

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jado](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jado)

## Parental monitoring, adolescent dishonesty and underage drinking: A nationally representative study



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 August 2016

Received in revised form 27 March 2017

Accepted 4 April 2017

### ABSTRACT

Little research has connected underage drinking with adolescent information management strategies. The present study uses longitudinal analyses to theoretically link adolescent lying with parental “monitoring knowledge,” and, in turn, with prospective adolescent drinking, in a large nationally representative sample of U.S. seventh- and eighth-graders ( $N = 4020$ ). Structural equation modeling evaluated and supported, two key hypotheses: (1) dishonesty promotes future alcohol use by decreasing parental monitoring knowledge, and (2) dishonesty directly predicts alcohol consumption independent of its effects on parental monitoring. Maternal warmth and adolescent satisfaction with maternal relationships, but not parental control, were associated with lessened lying, and predicted parental monitoring and underage drinking. Our data implicate the role of adolescent agency for parental monitoring and highlight advantages of cohesive as opposed to over-restrictive parenting.

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Underage drinking in the United States remains an urgent public health problem contributing to a host of immediate and long-term detrimental consequences (NIAAA, 2003, 2006; Richter, Pugh, Peters, Vaughan, & Foster, 2015). Multiple social-psychological determinants of adolescent alcohol use have been identified. Considerable research has focused on parental practices, such as monitoring youth's behavior outside of home as potential deterrents of underage drinking (Jaccard, Guilamo-Ramos, & Dittus, 2010). Parents' “monitoring knowledge” about their adolescent children's outside-home activities has consistently predicted less pervasive youth problem behaviors across cultures and geopolitical contexts (Jaccard et al., 2010). The pioneering work by Stattin and colleagues (e.g. Stattin, Kerr, & Tilton-Weaver, 2010) has suggested that a primary source of such parental knowledge is not “parental monitoring” in the traditional sense of parents' tracking/surveillance practices, but rather adolescents' own strategic management of their parents' access to information. Stated another way, much of parental “monitoring knowledge” comes from adolescents' voluntary disclosures to their parents about what they are doing in their lives outside the home; and, thus, disclosed information is subject to adolescents' active filtering and editing. Lying to parents is among several key adolescent information management strategies (Smetana, Villalobos, Tasopoulos-Chan, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2009). Theoretically, the more adolescents tend to lie to their parents, the less “monitoring knowledge” parents are likely to have in order to provide protective guidance. Additionally, adolescents' reliance on lying, as well as the degree of their self-disclosure to parents, largely depends on parent-child relationship qualities (Keijsers & Laird, 2010). Little research to date, however, has explored links of adolescents' tendency to lie to parents with parental monitoring

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knowledge and, ultimately, with underage drinking (Anderson & Teicher, 2009). The few existing studies that indirectly explore the issue have used small convenience samples. The present research uses a large nationally representative sample to (1) empirically test a key hypothesis about association of lying with “monitoring knowledge” and, prospectively with underage drinking, and (2) explore theory-based factors that impact adolescent tendencies to lie to parents.

## 1. Adolescent information management strategies

Recent literature has presented several classifications of adolescent information management strategies relative to their parents. Most of these taxonomies are similar in content and include such strategies as (1) free disclosure of information, (2) partial disclosure, (3) disclosing only after being asked, (4) hiding information, and (5) lying (Keijsers & Laird, 2010). The former three strategies do not involve providing deliberate misinformation, while lying does, as well as, to a degree, does the practice of hiding information/secretcy. Adolescents tend not to interpret avoidance of disclosure or partial disclosure as lying because they do not intentionally present parents with untrue statements (see Smetana, 2008). Several recent longitudinal studies (e.g. Frijns, Keijsers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Laird & Marrero, 2010; Masche, 2010) established, via confirmatory factor analysis, that a broad range of information management strategies can be represented by two overarching factors/dimensions: (1) disclosing strategies and (2) secrecy/concealment strategies. The use of disclosing strategies is more strongly linked to positive aspects of the parent-child relationship, such as trust and feeling connected, while the use of concealing strategies is more strongly linked to negative aspects of the relationship, such as perceptions of parental control (Keijsers & Laird, 2010; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). Both low levels of disclosure and high levels of secrecy/concealment have been prospectively linked to antisocial and rule-breaking behavior (Laird & Marrero, 2010). Studies also implicate concealment (ultimately, a composite score of lying and information-hiding items) as a stronger predictor of delinquency and depression than disclosure (Frijns et al., 2010). No research, however, has explored the role of lying/secretcy in the shaping of prospective adolescent drinking.

## 2. Sources of lying

Research on adolescent lying to parents explores determinants of lying in two major contexts: (1) family processes and (2) peer influences. In the family context, some theoretical frameworks based on the influential work of Baumrind (1966, pp. 887–907) view lying as influenced by parental warmth and parental control. Across studies, parental warmth has been conceptualized as a composite of youth' perception of parental loving, caring, and the adolescent's closeness to the parent (Amato & Kane, 2011). Increased parental warmth has been associated with less adolescent lying (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004; Cumsille, Darling, & Loreto Martinez, 2010). Parental control is generally conceptualized as the extent to which parents limit adolescents' decisions in a variety of domains. The association between parental control and lying is more complex; some studies link more control with more lying (Smetana et al., 2009), while others find the reverse (Jensen et al., 2004). Some researchers suggest that the relationship between parental control and lying may depend on youths' culture-based perceptions of whether parental control is legitimate (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). A study by Kerr, Stattin, Biesecker, and Ferrer-Wreder (2003) suggests minimal effect of parental control on adolescent information management strategies, and on parental monitoring, although that study did not directly examine lying.

Additionally, studies have reported associations between the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship and youth lying (Laird & Marrero, 2010): Better relational quality is associated with less lying/secretcy since youth with good parent-adolescent relations tend to perceive less need for deception (Frijns et al., 2010; Smetana et al., 2009). A reverse dynamic may also operate: When parents find out that their child was lying or hiding information from them and thereby violating their trust, parents might respond with bitterness, sarcasm, or ridicule, and thus withdraw interest (Kerr et al., 2003), making the relationship worse.

Another documented antecedent of adolescent lying is youth's perceived need to assert the right for their personal autonomy (Arnett, 1999; Nucci, 1981; Smetana, 2008). In a mixed-methods survey (Jensen et al., 2004), high school students admitted quite commonly lying to their parents, and found the most acceptable justification for lying being the feeling that they had a right to make their own decisions. This motive is close in domain content, but cognitively different from, adolescent reports of parental control. Some authors attribute a number of adolescent risk behaviors beside lying, such as alcohol use, to a need to assert their personal autonomy (Masten, Faden, Zucker, & Spear, 2008; Windle et al., 2008).

In the peer context, studies have linked lying to involvement with peers who tend to engage in risk behavior such as substance use (Dishion, Capaldi, Spracklen, & Fuzhong, 1995). Risk-taking peer involvement appears to be implicated in the effect of parent-adolescent relational quality on lying (Bristol & Mangleburg, 2005); corroding relationships with parents push adolescents towards negative peers whose influence, in turn, bolsters the propensity to lie. Theoretically, reverse causal dynamics also are plausible - negative peer influences may undermine parent-adolescent relationship quality which, in turn, encourages lying behavior (Goldstein, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2005).

The present research organizes and extends the above research in the context of the theoretical model in Fig. 1 as focused on middle school aged youth. Tendencies to lie to parents are represented as prospective predictors of alcohol use in the ensuing year. A key mechanism explaining this link is the idea that parents rely on adolescents' truthful accounts to keep track/monitor adolescent activities (Kerr, Stattin & Burk, 2010). Adolescent lying thus undermines parental “monitoring knowledge” (path a), disrupting parents' ability to offer protective guidance which, in turn, promotes future alcohol use (path

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