# Under**lying** Deception in Parent-Child Relationships

Justine Correia

B00571347

April 20<sup>th</sup>/2015

Honours Supervisor: Dr. Martha Radice

## Abstract

My research takes the relational role of lying as understood by sociologist Georg Simmel (1950) as the starting point for my qualitative study on lying in parent-child/child-parent relationships. Simmel (1950) argues that lies play a role in binding social relationships, and his work as well as the work of anthropologist Susan Blum (2007) are instrumental in my analysis of deception. My research analyzes lying within the dynamics of parent-child relationships in Canadian society. I explore how lying plays out in these relations and the effects that lying can have on the relationship as a whole. I discuss parent-child deception from three angles: ideology, practice, and justification. My aim is to address these three aspects of lying in relation to parent-child relationships and the contexts that this relationship provides. I conclude that through lying ideology, practice, and justification, lying plays a role in shaping the dynamic of the parent-child/child-parent relation.

## Acknowledgements

This year-long project was confusing, difficult, hilarious, and ultimately insightful. I have personally gained much knowledge from the research study. I learned not only about lying, but about how to do social science research and the multiple processes that even a small anthropological study entails. I would like to gratefully thank my research participants who generously devoted their time and knowledge to this study. I feel humbled by the insights I gained from our structured conversations. I would like to thank all the SOSA professors I have had throughout my undergrad, specifically Dr. Laura Eramian who encouraged me to do honours in my second year and whose lectures consistently challenged my own understanding of the world. I would also like to thank Emily Ballantyne at the Dalhousie writing centre who has helped me with my writing on seemingly endless versions of this paper. Thanks also to all my honours cohorts who have supported me throughout this process and whose own research projects have inspired me a great deal. Lastly, I would like to thank my honours supervisor Dr. Martha Radice who reassuringly assisted me throughout this process and showed genuine enthusiasm for my project. She provided welcome recommendations from the start when I had not a single formulated idea, throughout too many ideas, and into the production of my final draft.

Thank you all!

# Table of Contents

**Introduction: Why study lying in parent-child relationships anyways?**

*This is my son, and I'll never forget this. There is a bake sale at the school and he told me at like 10 o'clock at night. Mom there is a bake sale at the school tomorrow and I forgot to tell you. He had a crazy schedule and we finally got everything settled down. And he said but you know don't worry about it. I said no I'll see what I can do. And then I rummaged around and I had a cake box, like a cake mix for a yellow pound cake. So [I thought] I'll just make this, I made the yellow pound cake and it was ready. I sliced [it] up in the morning and packed it up and sent it with him. And he didn't say anything when he saw the yellow pound cake, because no child wants yellow pound cake. So he said, oh thanks mom that's great. He takes it to school and the next day I get home for work and I said oh how did the bake sale go? He says oh pretty good, pretty good. Did the cake sell well? And he says yeah mom it was almost gone. I said oh where's the container? He brings it over and there are like 1 or 2 pieces gone, and he probably ate them! He said yeah it's almost gone. That was a white lie because he didn't want to hurt my* feelings.

*- Kara*

In the vignette above, Kara's son lied to her in a situation where he likely easily could have told the truth. The lie, however, had meaning; it was a purposeful action that spoke to Kara's son's concern for his mother's feelings. Kara remembered the lie fondly as she continued to explain to me how in this situation she felt it was all right that her son had lied to her. There is something enticing about lying. Lying seems to permeate our everyday relationships both innocently and methodically. The everyday social situations in which we find ourselves influence why and how we lie. In different contexts we lie differently: we tell different types of lies, we express these lies in different ways, and we justify the lies we tell differently. In the parent-child relationship lying plays a significant role, because the relationship generally exists over long periods of time and is usually marked by a certain degree of intimacy.

My research is situated in the broader topic of anthropology of everyday life. I have explored every-day lying in the parent-child relationship to address a rather central component of people's daily lives that is more prominently studied by psychologists than sociologists and anthropologists. Anthropological studies of deception are nevertheless necessary because they place particular emphasis on investigating the cultural and social nuances of relationships. My research is therefore important because I pay close attention to how lying is a part of the parent-child relation in the Canadian context, and how this relationship shapes the lying that parents and children do. The two part research question I set out to answer in my research project was, why do parents and children lie to each other and how do they justify the lies that they tell? Given that my research project was a small qualitative study my findings are not generalizable to a larger population. Rather, my findings touch on intriguing elements of deception in parent-child relationships through an exploration of ideology, practice, and justifications.

In many ways my research stems from the work of Sociologist Georg Simmel (1950) who argued that the "ethically negative value of the lie must not blind us to its sociologically quite positive significance for the formation of certain concrete relations" (p.316). Here, Simmel states that lies are very much part and parcel to social relationships themselves: they play a role in binding relationships together. Thus Simmel provides a solid foundation for an exploratory research study that asks why parents and children lie to each other and how they justify the lies they tell. I will use key concepts such as deception, parent-child relationships, adult child, and justifications in order to answer my research questions. My methods included both the use of vignettes and semi-structured interview questions to address how participants were involved in both parent and child lying. Assessing lying relationally is central to my study into parent-child deception.

**The Lies that Lie in the Literature: Literature Review**

**The Nature of Lying**

"I have come to see that in our everyday actions we juggle a huge number of considerations every time we speak or act, even if we claim outright that we are mostly guided by matters of truth…my point is that all humans do it- all societies have instances of deception and lying-but the details differ" (Blum, 2007, p. 12).

In this statement, anthropologist Susan Blum (2007) suggests that lying and deception are familiar to all societies. Guido Mollering (2009, p.137), who holds a doctorate in management studies, echoes this belief with his argument that it is a "characteristic of human agency and vulnerability that one person can mislead another". Lying, therefore, plays a varying but necessary part in our everyday lives. It is therefore worth addressing the questions what is a lie, and what is lying? Although a lie and lying appear to be distinct, in thatone is the entity and one is the action, a lie cannot exist without having been told, concealed, or gestured. This means that the action of lying is what makes the lie possible. Thus, as philosopher Charles Barbour (2012, p.244) states "there is no lie per se, only the act, the practice, or the performance of lying". Lying has an additional requirement. Not only must lies be told, concealed or gestured, they must also be heard or interpreted. To lie, it is necessary that someone or some party is being lied to. To posit this comprehension in the terms of sociologist J.A. Barnes (1994), within relationships one person is the liar and the other is the dupe. As founding sociologist Georg Simmel (1950; 2009) has argued, lying then is inherently relational.[1]Taken together, these academics describe lies as relational actions that inhibit full knowing by the other party.

There are various kinds of lies. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1974, p.87-111) distinguishes between two types of lying: "benign fabrications" and "exploitative fabrications".

---

[1] I do not mean to say that self-deception cannot exist. Although, I will not be exploring this element of lying the relationship between telling and being told a lie still likely exist just within the self as opposed to with another individual or party. If this is of interest you should read Barbour's (2012) analysis of Simmel's pseudonymously published fable "The Maker of Lies".

Benign fabrications are instances of deception that do not deliberately diminish someone else's best interests, whereas exploitative fabrications are intended to harm the other person's self-interest. Simply put, Goffman's lie categories offer a typology of the lie. It is worth considering these categorizations, because although they do not account for all the situations in which people lie, they provide some general understandings of the kinds of lying people do. Goffman claims that benign fabrications include: a) "playful deceit"- joking around, b) "experimental hoaxing" – not providing full information to research participants, c) "training hoaxes"- setting up scenarios that novices come to understand as real, d) "vital tests"- testing someone's loyalty through a lie, e) "paternal constructions"- providing deceptive information for the benefit of someone else, and f) "strategic fabrications" –contesting situations where people use deception strategically in order to psych out an opponent  (Goffman, 1974, p. 87-103). These are all forms of deception which are, as Goffman (1974) notes, "essentially harmless" to the other party involved. Sociologist Bernard Meltzer (2003, p.67) is quick to add  to Goffman's benign fabrication list altruistic or white lies, lies where others are protected from some form of harm, by an act of deception. Goffman (1974) does not provide a similar classification of "exploitative fabrications", arguing that much has already been written on the subject. Goffman (1974) and Meltzer (2003) together show that although not the only applicable categorizations, lies can be categorized in various ways. Furthermore, as Goffman notes there is a fundamental distinction between lies told with the intention of harming someone else and lies told without this aim.

A categorization of lies, as identified by Goffman (1974) and extended by Meltzer (2003), makes it clear that lying is diverse. Essentially what Goffman's (1974) categorizations of benign fabrications demonstrate is that there are many different kinds of lies. This means that in different contexts, different kinds of lies are employed. Certain lies are therefore only

appropriate to certain situations. Expanding on Goffman's (1974) typology of lies, Blum (2007) speaks to the ways different kinds of lies are employed. She argues that lies, believable ones at least, have to be structured so they bear some connection to the physical and social contexts in which they are told (Blum, 2007). Telling ridiculously unbelievable lies or simply telling too many lies limits the effectiveness of a person's lie telling. It is our ability to choose not only between lying or truth-telling that enables us to have more control over situations and relationships in our lives, but also to choose the kinds of lies we tell and the way we tell them. Thus, Blum (2007) furthers Goffman's typology of the lie by speaking directly to how lies are used in an effective manner.

Lying also has a deep relationship with trust. Simmel (2009) touches on this association by asserting that if a person knows either everything or nothing they cannot reasonably trust. In other words, real trust requires the risk of being deceived. People deceive in order to conceal some internal truth from someone else. The act of deception, therefore, is a means by which full knowing is hindered. Mollering (2009) clarifies this idea and explores it further by arguing that trust and deceit go hand-in-hand. In imagining the hypothetical scenario of a world without lies, Barnes (1994) argues that trust and truth seem inevitable (p.136-146). The question remains, however, if there is no possibility of being misled then are trust and honesty ever *really* possible? In answer to this question, Mollering (2009) suggests that deception necessitates the possibility of deviation from instances of truth and honesty: when individuals trust they consent to the possibility that someone will deceive them. To this end, deception's inherent relationship with trust contributes to what it means to lie.

**Lying Relationally**

For Georg Simmel (1950), the lie is part and parcel to relationships themselves. In

Barbour's (2012) helpful analysis of Simmel's work on the lie, he argues that for Simmel, "the lie points inward, towards an aspect of the self that cannot be shown to be false, or submitted to the test of proof" (p.224). Withholding this subjective truth, which is paramount to the individual's own understanding of the world, alters the way that the individual is perceived by those she lies to. Simmel (1950, p.310) argues that the actual interaction between people stems from the image that they obtain from each other. By lying people can shape their relationships through altering how the self is projected to the other. Simmel argues (1950) that "intimate relations… lose… the content of their intimacy as soon as the close relationship does not also contain simultaneously and alternatingly, distances and intermissions" (p.315). Thus, according to Simmel, lies provide an avenue for individuals to distance themselves from others in their relationships. Lying's distancing attribute, almost paradoxically, strengthens the relationship itself.

Contextualizing Simmel's (1950; 2009) argument that lies bind relationships, Blum (2007, p.159) argues that humans need to have a good reputation (which includes not being seen as a liar) so that they can maintain social relationships. She argues that "from a social perspective there can be no functioning society that is not filled primarily with truth" (ibid). Here, Blum (2007) suggests that there is an important limit to Simmel's (1950) argument that lies bind relationships. On the one hand, it is the individual's ability to hide and conceal information about themselves in their interactions with others that shapes the nature of these relationships. On the other hand, however, a certain amount of distance can only strengthen relationships in contexts where lying is the exception, as opposed to the general rule. As Blum argues, lying is only effective because people believe that most of the time others are telling the truth. Furthermore distance surely also has the ability to terminate relationships all together. If none of the self-

presented to another is truthful to the self's own knowledge and understanding, then there is no "real" foundational relationship to alter or maintain in the first place. To this extent, Simmel's argument that the distinction between an individual's self-knowledge and the knowledge which the individual shares about herself maintain the strength of relationships is true within the contexts of these two important clarifications that Blum (2007) provides. As opposed to standing in opposition to each other, Blum and Simmel's arguments go hand-in-hand.

It is fitting to this idea of lying as relational, that much of the existing literature on deception discusses lying as a means of communication (Blum, 2005, 2007; Salamone, 1977; Smeltzer, 1996). For communications instructor Mark Smeltzer (1996), communication is a continual exchange that shapes how realities are understood by the social actors involved within the communication process. Smeltzer sees lying as an act of communication because it is only through communicating the lie that distinguishing between a false and real inter-subjective truth is possible. Furthermore, because lies are intentional, it is only through communicating with and observing the suspected liar that one can ever come to be sure if a lie has been told. By focusing on how lies, a transactional form of communication build an intersubjective truth, Smeltzer (1996) fails to account for the meanings that lies hold, both through and outside of an intersubjective reality. Anthropologist Frank Salamone (1977) writing much earlier than Smeltzer (1996), was attuned to the meanings that deception as a form of communication hold in fieldwork. Salamone (1977), argues that anthropologists must go beyond merely checking for deceptive responses. They need to explore the processes of the lie to understand how informants use their culturally privy information in interactions with the researcher. Salamone (1977) thus provides a useful supplement to Smeltzer's (1996) work on lying as communication, because his work speaks to how lies are grounded within cultural and lived realities that are not necessarily

shared intersubjectively.

**Lying Beliefs and Perceptions**

According to Blum (2005) and Mollering (2007) the commonsensical assumptions that

trust and truth are good and that deception and falsity are bad are prevalent within Euro-

American society. This belief is influenced by the equation of honesty with moral good within

the Judeo-Christian faith, which holds much traction in Western Societies (Blum, 2007). For

founding philosopher Immanuel Kant, people have an ethical duty not to lie: an ethical duty that

stands without exception (Kant in Mahon, 2007, p.655). The prevalence of the ideal that lying is

amoral is widely spread in Western societies. Despite this widely held belief, people also

recognize that lying is necessary in certain circumstances (Blum, 2007). Blum (2007, p.136)

notes that morality is always aligned with deception, but that morality is inconsistent and partial.

There are therefore tensions between the widespread ideal of lying as amoral and the everyday

circumstances in which people find it necessary to lie. Given the dominant perception of lying as

amoral, however, lying as amoral is the ideological context in which those situations when lying

is seen as morally acceptable occur.

The perception of lying as amoral extends to parent-child relationships as well. In the

parent-child relation deception's morally negative association is magnified because of how it is

often seen as the parents' responsibility to raise "good" ethical children. Blum (2007) argues

that, generally speaking, Western societies often idealize honesty in child-rearing practices

(p.137). Similarly, Philosopher Sissela Bok (1978) argues that lying to children is more

commonly accepted because children require a certain amount of "care, support and protection"

and that it is seen as the parents' role to provide this form of shelter (p.10). Thus, these critics

imply that parental lying is seen as more acceptable because lies are a means by which parents

can shelter their children.

**Lying in Parent-Child/Child-Parent Relationships**

Lying in parent-child relationships is of particular interest to me because of the closeness between parents and children, the permanence of the relationship, and the struggles between parents and children who ultimately seek both togetherness and independence from one another (Suizzo, 2002, p. 309; Hoffman, 2007, p.89). This relationship also undergoes drastic changes over time. Although we often consider the parent-child relation to be one where the child is young, the parent-child relationship continues to exist as both the child and the parent age. The adult 'child' is no longer a child in the most widely accepted sense. The parent, however, appears to remain a parent and an adult even into old age. Literature that discusses deception in parent-adult child relationships, as far as I am aware, is non-existent. This is therefore a literature gap to which my research provides some useful commentary.

Because I have expressed concern over the importance of adulthood, it is worth briefly exploring its meaning. Blatterer, (2007) argues that adulthood is quite frequently defined by what it is not. It is not childhood, or adolescence. In everyday life we evaluate people's adultness based on their social stability of a full time job, their relationship status, their independence and whether they have children (Blatterer, 2007, p.733). According to Blatterer (2007), adulthood is a period of life where social understanding and self-confidence ensue because of accumulated social competence over time (ibid, p.776). Blatterer (2007) argues that in contemporary society, this understanding of adulthood is presently undergoing radical change, as many of these measures for evaluating a person's adultness no longer apply. With this in mind, he argues that common to previous and present ideas of adulthood is the notion that adults are understood to be full persons. In Western societies personhood is associated with autonomy, self-determination,

and choice (ibid, p.779). By default then, childhood in Western societies represents a social

category where full autonomy, self-determination, and choice, are not achieved. In this way,

Blatterer's insights (2007) prove to be particularly useful for analyzing the parent-child

relationship because he suggests a pivotal point (adulthood) at which a clear shift in the dynamic

of the relation can be observed.

Given that I have characterized the individuals involved in adult child-parent

relationships as importantly distinct from those of parents and young children, it is worth asking

what characterizes this particular relationship as a whole. Writing prior to Blatterer's (2007)

insights about adulthood, Luescher and Pillemer (1998), a sociologist and psychologist

respectively, insist that adult-child parent relationships are characterized by ambivalence at two

distinct levels: both the internal personal level and at the level of social structure. For the authors,

ambivalence means that there are contradictions within either of these two levels of the

relationship. Ambivalence is generated in three key ways: "a) between dependence and

autonomy, b) resulting from conflicting norms regarding intergenerational relations, c) resulting

from solidarity" (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998, p.417). If we consider lying as a tool with which

social actors can more effectively navigate their social lives, as sociologist Bernard Meltzer

(2003) has argued, then it is worth reflecting on the role that lying may play in both contributing

to these ambivalences and managing them simultaneously.

As Simmel (1950; 2009) and Barbour (2012) have argued, lying makes up an essential

component of the fabric of social relationships. In order to understand lying within parent-child

relationships then, it is necessary to develop some understanding of how relationships are

distinguished.  I would now like to discuss some of the existing literature present on lying within

parent-child relationships when children are young. Blum (2007) maintains that Western

societies idealize honesty in child-rearing practices. At the same time, however, she notes that children are taught that telling the whole truth is commonly undesirable. For example, Blum (2007) mentions that children are advised to not say mean things that they think of their friends (ibid). Therefore, the assertion that lying must be either good or bad is complicated. Nevertheless, in child-rearing practice parents lie to their children. Parents lie to socialize their children, to promote behavioural change, to deliver false praise, to select what to say in front of their children, to protect their children, and to teach children how to deceive (Blum, 2007; Bok, 1978;; Heyman, Hsu, Fu & Lee, 2013; Wang, Bernas, & Eberhard, 2011).

A cross-cultural psychology study on instrumental lying by parents, (Heyman, Hsu, Fu, & Lee, 2013) found that 84% of US and 98% of Chinese-American immigrant parents reported that they had lied to their children in order to encourage behavioural compliance. The study was conducted by asking parents to respond to whether or not they had lied to their children in situations where it was perceived common that parents would lie to their kids. In line with the Heyman et al. study (2013), Wang, Bernas, and Eberhard (2011), who also conducted a psychology study, likewise found lying to be instrumental in child-rearing practices. They looked specifically at the deception practices of Chinese mothers in child-rearing. The research study gathered data from 40 mothers and their children through videoing a total of 635 hours of parent-child interaction. This was followed by asking mothers to respond to video vignettes and to analyze whether or not they perceived certain situations as involving lies. The study concluded that Chinese mothers highly valued honesty and taught honesty with great rigor to their children. The mothers also realized, however, that it was necessary their children be confident in the social practice of deception and therefore taught these practices through their own use of context appropriate lies (Wang, Bernas, & Eberhard, 2011). This realization suggests that deception and

parental teaching of honesty are not necessarily incompatible. What both these studies show is

that lying plays a significant part in child-rearing practices.

Notably, children also lie to their parents. The sophistication of these lies is, however,

dependent on the child's age (Blum, 2005; 2007). A survey- based study conducted by Knox.

McGinty, and Gescheidler (2001) found that adolescent children lie to their parents mainly so

that their parents are not aware of everything happening in their lives. In a survey of 281

university undergraduates, only 5% of students reported that they had never lied to their parents

about where they were. Eighty-five percent of students, however, reported that they were

basically honest people (Knox et al., 2001). In another survey study the researchers found that

almost 500 high-school and college students were asked to determine the permissibility of

certain lies to parents in a variety of scenarios. This was achieved by analyzing responses to a

variety of survey vignettes. The study found that young adults frequently lie to their parents even

though they widely regarded lying as unacceptable. Eighty-two percent of all students reported

lying to their parents about at least one of the following issues in the last year: friends,

alcohol/drugs, parties, sex, money, and dating (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004).

The study also found that students commonly lied to their parents as a way of expressing their

independence.  (Jensen et al, 2004). These studies demonstrate that lying to parents is prominent,

but also messy in terms of how people identify with deception.

**To Justify the Lie**

Evidently there is an incongruity between claiming to hold the virtue of being an honest

person and finding oneself needing to lie in certain situations. Often people think about a lie they

tell before or after they tell the lie (Blum, 2007, p.49). The contradiction between holding a

virtue of honesty and the lived reality of needing to lie causes people to make justifications. As

Blum (2007) notes in her ethnography, Americans are more likely to feel a need to justify their lies than Chinese people. This is directly related to the fact that it is more widely acceptable to lie in Chinese societies than in Euro-American/Canadian societies. It is therefore important to remember that people justify the lies they tell, because the contexts in which they tell these lies, are conditioned by the association of lying as amoral.

To justify is "to defend as just, right, or proper, by providing adequate reasons" (Bok, 1978, p.96). For Bok (1978), who is concerned with the ethics of lying, justifications for lying, provide a way to determine if lying is ever ethical. In order to develop an objective basis for which to assess the ethics of a lie, she argues that two conditions must be met. Justifications must be 1) publicly scrutinized by 2) reasonable individuals (Bok, 1978, p.99). But, as she notes, most of the time people provide justifications for the lies they tell, this does not occur (Bok, 1978). Instead, according to Bok (1978) most of the time people justify their lies they make a justification to their conscience in order to appease some sort of moral qualm (p.100). For the purposes of my research project what is essential to consider is how justifications provided for lying affect or are affected by the relationship between parents and their children. Justifications are, as Bok (1978) notes, most commonly provided to the self. To understand how this is relevant to a relational analysis of the lie, it is useful to bring the work of Simmel (1950; 2009) into conversations about justifications. As Simmel (1950; 2009) argues, lies enable individuals to affect the nature of their relationships. The justifications individuals provide for the lies they tell validate the individual's altering of subjective truth to someone else. In societies where lying is commonly seen as amoral, providing justifications allows individuals to maintain and alter relationships through deception without feeling morally at fault.

**Literature Review Conclusion**

The extensive literature on deception provides a solid foundation of information, but also leaves much to be examined in further studies. It is the ways in which lies permeate the parent-child relationship that I find to be particularly curious. The connections and contradictions that exist between moral associations of lying and the social necessity of lying are of particular interest to me. My research differs from existing studies by analyzing lying in parent-child relationships in a way that incorporates both parent-child and child-parent lying, into a single study. My study also takes the ideology of, practice of, and justifications for lying and assesses the relational role of lying in parent-child relationships from all three angles. These two aspects of my research provide useful contributions to both deception and parent-child relationship literature.

**Methods: From Telling Lies to Being Told Them**

My research consisted of nine semi-structured interviews that ranged in length from just less than 30 minutes to just over an hour. Four of the participants were fathers and five of the participants were mothers. The children of the interviewees ranged in age from 3 to 26 and participants each had between 1 and 4 children (see Fig.1). Interviews consisted of both discussion of vignettes and semi-structured interview questions. My study was a small qualitative research study, and therefore, I cannot make generalizations from the data I generated. Rather, my research study provides new insights into the workings of deceptions within parent-child relationships in the Canadian context. I recruited participants via snowball sampling. Four participants were recruited in Vernon, BC and five participants lived in or near Halifax, NS. Recruiting participants from two different areas of the country did not drastically alter my responses because the ideologies present in, and living conditions of, both areas are

relatively similar. Snowball sampling involved recruiting participants through word of mouth, sending out e-mails to friends and asking them to pass along the information to their friends, and posting recruitment messages on online parenting websites. My exclusion and inclusion criteria were simply individuals who had both at least one living parent and one living child. I did not interview parent-child pairs.

My purpose for using two different types of methods, vignettes and interview questions, was first to create a positive environment for conversation with participants, and second to capture two different kinds of data. In research, vignettes are stories where characters are a part of certain situations or come up against challenges that are of interest to the researcher. After I read the vignette out loud to the participant (See Appendix C), the participant was asked to respond to the vignette by answering a follow up question. In this way, vignettes distance the participants from the research interrogation. In using vignettes, participants are asked to respond to what *characters* would or should, do, and therefore participants are not the subject in question (Finch, 1987, p.113; Hughes, 1998, p.385). Lying is potentially a sensitive subject for research participants because of a widespread moral stigma attached to lying in Western/North-American society (Blum, 2007). Thus, because vignettes are less intrusive than interview questions, my aim was to make participants feel comfortable to engage in a conversation with me about deception in their own lives (Hughes, 1998, p. 393). I also made it clear to research participants that I was not making judgements about them or their actions, but wanted to learn from them about the social phenomenon of lying. I argue that vignettes served their purpose well because participants were open to me about times they both lied and were told lies.

My second reason for using vignettes was to gain insight into how people understand lying in parent-child relationships generally. Janet Finch (1987) and Rhidian Hughes (1998)

argue that the role of vignettes is to capture the beliefs and general social norms of participants. Hughes (1998) argues that vignettes create pictures of particular situations. This gives participants the opportunity to provide their interpretation of a specific practice in society within the constraints of the vignette (Hughes, 1998, p.383-4). In this way, I aim to address the normative dimension of lying in parent-child relations. This normative dimension helped me compare what people generally think about lying in parent-child relationships with people's actual lived experience of lying. The vignettes I created for my interviews were simple tales about what I thought were common situations in which characters in them might lie to their parents or children. I told four vignettes during the interview. Vignettes addressed both parental and child lying, but also aspects of lying beliefs, practice and justification. The vignettes played a role in framing the interview so that participants understood the type of lying I was interested in. Although vignettes provided me with invaluable insights into parent-child relational lying, to fully answer my research question about why parents and children lie, and how this is justified, additional information was needed. Thus, vignettes were followed by interview questions.

I developed a thorough interview guideline that focused on lying in four dynamics of the parent-child relationship: parents lie to the interviewee, the interviewee lies to his/her parents, the interviewee lies to his/her children, and the interviewee's children lie to the interviewee. The order in which I asked the questions, however, varied among the interviews. I chose to conduct a semi-structured type interview. Berg and Lune (2012) maintain that this type of interview involves asking questions in an organized and specific order, but that the researcher is not restricted to this interview framework (p.112). Instead, researchers are able to probe into participants answers in a way that takes the interview away from the structured format of the interview guideline (ibid). For my purposes, this is important. It gave me the opportunity to

understand aspects of lying in parent-child relationships that I had not anticipated. Some guidance was necessary and in this way the interview outline helped me to be sure I asked questions that addressed my underlying research question.

After reflecting on my interviews and thinking about how my methods influenced the data that I received, what became clear is that once in a while participants referenced the vignettes in their interview responses. For example, Fletcher, a research participant, stated that "as a teenager I can relate to the vignette- I can remember sneaking out of the house at night" and Kara noted that "I mean what do they mean [by lying]…you are a terrible actress you suck". The reference to the terrible actress is a direct reference to the second vignette I told in the interviews (see appendix C). Because of the way participants referenced the vignettes in their responses, it is clear that the vignettes had some impact on the way that interviewee's talked to me about lying. In one sense, this was beneficial because it provided some uniformity between participants discussion of lying, a rather diverse topic. The fact that participants referenced my vignettes is likely also evidence that my vignettes were believed to be real situations in which participants thought people might lie. In another sense, however, my vignettes likely limited participants' responses about everyday lying in their own lives. If participants were thinking about their own lying in relation to the vignettes, which were what I determined to be common situations in which parents or children might lie to each other, then their own responses were always set against what I had already determined to be the norm in parent-child lying. However, given the range of lies that participants discussed with me, using vignettes likely did not drastically damage the variation of lying in my data. Although it is worth reflecting on how my methods influenced my data, I hold that my vignettes were beneficial because they played a pivotal role in getting participants to talk about a morally sensitive issue that they otherwise

might have been hesitant to discuss.

My exploratory study into deception in parent-child relations was a minimal risk research study. Although participants may have experienced mild discomfort in talking about lying, because it is a sensitive topic, participants did not appear to be distressed at any time throughout the interviews. To mitigate discomfort I chose not to delve into deep family secrets or any serious lies that may have caused the participants anxiety. For this reason, my study was centred on everyday kinds of lies. Participants were provided with my own contact information, the contact information of my supervisor, and the contact information of the director of research ethics at the university if they had any concerns about the study or their involvement in it.

**Findings: My oh my my we lie**

**An Ideology of Lying: Encompassing perceptions and beliefs**

In many ways my participants' ideas about lying frame the context for the ideological reality in which parents and children lie to each other. In this section I will distinguish between perceptions and beliefs. Perceptions of lying are the ideas participants have about lying in their own society, whereas beliefs are their own personal views on lying in their relationships. Perceptions about lying are, in many ways, inconsistent with the specific beliefs participants have about lying in their own relationships. When I asked participants about how they thought lying was perceived in society, participants had different understandings of whether lying to parents or children was perceived negatively or neutrally. The language of "worse than" or "acceptable" present in the interviews, however, suggests that lying has a widespread negative connotation. This connotation is consistent with both commonsensical assumptions and foundational philosophy literature (Bok, 1978; Kant in Mahon, 2007, p.655).

In regards to participants' perceptions about lying, participants made it clear to me that in

Canadian society it is seen as more acceptable to lie to one's child than to one's parent. Only one research participant explicitly stated that lying to children was more unforgiveable, suggesting a consistency of opinions. For example, Larry exemplified this notion when he commented that "I think that [lying to parents] is the big no no, like culturally it is a big no no, but it is totally pervasive," but also that "lying to kids is ok because we are trying to protect them". Age and the kind of relationship, close or distant, also played a role in impacting how lying in this relationship was perceived. The fact that participants noted lying to children was perceived more positively is significant because it suggests that the parental role makes lying to one's child more socially acceptable than lying to one's parents. Below, Mark exemplifies how the power dynamic between parents and children shapes their interactions with each other.

> "I love my children and I'm going to do everything for them, but we are not on the same level. They are not adults yet. And as long as they are not adults you have this sort of inequality, not a political inequality, not a cultural inequality, but the thing is that ultimately I have to look after them" - Mark

Here, what Mark demonstrates is that the position of power parents hold over their children stems from the parental role of taking care of their children. Accordingly, Mark suggests that the parental position of power makes lying to children more acceptable than lying to parents. Existing literature echoes this because of the parental responsibility to protect and shelter children (Bok, 1978; Blum, 2007). It is also likely seen as more acceptable to lie to children because of the understanding that under a certain age children are incapable of fully understanding certain truths. Thus a lie's perceived moral appropriateness is determined in relation to child development. Lastly, one participant suggested that it is seen as more unacceptable to lie to parents because they have given so much to their children. Thus, reciprocity plays a role in determining a lie's perceived acceptability. There are therefore

multiple reasons why it is received more positively to lie to one's children than to lie to one's parents, all stemming from the relation between parents and children.

Participants' own beliefs about lying in the parent-child relationship, differ from their perceptions because all participants indicated at some point during the interviews that lying to one's parents or children can be harmful or wrong, but also that being completely honest to one's parents or children can do more harm than good. It is worth noting, however, that the degree to which participants held steadfast to one ideal or the other varied and even changed within the interview; this was largely context-dependent. It is clear from participants' explanations and examples, that the general pattern among participants' lying beliefs is that lying is the wrong thing to do, but it can also be the right thing to do. This is directly in line with existing literature on deception such as Blum's (2007) claim that the belief that lying is immoral is partial and incomplete. Participant's beliefs also speak to a clear distinction that Goffman (1974) made between "exploitative fabrications" and "benign fabrications", which rested on the difference between those lies intended to do harm, and lies devoid of this intention. If intention to do harm is an important means by which lying differs, it makes sense that certain types of lying (those told with, or devoid of, the intention to do harm) would be seen as more acceptable than others.

Even though perceptions and beliefs are distinct, there is a noteworthy connection. There is an understanding among participants that other parents and children lie to each other in the same way that they lie to their own parents and children. In this way participants feel that they are "typical" liars. They believe they lie much in the same way that others lie as well. When responding to vignettes about imaginary people and situations, people quite commonly responded with "I" statements, or justified an imaginary person's actions on the basis of how they themselves believed they would react. For example, when responding to the vignette about a

mother having to relay difficult news to her daughter about not getting the part in a school play, seven of nine participants all referred directly to themselves. For instance, Kara replied "I don't think she would use those words. I would not use those words, like this is how I would do it". Likewise, Rosemary stated "I would be honest with her". The fact that participants believe others lie in the ways they do suggests that even though the common perception of lying is that lying is amoral, the ways in which people believe they are typical liars shows just how prevalent participants recognize lying to be.

**Lying in Practice: parent and child deceit**

**Parental Deceit**

In my discussion of the practice of both parental and child lying I will address three facets of deception that characterize child and parent lying: a parent-child lying typology, lying through life stages, and avoidance of outright lying. Within the examples provided to me by participants, five key themes emerged about the kinds of situations parents find themselves lying to their children. Parents lie to their children: a) in socializing them, b) about taboo subjects like sex and drugs, c) for instrumental purposes, d) in moments where feelings are sensitive, e) and in intervening in their child's life or to keep their children from intervening in their own lives.

Lies that I categorized as socialization lies were those that facilitated raising a child to act in ways compatible with societal expectations of how children should behave. In this category lying to children about Santa Claus was most prominent. It is not surprising that participants were eager to offer this lie as an example because of the widespread acceptance of this fantasy lie within Canadian society. This prominence of this lie is in accordance with Heyman et al's (2013) psychology study that found that a high percentage (88%) of US parents had lied to their children about Santa Claus. On this note, Beatrice made her feelings about those parents who did

not lie to their children about Santa Claus quite clear "you know people who tell the kids when they are four that there is no such thing as Santa Claus - I think it's just terrible because it's taking away the magic of childhood". In lying to their children about Santa Claus, parents adhere to social norms and permit the existence of what Beatrice calls the "magic of childhood". Other lies that were placed in this category included lies that were jokes or ridiculous statements, and lying to a child about where her soother was, so that she would grow out of needing it. Fletcher explained that "our society buys into lots of lies and part of raising your children is to socialize them so that they can thrive within the society that includes those lies". By telling their children socialization lies, parents enable their children to grow up in ways that adhere to social norms present in their society.

Lying about taboo subjects, such as sex and drugs, was another type of lie that parents admitted to telling to their children. These types of lies were told generally to young children, who parents did not deem were at an appropriate age level to discuss such things. Like socialization lies, these lies play a role in positioning the child at a certain level of exposure to the outside world. One parent, Kara, with older children admitted to lying to her children about smoking drugs when they had asked her. Kara noted that this was her way of showing that smoking an illegal substance was not something that everyone had to do in their lives. Kara mentioned, however, that now that her children are considerably older, all in their 20's, that she is more honest with them. Lying to children about sex and drugs is a way for parents to avoid delving into sensitive subjects and likewise to maintain as Beatrice noted the "magic of childhood", a social space full of taboos.

The third type of lie that parents told their children were instrumental lies: lies that parents told so that their children would behave in a way that made day-to-day life for parents

feasible. Of all five categories, instrumental lies were the type most frequently told by parents because this kind of lying occurs daily, particularly when children were young. These types of lies are characterized by a sense of necessity or practicality on the part of the parent. Larry exemplifies this idea well when he lies to his 5-year-old son about them being late. Larry says "it doesn't matter if we are late or not. I just need to get him… to where we are going and if I don't make it seem like we are late we will be". In these types of situations the lie itself is not important, it is merely a tool that parents employ so that their children will do as parents need them to.

The fourth kind of lie is told by parents during those moments when feelings are sensitive. In these types of situations, telling the truth is likely to hurt either the parent's or the child's feelings. This category of lies ranged from failing to tell one's child that they were terrible at basketball to not telling your kids when parents were struggling emotionally or financially. Lies that fell into this category, more so than the others, were likely to underlie a longer portion of both a parent and child's life. For example, both Kara and Fletcher described how their parents disguised or hid certain details of their lives from them because telling the truth caused too much harm. When feelings are at stake, the lies people tell seem to take on another dimension, in that maintaining the lie is of particular importance.

The final category of parental lying I have identified encompasses lies that are told to intervene deliberately in the child's life or told so that children will not intervene in the parent's life. This category of lie speaks to how parents and children seek to maintain distinct lives from each other to a certain degree, while simultaneously seeking to meddle in each other's separate lives. Leslie described to me an instance where her mother was particularly adamant to purchase her a new king sized mattress. Despite Leslie's protest, her mother created a ruse, claiming she

had found a bargain-priced $312 dollar king-sized mattress. Her mother went so far as to provide a fake receipt for the mattress, which cost over 1500 dollars. In this instance Leslie's mother uses deception to insert herself into a part of Leslie's life, from which she otherwise would be removed. Although deception can be a way for parents to intervene in their children's lives, parental lying can also prevent children from intervening in their own lives. For example, Rebecca, aware that her daughter, Maria, disapproved of Rebecca's own relationship with her boyfriend, told her daughter that she and her boyfriend had broken up even though this was not the case. Rebecca knew Maria disapproved of her relationship with her boyfriend and she lied because she did not want to have to deal with the "extra little, why are you still with him? Why are you, why?" These situations show how parents can use lies to intervene in their children's lives, and to prevent their children from interfering in their own lives. Thus demonstrating the powerful position which parents hold over their children.

**Child Lying**

In contrast to parental lying, child lying to parents appears to be characterized along only two central themes: a) hiding behaviour that parents would not approve of (this included taboo behaviours like sex and drugs) and b) in feeling-sensitive situations. Lying to parents in order to hide delinquent behaviour was the most common lie example that participants discussed with me during the interviews. This is consistent with existing literature on lying to parents, which argues that children often lie to their parents so that they are not fully aware of everything that happens in their child's life (Knox, McGinty, & Gescheidler, 2001). Some examples of lies that children tell their parents included lying about doing math homework in order to do a school prank that involved filling a fish tank with blue Jell-O, roughhousing with the family cat, drinking at a party, getting a speeding ticket, arriving home late, or stealing an iPad from class. In these types

of situations, lying is a way for children to conceal from their parents actions that parents disapprove of. Although not surprising that children lie to their parents about delinquent behaviour, the prominence of this type of lie to parents in participants' responses is worth noting.

Children also regularly lied to their parents in feeling-sensitive situations, where the truth would hurt their parents' feelings or worsen their own emotional state. Lying in contexts of feelings is a reason that I noted parents also commonly lied to their children. Contrary to lies about delinquent behaviour, feeling sensitive lies are characterized by concern for one's own emotions, or that of their parents; either a fear of worrying them, or to prevent hurting their feelings. Examples of these lies included refraining from telling parents that they were controlling, during moments when women were experiencing rash emotions because of menstruation, struggling with emotions such as depression, and telling your mom that her yellow pound-cake was a hit seller at the bake sale when it was not popular. Emotions, their presence or concern for someone else's, therefore, often trigger lying. This suggests that lying can serve to manage emotional difficulty without addressing emotions per se.

**Life Stage Lies**

Relationships between parents and their children change constantly. One of the most apparent ways in which this relationship shifts is through time, as both parents and children age (Hartup, 1989). According to interviewees, as the relationship ages, parents and children become more open and honest with each other. Thus, both parent and child lying generally decreases as the relationship ages over time. An exception to this rule, however, was while children were in their teenage years. This was noted as a period of life where children often found it necessary to lie to their parents. Rebecca and Fletcher both echoed the idea that for teenagers, social lives are of the utmost importance and that prioritizing friends over family, caused teenagers to lie to their

parents.  When I asked interviewees about lying in their relationships with their parents, a number of participants felt that presently there was not much point in lying to their parents. Despite this assertion, 6 out of 9 participants were able to describe to me a situation in recent time where they lied to their parents or withheld information that they did not wish to share. Kara and Beatrice, whose children are all in their twenties, argue that they feel like they can be more open and honest with their children now that they are older. In this way, specifically post-adolescent parent-child relations were characterized by participants as generally more open and honest.

It is worth asking, however, if there may be another explanation for why parent-child relationships are more honest and open, or at least believed to be, as participant's age than simply that both parents and children mature throughout an aging relationship. As children age, they become less involved in and by their parents' lives. All of the individuals I interviewed, did not live with their parents and as such likely don't interact with their parents on a day to day basis. As Robert noted,

> "the relationship I have with my parents is not the sort of relationship where I really lie at this point… I don't live close to my dad so I don't have to deal with him on any uncomfortable matters all the time… so it's kind of just talking about the weather. I'm not going to lie about the weather." – Robert

Robert makes it clear that as parents and children become less involved in each other's lives there are less things to lie about, or reasons to lie. This notion is reflected in Simmel's (1950) idea of the lie because according to Simmel (1950) lying plays a role in binding relationships. When relationships become less intimate it makes sense that the measures in place to bind these relationships would lessen. Thus, lying generally becomes less prevalent.

Central to life stage lies is the process of taking children from the "magic of childhood", which is retained in large part through deception, into the rawness of reality, where lying

becomes a lesser part of parent-child relationships. Fletcher explained this sentiment well, "I think everyone in your anthropology class knows that there is lots of abuse and sexual assault and violence, but hopefully not everybody in the pre-school class does". It is therefore useful to consider lies in parent-child relationships as told throughout various life phases. Parents deceive their children in order to preserve certain truths from their kids because of their age. Lying about both Santa Claus and sex were clear examples of this. Deception used to preserve the "magic of childhood" is characterized by two processes simultaneously. Parents are concerned about their child's ability to fully understand certain truths, while also concerned about the level of knowledge that they *want* their children to understand. This results in the notion of age-appropriate truths that was widely expressed to me by participants.

**Navigating the Parent-Child Relationship to Avoid Lying**

In my findings so far I have explored lying in terms of how my participants have described their situations of lying or being lied to, to me. I have not placed an emphasis on distinguishing between situations of explicit lying, and lies by omission. This is because when I asked participants about times they lied, regardless of whether it was an explicit lie or a lie by omission, these were the examples provided to me and resonated with participant as acts of deception. It is, however, worth drawing attention to the commonly held notion of interviewees' preference to avoid outright lying and instead withhold information. Participants often avoided discussions where lying might be involved altogether. Avoidance was a common theme throughout participant's responses and suggests that to an extent parents and children navigate their relationships with each other to avoid lying or being lied to.

Fletcher spoke directly to the ways that parents and children both try to navigate their relationships with each other so they do not have to outright lie. He believes "there is an

unspoken agreement [between parents and children], about how much disclosure is needed and is appropriate". He describes this predicament as a game. When put in an uncomfortable situation, he says that,

"instead of withholding information now I've got to make a decision between coming clean or lying and that's the game. They are playing the game of not asking the question and you are also playing the game when you don't ask your parents- how is your marriage coming along"? - Fletcher

In Fletcher's view parents and children generally do not want to lie to each other and they do not want to put each other in a position where one person might have to lie. On this note, when Larry's 5 year old son lies to him about wetting the bed, Larry explains that you don't want to catch your child in a lie because "they feel bad and you feel bad about catching them in a lie". In this way, catching someone in a lie, a potential ramification of putting a parent or child in a position where they feel they have to lie, is likewise not desirable. Although Fletcher was the only participant that spoke directly to this idea of navigating the relationship so that parents and children don't have to lie to each other, avoidance was a key theme in participant responses and directly relates to this idea.

On the topic of avoidance, Kara explained that her father has done things in the past that she does not discuss with him "because it is uncomfortable or even painful". Kara terms this non-discussion "avoiding truths". Kara explained that she has stopped trying to get her father to talk about the truth, because it is painful and he continues to lie. In this way, Kara avoids the truth and refrains from putting her father in a position where he has to lie to her. Likewise when Beatrice was uncomfortable with telling her father that her son has been living with his girlfriend for two years, she explained that she long avoided discussing the topic with her father. One day, however, she just told him "because he already knew". Her father's refusal to bring up the issue with Beatrice, even though he was aware of it, was a gesture that stopped Beatrice from having

to address an uncomfortable truth, or lying about it. As was clear throughout other lie anecdotes told to me, parents and children often try to avoid lying and being lied to.

**Justifying the Lie**

As I discussed in the literature review, justifications for lying are most often provided as self-justifications. People convince themselves that it is acceptable to lie and act "amorally" for the sake of some form of greater good which then makes that lying morally justifiable. When I asked participants about their justifications for lying, I therefore occupied a rather interesting social position. People do not usually have to justify the lies they tell to others unless they are caught lying or decide they should confess their lie. But when I asked participants about their justifications for lying, I forced them to communicate that previously internal justification. Although participants certainly did not feel that they always justified lying, participants offered me many justifications for lies that they had told.

The most common *explicit* reason that participants used justify lying to their children and parents was out of protection. Six out of nine participants explicitly suggested that protection was a justification for a lie that they had told or had been told. Protection was used most often to justify a lie told by parents to their children. Although, when interviewees, presently all adult-children, discussed the lies that they told to their parents, protection was also mentioned as a justification. Among participants who had at least one child older than 16, protection was also suggested as a reason that they felt their children lied to them. This suggests that lying to protect is employed both by parents and children and that it is a justification only individuals of a certain age provide. Larry discussed this exact sentiment:

"I think the justification for lying to the kid is this kind of protection. I am protecting the child and then when the child is lying to the parent it is more of [say] a child under 16, I don't want to get in trouble. It's like avoidance of punishment. I think when it gets older it kind of switches. Like I am lying to my parents when I am 25

because I am protecting them from the fact that I got a D in a class and they are going to get super pissed off and they are already worried about a bunch of other shit. Where that might get to the same level, where the parents and the kids are lying to themselves as adults to protect each other." – Larry

Thus, protection can be a justification for both parents' and children's lies to each other. But what Larry demonstrates is that even those lies where the explicit justification is protection; the justifications are in fact layered. Larry says first, "I am protecting them [his parents] from the fact that I got a D in a class". When he explains further, however, it becomes clear why else he might lie by noting that his parents "are going to get super pissed off" and that "they are already worried about a bunch of other shit." These are justifications very different from protection. I argue that it is worth noting these multiple layers of justification because they show how the parent-child relationship shapes lying and justification for lying. If Larry told his friends he got a D in a class his friends would likely not reprimand him. Likewise, his friends are probably not so worried about his grades. By considering layers of justifications, aspects of the parent-child relationship can be made clearer.

In this quote Larry also points to an idea of an equilibrium level within the parent-child relation. By claiming that there may be a point when lying to one's parents and lying to one's child reach "the same level", Larry suggests that previously this balance did not exist. Consequently, as Mark discussed heavily in my interview with him, power dynamics are a part of parent-child relationships. As this relationship changes, there may be a point where this power-dynamic reaches a certain level of equilibrium. In Larry's view, the point at which this occurs is adulthood. The ways that both Blatterer (2012) and Luescher & Pillemer (1998) discuss adulthood and the adult child-parent relation are fitting with this assertion, because they characterize the parent-'adult' child relation as distinct from the parent-child relation when the child is young.

An additional layer of lie justification is self-benefit. Among those lies justified for the purposes of protection, it is clear that participants felt they were told on a supposedly selfless basis. They were widely seen as for the benefit of the person being lied to. For example, Beatrice states "you are telling your child a fib for the benefit of your child". Here Beatrice explains that the lie is told for the child's own good. Although participants reason they tell lies for the benefit of their parents and children, the lie-teller often also stands to gain from telling the lie. Participants, however, were not eager to provide the justification that they benefitted from telling a lie, and instead most commonly offered the justification of lying for protection, and second most commonly offered the justification of lying to avoid hurting the other person's feelings. Notably, both of these justifications position the liar in a morally righteous position as opposed to a morally shameful one.

In certain moments, however, participants stated their realization that they were also protecting themselves through a lie that they justified as being told for their parent or child's protection. For example, Fletcher made this exact assertion:

"I think an awful lot of the lies I told my parents were, could be framed as, protecting them from knowing the truth, but it's also pretty darn self-serving when the truth that you are protecting them from is that their angelic son is really a delinquent or some variation of that." – Fletcher

By justifying his lies to his parents as for their protection, Fletcher makes his lies seem to himself as though they are for his parent's benefit. Fletcher is also aware, however, that he stands to gain by lying about his delinquent behaviour. Through this type of lying Fletcher is able to maintain an image of himself as a "good son". This means that by lying Fletcher's parents don't know about his actions that they disapprove of.  By justifying the lie as for the protection of his parents, Fletcher is once again able to reinforce this ideal. He is again the "good son" protecting his parents. Justifications, therefore, play a part in maintaining the relationship roles and the

overarching dynamic of the relation. This is because if Fletcher is thought to be a more well-behaving son than he perhaps is, then his parents are likely to treat him in a way more to his liking.

I argue, therefore, that justifications provided for lying are multi-layered. Even when lies are told for the benefit of the parent or the child, they are also told for the benefit of the self. As I have shown in Fletcher's case this affects the nature of the parent-child relationship. To clarify, I do not mean to say that lies have an underlying self-serving purpose. Rather, lying for oneself and lying for another comprise layers of justification. This means that lies can be both for the benefit of another and the self, to protect and to avoid blame, to maintain power and to not hurt someone else's feelings, and so on. The significance that one layer holds, likely depends on the context and how the parent or child has assessed a particular situation.

**Concluding Findings**

My analysis of parent-child lying suggests that the contexts in which parents and children lie to each other are varied. The types of lies they tell, how these lies play into the parent-child relationship, and the justifications provided for them are equally diverse. Although it would seem to be crass to suggest that lying has an important role in parent-child relationships, similar to Simmel's (1950) argument, my small qualitative study suggests that lying does aid in maintaining and altering the dynamic of this particular relation. Lying, though most prominently understood as amoral, serves multiple social purposes within the parent-child relation. The beliefs and perceptions that individuals hold about lying frame the ideological contexts in which parent and child lying occurs. Both these ideological contexts and the actual lying, then, often cause participants to provide justifications for the lies that they tell. I found it useful to assess these three facets of deception, perceptions and beliefs, the act of lying, and justifications for

lying, because it provided a clear picture of the various avenues through which deception permeates the parent-child relationship.

## Conclusion: Lying to the end

My research project began with my own curious but nonetheless very unclear idea of deception in parent-child relationships. It has concluded, however, with many more questions than those I set out to answer. How does deception in the relationship affect parent-child trust? How do instances of self-deception characterize this relationship? And how does parent-child deception affect how individuals use deception outside the relationship and with their potential future parent-child relationships? Nonetheless, my findings have created at least a slightly clearer picture of why parents and children lie to each other and how they justify the lies that they tell.

Lying in parent-child relations is abundant. Parents tend to lie to their children a) in socializing them, b) about taboo subjects like sex and drugs, c) for instrumental purposes, d) in moments where feelings are sensitive, e) and in intervening in their child's life or to keep their children from intervening in their own lives. In contrast, children tend lie to their parents in a) hiding behaviour that parents would not approve of and b) feeling-sensitive situations. Lies vary along the changing and aging parent-child relationship. Furthermore, parents and children prefer withholding information from each other to outright lying. Justifications are multi-layered, but protection was the most common reason parents and children claim that they lie to each other. Evidently, lying pervades the parent-child relationship.

It is important that I note my study was conducted in Canada and therefore my findings are relevant only to the cultural contexts in which my research took place. Canada is largely a European settler society where the underlying belief that lying is amoral holds great weight. In other societies, like Chinese societies for instance, lying is more widely recognized and accepted

(Blum, 2007). Moreover, parent-child relationships differ immensely cross-culturally. The significance of the parent-child relation I have discussed is particular to the Canadian context. Even within the Canadian context, however, parent-child relationships are diverse. They differ along lines of class, race, gender, number of parents per household, and in measures of intimacy. Therefore, as I noted in my introduction, my study is not generalizable to a broader population. Instead, insights that my findings provide are exploratory in nature.

There appear to be various levels of deception, both within how the brain makes lying possible and the social environments in which lying necessarily occur. Consequently, further research could involve both psychologists and anthropologists working together to address how these different levels of deception interact. Most of the literature on lying is psychological. Given this, it is worth exploring the relational role of deception alongside psychological processes of lying. Anthropology's quest to account for the meanings people give to their social worlds and the discipline's astute focus on the dynamics of social relationships speaks to why anthropological perspectives on deception are strikingly necessary. My qualitative research study offers a mere contribution to the world of parent-child deception that is begging for further attention.

## References

Barbour, C. (2012). The Maker of Lies: Simmel, Mendacity and the Economy of Faith. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *29*(7-8), 218-236. DOI: 10.1177/0263276412456566

Barnes, J., (1994). *A Pack of Lies: Towards a Sociology of Lying*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.

Blatterer, H. (2007). Contemporary Adulthood Reconceptualizing an Uncontested Category. *Current sociology*, *55*(6), 771-792. DOI: 10.1177/0011392107081985

Blum, S. D. (2005). Five Approaches to Explaining "Truth" and "Deception" in Human Communication. *Journal of Anthropological Research, 61*(3), 289-315. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/stable/3631321

Blum, S., (2007). *Lies that Bind: Chinese Truth, Other Truths.* United States of America: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Bok, S. (1978). Lying to Children. *Hastings Center Report*, *8*(3), 10-13. DOI:10.2307/3560421

Bok, S. (1978). *Lying: Moral choice in public and private life*. Vintage.

Finch, J. (1987). The Vignette Technique in Survey Research. *Sociology,21*(105), 105-114. DOI: 10.1177/0038038587021001008

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.

Hartup, W. W. (1989). Social relationships and their developmental significance. *American psychologist*, *44*(2), 120. Retrieved from http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9037a9ca-5465-44c4-8427-10e01c1b8e12%40sessionmgr115&vid=1&hid=101

Heyman, G. D., Hsu, A. S., Fu, G., & Lee, K. (2013). Instrumental lying by parents in the US and China. *International Journal of Psychology*, *48*(6), 1176-1184. DOI**:** 10.1080/00207594.2012.746463

Hoffman, Diane M. (2013). Power Struggles: The Paradoxes of Emotion and Control among Child-Centered Mothers in the Privileged United States. *Ethos 41*(1), 75-97. DOI: 10.1111/etho.12003

Hughes, Rhidian. (1998). Considering the Vignette Technique and its Application to a Study of Drug Iinjecting and HIV Risk and Safer Behaviour. *Sociology of Health & Illness 20*(3) 381-400. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9566.0010

Jensen, L. A., Arnett, J. J., Feldman, S. S., & Cauffman, E. (2004). The right to do wrong: Lying to parents among adolescents and emerging adults. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *33*(2), 101-112. DOI:10.1023/B:JOYO.0000013422.48100.5a

Knox, D., Zusman, M. E., McGinty, K., & Gescheidler, J. (2001). Deception of parents during adolescence. *Adolescence, 36* (143), 611-4. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/docview/195930785?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wcdiscovery&accountid=10406

Mahon, J. E. (2006). Kant and the perfect duty to others not to lie. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, *14*(4), 653-685. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608780600956407

Meltzer, B. M. (2003). Lying: Deception in Human Affairs. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *23*, 61-79. DOI: 10.1108/01443330310790598

Mollering, G. (2009). Leaps and Lapses of Faith. In B. Harrington (Ed.), *Deception: From Ancient Empires to Internet dating*. (p.137-153). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Salamone, F. A. (1977). The Methodological Significance of the Lying Informant. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *50*(3), 117-124. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/3317591

Simmel, G. (1950). Knowledge, Truth and Falsehood in Human Relations. In K. H.Wolff (Ed.), *The sociology of Georg Simmel* (p.312-316). Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.

Simmel, G. (2009). The Secret and the Secret Society. In Blasi, A.J., Jacobs, A. K., Kanjirathinkal, M. (Eds.), *Sociology Inquiries Into the Construction of Social Forms* (p. 307-362).Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV.

Smeltzer, Mark A. (1996). Lying and intersubjective truth: A communication based approach to understanding lying. *Argumentation 10*(3) 361-373. DOI: 10.1007/BF00182201

Suizzo, M. A. (2002). French parents' cultural models and childrearing beliefs. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *26*(4), 297-307. DOI: 10.1080/01650250143000175

Wang, X. L., Bernas, R., & Eberhard, P. (2012). When a Lie Is Not a Lie: Understanding

    Chinese Working-Class Mothers' Moral Teaching and Moral Conduct. *Social*

    *Development*, *21*(1), 68-87. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9507.2011.00619.x

Appendix A

Fig 1) an outline of the parent-child relations of which interviewees were a part.

| Interviewee | Parental Role | # of Children | Age of Children | # of Living Parents |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Robert | Father | 3 | Newborn, 3, 6 | 1 |
| Leslie | Mother | 3 | Newborn, 3, 6 | 1 |
| Rosemary | Mother | 1 | Almost 4 | 2 |
| Kara | Mother | 3 | 20,23,26 | 1 |
| Mark | Father | 2 | 10, 5 | 2 |
| Larry | Father | 1 | 5 | 1 |
| Fletcher | Father | 3 | 18, 23, 25 | 1 |
| Beatrice | Mother | 4 | 19, 22, 24, 26 | 1 |
| Rebecca | Mother | 2 | 6, 16 | 1 |

Appendix B: Note for e-mail recruitment.

Hello,

Have you ever told a lie or 'stretched the truth'? Have you ever felt you had to lie to someone else? My name is Justine Correia and I am currently doing my honours thesis in Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and I am conducting research on people's experiences of lying in their everyday lives. I am recruiting participants for a qualitative research study on everyday lying within parent-child relationships. I want to find out about why parents and children lie to each other, how lying affects parent and child relations and how individuals justify telling lies.

I am looking for participants who have at least one living parent and one living child. To be clear, I am not looking for parent-child pairs simply singular individuals who have both a parent and a child. Research participants will be asked to partake in a 1 hour interview with me and answer numerous questions as well as respond to a few short vignettes about imaginary situations of everyday lying.

If you are interested in participating in the study please contact me by e-mail justine.correia@dal.ca or by phone (902) 817-0482. I would greatly appreciate your participation.

Thank you,
Sincerely,
Justine Correia

Appendix C: Interview Guideline: Vignettes and Interview Questions

**Vignette 1**
Josh is a 15 year old boy who has been wanting to go to his upcoming high school party on Friday night for some time. His parents have asked him to join them for a late family dinner at a family friend's house the same evening. Josh figures the dinner will go until around 11PM and that he would probably be able to go to the party for an hour and a half and then sneak home before his parents arrive. Josh tells his parents he is sick even though he is not so that he can sneak off to the party.

1) Why do you think Josh decides to tell this lie? 2) How would Josh justify this decision to himself? If he were to get caught how would he justify it to his parents? What would Josh tell his friends?

**Vignette 2**
Mari has just received a phone call from the theatre company for which her adolescent daughter has just auditioned. Mari's daughter Leslie has been practicing hard for the upcoming audition and it truly is her dream role. The lady from the theatre company told Mari that Leslie did not receive the role because she is simply not talented enough to play the part and they are looking for someone with more of an array of acting experience.

1) How will Mari explain the news to her daughter?

**Vignette 3**
Joel and Jenna have been married for just over 3 years. Joel's parents adore Jenna and their son and call Joel once in a while to check up on him and his spouse. Recently, Joel and Jenna have been living apart because of struggles in their marriage. As such Joel is going through quite a few challenges in his life.

1) When Joel's parents call to ask how he is and also to speak to Jenna how does Joel respond?

**Vignette 4**
Maggie is part of a young mothers parenting circle. Last week the mothers were talking about how important it was that they try not to lie to their children.

1) Do you think this is important parenting advice? 2) To what extent do you think the mothers would follow through with this effort?

**NEED TO KNOW PRIOR TO INTERVIEW:**
1) How many parents do you presently have?
2) How many children do you presently have?

**General:**
1) How do you think people generally perceive lying to one's child in society?
2) How do you think people generally perceive lying to one's parents in society? What are the differences between lying to one's parents and lying to one's children?

I'm now going to ask you about different situations that might arise between you, your parent(s) and your child(ren).

Let's start by thinking about scenarios where you might lie to your parent(s) (A).

*[I will move round the different scenarios below. The order will vary depending on the flow of conversation.]*

| *(A) X telling lies to parent* | *X being lied to by parents* |
|---|---|
| 1) What kinds of everyday lies do you tell to your parent(s)? | 1) What kinds of everyday lies do your parent(s) tell you? |
| 2) Thinking about those lies, how do you decide whether or not to tell them to your parents? | 2) Thinking about those lies, how do you decide whether or not it was ok that your parents lied to you in these situations? |
| 3) Can you tell me about a time you lied to your parent(s)? | 3) Can you tell me about a time your parent(s) have lied to you? |
| 4) What resulted from telling this lie? | 4) What resulted from them telling you this lie |
| 5) Upon reflection, are you glad you told this lie? | 5) Upon reflection, are you glad they told you this lie? |
| *X lying to children* | *X being lied to by children* |
| 1) Thinking about everyday kinds of lies what kinds of lies do you tell your child (ren)? | 1) What kinds of everyday lies do your children tell you? |
| 2) How do you reason whether or not to tell lies such as these to your children? | 2) How do you determine whether or not it was ok for them to tell you this lie? |
| 3) Can you tell me about a time you lied to your child (ren)? | 3) Can you tell me about a time your children have lied to you? |
| 4) What resulted from telling this lie? | 4) What resulted from them telling you this lie? |
| 5) Upon reflection, are you glad you told this lie? | 5) Upon reflection, are you glad they told you this lie? |

**Closing:**
1) In what ways do you feel like you have to justify lying?
2) Are these kinds of justifications different when you are acting as a parent from when you are acting as a child?
(If yes, how so?)

Appendix D: Consent Form

**DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY**
*Inspiring Minds*

*Faculty of Arts and*

*Social Sciences*

CONSENT FORM

**Exploring Everyday Kinds of Lies in Parent-Child Relations**

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Justine Correia, an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology, as part of my honours degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to explore why parents and children lie and how they justify lying in parent-child relations. In order to explore this dynamic, I will conduct semi-structured interviews. I will then analyze the data and write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis.

As a participant in the research you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. First, you will be asked to respond to a few vignettes. These vignettes are short anecdotes that contain characters who are involved in situations related to my topic of interest. I will then ask you to answer a number of research questions about your own experiences of lying within parent-child relationships. The interview should take about an hour and will be conducted in a quiet location of your choice. The interview will be audio-recorded. If I quote any part of it in my honours thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you from the quote.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over you can do so until March 1. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. Only the honours class supervisor and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my honours thesis. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis. I will keep only anonymized information so that I can learn more from it as I continue with my studies.

The risks associated with this study are minimal, but could include minimal discomfort if talking about lying brings up sensitive topics. Please note that I have a duty to report any disclosure of abuse of a child or an adult in need of protection. In order to mitigate discomfort I would like to stress that this is a study into everyday mundane kinds of lies.  I will also be using vignettes in the interview and you can refuse to answer a question, take a break or stop the interview at any time if you are at all uncomfortable.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on the role lying plays within parent-child relationships and how this relationship shapes the nature of lies. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my honours thesis after April 30.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is justine.correia@dal.ca. You can contact the honours class supervisor, Dr. Martha Radice, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University on (902) 494-6747, or email martha.radice@dal.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

**Participant's consent:**

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

## Appendix D: Research Ethics Final Report

**Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board**
Ethics Review for Continuing Research Involving Human Participants

## Annual / Final Report of the Investigator

Please complete the following information and return to:
Research Ethics c/o Dalhousie Research Services
Dalhousie University
6299 South Street, Suite 231
Halifax, NS , B3H 4H6
ethics@dal.ca

| Principal Investigator (name): | Justine Correia |
|---|---|
| Department: | SOSA |
| REB file #: | 2014-3439 |
| Project title: | Exploring Everyday Kinds of Lies in Parent-Child Relations |
| Effective date of original ethics approval: | December 12th/2014 (or a bit after) |

Please answer Question 1, 2 *or* 3 below (as applicable) and Question 4**:**

3. **STUDY COMPLETED**

If the project has been completed (analysis of data is complete), please submit a brief report (maximum 4 pages) stating the conclusions reached during the duration of this project (abstract or publication will be acceptable).

My research takes the relational role of lying as understood by Sociologist Georg Simmel (1950) as the starting point for my qualitative study on lying in parent-child/child-parent relationships. Simmel (1950) argues that lies play a role in binding social relationships, and his work as well as the work of anthropologist Susan Blum (2007), are instrumental in my analysis of deception. My research analyzes lying within the dynamics of parent-child relationships in Canadian society. I explore how lying plays out in these relations and the effects that lying can have on the relationship as a whole. I discuss parent-child deception from three angles: ideology, practice, and justification. My aim is to address these three aspects of lying in relation to parent-child relationships and the contexts that this relationship provides. I conclude that through lying

ideology, practice, and justification lying plays a role in shaping the dynamic of the parent-child/child-parent relation.

When did the study end?  April 19<sup>th</sup>/2015
How many participants participated?  9

4. **PROJECT HISTORY**

i. Have you experienced any problems in carrying out this project?

**No**
If yes, please elaborate (attach additional pages as necessary).

ii. Have participants experienced any harm as a result of their participation in the study?

**No**
If yes, please elaborate (attach additional pages as necessary).

iii. Has any study participant expressed complaints, or experienced any difficulties in relation to their participation in the study?

**No**

iv. Since the original approval, have there been any new reports in the literature that would suggest a change in the nature or likelihood of risks or benefits resulting from participation in this study?

**No**
If yes, please elaborate (attach additional pages as necessary).

I certify that the above is true and accurately portrays the status of my project with respect to ethical review.

_____     _____
 Signature (Principal Investigator)                    Print Name

_____
Date

For University Research Ethics Office Use Only

|  |  |
|---|---|
| [  ] Consent Form verified (no changes)          [   ] Consent Form not applicable<br><br>[  ] Approved for further 12 months<br><br>[  ] Clarification required (see attached).  Approval pending. | |
| Signature: | Date: |