Fraudulent Academic Excuses: Perceptions of Appropriateness & Believability

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ABSTRACT
We investigated perceptions of fraudulent academic excuses. Students completed a survey where they reported past affirmative academic excuses and then rated fraudulent excuses for three different hypothetical scenarios. Throughout the exercise, the recalled affirmative states changed from more negative to more positive. Fraudulent excuses were perceived as either high or low on both the appropriateness and believability measures—either excuses were credible or they were not.

INTRODUCTION
Past survey research has indicated that the use of excuses is prominent in university settings (Caron, Whitbourne, & Halgin, 1992; O’Dell & Hoyert, 2008; Roig & Caso, 2005). Excuse makers may perceive that considerable benefit can be gained from making the excuse, but may also show considerable apprehension about making an excuse. In general, the excuse must be effective.

According to Caron, Whitbourne, and Halgin (1992), “A fraudulent academic excuse is defined as one that the student fabricated specifically for the purpose of avoiding an academic responsibility” (p. 90). In our current study, fraudulent academic excuses were conceptualized as possessing two characteristics that contribute to the excuse’s effectiveness or credibility:

- Appropriateness: The degree to which the excuse fits the situation (e.g., a fraudulent excuse of car trouble for missing a class is much more fitting than a faking a death in the family).
- Believability: The degree to which the excuse could be thought to be true (e.g., a fraudulent excuse of a death in the family is more believable because it is a less commonly used excuse).

The goal of this study was to examine reported affirmative states related to making fraudulent academic excuses, and to note trends in the perception of hypothetical fraudulent excuses.

METHOD
Participants
UWSP students (N = 87) completed an online survey in which they answered questions pertaining to several aspects of fraudulent academic excuses. Eighty-three percent of respondents identified their class standing as either a freshman or sophomore, with a mean age of 19.25.

Procedure and Measures
The survey used in this study consisted of two sections. The first section was designed to be both a self-report of the students’ use of fraudulent academic excuses and to serve as a form of priming for later evaluation of excuse scenarios. Students answered questions about their personal use of fraudulent academic excuses and measured recall of their affirmative states (e.g., ashamed, excited, relieved) before, during, and after giving these fraudulent excuses. Students rated how strongly they felt a particular emotion at that time using a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (did not experience the feeling at all) to 5 (experienced the feeling the strongest).

In the second section of the survey, students were presented with three hypothetical situations in which a fraudulent excuse might be given. For example, students read the following scenario:

“You overhear a classmate who you don’t know discussing with a professor the possibility for a makeup exam. The exam is worth 40% of the overall grade in the class.”

The other two scenarios were similar but manipulated the missed assessment (long-term paper/project, or weekly quiz).

Following each scenario, students rated the believability and appropriateness of eight possible excuses (illness, work conflict, child care, death in the family, car trouble, court date, and weather conditions) on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not appropriate/believable) to 7 (very appropriate/believable). These excuses matched the categories of frequent fraudulent excuses identified by O’Dell and Hoyert (2008).

Finally, students also described the most fraudulent academic excuse they ever heard.

RESULTS
Recall of Affective States
Univariate Repeated Measures ANOVAs showed significant differences over time for both positive affective states, F(2, 172) = 17.348, p < .001, η² = .266, and for negative affective states, F(2, 172) = 6.220, p < .001, η² = .234. Reported positive emotions were significantly lower before and during the excuse making than they were afterward. Reported negative emotions were significantly higher while giving the excuse, and were particularly low after giving the excuse.

Believability and Appropriateness
Univariate Repeated Measures ANOVAs showed significant differences among excuses for both Appropriateness, F(7, 1204) = 13.947, p < .001, η² = .140, and for Believability, F(7, 1204) = 23.300, p < .001, η² = .213. Though patterns were slightly different for the variables, Death in Family and Illness were seen as significantly more credible, and Work and Out of Town as significantly less credible.

DISCUSSION
Sixty-two percent of surveyed students reported giving a fraudulent academic excuse at least once while in college. This percentage is comparable to results obtained in similar research studies (O’Dell & Hoyert, 2008).

On average, students reported experiencing more negative emotions before giving a fraudulent excuse, and reported experiencing more positive emotions after giving the excuse. Specifically, the three highest rated emotions were desperate before the giving the excuse, nervous while giving the excuse, and relieved afterwards—all highlighting the importance of providing excuses that are both appropriate and believable.

In general, participants rated illness and a death in the family as excuses with high amounts of both appropriateness and believability across situations. However, the mean ratings of appropriateness and believability for the eight possible excuses in the hypothetical scenarios were all significantly different across conditions, demonstrating that excuses often need to be tailored to the context in order to be viewed as credible.

A trend emerged among the rating of excuses: either the excuse was high or low in both appropriateness and believability. This shows the relatedness of the variables and the unwillingness of participants to view an excuse as just appropriate or just believable. This seems to be congruent with how excuses are perceived in general—it either they are credible or not.

Overall, it is important to remember that these results pertain to excuses that are false, and should not be used unless they are true.

REFERENCES