Deception in Interpersonal Settings: The Relationship Between the Content of an Excuse and its Recipient

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DECEPTION IN INTERPERSONAL SETTINGS:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONTENT
OF AN EXCUSE AND ITS RECIPIENT

by
Vera Margaret Trefry

A thesis submitted to the Department of Psychology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Dean of Graduate Students
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband,

Bruce Trefry.

Without his support, it would not have been possible.
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Abstract

A correlational study investigated the nature of excuses, including the relationship of excuse complexity, uniqueness, frequency, and success to the level of knowledge the recipient has about the excuse giver. Analysis of results from responses of 121 participants to questionnaires describing excuses to employers, teachers, parents, and spouse/boy/girlfriends found that the complexity and uniqueness of excuses vary positively with the knowledge level of the recipient, but only when an unequal power relationship exists between the recipient and the excuse giver. Excuses to recipients with a low personal knowledge level of the excuse giver, such as employers or teachers, tended to be simple in nature, contained a minimum amount of information, and were usually common and frequently occurring. In contrast, excuses to recipients with a high personal knowledge of the excuse giver, such as parents who lived with the participants, tended to be complex in nature, contained significantly larger amounts of information, were generally more specific to the excuse giver and less frequently occurring. Old excuses were used more than new excuses in all contexts. Previously used excuses were also more frequent in low or neutral confidence conditions, and were more likely to be successful. Excuses were more successful to employers or teachers than to parents or spouse/boy girlfriends. Different categories emerged for different recipients of the excuses: the illness category was used most in the work context, and the miscellaneous category was used most in the parent and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts. The influence of external control, and short and long term intimacy factors on the nature of excuses was discussed.
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Excuse making, when used as an untrue tactical communication, has been described as a special form of deception (Weiner, 1995). A less pejorative viewpoint suggests excuse making is “a way of living with our human flaws” (Snyder, Higgins & Stucky, 1983, p.1). The behavior may also be considered either chronic or acute. It is described in such ancient religious manuscripts of human morality and behavior as The Bible and early church writings of Sainte Augustine. Further, inasmuch as excuses (as lies) have widespread everyday use (e.g., Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984), the phenomenon presupposes both a purposeful goal and a continuing successful human interactive behavior. According to Camden et al., the ethics of “social” white lies have remained largely unconsidered, but their frequency gives credence to the argument that they are common, justifiable, and often the preferred communication strategy as the most efficient solution to interpersonal communication problems (Knapp & Comadena, 1979).

Excuses and self-deceptions have been associated with a variety of performance task advantage outcomes and improved physiological measures and psychological health (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). The large body of work of C.R. Snyder on deception emphasizes the importance of attributional styles in excuse making, and identifies the external, variable, unstable, and specific rather than global pattern of attribution to be the prototypical excuse making pattern. He defines excuses for deception as “the motivated process of shifting causal attributions for negative personal outcomes from sources that
are relatively more central to the person's sense of self to sources that are relatively less central, thereby resulting in perceived benefits to the person's image and sense of control” (Snyder & Higgins, 1988, p.23). Snyder suggests the excuse giver (deceiver) undergoes subjective analysis of one or more attributional strategies for distancing him/herself from a negative outcome. In this paper I will attempt to identify the variables related to deception in explaining the strategies of the excuse giver, as well as investigate possible relationships associated with the choice (content) and the recipient (context) of the excuses.

Detection of Deception in Interpersonal Settings

A common theme found in past and more recent reviews of the extensive literature covering verbal deception concerns how many of the experimental strategies and procedures have been used for impersonal rather than interpersonal relationships (Knapp & Comadena, 1979; Kraut, 1980; Miller, Mongeau, & Sleight, 1986; Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981). In addition, approaches in experimental studies often focus on variables (such as verbal and physical) associated with the deceiver rather than with the receiver/recipient (DePaulo, Zuckerman, & Rosenthal, 1980; Knapp & Comadena, 1979). The roles of the deceiver and that of the recipient of the deception are customarily treated separately in the experimental setting, with the actors mostly unknown to each other (Burgoon, Buller, Floyd & Grandpre, 1996; Brandt, Miller & Hocking, 1980; Miller et al., 1986), and having little concern for results of the deceptive behavior (Miller et al. 1986; Stiff & Miller, 1986). In this way, consideration of the dynamic relationship between
participants and the complexity of human interaction and motivation is neglected (Knapp & Comadena, 1979; McCornack & Parks, 1986). Additionally, empirical studies are likely to be confounded by demand characteristics and lack of mundane realism (Knapp & Comadena, 1979; Stiff & Miller, 1996). As Burgoon et al. (1996, p.726) note, “deception is not a one-way activity, and both sender and receiver actively participate in constructing the deceptive communication.”

In a review of representativeness of language and cognition, Miller posited that effective communication of information requires sufficient knowledge of the recipient by the speaker, while the recipient “must attribute certain intentions to the source” (Miller, 1990, p.12); i.e., the recipient assumes the message to be truthful and there is no intention to deceive on the part of the sender. It would appear that successful verbal deceptions (lies), a special form of communication, would also follow this maxim, but where attributions of intentions to the source are inaccurate (i.e., the recipient has no knowledge of the true intentions of the source). The following sections will attempt to integrate findings identifying variables associated with deception, particularly as they relate to relationships (familiarity) between participants.

**How Easy Is It to Detect Deception in Others?**

Experiments continue to converge on results that show that detection of deception (i.e., accurate attribution of source intention) in naive observers is only a little better than chance (e.g., Burgoon et al., 1996; Knapp & Comadena, 1979; Stiff & Miller, 1986). A metaanalysis of results of seven experimental studies measuring verbal behavior directly
showed that judgment of deceptive verbal communication was not a reliable cue for deception detection ($p > .20$) (Kraut, 1980). These results are in contrast to the metaanalysis of DePaulo, Zucherman, and Rosenthal (1980), in which they report that 12 of 14 studies showed judges’ accuracy to be significantly better than chance. A more recent demonstration using a classroom rather than an experimental laboratory setting supported Kraut’s finding (Desforges & Lee, 1995). Students were fairly poor at correctly identifying when classmates were telling the truth or lying, when perceived physical deception cues (such as eye contact, posture shifts) or natural poses were randomly assigned to the truthful or lying video sessions of their classmates. In effect, the students had concentrated on the wrong aspects of the communication. Another student study, however, suggested that people were suspicious of the truthfulness of casual conversation recalled over several previous days’ encounters (Schul, Burnstein, & Bardi, 1996). In none of these studies was the relationship of the speaker to the recipient (mostly strangers) taken into account. Strangers were also used as senders and recipients in an experiment by Stiff and Miller (1986), but an interaction relationship was manipulated between them by exposing senders to positive or negative interrogative probes on the part of recipients. Perceived nonverbal cues for detection of deception, such as blinks, smiles, and posture shifts, were again unrelated to actual deception.

Elaborating on their work on interactive deception studies, Burgoon et al. (1996) explain the poor prediction in naive observers in terms of their interpersonal deception theory. The fundamental assumption is that both sender and receiver participate in the
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deceptive interaction, and that their goals, motives, and perceptions of their own and each
others' behavior is discrepant. The demands of interaction increase the cognitive load for
receivers, leading them to selectively make heuristic judgments to confirm initial
impressions, often resulting in misleading perceptions.

Improvement of accuracy of detection has been found in studies manipulating
familiarity with the target's truthful behavior. Brandt, Miller, and Hocking (1982) found a
positive effect for familiarity in observers shown a videotape of the target's truthful
behavior compared to observers who had not seen the videotape. But in a similar design
(Brandt, Miller & Hocking, 1980), the authors found increased accuracy in judgment
across three conditions increasing in familiarity exposures, but a decrease to baseline
accuracy (comparable to the accuracy of observers who had not seen the truthful behavior
videotape) following the highest familiarity condition. The results suggest that, beyond a
certain point of exposure to the target's truthful behavior, the observer's accuracy in
detection decreases.

Studies that have used participants with extant relationships to the target/sender
have shown an increase in deception detection accuracy with degree of relationship. In a
correlational study, Comadena (1982) showed spouses to be more accurate than friends in
detection, and female spouses to be significantly more accurate than male spouses.
However, McCornack and Parks (1986) found that the greater the level of relational
development, the greater was the increase in truth bias (the belief that partners are telling
the truth). In turn, as the truth bias increased, the level of detection of deception accuracy
decreased. The deception studies appear to suggest that familiarity of the deceiver by the recipient, especially that produced by relationships, is a significant variable in detection accuracy, and that a nonlinear relationship may exist between relationship (familiarity) and detection of deception accuracy.

**Suspicion States**

Although DePaulo et al. (1980) showed that a state of suspicion on the part of the recipient facilitated detection of deception, other studies examining the effects of suspicion states on detection have had inconsistent results with unrelated partners (Toris & DePaulo, 1984), and with related partners (Stiff, Kim & Ramesh, 1989, as cited in McCornak & Levine, 1990). McCornak and Levine (1990) investigated the relationship between levels of state induced and trait suspiciousness with accuracy in detection of deception as the independent variables, and found improved probabilities of deception detection. Building on their previous research that truth bias exists between those in close relationships such as the participants in their study, and that sufficiently aroused state suspicion will cause truth bias to be abandoned, the authors hypothesized that moderately high levels of suspicion should increase deception detection. Very high levels of state suspicion were hypothesized to develop lie bias and to decrease accuracy of deception, while low levels of suspicion would not destroy truth bias and would again result in a decrease in accuracy of deception. The factorial design of their study included two levels of trait suspiciousness, identified by dichotomizing scores on a self-report measure of a generalized communicative suspicions scale, and three levels of state
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suspicion, obtained through different information given to participants in each of the experimental conditions. The results of their study were as they predicted and indicated a curvilinear relationship between suspicion states and detection accuracy.

Information Availability

Bauchner, Brandt, and Miller’s (1977) study investigated whether increases in available sensory information (verbal and nonverbal) from the sender increased detection accuracy of the recipient. Observers in the highest information condition had the highest accuracy rate of deception detection, but results did not achieve probabilities significantly different from chance. However, investigation of effects of information restriction between related and unrelated partners has been successful in establishing an interaction between familiarity and information levels for deception detection (Millar & Millar, 1995).

The authors based their reasoning on the selective processing hypothesis, which suggests that as familiar persons are associated with greater amounts of information than strangers, detecting a familiar person’s deception may cause the recipient to selectively or heuristically resort to simple decision rules (e.g., representativeness) when confronted by complex information instead of considering relevant information (Kahneman & Tversky, 1994). In two separate experiments, Millar and Millar (1995) manipulated the amount of information to recipients from truthful or untruthful, and familiar or unfamiliar senders. The recipients experienced a restriction in audio information in one half of the trials in the first experiment, and a restriction in video information in one half of the trials in the second experiment. Results significantly confirmed the authors’ hypothesis: with more
information, recipients were more accurate in detecting deception in strangers; with less information, recipients were more accurate in detecting deception in familiar people.

**Integrative Encoding**

The work of Schul and collaborators on theoretical cognitive strategies involving integrative encoding and suspicion states helps to explain the results of research identifying a nonlinear relationship between familiarity and detection, and the interaction between levels of information and familiarity of the Millar and Millar studies (Schul, 1993; Schul, Burnstein, & Bardi, 1996). The collective results of Schul et al. contribute to the theory of the variability of deception accuracy with elaboration of encoding for suspicious and unsuspicious recipients. Schul posits that the cognitive activity for suspicious recipients may differ from recipients who are not suspicious, because they engage in more elaborate encoding to prepare to cope with invalid (i.e., deceitful) information. Schul's findings demonstrated that although (a) suspicious recipients could prepare to encode (and discard) invalid information more successfully than unsuspicious recipients, (b) some recipients would have greater difficulty discounting invalid information to the degree that it has been integrated with valid reports, in which case integrative encoding may impair deception detection. Situation (a) would be represented by the case of the suspicious stranger in the Millar and Millar study who has a single representation or schemata of the sender, and situation (b) would be represented by the case of the suspicious relative who would have multiple schemata of the sender because of an already existing rich base of information (i.e., valid reports).
Summarizing the evidence from the cited studies thus far, it can be reasoned that successful verbal deceptions would need to include absence of knowledge of intentions of the sender on the part of the recipient. Nonsuspicious states would infer absence of counter-scenarios and elaborative encoding, and validate reliability of the source information from sender; thus, communication of deception would be accepted. Apart from disguising true intentions, the sender would need to ensure control of the amount of information, the degree of which would be different depending on the sender’s knowledge of the recipient. This has been shown to be correlated to the relationship of the recipient to the sender. Thus, a successful lie to a stranger would involve minimal information. A successful lie to a recipient familiar to the sender would need a more elaborate message.

As informative as it is, the mechanics of deception--how it works and under what conditions--does not address the “why” of deception. Neither can it directly examine underlying motivations and goals, which would seem a central focus of understanding the excuses-as-lies phenomenon. Instead, the mechanics of detection as identified here may be considered a useful tool in the further investigation of the social implications of deception of excuses.

Social Implications of Deception of Excuses in Interpersonal Settings

The focus of research on the social implications of deception rather than detection of excuses has varied widely. The scope of investigations has included the reasons for lying (Turner, Edgley, & Olmstead, 1975), the effects of lying (Hample, 1980), the goals and motivations underlying the deceptions (Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984; Weiner,
Figueroa-Munoz, & Kakihiro, 1991), relation of the attribution theory to excuses (Weiner, 1995), lies and impression management (Hample, 1980; Stiff & Miller, 1986), the content of the lies (what they are about), and their context (the situation and recipients of the excuse) (Lippard, 1988; Weiner et al., 1991).

The analysis of social motivations for excuses as lies, which concerns the nature and the function of the deceptions, had a beginning in the studies of Turner et al. (1975), who analyzed student subjects’ statements made in natural conversation. A total of 61% of statements were rated dishonest by the subjects themselves. They identified five motivations for lying, in order of prevalence: to save face (55%), to avoid tension or conflict (22%), to guide social interactions (9%), to affect interpersonal relationships (9%), and to achieve interpersonal power (3%). The authors concluded that nonintimate relationships involved more distortions of truth than primary relationships, and that lies were common and socially acceptable.

Hample (1980) replicated the Turner et al. findings that lies were common. In a correlational study examining undergraduate descriptions of lies from 13 interviews and 39 questionnaires, Hample identified motivations as benefiting self, benefiting others, or benefiting a relationship. The author concluded lies are motivated by a need for social or economical defense in a disadvantaged situation, are often used to cope with difficulties in unequal power relationships, and were also often considered the only communication alternatives in a situation. Three quarters of the subjects described situations that were near replications of previous ones in which lies had been used, and reported twice as many
lies to superiors as peers. Hample analyzed most lies to be automatic and repeated, and responsive rather than initiating.

Camden, Motley and Wilson (1984) expanded the categories of the studies of Hample and Turner et al. in refining the development of a social lie (content) category and a social motivation category. The authors noted 75% of lies benefited the liar, but suggested the possibility of mixed or more than one motive for a lie, such that at some level the liar is the eventual beneficiary (e.g., benefiting self esteem of the other improves how the other perceives the liar, and is really protecting the relationship). The authors found a greater reliance by women on the use of white lies to satisfy affiliation needs, and that women were more likely than men to use lies to protect self esteem.

Building on the findings of Camden et al. (1984), Lippard (1988) focussed on the refinement of their major reward category system of basic needs, affiliation, and self esteem. Her objectives were to expand the identification of the recipient role and to examine the relationship between motivation and recipient categories. In a three-week period, 74 undergraduate students recorded all instances of deception, including a description of the situation of deception, the recipient’s age, gender, and relationship and degree of intimacy to the subject, the perceived consequences for the excuse, including whether believed or not, and the imagined consequence for revealing the truth. She reported 85% of recipients of deception in her study were in relationship or affiliation areas (friends, acquaintances, roommates, parents, spouse, sibling, child, stranger) and 15% in achievement areas of school or work (employer or teacher). Lippard agreed
with Hample that the individuals deceived most frequently were parents and powerful others (teachers/employers). The author identified power and gender as variables affecting lying behavior, and hypothesized that a different pattern of deception might emerge for middle age subjects, rather than the very young adults of the study who might be seen as still seeking identity.

The work of Snyder (1987) similarly suggests that the self monitoring trait may emerge as a significant variable for excuse studies. In describing self monitoring as a unique psychological construct, Snyder identified different traits and behaviors in people categorized as high or low self monitors. High self monitors are defined as those “particularly sensitive to situational appropriateness of...social behavior and who use these cues as guidelines for regulating and controlling expressive behavior” (p.14), which is “not necessarily congruent with private attitudes and feelings” (p.15). On the other hand, low self monitors are “less attentive to social conformation about situational-appropriate expressed behavior” and do not “possess a highly developed repertoire of self-presentational skills” (p.15). He reports evidence that high self monitors “exploit their self presentational skills to successfully deceive others in a variety of interpersonal contexts,” and they possess an ability to “look someone in the eye and tell a lie with a straight face” (p.22). Such traits suggest high self monitors as compared to low self monitors may have a larger repertoire of more complex excuses from their more numerous self-presentation skills within a greater variety of situations.

The work of Weiner and collaborators (Weiner, 1995; Weiner, Amirkhan, Folkes,
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& Verette, 1989; Weiner, Figueroa-Munoz, & Kakiharo, 1991) also categorized excuses as made in either affiliation (65%) or achievement (work or school) settings. They classified nine content categories of the excuses (those involving parents, friends, illness, other commitment, transportation, work/study, forget/negligence, intent, and miscellaneous). The results show virtually all withheld (true) causes were internal and controllable, and that excuses (lies) were almost all external, uncontrollable, and mostly unstable. The authors concluded that the function of excuses was to decrease inferences of personal responsibility, which they considered the necessary condition for excuse goals to be met.

A more basic requirement for excuse goals to be met, however, might be the question, “Can they be believed?” This consideration keeps in mind the essential nature of excuses that they are untrue statements. The previously examined studies on the mechanics of deception suggest that the success of an excuse (whether it is believed) depends on both the amount of information contained in the lie and the knowledge the recipient of the excuse has about the excuse giver. Using this information, my focus in this present study will be to test (a) the relationship between the complexity of an excuse and the knowledge level associated with different recipients or contexts; to test the relationship of the nature of an excuse to the recipient depending on (b) the degree of uniqueness (specificity plus temporal probability) of an excuse or (c) whether it has been used previously or formulated especially for the occasion; and (d) whether the choice of an excuse is dependent upon the perception of how well the excuse will succeed, i.e., if data
support confidence factors for a clear choice (or clear rejection of choice) of an excuse content within a particular recipient context.

It is hypothesized that there is a relationship between context (recipient area) and content (situation, place, thing) of the excuse, in that specific categories of excuses would be used depending upon the recipients of those excuses. The reasoning follows results of the deception detection studies, such that for success, the deceiver has to manipulate the content of his/her excuse to match the optimum situation for deception for that recipient. Conclusions of the deception studies showed that for an unfamiliar recipient, the information content would need to be minimal; for a recipient with a close relationship to the deceiver, the information content would need to remain high. Thus, the amount of information in excuses would appear to depend on the familiarity of the excuse giver to the recipient.

**Hypothesis 1:** The complexity of an excuse is positively related to the level of knowledge the recipient of the excuse already possesses about the excuse giver.

It is further hypothesized that high self monitors would offer more complex and varied excuses. The reasoning follows from Snyder’s findings on self monitoring traits that high self monitors as compared to low self monitors may draw on a greater variety of experiences resulting from their more numerous self-presentation skills. They would thus tend to produce a more complex excuse for most situations.

**Hypothesis 1a.** The complexity of an excuse is positively related to self monitoring scores.
Second, it is hypothesized that the uniqueness of an excuse, a measure defined as comprising the specificity (i.e., the degree to which the excuse appears to be specially chosen for that particular situation rather than a global, general excuse) and temporal probability (the likelihood of occurrence over time) of an excuse would also be positively related to the level of knowledge the receiver has about the excuse giver. The reasoning follows from the likelihood that an excuse that is uncontrollable, global, and relatively frequently occurring would apply to a majority of people, and would be accepted in a variety of situations within the achievement (school/work) context, where the level of knowledge of the excuse maker to the recipient is low. For example, the excuse “I was sick” or “My car wouldn’t start,” might be used successfully to cut a class, excuse or delay examination attendance for school situations, and explain job tardiness or absenteeism in the employment area. The excuses may be successful because they are real, common, uncontrollable events true to many people some of the time, and because the amount of knowledge about the excuse maker is insufficient for the recipient to otherwise know the truth of the situation. On the other hand, such reasoning would seldom be likely to be successful in the spouse/boy/girlfriend relationship context, where the level of knowledge of the excuse giver by the recipient is high. Such knowledge would include an immediate assessment of the truth of such common claims such as “I was sick” or “The car wouldn’t start” by the excuse giver. Rather, an excuse to a relationship partner would be more likely to be carefully tailor made by the excuse giver and specific to the situation, taking into account all the relevant knowledge the recipient is
likely to have. Thus, the degree of uniqueness of an excuse will depend on who the recipient is; the more knowledge the recipient has, the more unique the excuse will be.

**Hypothesis 2.** The uniqueness of an excuse, the degree to which it is attributed to be common and global or specific to that circumstance, is positively related to the level of knowledge the recipient of the excuse has about the excuse giver.

Third, following the previous three hypotheses, it is further hypothesized that the likelihood of a previously used excuse being used again in a similar situation depends on who the recipient of the excuse is. The rational follows reasoning of the previous hypotheses in that excuses to those in the achievement area (low knowledge level) would be likely to be simple (Hypothesis 1), global, common and frequently occurring (Hypothesis 2), as such would be likely to be used successfully again. The recipient may accept them repeatedly, because the purported events (excuses) do re-occur (e.g., people can get sick more than once, and cars could break down any time). Suspicion states are not likely to be aroused, and detection of deception is less likely.

In contrast, excuses in relationship contexts, particularly close relationships which contain the highest level of recipient knowledge of the excuse giver, are likely to be more complex (Hypothesis 1), with a relatively higher degree of uniqueness (Hypothesis 2), and as such are unlikely to be used again. It is suggested that the recipient would be likely to recall such complex, unique circumstances and be suspicious of the coincidence of a reoccurrence. Thus:

**Hypothesis 3.** The frequency of an excuse is negatively related to the knowledge
level of the recipient.

Last, it is hypothesized that the frequency of an excuse depends on the excuse maker’s perception of the relative efficacy of the excuse, i.e., its power to deceive. Assuming confidence in the excuse to be synonymous with perceived deception, it follows that an important criterion of choice by excuse makers would concern their perception of the probability of the recipient in discovering the truth, i.e., whether old or new excuses are used depends on the excuse giver’s confidence of the efficacy of the excuse for a particular situation. In low confidence situations, there would be more reliance on old excuses. In high confidence situations, there will be less reliance on old excuses. In other words, confidence increases risk taking (of new excuses), while lack of confidence decreases risk taking. Thus:

Hypothesis 4. The frequency of an excuse is negatively related to its perceived power of deception.

Method

Subjects

A total of 121 people participated in the study. Ninety students, 77 female and 13 male, were volunteers from four undergraduate psychology classes and one graduate social science statistics class in a small Florida state university. The undergraduate students received extra credit for taking part in the study. Thirty-one subjects, 18 female and 13 male, were recruited from the local community from two twelve-step program groups and by word-of-mouth. The community participants and graduate students were
volunteers who were not compensated for their participation.

**Procedure**

The psychology undergraduate subjects were introduced to the experimenter in the laboratory, where the purpose of the study was explained as investigating changes in communication strategies within important relationship contexts such as school or work, parents, and spouse/boy/girlfriends. Consent forms (see Appendix A) were distributed, and were read and completed by the students. The three-page questionnaire and an 18-item high/low monitoring scale (see Appendix D) were distributed (Snyder, 1979), together with a simple demographics information form (for age, sex, student and work status) (see Appendix C). Before the students completed the questionnaires, the experimenter again informed the students that the study was voluntary, and no penalty would be imposed for nonparticipation. The questionnaires were reviewed by the experimenter, and a question and answer period time was allowed for participants to ask for any clarification.

The community participants and students from the graduate statistics class were given the same questionnaires, with a modified covering letter (see Appendix B) with the same explanation of the purpose of the study as given to the undergraduate subjects but without consent forms enclosed. They were asked to return the completed questionnaires and forms in the stamped, return address envelope provided and thanked for their voluntary participation. Anonymity of participants was assured by responses identified only by a four-digit code.
Participants read the following instructions (cf. Lippard, 1988; Weiner et al. 1991):

Please think of an occasion concerning your SPOUSE, or a GIRLFRIEND or BOYFRIEND, in which you gave an excuse that was not the truth. That is, you did something you should not have, or failed to do something you should have, and you then withheld the real reason for your behavior and gave a different one. Please describe the circumstances, what you actually said, and the reasons you chose that excuse.

The situation was:

The excuse I gave was:

The reason I chose that particular excuse was (CHECK ALL ITEMS THAT APPLY TO YOUR EXCUSE)

_____ (a). I have used this excuse before in somewhat similar circumstances.

_____ (b). It was the kind of excuse that would be accepted easily.

_____ (c). It would be very unlikely or impossible for my spouse/boy/girlfriend to find out what really happened.

_____ (d). It was the only suitable excuse I could have used in the circumstances.

_____ (e). I have not used this excuse before.

_____ (f). (other, please specify):

As a result of my giving the excuse,

If you had told the real reason for your action/nonaction, what do you imagine might have been the consequences?

The same wording was repeated on the other two pages of the questionnaire, where the words “Parents or Guardians” or “Work or School” were substituted for the recipients (Spouse, or Boyfriend or Girlfriend) given above. The order of the pages of the
three-page questionnaire was counter balanced to control for order effects.

The three-page questionnaire was coded as follows:

**Excuse content.** The excuse content was coded according to whether the excuse principally used statements concerning the following six categories (cf. Weiner et al., 1991).

1. parent/relative/friend/other
2. illness
3. other commitment/work/study
4. transportation
5. forget/negligence/no time
6. miscellaneous

**Criterion**

**Hypothesis 1.** The criterion variable for Hypothesis 1 was defined as the total complexity of the excuse, operationalized by the number of separate pieces of information contained in the verbal statement comprising the excuse. The complexity was coded as a continuous variable, with one point recorded for each occurrence of the following: self, other people, places, psychological and physiological states, events, objects, dates, measurements, and amounts. One half point was recorded for modifying adverbs or adjectives.

**Hypothesis 2.** The criterion variable for Hypothesis 2 was the degree of uniqueness of an excuse. The degree of uniqueness, coded as a continuous measure, was
defined as the sum of the specificity and temporal probability measures. A specific excuse involved a distinctive event/state caused by a choice or decision by the protagonist, e.g., “I picked up my manager’s grandmother at the airport” (1 point). A nonspecific excuse involved a common event/state, not caused by the protagonist(s)’ choice or decision, e.g., “The train was late” (0 point). The temporal probability of an excuse was defined as the true likelihood of the event’s occurrence over time: likely daily occurrence, e.g., traffic conditions (1 point); likely weekly occurrence, e.g., forgetting, negligence (2 points); likely monthly occurrence, e.g., illness (3 points); likely three-monthly occurrence, e.g., automobile problems (4 points); likely six-monthly occurrence, e.g., problems, situations with relatives (5 points); likely annual occurrence, e.g., vandalism of person/property (6 points).

**Hypotheses 3 and 4.** The criterion variable for Hypotheses 3 and 4 was defined as the frequency of the excuse. It was operationalized by the response to item (a) in the questionnaire that the excuse had been used before (coded 1) or a response to item (e) in the questionnaire that the excuse was new (coded 0).

**Predictor**

**Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.** The predictor variable for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 was defined as the level of knowledge the recipient has about the excuse giver, and was operationalized by the degree of intimacy of recipients to excuse givers (cf. Millar & Millar, 1995): work/school = low knowledge level, parent = medium knowledge level, spouse/girl/boyfriend = high knowledge level.
Hypothesis 4. The predictor variable for Hypothesis 4 was defined as the perceived power of deception of the excuse. It was operationalized by the response to item (c) of the questionnaire that an excuse was "very unlikely or impossible" to be exposed as a lie (coded 1) or a nonresponse to item (c) (coded 0).

Ancillary Variables

Additional variables included a dichotomous "intimacy" variable coded according to whether the excuse giver lived with (coded 1) or did not live with (coded 0) the recipient, and was determined from descriptions of the situation, the excuse, and the result of the excuse; descriptions of two cases were considered to be ambiguous in identifying living arrangements and were excluded from analysis. A dichotomous "success" variable was coded according to whether the excuse was successful (coded 1) or unsuccessful (coded 0), and was determined from the description of the excuse result.

Further, for the circumstance described in the questionnaire, an additional variable was coded 0 or 1 by the coder depending on whether the recipient could or could not have witnessed the event describing the excuse. This was to provide a convergent validity comparison for the predictor variable of Hypothesis 4.

It was assumed that having participants identify for themselves the perceived consequences of the deception would indicate the real reason for the excuse; and asking them to imagine and describe possible consequences if they had revealed the truth would point to the purpose for the excuse.
Reliability of Coding

The principal experimenter and a graduate student scored questionnaires independently. The graduate student judge received training in identifying content categories, and estimating complexity, specificity, and temporal probability scores. Before analysis of the results, 50 pages were randomly selected from work, spouse, and parent questionnaires, respectively, and coded by the trained graduate student coder to test for inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater agreement in coding random responses was as follows: for coder estimation of detection probability, Cohen’s kappa = .658; for content identification, Cohen’s kappa = .958. Inter-rater intimacy reliability was measured by comparison of a college graduate’s and the experimenter’s independent estimations of living status from 75 randomly selected spouse and parent questionnaires (Cohen’s kappa = .78).

Missing Data

A total of 309 valid excuses were recorded from the 121 participants; 109 excuses in the work/school context, 105 in the parent context, and 96 in the spouse/boy/girlfriend context. A total of 120 completed self monitoring scores were recorded. Missing and

1 Because of the variable nature of the data, and the fact that some results impact on subsequent tests, a full discussion of each test will follow immediately after the result.

2 All tests have a confidence interval of 95%.
responses included: no excuses given in any contexts (eight community respondents refused to fill out the context questionnaires after reading the instructions, and one student participant claimed she had never lied); no excuses in particular contexts (two student participants claimed they never had occasion to make excuses to those recipients, five community respondents noted it was too long ago to recall, and one student said she had never had a boyfriend). Reasons for invalid responses included: simple denial of action/nonaction; use of a context other than specified; no verbal excuse (described an action only); and telling the truth.

Subject Characteristics: Self Monitoring and Age

The mean age difference between UNF students (M = 25.3) and community participants (M = 54.0) was found significant using the Mann-Whitney test, chosen because of normality problems (Z = -7.72, p < .001). The difference between mean self monitoring scores of UNF students (M = 7.1) and community participants (M = 9.3) was found to be significant (Z = -.270, p = .007), as was the age difference between high self monitors (M = 26.89 years), defined by a score of 10 and above, and low self monitors (M = 37.77 years), defined by a score of 9 or below (Z = -3.58, p < .001). Results indicated that UNF students were significantly younger and had lower self monitoring scores than community participants, and that overall, high monitors were significantly younger than low monitors. The results of a 2 X 2 ANOVA to test the relationship of age X area for self monitoring found a main effect for age only (F = 7.67, df: 1, p = .007). In addition, self monitoring scores were found to be significantly negatively correlated
with age (Pearson $r = -.355, p < .001$). This result suggests self monitoring scores may not be a static marker reflecting two distinct separate types of self monitoring personalities, but may be based on the resultant influence of the self monitoring trait and other variables, such as age, rather than the self monitoring trait alone. The possibility arises that with age progression, the scores of some people may change to reflect an increase in low monitoring behaviors: i.e., with maturity and possibly more confidence in their own values, their behavior is less influenced by those around them. On the other hand, the self monitoring scores of young people may be more likely to reflect such high monitoring behavior concerns as peer acceptance. This speculation would support the human development theories identifying the influence of peer pressure on young adult behavior.

Hypothesis 1. The complexity of an excuse is positively related to the knowledge level the recipient has about the excuse giver. A repeated measures ANOVA was used to test Hypotheses 1 and 1a. The three within subject factors were the work, parent, and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts; the between subject factors were sex, self monitoring scores (low, 9 or below; high, over 10), and age (under 40, over 40).

Results of the within subjects contrasts ($n = 90$) showed that the mean complexity of excuses in the parent context ($M = 4.11$) was significantly greater than complexity of excuses in the work/school context, $M = 3.35$ ($F = 12.9, df: 2, p = .001$). However, the complexity of excuses in the spouse/boy/girlfriend context ($M = 3.71$) was not significantly different from the complexity of either the work/school context, $M = 3.35$
Fig. 1a. Mean complexity levels for excuses in work, parent, and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts.

The results suggest that excuses to parents contain more information and are more complex than excuses to employers/teachers. Hypothesis I is supported for the low knowledge context (work/school) and the high knowledge context (parent). It is not supported for the high knowledge context of spouse/boy/girlfriend.

The rationale for this hypothesis assumed that the spouse/boy/girlfriend context would represent the highest knowledge level of the excuse giver, and thus would result in a higher mean complexity for the excuse content. A closer look at both relationship components shows that the two high level knowledge contexts differ in important,
previously unexamined ways.

First, the relationships serve quite different life purposes, the parent relationship being one that is imposed on the excuse giver and is generally concerned with providing nurture and guidance for the developmental years, while the spouse/boy/girlfriend relationship is usually one of choice by the excuse giver and is generally concerned with social, emotional, and sexual life needs. Second, it is seen that an unequal power relationship exists between the excuse giver and recipient in the parent context (and work/school context), but that an egalitarian association is in effect between the excuse giver and the spouse/boy/girlfriend recipient. It can be seen that those individuals in power, such as an employer, teacher, or parent, are in a position to supply or deny essential needs, such as financial (or future financial) and physical securities. Thus, there appears to be a control variable operating in the parent (and work/school) relationship that is absent in the more egalitarian spouse/boy/girlfriend relationships, which may not involve the basic securities so critically.

Third, because of the broad interpretation of the spouse/boy/girlfriend context by many of the participants, the content of the relationships covered multiple, distinct associations, which again differed in purpose and intimacy. From the responses to the questionnaires, eight relationships were identified within the two high knowledge base contexts. The parent context described two situations, that of participants living with their parents or living apart from them. The six spouse/boy/girlfriend relationships included those living separately from the participant, such as boy/girl dating, same sex
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Mean complexity level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>85</th>
<th>59</th>
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<tr>
<td>sp 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge level

Fig.1b. Mean complexity levels for excuses in work, parent 0, parent 1, spouse 0, and spouse 1 contexts.

friends, divorcees; and those living with participants, such as married spouses, boy/girl cohabiting couples, and same sex roommates.

The mean complexities of five context levels, work, parent 0 (not living with), parent 1 (living with), spouse/boy/girlfriend 0 (not living with), and spouse/boy/girlfriend 1 (living with) were tested following the new interpretation of the context relationships. Because of unbalanced data, paired t-tests were used instead of a repeated measures ANOVA to compare the work/school (low knowledge context) with the four high level knowledge relationship contexts identified as parent 0, parent 1, spouse 0, and spouse 1 (see Fig.1b).

Results showed that only the complexity of excuses in the high level knowledge relationship parent context (parent 1) was significantly greater than the complexity of the
excuses in the low knowledge level work/school context (n = 85, M = .59, t = 2.69, df: 84, p = .002). No significant differences in complexity were found for comparisons of the work context to the three other high knowledge level contexts, parent 0 (n = 14, M = .00, t = .00, df: 13, p = ns), spouse 0 (n = 59, M = -.43, t = 1.82, df: 58, p = ns), and spouse 1 (n = 34, M = .161, t = .796, df: 33, p = ns). Results suggest that only excuses to parents who live with participants contain more information than excuses to employers/teachers. Thus, it is concluded that Hypothesis 1 is supported for the low knowledge context (work/school) and the high knowledge context (living with parents). It is not supported for the other high knowledge level relationships.

Discussion of the five context complexity results identifies the control factor of the unequal power relationship as being more important to complexity levels than the intimacy factor (participants living with or not living with recipients). Of the eight high knowledge level relationship contexts, only the one involving an unequal power relationship was significantly different in complexity of excuses from the low knowledge level work/school context.

The evidence supports the speculation that without the control factor present in a relationship, the hypothesis of complexity of excuses is not observed. An analogy would be of drivers on a highway strictly obeying the speed limit when law enforcement officers, who also have the power to threaten the drivers' personal financial/physical security, are present. However, when the law enforcement personnel are not in evidence, speed laws tend to be disregarded.
Hypothesis 1a. The complexity of an excuse is positively related to the self-monitoring score. Tests of between subjects effects from the same repeated measures ANOVA used to test Hypothesis 1 showed that the variables of sex ($F = .025, df: 1, p = ns$), self monitoring ($F = 1.14, df: 1, p = ns$), and age ($F = 2.54, df: 1, p = ns$) had no effect on levels of complexity in this study. The results support the previous study of Millar and Millar (1995), who found no difference in complexity scores for high or low self monitors. For this study, it could be suggested that other forces, such as those governing the security issues, might exert a more powerful effect and may mask influences due to individual difference characteristics of sex, age, and self monitoring.

Hypothesis 2. The uniqueness of an excuse is positively related to the knowledge level the recipient has about the excuse giver. The within subjects contrasts test of a repeated measures ANOVA with the three contexts as within subject factors ($N = 95$) showed that the uniqueness of excuses in the high knowledge level parent context ($M = 4.62$) is significantly greater than the uniqueness of excuses in the low knowledge level work context, $M = 4.03$ ($F = 8.05, df: 1, p = .006$) and the high knowledge level spouse/boy/girlfriend context, $M = 4.06$ ($F = 9.47, df: 1, p = .003$) (see Fig.2a). The high knowledge level spouse/boy/girlfriend mean value did not differ significantly from the low knowledge level work/school context. The results suggest that excuses in the latter contexts would describe common, more frequently occurring situations, whereas excuses to parents are more likely to describe unusual, less frequently occurring situations.

Thus Hypothesis 2 is supported for low (work) and high (parent) knowledge.
The results reflect a similar situation as in Hypothesis 1. The spouse/boy/girlfriend context again includes the multiple egalitarian relationship factors, the combination of influences of which may neutralized the uniqueness effects or fail to activate them. A comparison of the uniqueness levels of the work context to the four high knowledge level contexts identified by intimacy levels as in Hypothesis 1 was made using paired t-tests (see Fig. 2b).

Results comparing the five contexts showed that uniqueness of excuses in the living with parent context, parent 1, is significantly greater than uniqueness in the work context \( (n = 86, M = .57, t = 3.17, df: 85, p = .002) \). No significant differences in uniqueness of excuses were found comparing the work context to parent 0 \( (n = 14, \)
The evidence again shows the parent-living-with context, the only high knowledge level context that includes an unequal power relationship, is the only high knowledge context that supports the hypothesis. Parallel to the first hypothesis' results, Hypothesis 2 is supported only in the context situations that appear to include a control variable.
The intimacy variable is not seen as influential as the control variable, because, again, the means of the intimate and nonintimate spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts, spouse 1 and spouse 0, do not differ significantly from the work context. It is noted from the results of both Hypotheses 1 and 2 that the highest knowledge context appears to be parent 1 (living with). This is not consistent with the original definition of the high knowledge level contexts in the method section. There, the parent context was assumed to represent a moderate knowledge level of the recipient, with spouse/boy/girlfriend representing the highest knowledge level context. The results of the tests of Hypotheses 1 and 2 suggest that there may be two types of knowledge base, short term (intimate day to day knowledge) and long term intimacy (knowledge of a person over time). Parent 1 includes both types of knowledge (possibly the highest knowledge base), while parent 0 would more likely be restricted to temporal knowledge (possibly the lowest knowledge base, from the point of view of excuse makers). The relationships included in the spouse 1 and spouse 0 contexts would appear to combine varying degrees of both knowledge types.

**Hypothesis 3. The frequency of an excuse is negatively related to the knowledge level the recipient has of the excuse giver.** A chi square test of proportion was used to compare new and old excuse frequencies within the work (low knowledge level), and parent and spouse/boy/girlfriend (high knowledge level) contexts (see Fig. 3). Results showed that a significantly larger proportion of excuses were used before in the work (chi square = 7.51, df: 1, p = .006), parent (chi square = 19.04, df: 1, p < .001), and
Fig. 3. Frequencies of old and new excuses within the work, parent, and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts.

The results support the findings of Hample (1980) that most excuses were repeated. However, the percentages for this study, 64%, 65%, and 65% for work, parent, and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts, respectively, are lower than Hample's reported 75%. It is possible that the long term (temporal) intimacy variable may be operating for the high knowledge level contexts. Because of the length of intimacy over time in many of the high level knowledge contexts, there may only be a limited amount of new scenarios available, in which case, old successful excuses would tend to be repeated.
Hypothesis 4. The frequency of an excuse is negatively related to perceived deception. The result of the convergent validity test for perceived deception showed significant differences between the rater and participant agreement for perceived deception (Fisher's exact test, \( p < .001 \)). The Cohen kappa agreement measurement (.119) gives further evidence of negligible agreement. This result shows that even with no possibility of recipients witnessing the excuse situation, participants were less confident of the success of the excuse than the rater. This result may be seen to not only emphasize the difference between laboratory (objective) and real life (subjective) responses for this study, but might, in addition, provide more evidence for the importance of external validity for experimental results.

For the "not identified" condition of perceived deception (see Fig.4a) in which the participant did not respond to item (a) of the questionnaire, the resulting test of proportion for each context’s new and old excuses were as follows: work (chi square = 6.0, \( \text{df} \): 1, \( p = .014 \)), parent (chi square = 9.0, \( \text{df} \): 1, \( p = .003 \)), and spouse/boy/girlfriend (chi square = 10.7, \( \text{df} \): 1, \( p = .001 \)). The results showed that when success probability was not identified (28% of excuses in this study), old excuses were used significantly more than new excuses in all contexts. This indicates that in low/neutral confidence conditions, such as the "not identified" condition here, there appears to be more reliance on old excuses than new. Lessening of confidence appears to decrease the risk taking of new excuses. In other words, the results support the idea that people tend to rely on old behavior in uncertain conditions.
Fig. 4a. Frequencies of old and new excuses within the work, parent, and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts for the “not identified” condition of perceived deception.

For the high confidence condition of Hypothesis 4 (see Fig. 4b), where 63% of total excuses were identified as “nondetectable,” the test of proportion for each context’s new and old excuses were as follows: work (chi square = 2.25, df: 1, p = ns), parent (chi square = 7.68, df: 1, p = .006), and spouse/boy/girlfriend (chi square = 3.6, df: 1, p = ns). The results show that when success probability was identified as “nondetectable,” the use of old and new excuses within the work or within the spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts did not differ significantly. Old excuses were used significantly more than new excuses in the parent context.

This result suggests that in high confidence situations, new and old excuses are used to the same extent in the work and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts. Except for the
Fig. 4b. Frequencies of old and new excuses within the work, parent, and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts for the "nondetectable" condition of perceived deception.

In the parent context, confidence in the situation appears to increase the risk taking of untried excuses. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is supported with the exception of the parent context in the "nondetectable" situation.

The parent context exception in supporting Hypothesis 4 may again involve the effect of the long term (temporal) intimacy factor. Because of the considerable amount of time involved for participants living with parents, new excuse scenarios may be limited. In addition, as suggested previously, the parent context appears to represent the highest knowledge base of all the relationships, and thus may be the most likely context to arouse the suspicion state. For both reasons, old excuses might still be more likely to be used, with new excuses being considered at greater risk of detection.
Other Analyses

The relationship of complexity and content categories. The question answered here was: Do excuses within individual content categories vary in mean complexity? The mean complexity of each of the six content categories of excuses identified from the questionnaire excuse statements together with the frequency of each category within the three contexts is shown in Table 1. The category means were compared using a repeated measures ANOVA with the three knowledge levels and the six category levels for Factor 1 and Factor 2, respectively, of the within subject factor. Results of the within subject factor contrasts showed that the mean complexity level of the relative/friend/other category (M = 4.29) was significantly greater than the mean complexity levels for illness, M = 2.54 (F = 15.26, df: 1, p < .001), other commitment, M = 3.12 (F = 8.73, df: 1, p = .004), transportation, M = 2.97 (F = 31.18, df: 1, p < .001), and forget/negligence, M = 3.05 (F = 40.83, df: 1, p < .001). Similarly, the mean complexity of the miscellaneous category (M = 4.14) was significantly greater than the mean complexity levels of categories for illness (F = 35.68, df: 1, p < .001), other commitment (F = 29.70, df: 1, p > .001), transportation (F = 73.73, df: 1, p < .001), and forget/negligence (F = 40.83, df: 1, p < .001). Thus, the results show that the relative/friend/other and miscellaneous categories were both significantly greater in complexity than all other categories, but were not significantly different in complexity from each other (F = 2.8, df: 1, p = ns); they were both identified as “complex” in nature. All other categories were identified as “simple” in nature (see Table 1).
### Table 1

Frequencies of Excuse Categories within Work/School, Parent/Guardian, and Spouse/Boy/Girlfriend Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Category</th>
<th>Complexity (mean)</th>
<th>Excuse Nature</th>
<th>Frequency Work</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Relative/friend</td>
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<td>70</td>
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<td>Simple</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other commitment(b)</td>
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<td>Simple</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26*</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation(c)</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>13*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forget/negligence</td>
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<td>Simple</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>22</td>
</tr>
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<td>Complex</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50*</td>
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<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>108</strong></td>
<td><strong>105</strong></td>
<td><strong>96</strong></td>
<td><strong>309</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Denotes context with significantly greater excuse frequency within that content category: (a) $p < .001$; (b) $p = .024$; (c) $p = .004$; (d) $p < .001$.

The relationship of frequency of excuse categories and the knowledge level the recipient has of the excuse giver. The question answered here was: Does the frequency of excuse categories vary according to the context? Table 1 shows the distribution of excuses within each content category for three contexts. The Cochrane test for dichotomous related variables was used to compare excuse frequencies of each category within the low knowledge level (work) and high knowledge level (parent and
spouse/boy/girlfriend) contexts. Significant differences were found within the illness (Cochrane’s $Q = 58.17$, df: 2, $p < .001$), other commitment (Cochrane’s $Q = 7.47$, df: 2, $p = .024$), transportation (Cochrane’s $Q = 11.11$, df: 2, $p = .004$), and miscellaneous (Cochrane’s $Q = 28.14$, df: 2, $p < .001$) categories.

As the relative/friend/other and miscellaneous categories had been identified as complex in nature, more excuses will be expected within the high knowledge level contexts in support of Hypothesis 1. From Table 1, it is seen that although the parent context has the greatest frequency of excuses in the relative/friend/other category, the difference within the three contexts is not significant (Cochrane’s $Q = 4.04$, df: 2, $p = ns$). However, this category of excuse assumes a significant position in each of the three recipient contexts, being the second most frequently used excuse in the work (17%) and parent (28%) contexts, and third most frequently used excuse in the spouse/boy/girlfriend context (21%).

In discussing these results, it is suggested that, although the most influential factor for this trend might be that excuses involving relative/friends/others would be difficult to challenge within any context, to be accepted in the work/school context, the excuse situation would need to describe scenarios which clearly take precedence over immediate school or work responsibilities. Examination of the written excuse statements in the relative/friends/others category for the work/school context showed that of the excuses that appeared to meet this requirement, 53% involved emergency or terminal health situations to close relatives (three infant daughters, two sisters, one mother, one
grandmother, and one wife). The exclusive use of one gender in such excuses is noteworthy, and suggests that the excuse makers felt recipients would be more accepting of situations featuring emergencies to females.

The results of the frequency contrasts of the miscellaneous category support Hypothesis 1 (Cochrane's $Q = 28.14$, $df$: 2, $p < .001$). Significantly more excuses were recorded for both high knowledge level contexts of parent (53% of total excuses in the miscellaneous category) and spouse/boy/girlfriend (32%) compared to the low knowledge level work context (14%). The miscellaneous category accounted for the highest frequency of excuses within the parent (48%) and spouse (32%) contexts. A practical explanation suggests that although miscellaneous excuses might be difficult to detect as untrue in any context, they may also be less likely to be acceptable within the work/school context for similar reasons to those in the relative/friend/other category. For example, one miscellaneous excuse to a spouse for not arriving home on time was that the participant "fell asleep in the car" after a drinking spree. Although accepted by his wife, it is unlikely that this same excuse would be accepted by his employer for not arriving to work on time.

The illness, other commitment, transportation, and forget/negligence categories have been identified as simple in nature, and more excuses would be expected within the low knowledge level context in support of Hypothesis 1. Results of frequency contrasts in the illness category supported the hypothesis (Cochrane's $Q = 58.17$, $df$: 2, $p < .001$). Illness was used significantly more as an excuse when the recipients were employers or teachers (80% of excuses in this category) and significantly less for either
parents (4%) or spouse/girl/boyfriends (15%). In this case, it is not difficult to see that the excuse simply would not “work” as well in the closer relationship area because parents and significant others who live with the excuse maker would be more likely to know his/her true state of health at any time, and any lie would be easily detected.

Results of the other commitment/work/study content category contrasts did not support Hypothesis 1 (Cochrane’s $Q = 7.47$, df: 2, $p = .024$). In fact, significantly more excuses (50% in this category) were recorded for the high knowledge level spouse context, with 23% and 27% of excuses recorded for the work/school and parent contexts, respectively. It is noteworthy that an excuse involving an other commitment/work/study was regarded by excuse makers as a significantly more desirable excuse for the egalitarian relationship context (spouse/boy/girlfriend), and significantly less desirable for the unequal power relationships of work/school and parent contexts. In effect, the result suggests that excuse makers would be more concerned with offending those in power (which might possibly involve a threat to their essential securities) by inferring that other commitments might take precedence over those of the recipients. In contrast, other commitment/work/study excuses to the egalitarian spouse/boy/girlfriend relationships would be more likely to succeed, particularly when the excuse involved other commitments to work or school, which would be considered an acceptable priority over most spouse/boy/girlfriend issues.

The frequency of excuses in the transportation category supported Hypothesis 1 (Cochrane’s $Q = 11.11$, df: 2, $p = .004$). The transportation category was used
significantly more when the recipient was an employer or teacher (68% of category), than either a parent (16%) or a spouse/boy/girlfriend (16%). As a practical explanation for these results, it can be seen that the chances of a spouse, significant other, or parent living with the participant discovering the truth (and uncovering the lie) would be relatively high, as they would already be in an informed position regarding any likely transportation situations of the excuse maker. In the case of work/school associates (or parents who do not live with the recipient), intimate details of the excuse giver are not usually available, and the transportation excuse could be given with more confidence.

Results of frequency distribution in the forget/negligence category did not support Hypothesis 1 (Cochrane’s \( Q = .70, \text{df:} 2, p = \text{ns} \)). This category was the least used of all the six categories (7% of the overall total excuses), comprising 8%, 6%, and 7% of the total excuses recorded for the work, parent, and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts, respectively. A subjective explanation for this result suggests that although the excuse may be “successful” in sense that it would be believed, it may not be accepted: the consequences of the excuse may be just as damaging as the consequences of the truth (i.e., in both cases the relationship might be threatened, possibly precipitating undesirable consequences). Thus, excuse makers appear to consider admitting to forgetfulness or negligence in any context area to be of limited success value (accounting for less than 10% of excuses in any context). A possible theoretical explanation of the low response may lie within the attribution theory. The excuses in this category do not appear to meet the requirements of the attribution theory, in that they describe situations that are internal and
controllable to the excuse maker. This result would support the feeling of Weiner and his collaborators that excuse situations need to decrease inferences of personal responsibility, i.e., to reflect external and uncontrollable scenarios, in order to meet excuse goal requirements. This same problem of attribution may apply to the other commitment/work category results, where again, there were no significant frequency differences between the low knowledge level (work) and high knowledge level (parent) contexts.

Thus, one theoretical explanation for the pattern of the results shown in Table 1 is that a necessary condition for demonstration of the complexity hypotheses is that excuses might first need to meet the attribution requirements of being external and uncontrollable. Subjectively, however, excuse categories appear to be chosen for two reasons (a) how likely they are to remain undetected, and (b) whether that particular type of excuse would be accepted by the recipient. In effect, the frequency pattern seems to suggest that excuses in a particular content category were regarded by excuse givers as a clearly desirable or undesirable choice for that recipient.

The relationship of the nature of excuses and the knowledge level the recipient has about the excuse giver. The question to be answered here was: Do the nature of excuses, whether they are complex or simple, vary with the context? Results of chi square tests of proportions for frequencies of simple and complex excuses within the work context, representing low knowledge level of the recipient, and parent and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts, representing the high knowledge level of the recipient, are shown in Table 2.

For the low level knowledge level context (work), simple excuses were used
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Table 2
Comparison of Simple and Complex Excuse Frequencies within Three Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Excuse Frequencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simple</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

significantly more than complex excuses (chi square = 17.92, df: 1, p < .001). For the high knowledge level context (parent), complex excuses were used significantly more than simple excuses (chi square = 28.81, df: 1, p < .001). There was no significant difference in the use of simple or complex excuses in the high knowledge level spouse/boy/girlfriend context (chi square = .66, df: 1, p = ns). Thus, excuses to employers or teachers are more likely to be simple in nature, excuses to parents are more likely to be complex in nature, but excuses to other relationships are as likely to be simple as complex. The results of the work and parent contexts support the complexity hypothesis in that excuses more complex in nature would be more likely to be used in the high knowledge contexts, and those more simple in nature would be more likely to be used in the low knowledge level context. The results of the spouse/boy/girlfriend context do not support
Table 3

Comparison of Simple and Complex Excuse Frequencies within Five Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Excuse Frequency</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent 0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent 1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse 0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse 1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further investigation reveals the same situation as seen in the complexity and uniqueness hypotheses. The spouse context again includes egalitarian multiple relationship factors which may similarly neutralize the effects of complexity issues and thus the tendency to use either simple or complex natured excuses. Table 3 shows results of chi square tests of proportion for five contexts including the intimacy levels previously identified as work, parent 1, parent 0, spouse 1, and spouse 0.

Parent 1 (living with participant) was again the only high knowledge level context to indicate significantly higher use of complex excuses (chi square = 29.76, df: 1, $p < .001$). No significance was found for tests for parent 0 (chi square = 1.19, df: 1, $p = ns$),
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spouse 0 (chi square = .64, df: 1, p = ns), and spouse 1 (chi square = .10, df: 1, p = ns).
Thus, excuses to employers and teachers are more likely to be simple in nature, excuses to parents are more likely to be complex only when participants live with them, and excuses to recipients in all other relationships are as equally likely to be simple as complex.

It is noted that parent 1 is, again, the only high knowledge level context that represents an unequal power relationship. The intimacy factor was not considered as influential, because neither spouse 1 nor spouse 0 relationships differed with regard to proportion of simple or complex excuse use. The evidence again supports the speculation that without the control factor present in a relationship, excuse givers use both simple and complex excuses to the same degree.

The relationship of success of an excuse to the knowledge level the recipient has about the excuse maker. The question posed for this examination of the data was, “Do excuses vary in success rates within the work, parent, spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts?” A comparison of successful and unsuccessful excuses for the three contexts was carried out using the McNemar test for nonparametric related dichotomous data. Results showed that excuses in the work/school context are significantly more successful than excuses in the parent (p = .001) or spouse/boy/girlfriend context (p = .021). There was no significant difference between success rates comparing the parent and spouse/boy/girlfriend contexts (p = ns). More excuses failed to parents (13%) than to spouse/boyfriends/girlfriends (11%) or employers/teachers (2%). Thus, excuses to employers/teachers appear to be more successful than excuses to parents or to
spouse/boy/girlfriends. Excuses appeared to be equally as successful to parents as to spouse/boy/girlfriends. The results also suggest that there may be a negative relationship between success of an excuse and knowledge level of the recipient, in that excuses in low knowledge level (work or school) contexts appear to be more successful than excuses in the high level knowledge (parent or spouse/boy/girlfriend) contexts.

An explanation for these results may lie in the fact that because the work context is the lowest knowledge base, and possibly of the least temporal duration, recipients are less likely to know the true situation of the excuse giver. In addition, more effort and thought may go into excuse preparation, because serious consequences might result in their failure within this context (termination of relationship, getting fired from the job, loss or failure of grade in school, etc.). On the other hand, failure of excuses in the parent or spouse/boy/girlfriend relationship may be less likely to result in such irrevocable situations, even though negative consequences could result; a “forgiveness” principle might be operating in these cases, particularly if the relationship is a good one, otherwise.

The relationship of success of an excuse and frequency of use. The question posed for this analysis was: “Are previously used excuses more successful than new excuses?” A chi square test of proportion for new and old successful excuses was carried out for each of the three contexts of work, parent, and spouse/boy/girlfriend. The results showed that previously used excuses were significantly more successful than new excuses in the work (chi square = 8.9, df: 1, p = .003), parent (chi square = 20.28, df: 1, p < .001), and
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spouse/boy/girlfriend (chi square = 12.93, df: 1, p < .001) contexts. Thus, previously used excuses tend to be more successful and used more often regardless of the recipient.

The result of this analysis may reflect the pragmatic reason for the choice of specific excuses, following the operant conditioning principle of behavioral science, that rewarded behavior will be repeated. The two excuses that failed in the work/school context had a complexity mean of 7.0, compared to the complexity mean of successful excuses in this context of 3.37. This supports the complexity hypotheses in that excuses in the work/school context (low knowledge level) need to contain a minimum of information to be successful. However, subjectively, the excuse makers would have only been aware that the excuses in these instances had failed. That the complexity hypotheses may also be in effect would be of little concern to them. In other words, subjective trial and error, i.e., whether specific excuses were successful or not would determine their future use, rather than objective reasoning based on theoretical complexity issues.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the nature of excuses, including estimations of excuse complexity, uniqueness, frequency, and success. Particular emphasis has been given to the changes in such characteristics within different contexts distinguished by the level of knowledge the recipient has about the excuse giver.

Evidence has been found that the complexity and uniqueness of excuses vary positively with the knowledge level of the recipient when an unequal power relationship exists between the recipient and the excuse giver. Data analysis showed that excuses to
recipients with a low personal knowledge level of the excuse giver, such as employers or teachers, tended to be simple in nature, contain a minimum amount of information, and were usually common and frequently occurring. In contrast, excuses to recipients with a high personal knowledge of the excuse giver, such as parents who lived with the participants, tended to be complex in nature, contained significantly larger amounts of information, were generally more specific to the excuse giver and less frequently occurring. The present study supports Lippard’s (1988) conclusions that relationship variables are key factors in deceptive communication.

Hample (1980) identified the unequal power relation of excuse makers to parent or achievement contexts from the point of view that the recipients in these categories were the individuals deceived most frequently. Lippard also identified power as an important variable for excuse making with the goal of moderating or mitigating the control of those in power. Her findings are reflected in this study where the purpose of most of the excuses to employers or teachers appeared to be directed to avoiding work or school related responsibilities, such as not going to work or delaying school assignments or tests, and the purpose of many excuses to parents involved clandestine encounters with non-parent-approved friends of the opposite sex. Lippard also recognized the parent context as exerting the most control over the lives of excuse givers. In the present study, parents living with participants were identified as probably having the highest personal knowledge level of excuse givers, with information based on both immediate day to day and long term (temporal) intimacy.
No relationship was found for complexity and uniqueness of excuses for egalitarian relationships between recipient and excuse giver, despite that fact that all relationships identified in the work of McCornack and Parks (1986) and Millar and Millar (1995), which formed much of the theoretical basis of the present study, were egalitarian and none of an unequal power structure. The difference in the responses in the present study may be a reflection of the obvious contrast in methodology and focus. In the Millar and Millar experiment, the responses for recipients' detection of untrue objective statements in two personal relationships, friends and strangers, were compared in an experimental setting. In contrast, the present correlational study measures excuse givers' responses for real life deception issues within two professional and eight personal relationships (which did not include strangers).

Frequency analysis showed that old excuses were used more than new excuses in all contexts, which supported the findings of Hample (1980) that most excuses had been used before. Previously used excuses were also found to be more frequent in low or neutral confidence conditions, and were more likely to be successful. In addition, excuses were more successful to employers or teachers than to parents or spouse/boy/girlfriends.

Examination of the mean complexity of excuses in individual content categories identified two categories as "complex" in nature, and four as "simple" in nature. In support of the main complexity hypothesis, excuses to employers or teachers were more likely to be from categories identified as simple in nature, excuses to parents were more likely to be from categories identified as complex in nature. However, excuses to
spouse/boy/girlfriends were as likely to be simple as complex in nature. The absence of
the unequal power relationship for this context is again suggested as a reason for this
anomaly.

Complexity analysis for the six content categories showed different categories of
excuses emerging for different recipients of the excuses. Illness accounted for the greatest
number of excuses for employers or teachers (39% of all excuses to employers or
teachers), whereas the miscellaneous category was used most for parents and
spouse/boy/girlfriends (48% and 32% of all excuses in the respective contexts). The
majority use of the simple category (illness) for the low knowledge level context of
work/school and the majority use for the complex category (miscellaneous) for the high
knowledge contexts of parent and spouse/boy/girlfriend also supports the main complexity
hypotheses of this study.

Tests of between subject effects of the repeated measures ANOVA which
compared complexity within the three contexts, showed that the variables of sex, self
monitoring, and age had no effect on the levels of complexity for this study. However, in
a separate analysis, a strong negative relationship was found for self monitoring with age.
The results of this study support those of the Millar and Millar experiment, which reported
no effects of self monitoring on information levels of excuses.

Strengths of the Study

The approach of this study has weighed the theories of more than one
psychological discipline in explaining the nature of excuses, and has thereby possibly
increased their power of prediction by recognizing the contribution of research from more than one source. Results from cognitive psychology experiments on detection investigating information levels of excuses have been applied to findings of correlational studies on content and context of excuse deception in social psychology settings; the motivation/drive theories of developmental psychology have been proposed to explain differences in responses in egalitarian and unequal power relationships; finally the behavioral science theory of operant conditioning has been suggested for participants’ pragmatic reasons for choice of excuses.

The study has the external validity advantages of a correlational study in a field setting with the influence of real life factors, together with experimental dimensions provided by manipulation of recipient conditions and selection of different types of participants. The importance of external validity has been demonstrated by significant differences in responses to perceived deception judgments by coders and participants, and by the recognition of the influence of the unequal power relationship on the content of excuses in real life settings not previously recognized in laboratory experiments on information levels. Discussion of results has acknowledged that responses in real life appear to be the resultant of more than one force or influence. The present design and procedures adapted from previous correlation studies (Lippard, 1988; Weiner et al. 1991) have thus resolved some of the problems formerly identified by reviewers concerning deception experiments. They included such strategies as using personal rather than impersonal relationships, a focus on the recipient as well as on the excuse giver, and
interactive roles in an experimental setting for deceivers and recipients who are known to each other and are concerned with the results of the deception behavior. In this way, the design has considered the dynamic relationship between participants and enabled the complexity and motivation of excuses to be examined and measured. The results have particularly emphasized the singular effect of the control factor in human interaction, the influence of which may be important in other areas of social psychology.

Limitations of the Study

The correlational design limits the study’s usefulness in that it is unlikely that all factors that could have an influence on the complexity and nature of excuses have been identified. Additional variables might emerge from a replication study using a design suitable for a more powerful analysis, such as multiple regression techniques. This could be accomplished with a larger subject base and broader demographic information to include as many additional influences that could affect the nature of excuse, including quantified degrees of short and long term intimacy, time length of relationship, degree of quality of the relationship, exact age of participant/recipient at the time of the excuse, social and economic background details, etc., as examples. The importance of intimacy influences were detected in the present study, but were only able to be estimated subjectively from participants’ descriptive statements. In addition, all dependent measures and most independent measures were developed for this study, so that internal validity and consistency cannot be assumed. Standardization of measures with replication could address this problem. Finally, participants’ descriptions of excuses were based on
memories of events, which may have been altered over time, repressed, or forgotten entirely. Against this fact is that many of the events were emotionally charged, actively involved the participants, so most may have been recalled with acceptable accuracy.
Appendix A

University of North Florida Student Informed Consent Form

Principal Investigator

Vera Trefry
Department of Psychology

Project Title:
Social Communication Strategies:
Considerations of Content and Context

Description of Study: You are asked to complete four questionnaires and one demographics form. Three pages of the questionnaires relate to past experiences when you are asked to recall giving excuses on occasions concerning your (1) spouse, girlfriend, or boyfriend, (2) work or school, and (3) parents or guardians. Questionnaires are identified by numbered code only, and all responses are anonymous. Time will be provided for answering any questions you may have concerning the questionnaires after you have read instructions. Agreement to participate in this study will earn you extra credit as stipulated by your course instructor. However, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue the completion of the questionnaires at any time without incurring penalty. The questionnaires should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

I have read and I understand the procedures described above. I agree to participate in the study and I have received a copy of this informed consent.

Participant ___________________________ Date ____________ Witness ____________ Date ____________

Principal Investigator ___________________________ Date ____________
Appendix B

Community Informed Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Vera Trefry
Department of Psychology

Project Title:
Social Communication Strategies:
Considerations of Content and Context

Description of Study: You are asked to complete four questionnaires and one demographics form. Three pages of the questionnaires relate to past experiences when you are asked to recall giving excuses on occasions concerning your (1) spouse, girlfriend, or boyfriend, (2) work or school, and (3) parents or guardians. Questionnaires are identified by numbered code only, and all responses are anonymous. The questionnaires should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Please return the completed material in the stamped address envelope provided.

Your willingness to participate in this important study is warmly appreciated.

________________________  _______________________
Principal Investigator    Date
Appendix C

Demographic Data

Code_0 0 0 0

Please provide the following information:

SEX     Male______     Female ______

AGE     ______

STUDENT STATUS     full time______     part time______     none______

EMPLOYMENT STATUS    full time______     part time______     retired ______
                       full time homemaker______
Appendix D

Self Monitoring Questionnaire (Snyder, 1974)

Survey instrument deleted, paper copy available upon request.
References


and Social Psychology, 30, 526-537.


CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

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