Developmental profiles of children’s spontaneous lie-telling behavior

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ABSTRACT

Lying emerges as a typical childhood behavior, but little is known about the frequency and types of lies that children tell in relation to age and theory of mind (ToM). This study explored the frequency and types of lies that children 3–14 years old (N = 229) told in their natural environments over two weeks, as reported by their parents. Results suggest that classes of lie-telling behavior emerge according to age and ToM: occasional liars (those with few lies reported across categories; 51%), instrumental liars (lies primarily for material benefit; 42%), and antisocial liars (lies primarily to avoid personal consequences; 7%). Children with lower ToM had a higher frequency of antisocial lies reported, which suggests the use of lie-telling as a problematic social behavior in children whose ToM lags behind their peers.

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1. Introduction

Lying in both children and adults is a normative behavior in that most people tell lies, at least on occasion (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996; Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010). However, despite it being a common behavior, it is considered a reprehensible one that can have negative ramifications for social relationships (Bok, 1978; Talwar & Crossman, 2011). For some individuals it may become a maladaptive behavior, either due to telling many lies (Gervais, Tremblay, Desmarais-Gervais, & Vitaro, 2000; Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1986; Warr, 2007), or due to the types of lies that are being told, for example serious lies that involve transgressions or that could place an individual in danger (DePaulo, Anfield, Kirkendol, & Boden, 2004).

Educators, clinicians, and parents are concerned with the development of lie-telling that becomes a serious behavioral problem and that places children’s credibility in question. Indeed, there is some limited research to suggest that chronic lying is related to aggression, delinquency, and conduct problems in older children and adolescents (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1979, 1981; Gervais et al., 2000; Ostrov, Ries, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008; Rutter, 1967; Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1986; Warr, 2007). However, currently little is known about the types of lies that children tell in their daily lives and how these lies cluster to form profiles of lie-telling behavior that can suggest either normative development or a behavioral problem. To date, there has been no examination of the frequency of lie-telling and of the different types of lies told by children and adolescents to explore how types of lies may cluster in the same individual, despite the fact that this information may

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reveal whether children’s lying patterns follow a typical developmental pathway or may be a risk factor for other antisocial behavior.

1.1. Lie-telling and theory of mind

Researchers have shown that lie-telling emerges in the preschool years and is related to their emerging cognitive sophistication (Chandler, Fritz, & Hala, 1989; Ding, Wellman, Wang, Fu, & Lee, 2015; Evans & Lee, 2013; Lewis, Stanger, & Sullivan, 1989; Talwar & Lee, 2002a, 2008). Children’s propensity and ability to tell convincing lies further increase into middle childhood and adolescence (Evans & Lee, 2011; Talwar & Lee, 2002a, 2008; for a review see Talwar & Crossman, 2011, 2012) and is still likely related to their cognitive abilities. In particular, theory of mind (ToM), the ability to manage information from another person’s perspective, has been found to play a key role in the development of children’s lie-telling (Evans, Xu, & Lee, 2011; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar & Lee, 2008; Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007). Specifically, ToM has been related to children’s lie-telling in experimental settings (Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007; Talwar & Lee, 2008; Williams, Moore, Crossman & Talwar, 2015), and may also be associated with their lie-telling tendencies in naturalistic settings.

Children’s ToM may also be related to the types of lies they tell. Previous findings suggest that children with high ToM may also engage in more prosocial behavior (Caputi, Leccce, Pagnin, & Banerjee, 2012; Eggum et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2015), which may also be evident in their lie-telling through telling more prosocial lies (i.e., intended to benefit another individual) and fewer antisocial lies (i.e., intended to benefit themselves or even hurt another individual). At the same time, frequent lying in children and adolescents may be related to underlying immature cognitive abilities. This delay in cognitive development could result in the use of the more primitive strategy of lie-telling to manage their social environments following transgressive behavior (i.e., Rasmussen, Talwar, Loomes & Andrews, 2007; Talwar & Crossman, 2011; Talwar & Lee, 2002b). However, it is still not known how lying deviates from being part of children’s normal development to being a problem behavior for some children, nor about the role that ToM may play in these developmental trajectories of lie-telling behavior. To begin to understand this development, the first step is to explore how the frequency of lie-telling as a social strategy changes with age and ToM. Further, because lying in general tends to be perceived as a problem behavior in children, it is important to differentiate between the types of lies that children typically tell to understand better when and for whom lying is problematic.

1.2. Development of lie-telling

Children’s lie-telling has primarily been studied using experimental paradigms that examine the likelihood that they will tell a lie to a researcher in a contrived scenario. The majority of these studies have examined children’s lie-telling to conceal a transgression (e.g., Evans & Lee, 2013; Evans et al., 2011; Fu, Evans, Xu, & Lee, 2012; Talwar & Lee, 2002b), but a few have also explored other types of lies, such as lying to protect another or to be polite (e.g., Popliger et al., 2011; Talwar & Lee, 2002a; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2004; Talwar, Murphy, & Lee, 2007; Xu, Bao, Fu, Talwar, & Lee, 2010; Williams et al., 2015). Based on these paradigms, researchers have suggested that young children’s first lies may be told primarily to achieve instrumental and interpersonal goals, such as to conceal a transgression (Lewis et al., 1989; Talwar & Lee, 2002b), but that with age, around middle childhood, they are increasingly likely to tell prosocial lies, such as to be polite (Popliger, Talwar, & Crossman, 2011; Talwar, Murphy, & Lee, 2007). Findings from experimental studies also suggest that between middle childhood and mid-adolescence, children’s instrumental lie-telling may decrease (Evans & Lee, 2011). Overall, these findings suggest that there may be a developmental trajectory to the types of lies that children tell, however in general these studies examined only a limited age range in an experimental setting in which one lie, and only one type of lie (i.e., polite or instrumental), was measured. Although laboratory-based studies have allowed for controlled examination of children’s lie-telling abilities, they have not allowed for the measurement of the frequency of children’s lies or the range of types of lies that children commonly tell in their daily lives, which is necessary to test whether there might be a developmental trajectory to the types of lies that children tell in their daily lives.

Related to lying behavior, Hartshorne and May’s (1928) Doctrine of Specificity suggests that honesty is not a constant trait; rather, it depends on the social context of the interaction. That is, individuals are likely to lie for many different reasons, for example the severity of the consequences if the truth was discovered or the possible benefits that might result from lying (e.g., Ceci, Leichtman, & Putnwick, 1992). In essence, this theory asserts that children cannot be classified into categories of honest children versus dishonest children because their honesty or dishonesty is dynamic according to the social context. However, in experimental designs this is often the case; children are categorized as a truth-teller or a lie-teller based on information that is available from one laboratory situation that may not accurately depict their lie-telling behavior on a daily basis. For example, experimental designs are not able to capture children’s common uses of lie-telling as a strategy in their daily interpersonal interactions with those with whom they are familiar and have close relationships. To truly evaluate whether patterns emerge in children’s lie-telling behavior, it is necessary to consider the frequency and types of lies that children tell across contexts, as suggested by the Doctrine of Specificity.

1.2.1. Types of lies that children tell at home

Children’s spontaneous lie-telling in their natural environments has only been examined in two known studies. One study examined the frequency of deception among 40 children between 3 and 6 years of age in their homes using two
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