

Children's moral judgment of lying: Useful knowledge for classroom teachers

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Abstract

This article reviewed the recent literature on children's moral judgment of lying. A spectrum of reprehensibility was found featuring children's moral judgment of lying, with altruistic lies being rated as most permissible, white lies as positive but less than altruistic lies, and anti-social lies as most reprehensible. Children's moral judgment of lying was found age specific: The younger the children the harsher their judgment. Children 4 or 5 years of age begin to understand the moral values of altruistic lies and the social functions of white lies, while condemning anti-social lies for their moral disvalues. Cultural differences were found in children's moral judgment of white lies, but not in altruistic and anti-social lies. Suggestions for further research and classroom teachers were discussed.

Key word: elements, child, moral judgment, lying, classroom teachers

Many teachers are frustrated with student lie-telling. Their frustration is due to large extent to lack of knowledge about the fact that lying is a ubiquitous human phenomenon, and children as young as 3 years old start to lie (Polak & Harris, 1999, cited in Lee, Cameron, Doucette, & Talwar, 2002). To effectively manage students' problem behaviors and deal with student lying behavior, classroom teachers desperately need to understand the nature of lying and particularly children's moral judgment of lying. Also, it is necessary for prospective classroom teachers to be informed of the psychology of lying, which has yet to be included in teacher education courses. Teacher educators, especially those who teach courses with regard to effective teaching strategies, classroom management, and educational psychology should educate future classroom teachers how to effectively deal with student lying behavior, among others. As a small part of a large project which seeks to inform classroom teachers how to deal with student lie-telling, the present article synthesized empirical findings regarding children's moral judgment of lying.

As an early area of investigation in developmental psychology (e.g., Hartshorne & May, 1929; Krout, 1931; Piaget, 1932/1965; Tudor-Hart, 1926), children's moral judgment of lying had been neglected for decades. Since the 1970s, this area has witnessed a resurgence of interest among social scientists, and a wealth of literature has been produced. However, information on children's moral judgment of lying is scattered in various studies which explored children's concepts, production, detection as well as moral judgment of lying (Lee et al., 2002). Progress, therefore, requires systematic attempts to assess the current state of knowledge and "point up tentative generalizations, gaps, and inconsistencies which can be used as guides in further research" (Hoffman, 1963, p.295). This is another reason for the author sparing no pains to navigate through the literature and integrate and distill the findings and insights of previous investigators.

Studies conducted before the 1970s have been fairly systematically examined (e.g., Burton, 1976; Duska & Whelan, 1975). Studies conducted after the 1970s have not received critical evaluation. The only existing effort which examined the post-1970s studies (Lee, 2000) has not drawn attention to the full range of latest advances in this area. The current study is such an attempt to evaluate the recent (i.e., post-1970s) publications. This synthesis was conducted by following the general research question: How does the recent literature depict children's moral judgment of lying in general and of particular lie types?

Method

Searching Literature

Three methods guided the literature search. First, the search engine PsycINFO was used. Studies to be reviewed are primarily psychological in nature, so PsycINFO appears to be the most relevant search engine. Also, the databases JSTOR and ERIC were searched. For both methods, key words were developed and employed to facilitate the search, including moral judgment and its relevant phrases (e.g., moral evaluation, acceptability, moral reasoning, and moral attitude); lying and its synonyms or antonyms (e.g., verbal deception, cheating, truth, honesty, fabrication, and prevarication); and combinations of moral judgment and lying or lies (e.g., moral judgment of lying or lies, acceptability of lying, and reprehensibility of lying). In addition, the bibliographies in initially identified studies helped with identifying other relevant studies. The search stopped at the point when the same studies were repeatedly found. A total of 25 relevant studies ($n = 25$) were obtained for further analysis.

Analyzing Literature

Literature analysis witnessed three stages. The first stage involved case analysis. Each study was closely examined to identify children's moral judgment of lying and particular lie types.

During the second stage, cross-analysis was conducted between the obtained studies. Each study was compared and contrasted with others, with particular attention paid to information on characteristics of the subjects, methods and measures for data collection, methods of data analysis, relations tested, and results obtained. From this cross analysis emerged two major themes: (a) children's moral judgment of lying in general and (b) children's judgment of particular lie types. These two themes match the general research question and provide a "convenient framework" (Ho, 1986, p.3) for the macro organization of results.

The third stage of analysis was focused on classifying the investigated lie types. The literature examined primarily social lies and anti-social lies as defined by Tudor-Hart (1926). Social lies include two subcategories: (a) altruistic lies told to save others from danger or specifically for the good of others, and (b) white lies told for politeness or not embarrassing the speaker or the target (Bussey, 1999). While altruistic lies and white lies often times seem to overlap a lot (e.g., a white lie told to save others from shame or embarrassment is altruistic in nature), altruistic lies, compared to white lies, are "the more extreme type of social lies" (Bussey, 1999, p.1339), as altruistic lies are specifically for the good of the target, and white lies are primarily for politeness or good feeling.

Accordingly, lie types were classified into three types. The first type is altruistic lies, including lies intended "to protect innocent victims from harm" (Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto, 1983, p.1530) or "to save someone from danger" (Bussey, 1999, p.1339). The second type is white lies, including lies "not meant to injure anyone" (Bok, 1979, p.61), "intended to spare hurt feelings" (Peterson et al., 1983, p.1530), or intended to get others or oneself out of an awkward situation (Tudor-Hart, 1926). The third type is anti-social lies, including lies told to hurt or harm, to get the advantage over the target, to benefit oneself at the expense of others, or if not at the

expense of others, at least with the conscious knowledge that others will suffer on account of the lies (Tudor-Hart, 1926).

Results

A Spectrum of Reprehensibility

This study found that children's moral judgment of lying in general was featured with a spectrum of reprehensibility, and within lie types, altruistic lies were rated as most positive, and next to altruistic lies were white lies. Both altruistic lies and white lies were more positively rated than anti-social lies (Bussey, 1999; Lindsfold & Han, 1986; Lindsfold & Walters, 1983; Peterson et al., 1983). Lindsfold and Walters's (1983) study distinguished itself by establishing a spectrum of reprehensibility of lies based on children's ratings of different falsehoods. Citing Maki, Thorngate, and McGlintock's (1979) theory that social motives in American culture range in positivity from martyrdom and altruism through cooperation, individualism, competition, harm-doing, and exploitation, Lindsfold and Walters (1983) hypothesized that lies told in the service of these motives should accordingly be evaluated as variously praiseworthy or reprehensible. To test this hypothesis, they designed three experimental studies. As found out, a set of six categories of lies range in children's ratings from most permissible altruistic lies, through less permissible white lies, to least permissible anti-social lies.

However, Lindsfold and colleagues suspected that the perceived permissibility of these lies might have been a function of their arrangement along the aforementioned continuum of social motivation. To test this hypothesis, Lindsfold and Han (1986) rewrote 15 of the lies used by Lindsfold and Walters (1983), chosen to represent all 6 categories, without showing the term *lying* to describe social behavior of a similar nature. Child participants (n = 60) rated the 15 actions on an 11-point scale. The results were evaluated by comparing the ranking of the means

of the 15 items when rated as lies with the ranking of the means of the rewritten items. The two sets of ranks were highly correlated. It was concluded that the lie categories seem very stable, and children's moral judgment of lying is featured with a spectrum of reprehensibility, ranging from the least reprehensible altruistic lies, through less reprehensible white lies, to most reprehensible anti-social lies.

Children's Moral Judgment of Particular Lie Types

Altruistic lies. Two recent studies specifically addressed children's moral judgment of altruistic lies, either in terms of age differences (Peterson et al., 1983) or the effects of intention (Barnett et al., 2000). Peterson et al. (1983) explored how children 5-11 years of age evaluated different lie types, one of which is an altruistic lie in the form of a televised story: A bully, who is searching for a younger child whom he claims to want to beat up, asks a girl where the little child is; the girl knows where the child is, but she says she doesn't. Participants rated the goodness or badness of the girl's statement. Scores for the evaluation range from 1 for "very, very bad" to 6 for "very, very good." Mean rating by all ages combined is 3.8; the altruistic lie is rated as positive or "a little bit good" and is more positive than are white and antisocial lies. Participants' ratings of altruistic lies are age specific: The younger the children, the lower their ratings of altruistic lies. Specifically, 5-year-olds gave the altruistic lie significantly lower scores than older groups; 8-year-olds' ratings of the altruistic lie did not differ significantly from 9-year-olds', but both were lower than 11-year-olds'.

Barnett et al. (2000) explored the effects of intention on children's moral judgment of altruistic lies. Child participants ($n = 152$; no significant gender difference) were asked to consider 8 different lie situations described by 8 different children. In each case that was considered, a (fictitious) child described a situation in which he or she had lied to another child

and the reason why he or she had lied in that situation: either to benefit the child who lied or to benefit the child lied to. Subjects were first read each lie description before they rated on a 5-point scale the extent to which the child who lied is likeable or sneaky. It was found that child participants displayed a clear positive attitude toward the child who told altruistic lies to benefit the target, meaning that lies intended to benefit the target were rated more favorably than those intended to benefit the lie-teller oneself.

White lies. Six recent studies (Bussey, 1999; Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, & Board, 1997; Lee, Xu, Fu, Cameron, & Chen, 2001; Peterson et al., 1983; Walper & Valtin, 1992) specifically investigated children's moral judgment of white lies. Bussey (1999) found that white lies were evaluated less negatively than anti-social lies. Peterson et al. (1983) found that age is not significantly associated with 5- to 11-year-olds' moral judgment of white lies, and children did not differ from one another in their ratings of the acceptability of white lies. However, the white lie used by Peterson et al. (1983) to provoke children's moral judgment was told by a child to another child. It is possible that children's ratings might be different had the lie been told by a child, say, to an adult. This assumption was confirmed by Walper and Valtin (1992), who found that white lies told to adults (one's own mother) were negatively evaluated by all 6-, 8-, and 10-year-old participants.

Noticing that Walper and Valtin's (1992) subjects are all Western children (Germans in Berlin), and it is unclear if the findings regarding the context differences were universal or culturally specific, Lee et al. (1997, 2001) explored children's moral judgment of white lies from a cross-cultural perspective. They found that both Chinese and Canadian children's evaluations of white lies were significantly related to age and culture. Canadian children overall rated white lies as negative while Chinese children's ratings changed clearly from negative to positive;

Chinese children rated the white lies as more positive than Canadian children. As age increased, Chinese children's ratings went from negative to positive while Canadian children's negative evaluations of white lies remained relatively stable. Lee et al. (1997, 2001) interpreted this effect as the result of Chinese children's increasing awareness of the socio-cultural norm of being modest and self-effacing in pro-social deed situations.

However, Lee et al.'s (2001) interpretation seems inadequate, as there are other alternative explanations. As reported in a study of Chinese children's ethical discourse on the necessity of lying about one's own pro-social deeds (Gao, 2010), the most frequently mentioned reason appears to be social consequences (e.g., losing peers' friendships or facing peers' mockery), followed by personal emotional experiences and influences of authority, with the socio-cultural norm modesty or humility least frequently mentioned.

Anti-social lies. Six studies investigated children's moral judgment of anti-social lies (Barnett et al., 2000; Bussey, 1999; Lee et al., 1997, 2001; Peterson et al., 1983; Wimmer, Gruber, & Perner, 1984). Overall, anti-social lies were negatively judged and worse than white and altruistic lies. According to Peterson et al. (1983), children as young as 5 years of age assigned worse ratings to anti-social lies than to white and altruistic lies. When a protagonist's deceptive or truthful intention is made explicit (Wimmer et al., 1984), children as young as 6 years of age gave significantly more rewards to the protagonist who had truthful intention than the one who had a deceptive intention.

Children's moral judgments of anti-social lies appear to vary with consequences (Peterson et al., 1983; Barnett et al., 2000). Peterson et al. (1983) compared 5-, 8-, 9-, and 11-year-olds' (n = 160) evaluations of three anti-social lies. In Lie 1 (which caused neutral consequences), a child by chance spilling milk to the floor told her mother that the dog did it. In Lie 2 (which caused

punishment), a child accidentally spilling ink on her bedspread said she did not do it; but her mother did not believe her and thus scolded and spanked her. In Lie 3 (which was believed and thus did not cause punishment), a child by chance spilling ink on her bedspread said she did not do it; her mother believed her and thus withheld punishment. All three lies were judged negatively (between “medium bad” and “a little bad”), but Lie 1 was judged more negatively than were Lie 2 and Lie 3, both of which had the same negative ratings. Age comparisons revealed that children of all ages did not differ from one another in their evaluations of Lie 2 (punished), whereas 9-year-olds gave Lie 1 (neutral consequences) a better rating than did 11-year-olds. Lie 3 (believed and not punished) was judged as worse by 11-year-olds than by other age groups and as significantly better by 5-year-olds than by 8-year-olds. It was found that 5-year-olds did not judge the punished lie (Lie 2) to be any worse than the believed-and-not-punished lie (Lie 3). Barnett et al. (2000) also reported that children’s reactions to anti-social lies were influenced by the types of consequence, with anti-social lies which physically benefit the liar being more negatively rated than those with psychological consequences.

Effects of intention on children’s ratings of anti-social lies were also examined. Bussey (1999) explored 4- to 11-year-olds’ evaluative reactions to four anti-social lies told to conceal misdeeds and four anti-social lies told for the liar’s temporary amusement but tempered by the negative reaction of the recipient who is misled. In general, eight anti-social lies were all rated as significantly negative, and this pattern held across all age groups. However, the four anti-social lies told to conceal misdeeds were more negatively rated than those told for the liar’s temporary amusement but were tempered by the negative reaction of the recipient who is misled.

In addition, Lee et al. (1997, 2001) delineated situational effects on children’s ratings of anti-social lies. They found that both Chinese and Canadian children rated anti-social lies negatively,

and negative ratings increased with age irrespective of culture. However, 7-year-old Chinese children rated anti-social lies in the physical condition less negatively than did older children, whereas 7-year-old Canadian children rated anti-social lies in the social condition less negatively than older ones.

Discussion

Conclusions

This synthesis contributes to the knowledge pool of how children perceive the morality of lying. First, children's moral judgment of lying is featured with a spectrum of reprehensibility and varies with particular lie types. Children tend to rate altruistic lies as most permissible, white lies as positive but less than altruistic lies, and anti-social lies as the most reprehensible. Also, children's ratings of lying are age-specific: The younger the children are, the harsher their moral judgment of lying is. Children as young as 4 or 5 years old begin to understand the moral values of altruistic lies and the social functions of white lies, while condemning anti-social lies for their moral disvalues. Finally, children's ratings of white lies are characteristic of cultural differences, and for anti-social lies, no major cultural differences were found.

Suggestions for Future Research

First, most of the recent studies have assessed children's moral judgment of lying by asking them to evaluate behavioral sequences that are depicted in a verbal (audio or video), story-like format. However, many stories used in the moral judgment literature are poorly structured. One helpful technique is the story-grammar analysis (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1975; Stein & Glenn, 1979). The story-grammar analysis has six categories and is particularly suited to

deal with the kind of goal-motivated story that is commonly used in the moral judgment literature (Grueneich, 1982).

Also, a number of recent studies are focused on the cognitive process in which children employ their moral knowledge of lying to make moral judgments, without asking how children acquire their moral knowledge of lying. If individuals come to grips with what is right and what is wrong to tell and do in the process of acculturation and socialization (Schein, 2004), then future efforts have good reasons to investigate the process of acculturation and socialization in honesty, namely, how a child acquires what Aristotle called *phronesis*—practical wisdom of lying or truthfulness (Flanagan, 1992).

In addition, most of what is known about children's moral judgment of lying has been the product of fairly sanitized settings in which children are asked to make judgments about either fictitious events that hold little interest or emotion for them or hypothetical moral situations which are "emotionally neutral and motivationally weak" (Ceci, Leichtman, & Putnick, 1992, p. vii). It is possible that when children are assessed in settings that are highly meaningful and affectively laden, their moral judgment of lying may be more likely to conjure up a different picture than when they are studied in weak or affectively limited contexts (Saltzstein, 1994). Therefore, researchers should venture outside the current hypothetical paradigms and start embedding their studies in affectively laden contexts and pushing the outer envelope of ethical permissibility by subjecting children to their own lived experiences.

Suggestions for Classroom Teachers

It is important that classroom teachers understand how children perceive the morality of lying in order to effectively deal with student lie-telling. In classroom practices, teachers would feel most comfortable should they understand that children tell lies for a variety of reasons. Just

to name a few. First, kids are scared of the consequences of their actions, so they often tell lies to cover up. Teacher should reflect whether the rules or limits they have set up for classroom behaviors are too strict or too tight. Teachers also should create an environment in which students feel free to talk with them. Secondly, young children are imaginative and cannot distinguish lies from fantasy. For many of them, telling the truth is just way too boring. They'd prefer telling untrue stories either for fun, to avoid an unpleasant task, for love, or simply to impress adults. Thirdly, it is impossible for teachers to keep their students from lying. What teachers can do is not create a situation where their students feel pressured to lie or suffer the negative consequences of misbehaviors. Finally, when a student has misbehaved, a better approach is to talk calmly with him or her about what happened rather than confront him or her with direct reprimand, scream, or putting him or her into a situation where he or she has got no way out except to lie.

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