided a wealth of knowledge concerning how people decipher truthful statements from deceptive statements, yet stop short of describing how lies are analyzed and evaluated once detected. Seiter, Brushke, and Chunsheng (2002) assert that the focus on detecting deception may be the result of an assumption that all deception is unacceptable or a viewpoint that chooses to remove morality from the study of deception and focus exclusively on understanding how it is accomplished. This is a useful endeavor, however, given that some forms of deception are accepted and others are not it would appear that morality is an inherent aspect in how people evaluate deception. For this reason, additional scholarly attention is necessary to understand the social function of deception.

Although many of these existing studies manipulated the type and severity of lies (i.e. Hopper & Bell, 1984; Lindsfold & Walters, 1983; Maier & Lavrakas, 1976; Seiter, Brushke, & Bai, 2002), the quantitative and experimental nature of these studies prevented them from describing how people think of different types of lies. As a result, extant literature fails to provide a sufficient understanding of how people understand, define, and evaluate different types of deception. Notable exceptions to this would be Seiter et al.'s (2002) study of the perceived acceptability of deception and Camden et al.'s (1984) examination of white lies. Both of these studies, however, used a quantitative methodology and therefore limited participants' ability to describe their assessments of deception using their own words and classification systems. Understanding the fine distinctions between different forms of lying requires a qualitative methodology that allows participants to fully contextualize their experiences with different types of lies. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring how college students define and differentiate between types of lies using in-depth interview and focus group data.

Review of Literature

Aversive Interpersonal Behaviors

Deception is typically placed into a category of behaviors known as aversive interpersonal behaviors (Goffman, 1967; Kowalski, 1997; Kowalski et al., 2003). Aversive interpersonal behaviors include any unkind acts that people experience on a frequent basis such as betrayal, teasing, lying, arrogance, and even complaining (Kowalski, 1997). These behaviors can induce feelings of anger or dislike from other people because they are hostile, abrasive, or inappropriate in comparison to accepted social behavioral codes (Kowalski et al., 2003). Some of these behaviors, however, are judged more harshly than others (Metts & Cupach, 1989; Vangelisti, 1994). Complaining, for example,

will likely only be annoying, whereas betrayal might destroy trust and arouse deep feelings of hostility. Scholars wishing to understand aversive behaviors therefore need to determine how people distinguish these gradations.

A number of different factors might play a role in how people determine the seriousness of an aversive behavior. According to Kowalski et al. (2003) "aversive behaviors differ from one another in their directness, in the degree to which they are perceived as indicating relational devaluation, and in the degree to which they are viewed as motivated by malicious intent" (p. 485). Similarly Knapp and Comadena (1979) suggest that people determine whether they should condone or condemn a lie based on "(1) the actor's motivation; (2) the degree to which the actor was aware of what he or she was doing; and (3) the effects of the act on the parties involved" (p. 275). By combining elements from the above classification systems it could be argued that aversive behavior like lying can be judged based on the lie's intention, directness, effects, and degree to which the relationship between the people involved is harmed. A person's judgment of an act based on these criteria should contribute to its overall evaluation.

Lying and White Lies

The focus of the present study is on lying, which is one of the most harmful forms of aversive interpersonal behavior (Goffman, 1967; Kowalski, 1997; Kowalski et al., 2003). Lying is the intentional telling of an untruth that is typically committed when a person realizes that the truth violates another person's expectations (Millar & Tesser, 1988). Lies are told for a variety of reasons including a desire to save face, guide social interaction, avoid tension or conflict, preserve interpersonal relationships, or achieve interpersonal power (Turner et al., 1975). Because it is often an efficient way to accomplish these goals, lying is a common element of social interaction (Knapp, Hart, & Dennis, 1974). For example, DePaulo et al. (1996) found that the average participant lied every day with college students telling at least two lies every day. In a similar study Turner et al. (1975) asked participants to record their conversations and later asked them to analyze the truthfulness of their statements. They found that participants only labeled 38.5 percent of their own statements as "completely honest." The frequency in which participants in these studies admitted to telling lies supported the researchers' claims that lying is a pervasive element of social interaction.

In addition to examining the frequency of lies, scholars have also inspected the different ways in which people categorize lies. Across varying fields of research it is generally accepted that lies fall into two broad categories, however scholars differ slightly in how they differentiate between and label these two categories. For example, deception has been broken up into benign lies (harmless and acceptable) and exploitive lies (harmful and unacceptable) (Goffman, 1967; Hopper & Bell, 1984). A slightly different approach was taken by DePaulo et al.'s (1996) taxonomy that broke lies

into three different types; outright lies (total falsehoods), exaggerations (overstatements of the truth), and subtle lies (purposeful omission of details). The authors also differentiated between self-oriented lies told to protect or enhance the liar's interests and other-oriented lies told to protect or enhance someone else's interests (p. 983). Other-oriented lies express a concern for other people and thus tend to receive more positive appraisals and are more accepted than self-oriented lies (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; DePaulo et al., 1996, Lindsfold & Walters, 1983; Seiter, Bruske & Bai, 2002). Similar to self and other-oriented lies, Di Battista (1994) concluded that the two categories of lies include "lies told solely for one's own self interest (trust-violating) and white lies (tactful) told in consideration of other's feelings" (p.174). Trust-violating lies are generally not accepted by society making them an uncommon occurrence, whereas tactful white lies are said to be relatively common and acceptable because the majority of society agrees that "some greater good has been served" by the telling of the lie (Knapp & Comedena, 1975, p. 277).

White Lies. A common theme in all of the above classification systems is that some lies are not as bad as other lies. These acceptable lies were labeled "other-oriented lies" and "tactful lies" but are most commonly known as *white lies*. A white lie as defined by Bok (1978) is "a falsehood not meant to injure anyone, and of little moral input." (p. 58). White lies might be a form of facework, which posits that people are motivated to act in ways that allow social interactions to occur smoothly by avoiding disagreements that could harm either person's image or pride (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Cupach & Metts, 1994). People are thus willing to fabricate or conceal information when the truth might cause tension, stress, or embarrassment (Ekman, 1985) or violate another person's expectations (Millar & Tesser, 1988). In addition to being tactful or polite, white lies are also commonly told to maintain the stability of a relationship, defer to the authority of a superior, or protect the psychological self-image of the person telling the lie (Camden et al., 1984). These uses of white lies are so common they are often not considered lying and are accepted as normal behavior. In fact, the ability to correctly use white lies has been called a communication competence and "social lubricant" (Saxe, 1991, p. 414) that is necessary for people to smoothly negotiate social interactions (Camden et al., 1984; Di Battista, 1994; Knapp & Comedena, 1975; Knapp, Hart, & Dennis, 1974). People expect that others will know when it is necessary to tell the truth, and when it is best to tell a white lie.

Extant research has touched on the subject of white lies when exploring aversive behaviors and deception, however; with the exception of Camden et al. (1984) very few have made white lies the focus of their study. This is somewhat surprising since "telling white lies is a familiar experience for many people. Excluding pathological liars, telling lies solely for the benefit of oneself is probably less familiar." (Di Battista, 1984, p. 175) Since white lies are a more common occurrence than serious trust breaching lies it is

important that they receive special attention from researchers. Furthermore, the fact that white lies blatantly violate the social conduct rule that lying is wrong and "honesty is the best policy," (Seiter et al., 2002, p. 158) that they are widely accepted is an especially unique phenomenon. Any time a prevalent social practice runs contrary to common understandings of societal rules it becomes particularly important to understanding that practice. For this reason, there is a need for the nature of white lies to be explored both as a unique phenomenon, and in relation to other forms of lying.

Because the categorization of lies is heavily dependent on individual perceptions, there are often misunderstandings regarding the severity of a lie. In fact, Seiter et al. (2002) point out that no consensus has been reached regarding a single typology of deception. Similarly, Kowalski et al. (2003) assert that additional research is needed to determine how individuals define aversive behaviors such as deception because subjective definitions may not always align with definitions created by researchers. Different individuals often disagree concerning the nature of lies because as noted by Kowalski et al. (2003) "what another may have intended as good natured ribbing or a 'white lie' intended to protect one's feelings is perceived as malicious teasing or pathological lying" (p. 487). The same dilemma was commented on by Knapp and Comadena (1979) in that "What is a vicious, harmful lie for one person may be an act of loving concern for another... Lies can only 'be' as they are perceived by specific involved people" (p. 271). To prevent these misunderstandings, an in-depth analysis of subjective perceptions is necessary to understand how people understand and classify different forms of deception. There is currently a gap in deception research regarding these perception using qualitative methods. In fact, the field of interpersonal communication has historically been dominated by quantitative research and hesitant to embrace studies of an interpretive nature (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1992; Lindlof & Taylor, 2003). Notable exceptions include Jorgenson's (1989) examination of family self-definitions and Rawlins (1983, 1989) who used qualitative methods to explore friendships. The problem with this is that quantitative methods do not allow the researcher to gain an in-depth view of the complex thoughts and beliefs people have concerning lies. In order to fill this gap, this study will use qualitative methods to explore:

RQ: How do college students define white lies and distinguish them from other forms of deception?

Methods

Data Collection

This study utilized a qualitative research design by conducting interviews and focus groups at a large northwestern university. A total of thirty-four students participated in this study (19 male and 15 female) ranging in age

from 19 to 27 years ($M=20$). This was an appropriate sample because it accurately represented the age demographics of the university. In order to ensure the safety and welfare of these participants this study was conducted in compliance with the university's human subjects guidelines and received institutional review board approval. Every participant was given an overview of the project and signed a consent form allowing their comments to be audio recorded and used for research purposes.

Interviews. Two participants (one male and one female) were selected to participate in in-depth interviews using convenience sampling. The interview protocol consisted of 20 open-ended questions aimed to facilitate conversation about the characteristics of white lies versus other forms of lying (see Appendix A). The use of interviews was an ideal way to explore the rationale behind how participants discriminate between different lies because as noted by Lindlof and Taylor (2002) "interviews are particularly well suited to understand the social actor's experience and perspective" (p. 173). This methodology thus encouraged in-depth discussion of the participants' beliefs and the intricate rationale behind these beliefs. This data was used to inform the construction of a focus group protocol.

Focus groups. Following the interviews, focus groups were conducted using a sample of students selected from general education classes taught by the researcher at the same university. The students received a small amount of extra credit in the course for their participation in this study. The use of a general education class was ideal because it helped ensure that a diverse sample of students was represented in the sample. A total of two focus groups were conducted. The first focus group consisted of 15 participants (8 male and 7 female). The second focus group consisted of 17 participants (10 male and 7 female). Although this is larger than Lindlof & Taylor's (2002) recommended focus group size of 6–12 members, the large focus group size worked well in this situation because it increased the chances that multiple participants would convey different viewpoints. This helped definitions become more in-depth as participants debated ideas and built on each other's statements with confidence that they were not alone in their ideas.

Focus groups were also conducted in a semi-structured manner. The protocol was developed in consideration of major themes that surfaced in the interviews and was then revised based on feedback from an experienced qualitative researcher. The protocol consisted of 16 open-ended questions (See Appendix B) designed to facilitate group discussion on the evaluation of deception. Six specific examples of hypothetical yet common forms of deception were also presented. Participants were given the instructions to evaluate each example and debate their evaluations to see if they could come to a group consensus. Providing these hypothetical situations allowed participants to judge and discuss concrete examples of lies in a non-threatening environment because none of participants were involved in the situation being discussed. The use of this semi-structured protocol provided

a general framework for discussion while still allowing flexibility for the groups to direct the flow of conversation.

Although in-depth interviews and focus groups are not typically mixed within the same study, they were actually well suited to balance each other's weaknesses. In fact, Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts (2006) combined focus group data with narrative interview data to explore the topic of workplace bullying. They asserted that in-depth interviews allowed participants to feel secure enough to go in-depth when sharing their personal feelings and thoughts, while focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to build off of each other's statements and increase the breadth of discussed topics. They argued that when conducting focus groups a synergy occurs when participants hear others' verbalized experiences that, in turn, stimulate memories, ideas, and experiences in themselves. This is known as the *group effect* (Carey, 1994) in which participants engage in "a kind of 'chaining' or 'cascading' effect; talk links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions preceding it." (Tracy et al., 2006, p. 155)

This group or cascading effect can also lead to the development and use of "native language" among group members (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) which was important for the present study's goal of deciphering how college students label and refer to different types of lies. Following Tracy et al.'s (2006) methodology, the diversity of opinions gathered through focus groups coupled with the in-depth and contextualized personal accounts provided by interviewees served as an excellent method to explore how participants make sense of and evaluate different types of lies. In fact, it could be argued that focus groups provide an opportunity to check whether the opinions discussed by interviewees are similar or contrary to public opinion. After they were conducted, both the interviews and focus groups were transcribed in their entirety producing a total of 50 pages of printed data. Data was analyzed for prevalent themes using a constant comparison and grounded-theory approach.

Results

The research question asked how people conceptualize white lies and distinguish them from other forms of deception. Results indicate that participants view lies as falling into three main categories: white lies, real lies, and gray lies. The factors of intention, consequences, beneficiary of the lie, truthfulness, and acceptability were said to differentiate the types of lies and contribute towards an overall definition of each.

Types of Deception

In order to discuss the types of deception it is first necessary to examine the salient factors described by participants when discussing different types of lies. Five factors surfaced as being the most important evaluation criteria

Types of Lies

Participants described three major forms of lies: real lies, white lies, and gray lies. Due to their prevalence as distinguishing factors; each type of lie is discussed in relation to its intention, consequences, beneficiary, truthfulness, and acceptability (see Table 1).

Table 1: Categorizations of White Lies

		Factors				
		Intention	Consequences	Beneficiary	Truthfulness	Acceptability
Types of Lies	Real Lies	Malicious Deliberate Deceptive Deceitful	Serious Direct	Self-Serving Egotistical	Complete Fabrication Blatant Untruth Zero Truth	Unacceptable Not Justified
	White Lies	Benign Pure	Trivial Meaningless Harmless	Altruistic Other-Focused Protecting Helpful	Partial Truth Half Truth Bending the Truth Stretching the Truth	Acceptable Justified Expected Common
	Gray Lies					
	Ambiguous Gray Lies	Ambiguous Intention	Ambiguous Consequences	Ambiguous Beneficiary	Ambiguous Level of Truth	Open to Interpretation
	Justifiable Gray Lies	Malicious	Direct	Self-Serving	Complete Fabrication	Justified Acceptable

Real Lies

The form of deception labeled as real lies shared a common definition from all participants. Real lies were defined as being “something that is not true” by both interviewees, as well as a female focus group participant. Participants used a number of different terms to describe this form of lying. While some simply called them a lie, a large number referred to them as a “real lie,” a “flat out lie,” a “bold-faced lie,” a “full-blown lie” and even a “straight-up lie.” Although these terms differed slightly, they all highlighted the intense nature of real lies in comparison to other forms of lying. The severity of real lies was also evident in that participants defined them as being unacceptable lies that were malicious, self-serving, complete fabrications of the truth, that hold serious consequences.

Intention. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that a liar’s intention or motivation for lying is an important factor to consider when judging a lie. Real lies were described as having malicious motives. One male focus participant defined real lies as “knowingly leading someone away from the truth” and labeled them as “manipulative.” A female and a male in different focus groups both labeled real lies as being “deceptive” and “deceitful,” while

the male interviewee labeled them as “thought out” and “devious.” All of these adjectives suggest a malicious and premeditated intention for lying. The female explained that a real lie is a “full on lie where you are either hiding the truth from somebody or you’re deliberately hurting them.” The common characteristic in all these descriptions is that real lies were described as being told with the purpose of misleading or hurting someone.

Consequences. Participants also consistently claimed that the consequences of a deceptive act are important in differentiating between types of lies. According to one female participant, an important characteristic of a real lie is that “it affects a lot of people.” A male participant noted that in a real lie, “the repercussions of that are like way worse” than other types of lies. The presence of serious and negative consequences was an important marker of real lies. For example, a different male stated that telling a real lie “would reduce the trust in the people telling them,” so harm is caused by the act of telling a real lie. This is mirrored by a female participant who claimed that a real lie “seems to carry direct consequences.” These consequences automatically elevated the status of a lie into a real lie.

Beneficiary. The majority of participants asserted that a characterizing element of real lies was their self-serving nature. According to a male participant, “It seems like real lies benefit whoever’s lying... white lies benefit someone else.” A female in another focus group echoed this idea in saying that real lies are “interested in yourself and benefiting yourself.” A different female categorized an example situation as a real lie because “she’s doing it for her own good, not for someone else’s. It’s for personal reasons.” These self-serving lies were described as being used to further a person’s own interests, cover their own mistakes, or avoid responsibility for one’s actions without regard for other people. This egotistical, self-interested motivation for lying surfaced as a major characteristic of real lies.

Truthfulness. Real lies were also regularly defined as being complete fabrications with no element of the truth. Participants labeled lies as being blatantly untruthful and dishonest. One female said that with a lie, “there’s absolutely no truth to it.” Building on that statement, a male added that “A lie could be, the whole story could be not truthful” and that that “there’s zero truth to it.” This complete lack of truth was a major defining factor of real lies in that the most blatantly untrue lies also tended to receive the harshest evaluations.

Acceptability. Participants regularly highlighted the fact that real lies are never acceptable, regardless of the circumstances. For example, the male interviewee stated that real lies are “totally unacceptable no matter what the situation is.” The female interviewee noted that due to their unacceptability, “You feel bad after you tell a real lie and you have a conscience with that. And with a white lie you’re, you know that it’s just to make someone feel a little better or something like that.” The guilt associated with telling a real lie is the direct result of knowing that they are unacceptable behavior. Since

they were viewed as being malicious, self-serving, complete fabrications of the truth, real lies were characterized as unacceptable behavior.

White Lies

Participants also shared a common definition regarding a form of lying referred to as a "white lie" or "fib." According to the male interviewee, white lies are "sparing someone's emotions or feelings... if it's something trivial." The female interviewee mirrored this definition by saying that a white lie is "stretching the truth to spare feelings." Participants regularly used words such as "harmless," or "trivial" when describing white lies. The common element in all participant definitions was that white lies were said to be more common and hold more positive connotations than real lies. White lies were also described in their relation to the five differentiating factors in that they were defined as acceptable lies that are altruistic, have a benign intent, represent a partial truth and hold only trivial consequences.

Intention. White lies were described as lacking a malicious intent or goal of purposely harming someone. In fact, white lies were clearly characterized by a benign intent. A male participant explained that telling kids that there is a Santa Claus is completely false, yet is only a white lie because it lacks a malicious intent and even aims to make people happy. A different male agreed that, "A white lie is like more pure. Just like the color white is associated with more pure things. They're not harmful to anyone, just like Santa Claus doesn't hurt a little kid to believe." The male interviewee claimed that white lies are usually used in "avoiding awkwardness in situations." Similarly, a female participant stated that white lies are often told "just trying to not get in the middle of someone else's affairs." All of these examples illustrate a benign purpose in that there is no intent to purposely trick or harm someone.

Consequences. White lies are also characterized as having a lack of serious consequences. For this reason, white lies were widely defined as being trivial, meaningless and harmless. One female defined white lies as "lying about something that's not important," while another female added that "a white lie is more something that is not that meaningful." One male noted that when you tell a white lie "it's like who cares" because there are no consequences. The participants almost unanimously agreed that a woman lying about liking her husband's cooking is a white lie because there were not any consequences from lying. As one male put it, "Unless he is going into a career of cooking then I don't think it's going to hurt him any to not know that his food sucks." In these examples, participants regularly emphasized that in order for a lie to be categorized as a white lie it could not have any severe consequences.

Beneficiary. Having an altruistic purpose was said to be one of the most salient characteristics of white lies. Whereas real lies were told out of self-interest, white lies were described as being told with the purpose of helping, protecting, or benefiting someone else. One female claimed telling a white

lie is "lying to a person so you don't hurt someone's feelings." The female interviewee noted that

You're told not to lie but you're also told not to be mean to people. So when you're not being mean to someone you may say what the other person wants to hear instead of instead of telling exactly how it is.

A male provided a similar example in claiming "it's like when you tell a little kid in a play or something he did great, and he sucked. Just because the kid sucked you don't break his heart. You tell him he did a good job and life goes on." In all of these examples the use of a white lie was said to protect someone else's feelings from unnecessary harm or embarrassment.

Truthfulness. Whereas real lies were said to be complete fabrications, white lies were described as being partial truths, exaggerations, or omissions. Participants explained that "a white lie could be just like tweaked details" or "bending the truth" because "white lies usually have some part of the truth in it." For example, one male focus group participant provided the example of "someone says they caught a hundred pound fish when they caught a five-pounder." This was said to be a half-truth because this person really did catch a fish; they just exaggerated the details. Furthermore, given the example of a wife lying about enjoying a meal her husband cooked a different female pointed out that "It could be the truth because she could have enjoyed the fact that he went out of his way to do that. Like it's the thought that counts sort of thing." This situation was labeled a white lie because it was partially true in that she may not have enjoyed the food itself, but did appreciate his effort. It was also pointed out that since this lie is an opinion, there is no way of knowing if it was the complete truth. In this way, as suggested by a male, "I think it's possible that it is true with a white lie." Thus, the element of being partially or potentially true was continually brought up as a trademark factor of a white lie.

Acceptability. One of the largest factors discussed by participants was the fact that white lies are generally considered to be an acceptable and in some cases, expected behavior. In fact, there was almost unanimous agreement among participants that white lies are far more acceptable than real lies. One major reason why white lies were said to be acceptable is that their trivial nature makes it easier for people to use them on a frequent basis. According to a male participant, "I think most people in the world.... Its universal... most people will admit that they do say white lies every once in awhile." A different male added that "white lies are justifiable. Like you said, most people do them, it's okay, you can get away with it, and it doesn't hurt anybody." Thus, the perception that most people tell white lies made them more acceptable according to the participants.

Some participants went even further in their classification of white lies as being not only acceptable, but also expected behavior. A female participant illustrated this view in saying that

white lies are more acceptable than lies because everybody tells white lies. Like if you're eating at someone's house and they ask if you like the food and you really don't, you can't say you don't. They'd be upset if you said you didn't like it so they expect a white lie. They have a preconceived answer that they want.

This view was confirmed by a male participant who claimed "it gets expected sometimes that you're gonna get lied to. Like sometimes you ask a question wanting one answer and when you get that answer you're happy. Even if it's completely wrong you're like, ok that's all I wanted to hear." In these situations, white lies were described both necessary and useful in that participants felt that telling people what they want to hear is the right thing to do.

Finally, people justified the acceptability of white lies in suggesting that it is acceptable to tell a white lie when telling the truth would involve getting someone else in trouble or revealing someone else's indiscretions. One male claimed "there's like a general rule though, like you don't tell on people. You let her admit it because you don't want to rat on her, and she'll get in more trouble than if you let her do it." A male in a different focus group added "it is also ingrained in society that you wouldn't rat someone else out." In both of these views, it is stressed that people are expected to plead ignorance regarding knowledge of situations that would incriminate someone else. A third male summarized that "I think sometimes you don't have the right to tell the truth... like you have to lie to them. So that I consider a white lie. It's like if you tell them the truth it's not your place." In all of the above cases, white lies are considered acceptable because they are harmless, common, expected, or involve a situation where telling the truth would reveal someone else's indiscretions.

Gray Lies

The third category of lies that surfaced in this study did not have the boundaries that real lies and white lies possessed. Instead, gray lies were described as being lies that were not necessarily real lies, yet were too serious to be considered white lies. For this reason it is hard to discuss gray lies in terms of the factors used to discuss real and white lies. Instead, it is useful to examine the two types of lies that participants described as falling into the gray lies category: ambiguous gray lies, and justifiable gray lies.

Ambiguous Gray Lies. One key element discussed concerning gray lies is that not every lie can be easily put into one category and labeled a complete real lie or a complete white lie. Instead, some lies are ambiguous because they are heavily open to interpretation. In discussing this fact, a male participant noted that, "lies can differentiate. We were able to reason why it was a lie and we were also able to reason why it was a white lie. And to me that makes it a gray area if you can classify it in both." When discussing an example of an ambiguous gray lie, a female stated "it could kind of be in the

gray area again because it is completely not true. But it is also helping her." The characteristics of this lie clashed with the varying factors considered. When looking at the truthfulness factor this lie seems to be a real lie, but when looking at the beneficiary factor, it appears to be a white lie. This ambiguity of the situation and the fact that it can be interpreted in different ways led participants to place it in the gray lie category.

Justifiable Gray Lies. The second key element dealt with acceptability, which was the major factor brought up concerning gray lies. The participants argued that some lies take the appearance of real lies in that they have consequences, are self-serving, purposely deceive someone, and are complete fabrications. However, they also argued that sometimes the use of these lies is justifiable given certain circumstances. For example, a male participant claimed that a gray lie is "a real lie that is justified. Like when you tell people I had to lie about this and everyone's like well, you had to do it... and that's like accepted." A different male confirmed that a justifiable gray lie is "a full-blown lie but it's legit." For this reason, it falls in the gray area of being a lie that is justifiable. Another male participant noted that with many gray lies "It's a lie, but it's acceptable because anyone would do it." This follows the sentiment that given the same set of circumstances most people would tell a lie. A female participant claimed that in many cases "It may like be a morally justifiable lie... but it's still a lie." The common theme that was evident is that sometimes even real lies are justified.

Most of the lies that participants placed into this category involved telling a full-blown or real lie in order to protect one's self or another from a serious harm that could arise if the truth were to surface. The example was discussed of someone lying to their boss about having done something wrong so as to avoid getting in trouble. Participants unanimously agreed that this was a real lie; however, many argued that it was justified because telling the truth would have gotten the person fired. Similarly, making up a fake excuse for having missed a test was said to be a legitimate use of a real lie because the teacher would not have accepted the truth. In this way, real lies that are commonly viewed as justifiable become gray lies.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of white lies and explore how college students decipher them from other forms of lying. It was found that participants categorize deception as real lies, white lies, or a gray lies. Five major factors were used to differentiate the types of lies. How a lie is evaluated and categorized depends on its intention, consequences, beneficiary, truthfulness, and acceptability.

Real lies were described as being malicious, self-serving, unacceptable lies with serious consequences that completely fabricate the truth. They were viewed as being the most serious and unacceptable form of lies because they intentionally deceive people and can cause serious problems.

In general, participants had a very negative connotation of real lies, calling them malicious, deceitful, deceptive, and manipulative.

White lies were described as being altruistic lies that are trivial, partially true, benign in intent and generally considered to be acceptable. They were viewed as being the least serious type of lie because they are relatively small and trivial, do not hurt anybody and are commonly used by most people. In fact, many participants went so far as to say that white lies are expected in many situations. People generally had very positive connotations of white lies, referring to them as harmless, trivial, small, and even helpful.

Gray lies were described as being a middle area between real and white lies. There were two types of gray lies, ambiguous gray lies and justifiable gray lies. Ambiguous gray lies are lies that can easily be interpreted in different ways by different people because they do not cleanly fall into either category. Justifiable gray lies are those lies that are told that are real lies in most ways, but that most people consider to be justifiable in certain circumstances.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to a greater area of research concerning forms of deception. This study found that participants view white lies as being acceptable and harmless ways to negotiate the social world. This finding supports Bok's (1978) argument that white lies are harmless and accepted because they "preserve the equilibrium and often the humaneness of social relationships" (p. 59). The claim that lies are viewed differently depending on their perceived intention also found support in the present study (Goffman, 1967; Walker, Wilkinson, Queen, and Sharpe, 2003; Vangelisti & Young, 2000; Weiner, 1995). Furthermore, this study supports the idea exploitive lies told for malicious or self-benefiting purposes are more permissible than benign white lies told with an altruistic intent (Hopper & Bell, 1984; Linskold & Walters, 1983; Seiter et al., 2002). While the lies described in these studies were labeled slightly differently, these basic findings were supported in the present study.

Finally, this study has implications when considered in the greater body of research concerning how people negotiate and maintain face in their daily lives. Brown and Levinson (1978) defined face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61). It has also been argued the use of a white lie in a socially awkward situation can preserve the face of all individuals involved (Cupach & Metts, 1994). In the present study participants reported that white lies are used to spare people's feelings and protect them from being embarrassed by a harsh truth. This suggests that white lies can be viewed as a facework strategy that benefits everyone involved in a potentially awkward situation. This possibility should be explored in future research.

One of the most unique findings of this study was the emergence of the

category of gray lies. This finding has interesting theoretical implications considering that much research has labeled only two types of lies (e.g. trust violating and tactful; exploitive and benign; self-oriented and other-oriented) in some cases with the addition of an "other" category (Camden et al., 1984; De Battista, 1994; Goffman, 1967; Hopper & Bell, 1984). Even in classification systems that acknowledged an "other" category, it was not treated as a concrete category of lies but as a catch-all bin for lies that did not fit into any category. One exception to this was DePaulo et al. (1996) who found that there are three types of lies: outright lies, subtle lies, and exaggerations (p. 983). The present study supports DePaulo's study by showing that there is an actual third category of lies that has its own definition and requirements, but it proposes a different way of categorizing these three types by introducing the concept of gray lies.

Finally, the qualitative approach of this study provided insight into not only how people use and think about and judge different types of lies. It is interesting to note that participants did indeed condemn lying yet justify white lies. Many went as far as to say that not telling an expected white lie can make a person look rude or inconsiderate. This is an important finding because it shows an anomaly between the moral code that lying is wrong, and the accepted societal code that some types of lies, such as white lies, are justified. Understanding this anomaly will enable people to better negotiate social interactions involving deception.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

Although this study makes many contributions to the study of deception, it is not without limitations. The qualitative methodology and sample size were well suited for the research question, but do limit the extent to which results can be generalized. Additional interviews should be done to determine if the types of lies and factors in determining lies are present in a larger group of participants. Similarly, further studies should be conducted on different demographic groups to see if similar themes surface. A quantitative study should also be conducted to test the results of this study. Finally, while it is argued that both the large size of the focus groups and the use of the researcher's students were a benefit to this study, it could also be argued that these methods could contribute to a social desirability bias that might impact the discussion of deception.

Extant literature on the topic suggests that there are factors that did not surface in the present study, but likely play a role in the categorization of lies. In particular, premeditation, or the degree to which the lie was planned out in advance (Hopper & Bell, 1984; Knapp & Comadena, 1979; Seiter et al., 2002) and the preexisting relationship between the people involved in the lie (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Kowalski et al., 2003; Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Young, 2000) should be further explored. Neither of these elements surfaced as major categories in the present study, but could be

additional factors to consider in future research. Future research should also explore the use of white lies as a form of everyday banal communication.

The present study suggests that white lies are incredibly common and widely accepted. As a result, they likely serve a unique function in people's day-to-day social interactions. This topic deserves the focused attention of future research. Finally, future research should attempt to link the evaluation of different types of lies to different behavioral responses. For example, it might be expected that white lies are less likely to induce retribution or questioning than more severe real lies. This area has not yet been adequately explored and should receive further attention.

Conclusions

This study provided a fresh insight into how college students categorize types of deception, as well as what factors they use in differentiating between the types. The qualitative nature of this study contributes to the growing body of research regarding deception and presents a unique understanding of how people understand and evaluate different types of deception. Future interpersonal communication research should continue to embrace interpretive methodologies because they have a great deal to offer the field's understanding of why people act the way they do in social interactions. Furthermore, although the detection of deception is an important area of research, the present study highlights that additional research is needed regarding what happens after a lie is detected. The present study should serve as a spring-board to future research that explores how deception is evaluated. Hopefully, future research will further examine the validity of these findings and continue to work towards the development of a comprehensive typology of deception.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

- 1) In your own words, what is a “lie”?
What are some descriptive words you would use to characterize a “lie”?
- 2) Are you familiar with the term “white lie”?
What is a white lie to you?
Can you think of any other terms that are used to represent the same or similar concept?
What are the first things that come to mind when you think of the term white lie?
What descriptive words would you use to characterize “white lies”?
- 3) What is the difference between a lie and a white lie?
How would you categorize omission? Exaggeration?
- 4) What examples of typical white lies can you think of?
- 5) Have you ever noticed yourself telling one of these white lies?
How did you feel afterward?
Do you think you would feel different if it were a “real” lie? How so?
- 6) Have you ever thought that somebody else was telling you a white lie?
What made you think that?
How did it make you feel?
- 7) Are some lies more justifiable than the others?
Which ones and why so?
- 8) In what kinds of social situations do you think white lies are typically used?
- 9) In what situations are white lies acceptable? Or likewise, unacceptable?
How so?
- 10) Why do you think people tell white lies?
- 11) Using your example from earlier, were you consciously aware that you were telling a white lie?
- 12) Do you think people usually notice when they are being told a white lie?
Can you think of an example where someone challenged a white lie they were told?
Why do you think this example was challenged?

- 13) On that note, can white lies become problematic or harmful? How so?
- 14) What examples can you think of that illustrate the problems arising from white lies?
- 15) So, where do you draw the line between regular and white lies? At what point does a white lie become big lie?
Do you think it's possible for people to disagree over whether a lie is a white lie or a bigger lie?
Can you give an example of a situation where this kind of misunderstanding might occur?
- 16) What messages were you told as a child concerning appropriate behavior concerning lies and white lies?
- 17) Is there anything else you can think of that I haven't asked about white lies? Any other comments or points you would like to make?

Appendix B

Focus Group Protocol

- 1) I'd like to start out by having your group brainstorm possible ways to define the term "lie". Say anything that comes to mind? Our goal is just to include as many different answers as you can think of.
- 2) Together, I'd like you to develop a list of elements or adjectives that characterize lies. If you disagree with others' ideas, please talk about it and see if you can reach a consensus on the important concepts.
- 3) Is everybody familiar with the term "white lie"? What are some possible ways to define a white lie.
- 4) Now, I want to see if we can develop a list of elements or adjectives that characterize white lies. Once again, brainstorm some ideas and talk about any disagreements that surface. See if you can reach a consensus on the important characteristics of a white lie?
- 5) Now that we have a working definition of lies and white lies, I want you to discuss the major differences between the two concepts. What are the key elements that separate them? Share your ideas with the group and see if you can reach a consensus.
- 6) Now I want you to explore the acceptability of lies and white lies. Do you personally view them differently in terms of how acceptable or justifiable they are?
- 7) Do you think most other people view lies and white lies differently in terms of acceptability?
- 8) Can you all give me some examples of white lies that you think are common? Brainstorm as many examples as you can think of.
- 9) Okay, now that we have a basic list, do you agree that all of these examples are white lies? Do you think they are all commonly used? If not, which ones do you disagree with and why?
- 10) Next I am interested in exploring whether or not people normally detect when they are being told a white lie. Are they something that people are consciously aware of, or do you think they usually go unnoticed? Discuss this as a group, drawing on your personal experiences as well as how you think it relates to society in general.
- 11) So you all seem to have clear views of white lies and lies, as well as

an understanding of how they are used and whether each is acceptable. The next topic I would like you to address is how you think your views of white lies and lies were formed? See if you can brainstorm a list of contributors to your views of lies and white lies. Which contributors were most important in shaping your current views?

Next, I am going to give you some hypothetical situations. I want you to discuss how you would classify each example situation. Give specific reasons for your decision, drawing on the specific elements that influenced your decision. If you disagree someone else's evaluation tell us why.

- 1) Ryan has a big test in class. He stays up late studying and accidentally sleeps through his alarm and misses the test. He tells his professor that he missed class because of a family emergency so he can make it up.
 - a) Is this a lie or a white lie?
 - b) Support your choice. What are the key elements that influenced your choice?
- 2) Now, given the same situation, what if Ryan were to forge a doctor's note so he would be allowed to make up the test?
 - a) Is this a lie or a white lie?
 - b) Did your view change given the differences in this example?
 - c) Why or why not?
- 3) Mary's boyfriend decides to surprise her by making dinner one night, which he does not usually do. Later, he asks her if the food was good. Mary did not really like the food very much, but she tells him that she loved it anyway.
 - a) Is this a lie or a white lie?
 - b) Support your choice. What are the key elements that influenced your choice?
- 4) Kelly is a sophomore in high school. Her parents are very strict and do not allow her to date. She gets asked out by Josh, who she really likes, so she tells her parents that she is going to a movie with her girlfriends and goes out with Josh instead.
 - a) Is this a lie or a white lie?
 - b) Support your choice. What are the key elements that influenced your choice?
- 5) Rob's wife asks him to come to dinner with her parents. He doesn't want to go so he tells her "Oh that's too bad, I wish I could go but my boss is making me work late" even though this isn't true.
 - a) Is this a lie or a white lie?
 - b) Support your choice. What are the key elements that influenced your choice?

- 6) Jason is the manager of the restaurant that Katie and Bob work at. One night, Kelly forgets to close the freezer door. Jason does not discover it until the next morning, and all the food inside has to be thrown away. Given this situation... I am going to give you some different scenarios and I want you to discuss whether each is a lie or a white lie... and why?
- a) Jason asks Bob if he knows anything about who left the freezer open. Bob knows it was Kelly, but he tells Jason he doesn't know so Kelly won't get in trouble.
 - b) Jason asks Kelly if she knows anything about the situation and she says she doesn't know anything about it.
 - c) Jason asks Kelly if she knows anything about the situation. She tells him it was Bob to avoid getting blamed herself.
 - d) What key elements of each example situation shaped your decision on whether it was a lie or a white lie?
- 7) So, now that you have discussed and labeled all of these situations, did you notice a common point or "line" that is drawn between a white lie and a lie? What specific elements need to be present for a white lie to cross the line and no longer be a white lie?
- 8) Is there always a clear-cut way to define a situation as either being a real lie or a white lie?
- 9) So as you have discussed, there are a lot of examples of white lies in our lives. But do you think white lies can become problematic or harmful in any way?
- 10) Given everything you have discussed today, have your views or definitions of white lies changed? Would you change or add anything to your early definitions and characterizations of lies and white lies?

Author

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