# Who Thinks It's Okay to Lie?

## Introduction

This is a pilot research project aimed at understanding UChicago students' attitudes towards honesty. I want to understand their opinions on whether or not it is okay to lie in a variety of contexts. My hypothesis is that students with more privilege in certain contexts are less likely to think it is okay to lie in those contexts, because if their privilege affords them the space to be honest, they might develop a blind spot to the reasons why it might be necessary (and thus justified) to lie. Meanwhile, less privileged students might have experiences that impress upon them the importance/necessity to lie in some situations, therefore making them more likely to say it is okay.

The privilege I mention rears its head in different manners, depending on who and what one is talking about. White privilege or male privilege for example, could be manifested when men or people with white names are hired, promoted, or paid more than other people. Straight privilege or male privilege is at work when straight people or men are able to live in a world with less risk of sexual assault or harassment. There are several studies that outline these realities; the UChicago campus climate survey from last year is one that very clearly showcases male and straight privilege at work.

## Materials and Methods

I chose my overall population to be UChicago students because it is a distinct community that I have access to and because it can be easily segmented up into distinct subpopulations (i.e. different genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, etc.) that have different levels of privilege.

In order to gauge students' attitudes towards honesty, I decided to create a 20-question, online survey through Google Forms. The first 15 questions described situations in which the subject (described in the second person) lies. The subject then is instructed to mark whether *they think* it is "okay to lie in this situation" or "not okay to lie in this situation." After the 15 questions, the subjects were asked five demographic questions — their year in the College, their race/ethnicity, their gender, their sexual orientation, and whether or not they were transgender. None of the 20 questions were required to submit the form.

### Questions About Lying

To more easily analyze the data, I gave each question a letter code (from '**A**' to '**O**') as shown below.

| | |
|---|---|
| **A** | A telemarketer calls you and asks if it is your main phone number. Not wanting them to call you again, you say no, and give them the wrong number instead. |
| **B** | Your roommate bakes cookies and offers you some. After eating them, you tell the roommate they are very tasty, when in fact they're pretty bland. |
| **C** | When asked by a potential romantic partner, you lie about the number of sexual partners you have had. |

| D | You've had a rough week and need to take a break and stay home for a day. Unfortunately, the class you have that morning assigns grades based on attendance, except for "excused absences." Not knowing whether your mental health is an excused absence, you tell the professor that you have to miss class because of a job interview. |
|---|---|
| E | A friend of yours asks you if you got an offer from the company that you had been interviewing at. You got rejected, but instead tell them that you got an offer and turned it down. |
| F | This morning you discovered that your partner of three years was cheating on you. Before lunch you got rejected from a job that you really wanted. As you're waiting in line to get coffee you make eye contact with someone you vaguely know from first-year. They ask you how your day is going and you manage a smile and say "Fine!" |
| G | While working on a group project, you offer to take on more responsibility for the work. When one the members in your group objects, you tell them "Don't worry, I can do it" — even as you realize it might be too much for you to handle alone. |
| H | You learned Mandarin in high school and haven't spoken it consistently in years, but you say you are fluent in Mandarin on your resume. |
| I | Your partner of one year is about to go into surgery. Although you are worried about serious complications, you tell them that there is nothing to worry about. |
| J | You tell a potential employer that you have other job offers you are considering, when in fact you do not. |
| K | You sit in on a meeting between your boss and their boss. Your boss is giving a presentation — while not terrible, it is certainly subpar. After the meeting, when your boss asks you in private how you think the meeting went, you tell them they did a great job. |
| L | Immediately before a tough midterm, your partner of two years unexpectedly breaks up with you. You manage to make it through the rest of your day in a haze. When you get home, you meet your roommate (and best friend) in the kitchen. They ask you how you've been and you say "Oh, it's okay," and then head into your room. |
| M | Ostensibly in order to ask you on a date, someone asks for your phone number. Not wanting them to contact you, you purposefully give them the wrong number. |
| N | Your boss is heaping praise on a project that you did mostly on your own. As they compliment you, you tell them that your colleague did most of the work, so they deserve the praise. |
| O | Your friend asks you if they look good in an outfit they just bought and are really excited about — you don't think it looks great, but you say they look fantastic. |

In the hope of finding statistically significant results, I wanted to present the subjects with questions that spanned a variety of situations — lies relating to the workplace, to school, towards friends, towards acquaintances, as well as varying levels of severity — from white lies to serious ones. Being inspired by the taxonomy of lies in "Lying in Everyday Life" (DePaulo, Epstein, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer), I came up with lies that might occur to advance one's own personal gain (H, M, A, J) or someone else's gain (G, N). Lies might also occur not for anyone's material gain but to simplify matters or for one's own mental benefit (D, E, L), or the benefit of another person's mental state (C, O, B, I, K, F).

When planning the structure of this survey, it was suggested that I ask each subject whether they perceived the lie as self-oriented or other-oriented, in order to put into context each subject's response. While this would help to enrich the analysis that could be done, I realized it would make the survey too long and I worried too few people would finish it, so I decided not to include those questions.

My other goal was to come up with situations that might test my hypothesis specifically. Question M, for example, concerns dating and relationships. In general, female students face more sexual harassment and stalking instances than male students — the male students have the privilege to not have to worry about those dangers as much. I included this question to see

whether those two populations had different opinions on whether or not it was okay to lie in order to stop a potential romantically interested person from contacting them. In a similar vein, questions K and N involve interacting with one's boss in the workplace. I believe that it's been shown that (all else being equal) men and white people are often promoted at higher rates than their less privileged counterparts. Questions K and N might highlight whether these groups diverge on their view of lying in the workplace, perhaps due to their amount of privilege in that space.

I did not randomize the questions — the order that they are listed above is the order they were shown in. I originally thought that Google Forms did not provide that functionality, so I tried to at least shuffle the questions so respondents wouldn't see several of the same type of lie in order. Unfortunately, I only found out after sending out the survey that I could have shuffled the questions.

## Demographic questions

In order to analyze the results, I needed to get some sense of who was answering the questions, so I asked the following questions.

| Question | Possible Responses | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| **What year in the College are you?** | First; Second; Third; Fourth | Could only choose one |
| **How would you describe yourself?** | American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black; Hispanic or Latinx; Middle Eastern; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; White; Other | Checkboxes — could choose several, as well as fill in an 'Other' choice |
| **To which gender identity do you most identify?** | Female; Male; Nonbinary | Could only choose one |
| **Do you consider yourself to be:** | Heterosexual; Homosexual; Bisexual; Other | Could only choose one, or fill in an 'Other' choice |
| **Do you consider yourself to be transgender?** | Yes; No | Could only choose one |

## Data Analysis

I used Google Forms to aggregate the responses in a Google Sheets spreadsheet. I then used the pandas, scipy, and matplotlib libraries in Python to wrangle the data, delete any respondents who did not fully fill out the survey, and analyze and plot the responses.

To determine which results were statistically significant, I used Welch's *t*-test, testing the null hypothesis that two populations have equal means. To use this test, I assumed that each population I was testing was independent and normally distributed, albeit with different variances. Since I was testing disjoint groups like Male vs. Female, White vs. Non-White, Straight vs. Non-Straight, etc. I felt comfortable making the independent and normal assumptions.
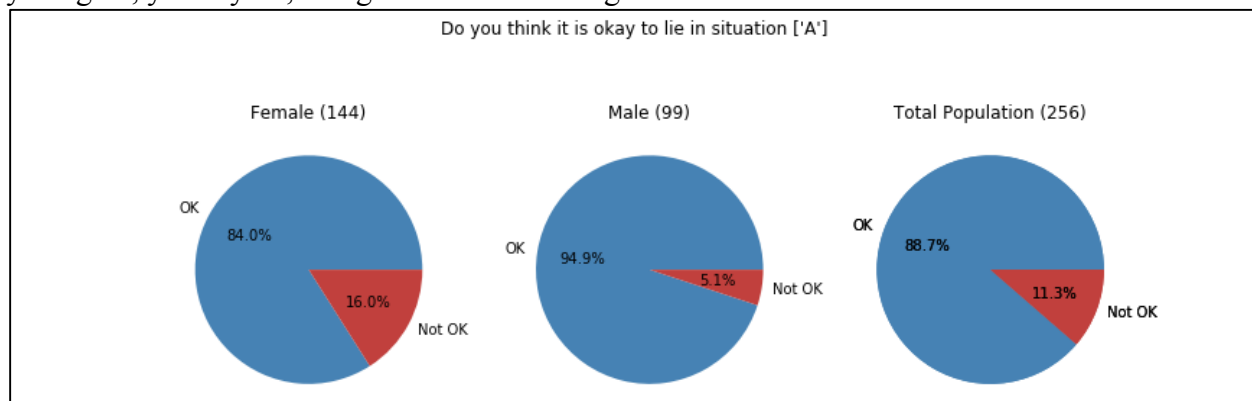
# Results

I received **n = 266** responses. Of those responses, 10 subjects did not fill out at least one question in the survey, so I pared the data down to only the **256** subjects who completed it in full. The table below lists the respondents broken down by specific demographic slices. Note that the totals may not sum to 256 because I am not listing categories with fewer than 10 respondents.

| Gender | Female | 144 |
|---|---|---|
| | Male | 99 |
| | Nonbinary | 13 |
| **Sexual Orientation** | Heterosexual | 173 |
| | Homosexual | 19 |
| | Bisexual | 55 |
| **Race/Ethnicity** | White | 132 |
| | Asian | 48 |
| | Hispanic or Latinx | 18 |
| | Hispanic or Latinx and White | 15 |
| | Asian and White | 12 |
| **Year** | Fourth | 166 |
| | Third | 32 |
| | Second | 35 |
| | First | 23 |

# Gender Analysis

The sample size of males and females was large enough to compare the two groups and see if there was a statistically significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) difference in responses for any of the questions. Below are the questions that resulted in such a difference.
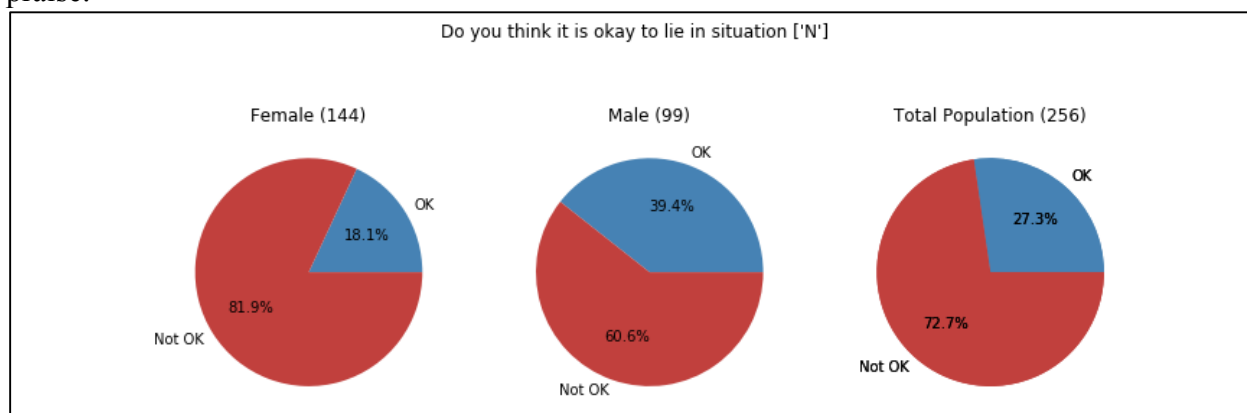
A: A telemarketer calls you and asks if it is your main phone number. Not wanting them to call you again, you say no, and give them the wrong number instead.



Do you think it is okay to lie in situation ['A']

| Female (144) | Male (99) | Total Population (256) |
| OK 84.0% / Not OK 16.0% | OK 94.9% / Not OK 5.1% | OK 88.7% / Not OK 11.3% |

M: Ostensibly in order to ask you on a date, someone asks for your phone number. Not wanting them to contact you, you purposefully give them the wrong number.
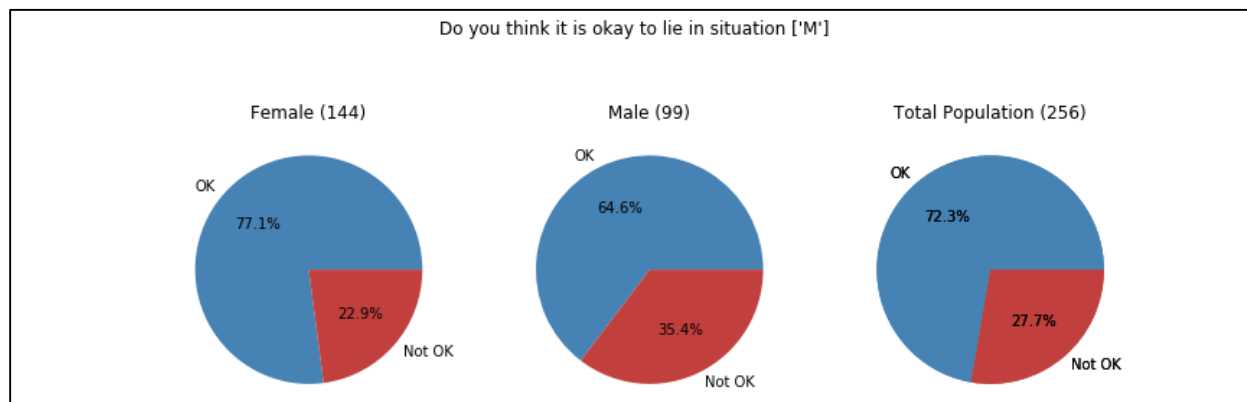


N: Your boss is heaping praise on a project that you did mostly on your own. As they compliment you, you tell them that your colleague did most of the work, so they deserve the praise.



O: Your friend asks you if they look good in an outfit they just bought and are really excited about — you don't think it looks great, but you say they look fantastic.
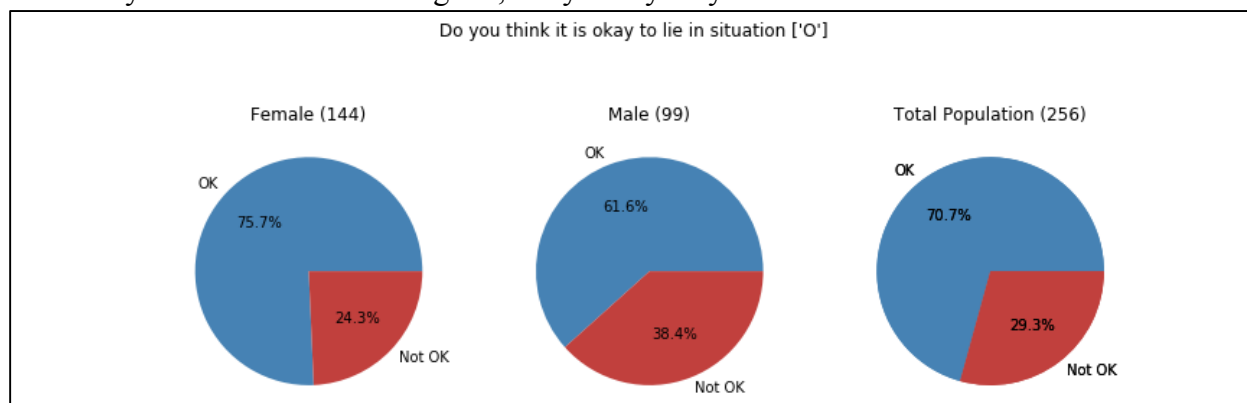
## Sexual Orientation Analysis

Because of low numbers of respondents all of the non-Heterosexual categories, I decided to combine all of the non-Heterosexual students into one category, and see if there were any significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) difference in responses for any of the questions. Below is the only question that resulted in such a difference.
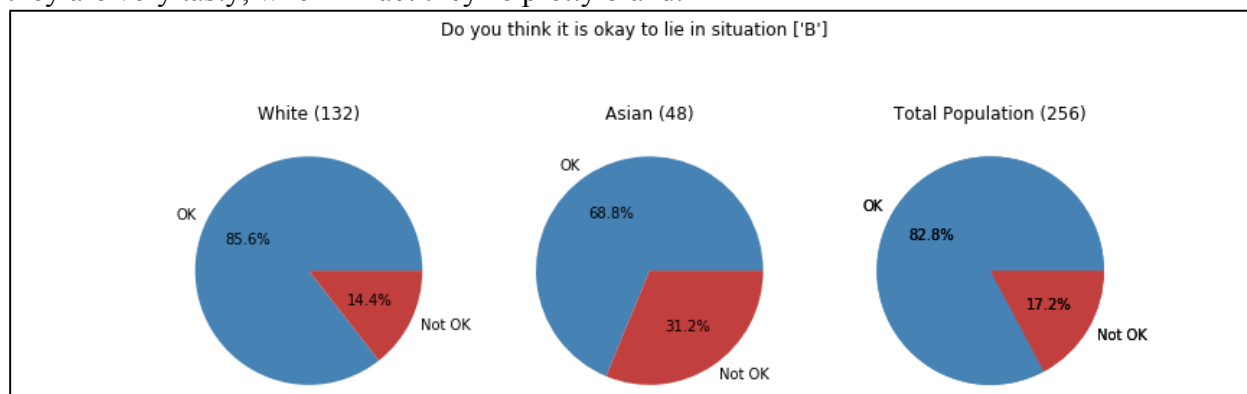
M: Ostensibly in order to ask you on a date, someone asks for your phone number. Not wanting them to contact you, you purposefully give them the wrong number.
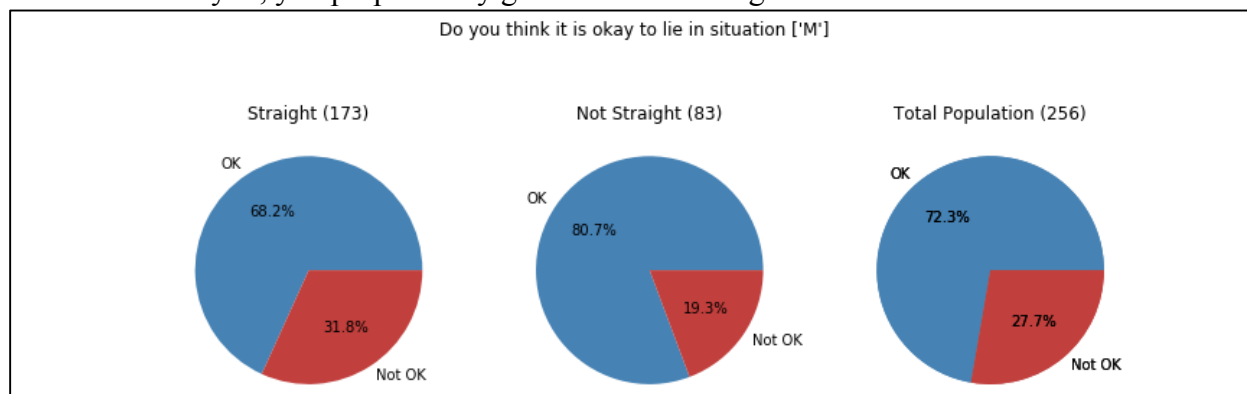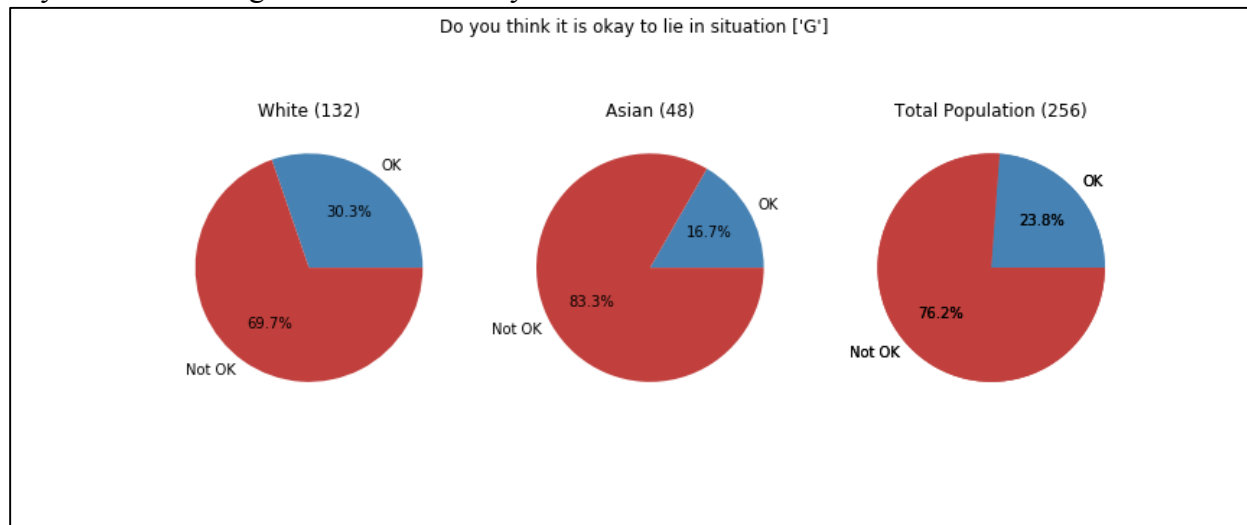


## Race/Ethnicity Analysis

There were enough White and Asian respondents to compare those two groups. However, I was also interested to see if there were any significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) differences in responses between White and non-White students, perhaps owing to white privilege. Below are the questions that resulted in such a difference.
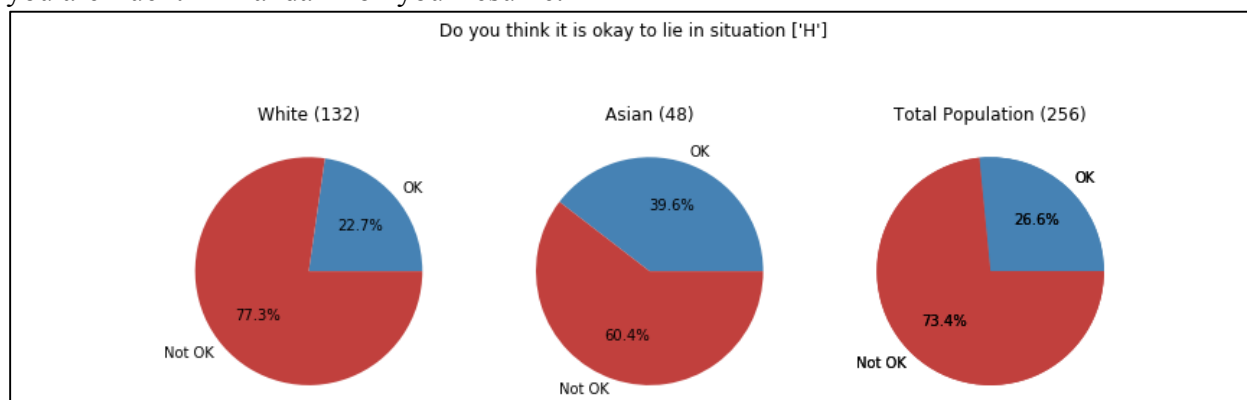
B: Your roommate bakes cookies and offers you some. After eating them, you tell the roommate they are very tasty, when in fact they're pretty bland.
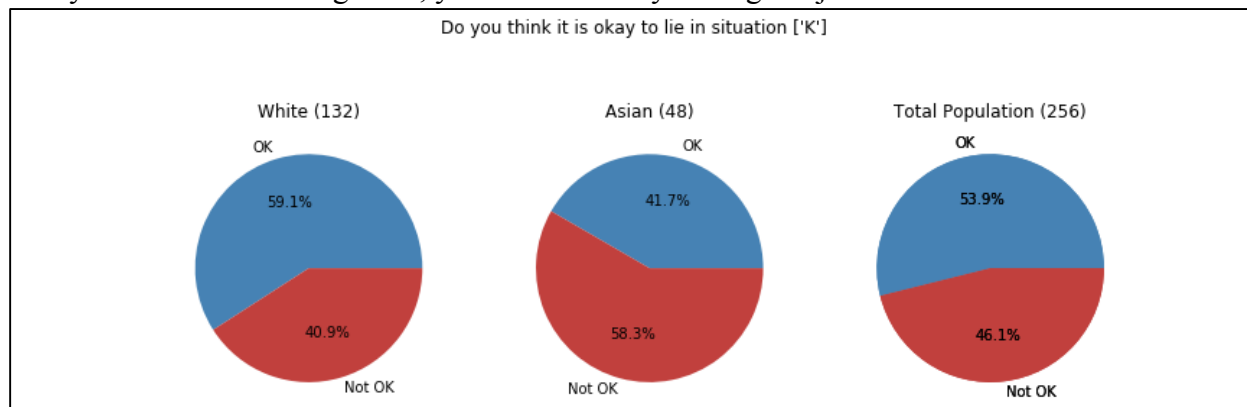
G: While working on a group project, you offer to take on more responsibility for the work. When one the members in your group objects, you tell them "Don't worry, I can do it" — even as you realize it might be too much for you to handle alone.

Do you think it is okay to lie in situation ['G']

White (132)

OK
30.3%

Not OK
69.7%

Asian (48)

OK
16.7%

83.3%
Not OK

Total Population (256)

OK
23.8%

76.2%
Not OK

H: You learned Mandarin in high school and haven't spoken it consistently in years, but you say you are fluent in Mandarin on your resume.

Do you think it is okay to lie in situation ['H']

White (132)

OK
22.7%

77.3%
Not OK

Asian (48)

OK
39.6%

60.4%
Not OK

Total Population (256)

OK
26.6%

73.4%
Not OK

K: You sit in on a meeting between your boss and their boss. Your boss is giving a presentation — while not terrible, it is certainly subpar. After the meeting, when your boss asks you in private how you think the meeting went, you tell them they did a great job.

Do you think it is okay to lie in situation ['K']

White (132)

OK
59.1%

40.9%
Not OK

Asian (48)

OK
41.7%

58.3%
Not OK

Total Population (256)

OK
53.9%

46.1%
Not OK

G: While working on a group project, you offer to take on more responsibility for the work. When one the members in your group objects, you tell them "Don't worry, I can do it" — even as you realize it might be too much for you to handle alone.
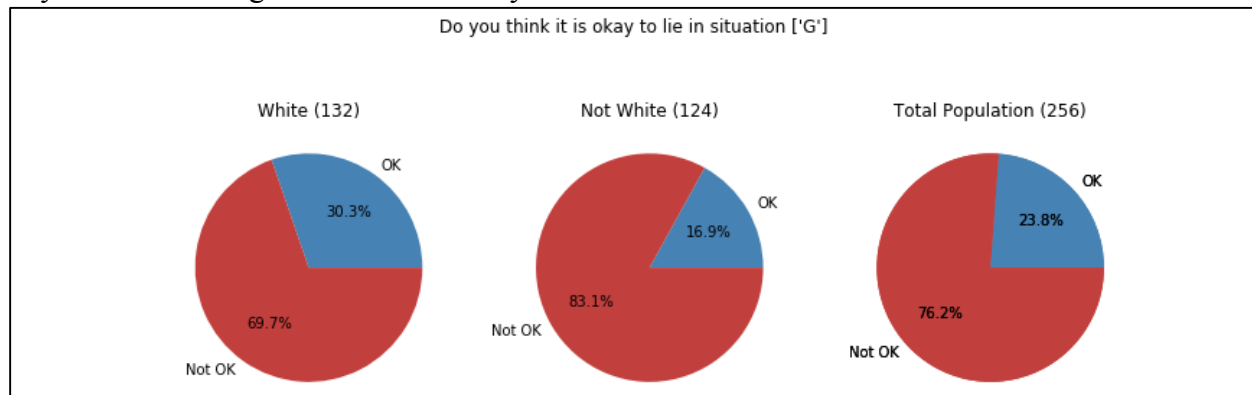


## **Discussion**

Question M asked students whether or not it was okay to lie about your phone number in order to stop another person from contacting you for a date. 35.4% of male respondents thought it was not OK to lie, compared to 22.9% of female respondents. Similarly, 31.8% of straight respondents thought it was not OK, compared to 19.3% of non-straight respondents. This aligns with my hypothesis: perhaps female students who have had more experiences with unwanted advances are more likely to recognize the need to lie in this situation. Similarly, non-straight students may have more experiences with unwelcome or unrequited attention, which would justify lying in order to extricate oneself from the situation. The groups that tend to have more privilege regarding romantic or sexual settings (male students and straight students) might have blind spots as to why it would be justified to lie here.

It is interesting to note, however, that Question C (which asked whether or not it was okay to lie to a potential romantic partner about the number of sexual partners one has had) did not have a statistically significant difference in responses between any of the groups I compared. For example, 76.4% and 77.8% of female and male students, respectively, thought it was not okay to do so. This makes me want to ask more specific versions of this question. Would the percentages among men and women remain nearly identical if we asked whether or not it was okay to say one has had more sexual partners than is true? What about less? What if we asked whether or not it is okay for a man to lie about this? A woman?

Another interesting significant difference between female and male students occurred for Question N, which asked whether or not it was okay to lie to your boss and say that your colleague did more work than is true, resulting in them getting praise. Here, 60.8% of male students thought this was not OK to do, while 81.9% of female students thought the same. This might go along with my hypothesis, but it has an interesting twist since the group with typically more privilege is *less* likely to disapprove of lying. However, the idea of blind spots still is present. If female students tend to speak less in meetings, then they may be less often recognized for their work. As a result, they might be less inclined to say they have done less work than is true and maintain that lying in this case is not OK. Due to their privilege, male students here

could have a blind spot as to the necessity to take credit for one's work. However, this is another question that I would want to re-ask with more specific language —either more clearly outline the result of the lie, ask follow-up questions to understand more about what the subjects thought the result might be.

Question K asked students whether or not it was okay to tell your boss that they gave a great presentation when in fact they did not. My hypothesis was that more White students would say it was not okay than non-White students. That did not happen! While not statistically significant, the trend was switched: 40.9% of White students said it was not okay, while 51.6% of non-White students thought the same. The effect was greater (and statistically significant) when specifically comparing White students to Asian students — 58.3% of Asian students thought it was not OK to lie in this situation. I am not sure why this is the case, but here, again, I would want to know what the subjects thought the outcome of this lie might be. As it is written, I could see it going two ways — lying to the boss in order to placate them and get in their good graces (thus benefiting the liar) or lying to the boss and ultimately steering them wrong, which could disadvantage the boss. The interpretation of this question might have varied among respondents, skewing this data.

There are several other interesting, statistically significant differences among groups answering many of these questions. For example, the percentage of Asian students who think it is not OK to tell one's roommate that their cookies are bland is twice that of White students. More than 77% of White students think it is not OK to lie about how well one can speak Mandarin on their resume, compared to only 60% of Asian students. I haven't yet thought much about what is driving these differences and the others plotted above. However, I have created a GitHub repo with my data and code for analyzing it, so feel free to play around with it yourself here:

[https://github.com/gabeschoenbach/Lying-Research/tree/master/midterm_project]

## **Limitations and Further Plans**

There are several aspects of this pilot study that I would like to change if I were to pursue further research in this area.

In terms of the survey itself, I would definitely randomize the questions. I also would like to reduce the number of questions overall, but increase their quality. I think one well-chosen, specific question per situation (workplace, romantic relationships, etc.) would give me enough information to analyze, and then I could ask further questions about how the subjects are interpreting that situation to ensure that I am not getting confused responses. Lastly, I would phrase the questions in the third person rather than the second person. I heard from some subjects that they were slightly confused about whether they should answer about whether *they* would lie or whether it is okay in general to lie, and I think that would clarify that I am asking about the latter.

Outside of the survey, I would want to get a larger sample size overall, specifically trying to sample more minority populations so I could do better analyses of those groups. Lastly, I'd like to do some more complex, intersectional data analysis — for example, comparing Black women

to White men, etc., as well as analysis on several sets of questions together. I'd like to do analysis similar to "Lying in Everyday Life" (DePaulo, Epstein, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer) to see if I could find what they found, that female students tell more other-oriented lies and fewer self-oriented lies than male students do. My survey is set up to produce those results — I just don't have the technical skills (yet) to combine responses across several questions.

# Conclusion

My results were not fully conclusive, as many situations that I thought would engender significant differences of opinion among segments of the population did not do so. However, there were several instances of significant differences between groups of respondents, and I think that some of the questions that did not result in significant results might be due to lack of specificity or poor phrasing in the question. Considering all of my results together, however, has made me revise my thinking: having more privilege in certain settings might not always make one *less* likely to think it is OK to lie, but the blind spots that privilege creates will *change* the likelihood that one thinks it is OK to lie. This might explain the difference between the results in Question M vs. Question N. Further analysis will be necessary to determine differences between populations in larger categories of lying, i.e. self- vs. other-oriented lying, and gain- vs. psychological-oriented lying.

# Acknowledgements

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