

“You look fine”: A Closer Look at White Lies in Female Best Friendships

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In contrast to the popular adage, honesty may not always be the best policy within friendships. Sometimes, seemingly harmless “white lies” may supplant the truth for any of a variety of reasons. The qualitative interview responses of 20 female participants were examined in order to discover the motivations and feelings that underlie the use of white lies by women within their close, same-sex friendships. Major themes detected include: telling white lies to protect the teller’s or the receiver’s face (or sense of self), to preserve a friend’s positive feelings, and to provide social support. Theoretical and practical implications regarding white lies are discussed.

Deception plays a complex role within close relationships, and individuals lie for an abundance of reasons, ranging from protecting one’s self to saving another’s face (O’Hair & Cody, 1994; Turner, Edgley, & Olmstead, 1975). Even if a lie is told for seemingly altruistic reasons, it is still considered a form of deception, as it deliberately misleads (Tosone, 2006). Deception occurs in a multitude of different relationships, from those with strangers to even relationships considered most intimate, such as romantic relationships and best friendships. Deception can be defined as “the conscious attempt to create or perpetuate false impressions among other communicators” (O’Hair & Cody, 1994, p. 183).

The vast majority of deception research (over 200 studies) focuses on people’s ability to *detect* deception (Levine, Kim, Sun Park, & Hughes, 2006).

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Furthermore, numerous studies assess the variability in the *use* of deception across relationship types (see DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Ennis, Vrij, & Chance, 2008), as well as the morality and ethics of different levels or types of deceptive communication (Dunbar et al., 2016). However, “While these comparative studies demonstrate that deception varies across relational types...they fail to provide sufficient information regarding the different ways that individuals use deception within any particular context” (Cole, 2001, p. 108). Indeed, the nature of motivations for lying within the context of women’s close, same-sex friendships has yet to be determined.

As to the prevalence and kinds of deception practiced, deception does not appear to occur as frequently as previous literature may suggest (Serota & Levine, 2014). In fact, in their study, Serota and Levine found that individuals are honest more than they are dishonest and that “white lies” are used more often than are more serious and extreme “big” lies. Camden, Motley, and Wilson (1984) define “white lies” as deception that is “socially somewhat acceptable, and capable of generating little to no negative consequences to the recipient” (p. 309). Because a paucity of research still exists regarding the role of deception within best friendships, the purpose of the present study was to discover what motivates women to tell white lies within their close, same-sex friendships.

The present study also addresses the need to determine the purposes white lies might serve within the provision of social support to close friends. Social support can be defined as “the fulfillment of more specific time-limited needs that arise as the result of adverse life events or circumstances” (Cutrona, 1996, p. 3). Individuals often believe that being supportive friends means being there for each other, being helpful when disclosed to, and sharing common beliefs (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Additionally, Rawlins (1989) suggested that friendships are unique because they are voluntary, and rules are created and negotiated by those in the relationship. Whereas friendships are far from normative, they can be as important as romantic and/or familial relationships (Rawlins, 1989, 1992). Moreover, research indicates that female friendships are created on the basis of caring more than are male friendships, and therefore those friendships are strengthened by personal disclosure, which increases feelings of closeness (Floyd & Parks, 1995).

There are a host of reasons that friends may tell lies to one another when providing social support. For instance, fear of conflict that threatens a close friendship may prompt a white lie. In addition, when someone desires social support, she may be in a fragile emotional state and foster a friend’s assumption that she cannot handle the “cold, hard truth” (Erat & Gneezy, 2012). Moreover, some may believe that being a supportive friend means appearing to agree

with ideas and choices, even when they do not. In any of these instances, white lies may be utilized to further the goal of preserving a friendship. Thus, in order to answer the call for more research regarding how deception functions in specific relationship types (Cole, 2001), and to respond to the more specific voids noted above, this study aims to examine the use of white lies, motivations to tell them, and the possible link between deception and social support, in close, female friendships.

Literature Review

Previous research has revealed that deception occurs within close relationships (e.g., DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Even within seemingly open and honest relationships, there exists a potential to use deception for a variety of reasons (Camden et al., 1984; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Turner et al., 1975). Erat and Gneezy (2012) discovered that “a significant fraction of senders lie when it costs them a little but helps the receiver a lot” (p. 725). In addition, deception “makes it easier for people to function socially” (Tosone, 2006, p. 336). For many people, a “white lie” is considered relatively harmless and, thus, white lies are a common form of deception (Camden et al., 1984). In fact, white lies are also well-represented in contemporary culture. For example, Hope Hicks recently announced that she was leaving her position as White House Communications Director a day after admitting to the House Intelligence Committee that she told “white lies” on behalf of President Donald Trump (Fandos, 2018). White lies are considered a less dark form of deception (as opposed to a blatant lie) because of the potential benefits to the recipient, as they may protect feelings or help to conceal unsavory information. The following review examines the definition and use of white lies, as well as motivations for using white lies in close relationships.

Conceptualizing White Lies

While a white lie is more socially acceptable and less likely to produce negative consequences (Camden, et al., 1984), a “black lie” can “involve considerable monetary value [or a] serious breach of trust” and is “capable of invoking serious damage” (Camden, et al., 1984, p. 309). Erat and Gneezy (2012) delineated two types of white lies: (a) “altruistic white lies” that help others at the expense of the person telling the lie, and (b) “Pareto white lies” that help both the liar and the other person (p. 723). For example, an altruistic white lie might entail telling a friend—to save her feelings—that you received a worse grade on something than she did when you actually did better. A Pareto white lie is more selfish (Erat & Gneezy, 2012), such as a person telling a friend that she does not know where her

boyfriend is when she actually does in order to avoid conflict. Rather than being concerned with the friend's feelings, the individual is thinking about saving herself from what could be a lengthy and emotional exchange. Erat and Gneezy (2012) argued that incentives specific to the situation likely play a role in the decision to tell a white lie. Thus, though white lies are deliberate, they may be used to protect the person who is being lied to.

Motivations for White Lies and Acceptability Across Relationships

Individuals have a variety of motives to use deception (Turner, et al., 1975). These researchers found five major general motivations for using deception: "to save face, to guide relationships, exploitation, to avoid tension or conflict, or to gain or maintain situational control" (p. 33). In fact, the most common reported motivation for deception was "to save face" (Turner, et al., 1975, p. 33). Similarly, Camden, et al. (1984) sought to determine motivations for using *white lies* and found four major categories: (a) basic needs, (b) affiliation, (c) self-esteem, and (d) other, with subcategories existing within each. Camden, et al.'s results indicated that the most common motive for a white lie was affiliation or telling lies to protect the connection between individuals; additionally, within the affiliation category, lies are told to benefit the self rather than other. However, in the self-esteem category, more lies are told to benefit the other than are told to benefit the person telling the lie. Thus, a white lie can be told to either benefit the deceiver or the one being deceived, depending on the context.

Bryant (2008) examined the intentions and acceptability of white lies and found that "intentions for lying... can range from a malicious desire to mislead, to a harmless or benign intent of avoiding problems" (p. 30) and that white lies are generally more acceptable, in contrast to one participant's representative view that "real lies" were "totally unacceptable" (p. 33) regardless of the situation. Whereas Bryant refers to white lies as "trivial" and "harmless" (p. 23), it follows that real lies are not justifiable, may be rooted in malice or self-serving motives, and can lead to destructive relational consequences. In sum, white lies, by definition, are forms of deception that, due to their more altruistic origins, are seen as more tolerable than other, more blatant, "dark" forms of deception. The present study is thus aimed to contribute further understanding of the unique functions of this form of communication within a specific type of relationship.

White Lies in Friendships

Deception in relationships that are considered to be closer may be less prevalent. Indeed, some research has found that fewer lies are told to the people who are considered close, and “more of the lies told to best friends and friends [were] altruistic than self-serving, whereas the reverse [was] true of lies told to acquaintances and strangers” (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998, p. 63). Moreover, the closer the relationship, the more uncomfortable the deceiver is with lying to the receiver. Thus, more altruistic lies are used in close relationships, perhaps “because altruistic lies can communicate caring” (DePaulo & Kashy, p. 63). Overall, then, the evidence suggests that there are differences in rates of lying and motives for lying within best friendships as compared to more acquaintance-based relationships.

Motives for deception and white lies in friendships. As deception often involves a “conscious attempt” (O’Hair & Cody, 1994, p. 183) to deceive, and can be associated with negative repercussions involving hurt feelings, such as betrayal and distrust, individuals generally expect those closest to them to be honest (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2014).

Nevertheless, there are multiple motivations for deception within close relationships (Guerrero et al., 2014). First, motives can be partner-focused, “such as using deception to avoid hurting the partner [or to] help the partner maintain self-esteem” (Guerrero et al., p. 328). These deceptions can also be perceived as altruistic, socially polite, and relationally beneficial. Indeed, white lies are often aimed at benefitting their receivers (Camden et al., 1984). Another motive for deception is relationship-focused, where the goal is “limiting relational harm by avoiding conflict, relational trauma, or other unpleasant experiences” (Guerrero et al., p. 329). Again, white lies in friendships are frequently employed to protect senders and/or receivers from unpleasantness.

Politeness and white lies within friendships. Being polite in order to manage face needs may motivate the telling of white lies in friendships. According to politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), *face*, or the “conception of self that each person displays in particular interactions with others” (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 3; Goffman, 1967) is comprised of two basic wants: positive and negative face. Positive face focuses on the desire to be liked and accepted by others, whereas negative face involves the desire for autonomy and freedom from constraint (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Attempting to manage both face needs may become “complicated by the inherent face-threatening nature of speech acts” (Kunkel, Wilson, Olufowote, & Robson, 2003, p. 384). Indeed, the attempt to satisfy one face need occasionally creates a threat for the other (Cupach & Metts, 1994). The sender may feel a tension between positive and negative face and thus struggle to maintain both simultaneously.

Individuals generally make attempts to protect the faces of others (Goffman, 1967); this may hold especially true when white lies are employed as a face-saving strategy. There are several facework strategies that help maintain face needs. One such strategy is preventative facework, which functions to minimize the impact of face threats (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Further, individuals may use politeness strategically to aid in reducing negative perceptions about themselves or minimizing the extent to which they blatantly threaten another individual's face (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Of course, being caught in the commission of any form of deception may threaten one's own positive face. White lies may be particularly advantageous for diminishing potential damage to a friend's face, while simultaneously maintaining one's own. Although they are deceptive, white lies may be conducive to more appropriately delivering an otherwise face-threatening message.

Significance of the Current Project

The current study investigated white lies to bring clarity to *why* women use them within close, same-sex friendships. Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz (2017) suggested that close feminine relationships often have different communication styles than do close masculine relationships. Indeed, "many women share their personal feelings, experiences, fears, and problems in order to know and be known by each other" (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2017, p. 189). In addition, women are socialized to be "attentive, emotionally supportive, and caring" (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, p. 190). The assumption that women are socialized to be emotionally supportive leads to speculation as to whether the use of white lies within their close, same-sex friendships reflects or contradicts such motives.

Although research regarding white lies within close relationships exists, there is a need to further consider exactly how white lies function in specific relational contexts (Cole, 2001). The current project was especially inspired by: (a) the idea that women are socialized to communicate on a more personal level than men (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2017), (b) the paucity of qualitative research examining white lies in best friendships, and (c) the importance of illuminating the role of white lies in the service of providing social support. Thus, our overarching research question was as follows: What are the motivations women describe for using white lies in their close, same-sex friendships?

Method

Qualitative interview methods were utilized to gather information about the use of white lies in close, female friendships. The Institutional Review Board overseeing the university that served as the site of this study approved all of its methods and procedures.

Participants and Procedures

This study included 20 female participants (M age = 20.51 years; age range 19–23 years) attending a large, Midwestern university. The ethnic composition for this study was 19 Caucasian participants and one Asian/Caucasian participant. Within the data generated by the 20 participants, repeating patterns of information emerged so that the researchers agreed saturation had been achieved (Charmaz, 2006). All participants in the study were college age, which may have influenced certain aspects of the data; however, this was still an important age group to study, because most college-age students interact frequently with their friends and depend on them for support. Pseudonyms were created in place of actual names to identify quotes in the analysis without revealing actual participant identities.

The first author used a snowball sampling technique and contacted potential participants to ask them to participate in an audio-recorded interview in a public but quiet location. An informed consent statement was offered to each participant, which indicated that the study was confidential and voluntary. The first author reiterated to each participant that the participant could stop the recording device at any time and her information would be discarded from the study.

The interviewer asked each participant to answer all questions with their best female friend in mind. Interview questions specifically addressed communication with the best friend; how the participant defined a white lie; frequency of white lie use; motives for and perceptions of white lie use; results of white lie use; and functions of honesty, white lies, and social support in a best friendship. For example, the following questions were asked: “Why do you believe people sometimes tell white lies to their friends?” “Do you consider white lies harmless? Why or why not?” “Can you think of a time when you would rather hear a white lie than the truth from your best friend?” and “What do you think are some benefits to using white lies in your friendship?” Upon completion of the interview, participants were asked if they had anything to add or any questions about the study.

Interviews averaged 7.7 minutes in length (range = 5–11 minutes). Because the interview protocol was precisely targeted at creating a baseline of information regarding this topic, the interviews,

while brief, resulted in a rich data set that provided a significant amount of insight. Professional transcription resulted in 102 single-spaced pages of text, with the average interview equaling 5.4 pages (range = 4–7 pages). The first author checked a sample of the transcripts for accuracy.

Data Analysis

An inductive data analytic technique of open and axial coding was used to analyze the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, open coding was used. As the primary coder, the first author went through all interviews line-by-line, highlighting the emerging themes in a color-coded, strategic manner (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Each time a particular theme emerged in the data, its instances were highlighted in a single color. Participants' own words were used in the development of the initial codes for this study (Charmaz, 2006). The data was examined multiple times, and the second and third authors also coded the data. Following the open coding process, the authors had multiple discussions about the possible overarching themes.

The authors used axial coding techniques to condense the codes into a smaller number of themes (and subthemes). Throughout this process, the authors negotiated and revised theme categories through constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This revision process allowed for more concise, concrete categories to emerge from the data (Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

Results and Interpretation

Data analysis indicated that most participants were in general agreement about what constitutes a white lie. For example, when asked to describe a white lie, several participants mentioned that it should be inconsequential. Similarly, numerous participants suggested that white lies should be used to protect a friend and to avoid embarrassment or hurt feelings. These answers appear consistent with previous research that suggests white lies are more benign, altruistic, and relationally protective in nature (Bryant, 2008; Camden, et al., 1984).

The analysis revealed why women are motivated to use white lies in their close, same-sex friendships. Three overarching themes regarding motives were discovered: (a) preserving positive feelings, (b) providing social support, and (b) conflicted motives. Within each major theme, several subthemes emerged. For the *preserving positive feelings* theme, two subthemes emerged: (a) avoiding conflict and (b) avoiding hurt feelings. In the theme of *providing social support*, two subthemes emerged: (a) making the friend feel better and (b) facilitating confidence about appearance.

For the *conflicted motives* theme, two subthemes emerged: (a) managing negative consequences and (b) balancing the “when to white lie and when to be honest” conundrum. The subsequent paragraphs detail these results.

Major Theme One: Preserving Positive Feelings

The first overarching theme involved preserving positive feelings in the relationship. Participants frequently mentioned that white lies were used to help the friendship stay more positively focused. Aligned with this notion was the motive to protect positive face, which Cupach and Metts (1994) described as an individual’s desire for acceptance by those they perceive to be important. By using positive face protection strategies, one is able to project oneself in a favorable light, thus reflecting the desire to protect the friend and the relationship.

Avoiding conflict. Numerous participants expressed a motivation to lie based on an attempt to avoid prolonged conflict with their friend. For some women, using a white lie was a great way to avoid potential conflict (see also Guthrie & Kunkel, 2013 regarding romantic partners’ use of deception to avoid conflict). When asked why people tell white lies to their best friends, Kathy stated, “To make their relationship smoother. To not cause problems that would ruin the relationship.” Allie noted that a white lie could help “to keep things even keeled.” Kacie mentioned that white lies have prevented conflict in her best friendship, saying that, “It would have been a fight instead of me getting out of it.” Overall, participants reported using white lies to avoid potential conflict that would interfere with the positive face goals of the person telling the white lie and/or the receiver of the white lie.

Avoiding hurt feelings. When asked about using white lies, Kaylee said, “Well, I am only doing it to protect her feelings.” Similarly, Nicole said, “it doesn’t really hurt anybody, but it’s meant to kind of protect the other person that you are telling it to.” Likewise, when asked about reasons she believes people tell white lies to their best friends, Allie said, “One would be they want to protect their best friend from something they don’t think they would want to hear.” Lauren also noted, “It’s never nice to hear an insult from your best friend. It’s nicer to hear something nice from them.”

Overall, participants who contributed to a *preserving positive feelings* theme justified white lies by recognizing that the possible costs of either engaging in conflict or hurting their friend’s feelings outweighed the benefits of telling the truth.

Major Theme Two: Providing Social Support

The second overarching theme emerged from participants’ reports of using white lies to provide social support. As noted above,

social support can be defined as “the fulfillment of more specific time-limited needs that arise as the result of adverse life events or circumstances” (Cutrona, 1996, p. 3). Cutrona, Hessling, and Suhr (1997, p. 384) articulated five types of social support: (a) emotional (“communicating love, concern, or empathy”), (b) esteem (“communicating respect and confidence in abilities”), (c) informational (“providing information about the stress itself or advice on how to deal with it”), (d) social network (“communicating commonality with or belong to a group”), and (e) tangible (providing “goods or services needed in the stressful situation”). Data analysis revealed that participants appear to use white lies to communicate both emotional and esteem support.

Within this overarching theme, two subthemes of using white lies to socially support a friend emerged: (a) making the friend feel better and (b) facilitating confidence about appearance.

Making the friend feel better (emotional and esteem support). One of the goals of implementing white lies described by participants was to make a friend feel better. As Amy noted, a white lie is “not the truth and you tell it to someone because you want to make them feel better.” When asked why women tell white lies to their friends, Kacie simply responded, “to make them feel better.” Similarly, Anna said, “To make them feel better, because sometimes the truth—the full truth—isn’t really worth it.” Morgan noted:

Well, the saying, “the truth hurts.” You don’t want to hurt your best friend. And sometimes if the truth hurts—you give them reinforcement, positive reinforcement that may or may not really be true, but it makes them feel good.

Facilitating confidence about appearance (esteem support). Several women expressed that part of being a best friend is aiding in a friend’s self-confidence. One of the most frequent topics discussed was using white lies when answering questions about a friend’s outfit or physical appearance. Nicole shared an example when she said, “I’ll tell her I like it, even if I don’t, just so she doesn’t feel upset about her hair.” It was also noted that sometimes women need to hear white lies about their own appearance and hearing it from their best friend makes them feel better. One example provided by Jacque was, “When I’m feeling really ugly one day, or if I have like had a bad day, like sad, crying and someone’s like, ‘Oh you look beautiful,’ that’s the best feeling in the entire world.” Some of the women also mentioned that, on occasion, they might prefer hearing a white lie to the truth. As an example, Amy said “If I look really atrocious, I’d rather hear that I don’t look really horrible just because it doesn’t matter.”

Further, it was revealed that some of the participants also liked to hear white lies in regard to their own self-esteem. Morgan explained, "If I had an insecurity about my body, I would rather someone tell me that I look good." Additionally, Kacie said "Like with the outfit, like a clothing situation. Like if I really like something I would rather her tell me that I look okay in it, like if I really want to wear something."

Major Theme Three: Conflicted Motives

Along with the complications of using white lies in a relationship with a best friend come conflicted tensions about when it is acceptable to tell a white lie and when the truth is necessary. Several participants reported it is sometimes "okay" to tell a white lie, but also wanting to hear the truth from friends. Two subthemes emerged in regard to this tension: (a) managing negative consequences and (b) balancing the "when to white lie and when to be honest" conundrum.

Managing negative consequences. Many of the women noted some of the downsides of telling white lies. Some of the women recalled feeling *guilty* after telling a white lie and others mentioned that they were concerned with *trust issues* and sometimes avoid telling white lies because they are afraid of what might happen in future interactions with the friend. Another common fear among participants was *getting caught* lying, which could create potential problems and loss of face within the relationships.

Guilty feelings. A number of the participants mentioned that telling white lies makes them feel guilty. Susan mentioned that she considers a white lie harmless for the most part, but "they have come back to bite me and then I feel guilty about them." Jamie admitted, "I didn't really feel too strongly about it until now I'm thinking about it, and I feel bad." When asked how she felt after telling white lies, Brittany said, "I feel guilty" and later mentioned that there are times when she wished she had just been honest from the start because she continues to feel guilty about the exchange.

Trust issues. The women in our sample also reported that telling white lies could become an issue with regard to trust within the relationship. For example, Amy mentioned positive aspects of white lies when she said, "I just need to hear like, 'Yeah you look good,' or 'You look skinny,' or whatever...I think we need that little bolster," but she also said: "There's that level of not necessarily trusting everything that your friend would say about you." Lacey also said of telling white lies, "It creates mistrust." Almost identically, Jamie said, "I guess it would create some kind of mistrust if you're doing it all the time."

Getting caught. The data revealed that, in several instances, some women believed that white lies could eventually affect them,

and potentially create relational problems in subsequent interactions. As Christy said, "It could come back and haunt you." Likewise, Sophia said:

Well, for a second you can get caught in your lie and you can just accidentally later on say something that is [not] in line with your white lie, so then they think you are a big liar, when really it was just an innocent little lie.

In the same way, Allie said, "a white lie can build onto another one and then another one and then another one." Similarly, Abby said, "The more you tell, they will add up over time and I think it will come back to get you eventually."

Balancing the white lie and truth tension. Many women expressed conflicted motives in deciding whether or not to be completely honest with their best friends. They spoke of an inner desire to be honest with their best friend and to be perceived as an honest person but also perceived how honesty could also have negative consequences. Further contributing to this subtheme of tension is that several women noted that when they are receiving white lies from their best friends, they understand the reasons for them and, in some cases, prefer the white lie. For example, Susan explained:

I'm sure I would more often like to hear the truth. But, I mean, if I understand the reasons that I tell white lies, I can excuse other people's reasons for telling white lies. Like if they don't think it's really going to harm me or if they're embarrassed about something or something like that, like I would never hold that against them.

Further, Lauren, in regard to being asked if she wishes she had ever been honest instead of telling a white lie, said "I've tried that before and it doesn't seem to go as well for them. So, I think it's fine telling white lies sometimes." Likewise, Morgan commented:

Even if you're telling the truth and it's not your fault that it's the truth, it still makes people feel badly. So, I think in the case with my best friend it's beneficial to our relationship to make each other feel better about things.

Finally, Lauren simply said "I think that honesty is always the best policy, but white lies are okay sometimes."

Discussion

The results of this study revealed female participants' motivations for telling white lies within their close, same-sex friendships. Major themes included preserving positive feelings, providing social support, and balancing conflicted motives. Many participants felt a need to tell white lies because supporting one another is an imperative part of best friendship. Further, results revealed that each participant had a unique continuum between a "real" lie and a "white" lie.

Theoretical Implications of Research

Politeness theory. There appeared to be a struggle in balancing both positive and negative face needs within best friendships. Cupach and Metts (1994) explain that positive face involves one's desire to be liked and accepted among others, whereas negative face focuses on maintaining autonomy and control. Thus, with regard to negative face, we may *want* to tell our friend that her outfit is hideous, but our positive face encourages us to tell her what we know she *wants* to hear (e.g., she really looks good in that outfit). For example, Christy described a situation in which she wanted to be alone, but her friends wanted her to come over. Thus, she told a white lie about what she was actually doing to avoid having to visit her friends. In doing so, she maintained both her autonomy as well as her desire for acceptance. This finding aligns with Guthrie and Kunkel's (2013) description of how romantic partners also sometimes use deception to navigate face needs and is thus also consistent with politeness theory.

Further, with regard to politeness theory, Kunkel et al. (2003) suggested that, "speakers frequently use politeness, or linguistic features that redress threats to the target person's face, as a way of balancing their desires to gain compliance while also maintaining the target's face" (p. 384). In many situations, it may seem as if one is pressured to give a certain answer and, in doing so, save face for the receiver. For example, Abby said, "She asked me about an outfit and she asked if I liked it, and if it looked good I would say 'Yes,' when in reality, maybe I don't love the outfit, but I can tell it's her style."

Based on the data, it is apparent that there is an internal struggle for individuals to maintain their own face, but also maintain the face of the individual who is receiving the white lie. Indeed, deciding how to handle the positive and negative face needs of both the sender and receiver can be a complex puzzle to solve.

Relational dialectics theory and social support. The results also indicated that relational dialectics were at play within the friendships. This is consistent with Rawlins' (1989, 1992) contention

that friends have multiple ways of handling dialectical tensions. Baxter (2006) explained that discursive tensions are messages that have two contradictory meanings. Further, people express their different outlooks when they interact with others, and that process in turn involves making sense of those differing perspectives. The dialectics of integration, certainty, and expression are “the big three” dialectics found in close relationships (Baxter, 2006, p. 137).

The data for this study revealed that the dialectical tension of expression (i.e., openness-closedness) was at play within female best friendships. Baxter (2006) described this tension as an individual knowing they are free to share thoughts, but also being aware that, occasionally, sharing those thoughts is not entirely favorable. For example, many of the participants shared that when “boys” or “boyfriends” were the topic of discussion, they felt more likely to tell a white lie because it was not necessarily their business to judge. Kathy described a situation where she disliked her best friend’s boyfriend but told her that she liked him because “It’s easier than making her choose between her best friend and her boyfriend. And so, if I can make her life a little easier, I know it’ll make her happier.” Similarly, Morgan said, “She and her boyfriend broke up...and of course I told her it was going to be okay...but I think that would be considered a white lie, because who am I to know?” Likewise, Nicole said she gave social support to her best friend when she was having trouble with her boyfriend. She mentioned, “I didn’t know if it would actually work out in her favor, but I didn’t want her to be really upset and discouraged about her relationship.” Moreover, women are socialized to be emotionally supportive (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2017), so it is possible that the participants in this study were motivated to tell white lies to their friends in order to provide emotional and esteem support rather than telling the truth, which may have been discouraging or denigrating.

As Guthrie and Kunkel (2013) found in their study of deception in romantic relationships, participants “noted a tension between wanting to be honest with their partners but not always wanting to experience the consequences of that honesty” (p. 153). Adding to this, the current study revealed a tension between wanting to be honest while simultaneously wanting to be a “good friend.” Thus, a nuanced dialectical tension reported by participants was that of simultaneously being a good friend by giving support, yet not being a completely honest good friend by deceiving. Several of the women mentioned that it is hard to decide when truth is paramount and when a white lie is more acceptable in best friendships. Anna spoke about a complicated situation for her: “If a girl was asking ‘Do I have an eating disorder?’ and you just skate around it...but you should be confronting her about it—that [could] be harmful.” Anna further describes this tension by saying, “But then if she’s asking

you... 'Do I look bigger than last week?' And I know it's going to make her spiral down a horrible trail of self-consciousness, it's not worth it. I would probably... say, 'No, you look fine.'"

As mentioned previously, Morgan said, "Even if you're telling the truth... and it's not your fault that it's the truth, it still makes people feel badly. So, I think in [my] case... it's beneficial to our relationship to make each other feel better." Amy also mentioned "I just thought, it's better to boost her confidence than to have her focus too much on her weight." In these cases, the women seemed to have an internal struggle between telling their friend what they really thought and *not* making their best friend feel bad about themselves. A practical example of this tension may be that a friend is dating a person who treats her terribly, but she claims that she really loves him. The friend would likely be upset if her closest friend expressed her disdain for the partner, but the liar likely realizes the friend may continue to get hurt without intervention. Or, conversely, as Brittany said, "Well, sometimes she fights with her boyfriend, and I kind of side with him, but I have to be supportive because she needs me to support her and... listen."

Thus, it can sometimes be hard to decide where to draw the line in this tension. Does not telling the truth in such situations make you a "bad" friend? Do good friends avoid the straight truth even when the relational partner needs to hear it? Several women mentioned supporting each other as the basis of friendship, but where is the line between supporting them and enabling them to do something not in their best interest? When Jacque was asked if she considers a white lie as harmless, she said:

I'm going to say both yes and no, because yes, it's harmless because you're not intending to harm them, but maybe by not telling them that in the long-run is like helping them not improve themselves or make some bad decisions or something.

This theme exemplifies the dialectical tensions involved in providing social support. Indeed, women may face an especially heavy burden regarding expectations to provide appropriate support, and participants' reports clearly illustrate the tension between wanting to be a good friend and providing "appropriate" social support—even if that means using white lies to do so (La Gaipa, 1990). Overall, then, our research confirms yet also extends relational dialectics theory, especially within the context of deception and social support as performed within close, same-sex friendships.

Practical Applications of Research

Participants reported that there are times when they may feel it is suitable to tell a white lie to their closest female friend. It seemed that many of the participants agreed that it was acceptable to stretch the truth or tell a “little white lie” if it was something that did not “really matter” or would not affect their friend in the future. For example, most of the women mentioned that they would tell white lies to their best friend about their appearance or outfit. Kacie said in those situations, she felt a white lie would be harmless: “Like if you tell them [their outfit or appearance is] great, they’re not going to know one way or the other; it’s not going to harm them.” Avoiding conflicts was also a big motivation for using a white lie. Leah simply said, “There are times when it would keep the peace.” Christy said that without telling a white lie, “I would’ve had to face the argument rather than avoiding it.”

However, many participants also mentioned that if it was something *big* that needed to be addressed, the truth should be used. Indeed, some of the participants noted that it would be wrong to tell a white lie if it was something that could result in something bad happening (e.g., potential eating disorders). As Anna mentioned, if her friend was asking her about her weight and her appearance, and Anna knew she had some sort of eating issue or disorder, it would be wrong to tell her she looked great if she was actually appearing thin to an unhealthy degree.

Managing the tension between when to tell a white lie and when to be truthful can be difficult, and the current study yields a vital relational prescription. Specifically, the costs and benefits of the situation should be weighed to determine whether the possible consequences of deception are truly worth it. For example, is it worth it to tell a friend that they look fine in an unattractive outfit? Perhaps, because the risk of the situation may be perceived as low and, as a benefit, more positive feelings will be shared amongst both friends. However, what happens if a friend has an eating disorder and a white lie is used instead of confronting her with the honesty she needs? In this context, the costs and benefits represent higher stakes and must be assessed. Each situation presents unique contexts, which must be considered, in addition to potential costs and benefits.

Limitations of Study

A primary limitation of the current study is that in-person interviews create the possibility of data affected by social desirability effects. Also, the sample for this study was obtained using a snowball technique, resulting in participants that were not necessarily diverse in age or ethnicity. A third limitation may be that, despite saturation

having been reached, 20 participants is a somewhat small sample size. A larger sample size conceivably could have resulted in more unique and diverse data. Finally, an additional limitation to consider is the age of the participants. All participants in this study were college-age females, and while this is an especially interesting age group in which to study white lies, it does not make for a representative sample. College-age students arguably tend to live with their best friends, or at least see them on a more regular basis than do individuals not in college. Because of this frequency of contact with their best friends, this sample of women may have unique motives for using deception in their best friendships.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the inherent contradiction between support and deception, it will be productive as well as interesting to delve deeper into social support and how it affects the telling of white lies. Another possibility for future research would be to similarly examine a group of men and their close, same-sex friends. This could shed light on similarities and/or differences in the motivations behind why men lie to their best friends. It would also be interesting to identify differences that may occur between white lies used in best friendships and those that occur in relationships that are not as close. Further, future research regarding white lies and social support needs to extend beyond the scope of a college-age sample.

Conclusion

This study uncovered interesting exchanges between women and their best friends. Many motivations exist for telling white lies to a best friend, including protection of both the individuals involved, as well as of the relationship itself. However, it was also discovered that there is a clear tension between wanting to be honest and wanting to be a good friend. Finally, results revealed that there is a fine line between the justifications for being honest and for telling a white lie. In the end, the situational context, the dynamics of the friendship, and the personalities of the individuals involved serve to determine whether and when a white lie is acceptable. The presence of politeness theory and relational dialectics theory appear to be at the heart of interactions that feature white lies and should continue to be applied as frameworks within which to study this fascinating phenomenon.

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