College Student Beliefs on the Justification of Lying

Abstract

Concerns about honesty and prevalence of lying in a college academic setting has been a topic of interest in social sciences, including sociology, psychology, and philosophy. In this paper we used an online survey to explore if college students aged 17-24 believed lying was justified in different situations. We assessed whether students thought lying was justified in general as well as in specific situations (story-telling, stealing food, and on job applications). Additionally, we investigated whether students' beliefs changed when additional context was added. We performed chi-squared tests for association and Fisher's exact tests. We found, (a) an association between students' general beliefs about whether lying is justified and only the first pre-context situation regarding lying while story-telling ($p<0.05$), (b) an association between students' answers to each set of pre- and post-context questions for the given situations ($p<0.05$), and (c) no association between whether students had siblings and their beliefs about lying in regards to stealing food ($p>0.05$). Future research could examine whether the responses differ among class years and if length of college experience affects students' beliefs about lying. Moreover, future research could explore whether students' actions are consistent with personal beliefs about lying and whether their actions are influenced by societal pressure.

Introduction

Time spent in college is a period in which there exist many opportunities wherein it would be beneficial for one to lie, such as on exams, when applying to internships, or when navigating new social situations. John F. Ahearne writes in the article “Ethics: Honesty” that “One might ask ... what long-term damage could come from seemingly insignificant transgressions” (120), citing the example of college students justifying their decisions to cheat on tests or plagiarize papers. However, Ahearne argues, “small transgressions, if discovered, can easily destroy one's credibility on a larger scale. And, even if undiscovered, missteps set up the classic "slippery slope" on which small transgressions lead to larger ones” (120). By Ahearne’s logic, lies that may seem small and benign at first may eventually lead to serious consequences.

In our research, we wanted to find out in what situations students might say that lying was justified. Outside of investigating academic dishonesty, it does not appear that a study which explores the beliefs of college students on the general concept of lying has been done. We therefore set out to more broadly investigate whether college students believe whether lying is ever justified. We created an online anonymous survey framed around this question, and specifically investigated if college student’s beliefs about the justification of lying changed when additional context was provided. We hypothesized there to be an association between students’ general opinion about whether lying is justified and their answers to situational questions, as well as between students’ answers to situational questions before and after being provided with additional context.

Methods

Participants

We had a total of 187 respondents (primarily Grinnell College students) to the survey. Out of those respondents, 123 self-identified as female, 51 as male, and 9 as agender, pangender, nonbinary, or genderfluid. Five respondents chose not to self-identify their gender. Respondents’ ages ranged from 17 to 24, with an average age of 19.941 and a median age of 20. 164 respondents said that they had siblings; 23 said that they did not.

Research Instruments and Procedures

We used an original data set that we compiled based on survey results from a survey that we designed specifically for this experiment. The survey was released on the social media platform of Facebook and was primarily promoted to Grinnell College Facebook groups.
Our explanatory variables included age, major(s), gender, and sibling status of the participant. We had seven response variables, one of which was whether students believed lying in general was justified, and the remaining six response variables included three pairs of related questions. These are provided below:

	Pre-context questions (Part I)	**Post-context questions (Part II)**
LyingStory/ LyingComedian	If while telling a story you exaggerate on a few details to make it more entertaining, is this justified?	If while telling a story, *as a comedian*, you exaggerate on a few details to make it more entertaining, is this justified?
LyingFood/ LyingFood2	If you steal someone's food and lie when they ask you about it, is this justified?	If your *sibling/best friend* had stolen someone's food and you say you did it, is this justified?
LyingJob/ LyingDreamJob	If you lie on an application to get a job, is that justified?	If you lie on an application to get your *dream job*, is that justified?

Possible answers to any of the above response variable questions were either yes or no. The survey was structured into two parts, with Part I including the explanatory variable questions and the pre-context response variable questions. Part II included the post-context response variable questions. This was done in effort to not alert the participant that the situations of the questions were going to change later in the survey. The paired questions within this survey were

also intended to provide three distinct situations in order to observe answers in different contexts. Two question sets focused on changes regarding the situational contexts (*LyingStory/ LyingComedian* and *LyingJob/LyingDreamJob*) while the third set focused on a change regarding the altruistic context (*LyingFood/LyingFood2*).

Data Analysis

We used eight chi-squared tests to compare the binary categorical responses of the seven response-variables and three Fisher's exact tests when the expected cell count was less than one and therefore invalid for chi-squared testing. Not all pair-wise comparisons were made. We then applied a Bonferroni correction to reduce the occurrence of an experiment-wise Type I error after the completion of eleven pair-wise tests of the variables.

Hypothesis Testing

Chi-Squared Analyses

After collecting our data, we wanted to determine if there was a significant association between different sections of the data. We divided our chi-squared analyses into the following three distinct sections:

1. General opinions on lying vs. situation-specific opinions on lying: for this section, we tested the variable *LyingGeneral* against the six other *Lying* variables to determine if there was an association.
2. Association between responses to "paired" questions: for this section, we tested the responses to the "paired" questions against each other (so, *LyingStory* vs. *LyingComedian*, *LyingFood* vs. *LyingFood2*, and *LyingJob* vs. *LyingDreamJob*.
3. Association between having siblings and responses to food-related questions: for this section, we tested the responses to "Do You Have Siblings?" against the variables *LyingFood* and *LyingFood2*.

Fisher's Exact Testing

In situations where the chi-squared test was invalid as a result of expected cell counts of less than 1, and to therefore reduce experiment-wise Type 1 errors, we used a Fisher's Exact Test to determine if there was an association between the two variables.

Fisher's Exact Tests were used in the cases of the following 3 comparisons: *LyingGeneral* vs. *LyingStory*, *LyingGeneral* vs. *LyingFood*, *LyingGeneral* vs. *LyingComedian.*

Applying a Bonferroni Correction

After completion of the chi-squared analyses and Fisher Exact Tests, we found five results with p-values of less than 0.05: *LyingGeneral* vs. *LyingStory*, *LyingGeneral* vs. *LyingComedian*, *LyingStory* vs. *LyingComedian*, *LyingFood* vs. *LyingFood2*, and *LyingJob* vs. *LyingDreamJob*. However, because our analysis consisted of 11 pairwise comparisons, the probability for error was high. To correct this, we performed a Bonferroni correction by dividing our significance level by 11, resulting in a new significance level of 0.005.

Results

In the reporting of results, we first present the "Yes" and "No" counts for each question/variable.

Variable	Yes	No
LyingGeneral	182	5
LyingStory	34	153
LyingFood	13	174
LyingJob	39	148
LyingComedian	8	179
LyingFood2	112	75
LyingDreamJob	50	137

We then address the results of the tests for association.

Test	Final P-Value	Reject Null Hypothesis?
LyingGeneral vs. *LyingStory*	0.004	Yes
LyingGeneral vs. *LyingFood*	1	No
LyingGeneral vs. *LyingJob*	0.245	No
LyingGeneral vs. *LyingComedian*	0.015	No
LyingGeneral vs. *LyingFood2*	0.065	No
LyingGeneral vs. *LyingDreamJob*	0.171	No
LyingStory vs. *LyingComedian*	0.000	Yes
LyingFood vs. *LyingFood2*	0.002	Yes
LyingJob vs. *LyingDreamJob*	0.000	Yes
Siblings vs. *LyingFood*	0.600	No
Siblings vs. *LyingFood2*	0.420	No

We found significant results between *LyingGenera*l and *LyingStory*, meaning that general beliefs about lying were only upheld while telling a story to friends. We also found a significant difference between the pre/post-context set variables (*LyingGeneral* vs. *LyingStory, LyingStory* vs. LyingComedian, *LyingFood* vs. *LyingFood2,* and *LyingJob* vs. *LyingDreamJob)* where the addition of supplementary details and altruistic elements significantly increased the number of participants who believed that lying was justified. However, only in the pre-/post-context story situation (*LyingStory* and *LyingComedian*) and the post-context food situation (*LyingFood2*) did the majority of students believe that lying was justified.

Discussion

After exploring levels of dishonesty and lying in sociology and philosophy research, we wanted to investigate the specific beliefs around lying held by college students. We designed an experiment to survey primarily Grinnell College students and their opinion on justifying specific lies. Our results supported our predicted association for the three pre and post-context variable sets, and for all examples except for one contradicted our predictions regarding the existence of an association between general beliefs about lying and beliefs about lying in specific situations.

We contribute to the larger scope of research by providing a preliminary investigation into the beliefs held by college students regarding whether lying is justified. Research on the various topics that students are more willing to lie about will help identify their motivations and allow institutions to take a closer look and possibly prevent the environmental and social conditions that are driving said motivations. However, this experiment is merely preliminary, as the results of this research are not generalizable. It is important to note that our survey was given online through a social media platform, Facebook, which limited those who could participate. The participants were mostly students attending Grinnell College, but individuals from other colleges also took the survey. Therefore, results are not generalizable to neither the Grinnell College population nor a wider college student population.

In a future study, we would like to explore further stratifications of lying between class years and gender, as we were unable to do so here due to the unequally represented age and gender of participants. Observing the relationship of such variables may tell us more about the influences of college experiences on moral standards over time. Furthermore, research could expand to include analysis of whether the actions of college students follow these beliefs about whether lying is justified. Additionally, it would be fascinating to observe whether these results would change if the survey had been distributed in person, and then investigate if societal pressure plays a role in the actions of students and their level of honesty.

Based on our research, there is a significant increase in students believing that lying is justified when context is provided to previously vague and less personal situations. Looking forward, we believe that this research should be expanded to observe what drives students to lie, and to determine what can be done to prevent situations that would justify the need to lie.

Bibliography

Ahearne, John F. 2011. "Ethics: Honesty." American Scientist 99 (2): 120-122.