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The roles of liar intention, lie content, and theory of mind in children's evaluation of lies



Him Cheung*, Tik-Sze Carrey Siu, Lan Chen

Department of Psychology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This study found that 7-, 9-, and 11-year-old children and young adults identified prosocial lies as lies less frequently and evaluated them less negatively than selfish lies (liar intention effect); lies about opinions were identified as lies less frequently and evaluated less negatively than those about reality (lie content effect). The lie content effect was more pronounced in the prosocial lies than in the selfish lies for both identification and evaluation. Overall, the older participants considered liar intention more than the younger participants in lie evaluation. For the child participants, second-order belief understanding correlated marginally with sensitivity to liar intention in the opinion lies, but not with content sensitivity. Finally, lie identification correlated with evaluation in the prosocial–opinion lies for all of the children. The independent effects of intention and content could potentially explain children's development in “white lie” understanding demonstrated in the literature. Although the content effect appears to stem from a more general concern for whether communication is about objective reality, the intention effect may involve theory of mind.

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Introduction

Lie-telling is commonplace among 3- and 4-year-olds (Reddy, 2007; Talwar & Crossman, 2011). One recent study reported that children start to tell lies to conceal transgressions before their third birthday (Evans & Lee, 2013). This study, and many others, used the temptation resistance paradigm,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: hcheung@psy.cuhk.edu.hk (H. Cheung).

in which the children were asked not to peek at a toy. Many of them peeked nevertheless and also lied about the transgression when later asked. Although early lies are usually told to serve selfish purposes, later in development the motivations of lie-telling become more varied. For instance, “white lies” are told to protect another person’s feelings when the blunt truth is considered hurtful or impolite (Popliger, Talwar, & Crossman, 2011; Talwar & Lee, 2002b; Talwar, Murphy, & Lee, 2007; Xu, Bao, Fu, Talwar, & Lee, 2010; Xu, Luo, Fu, & Lee, 2009). In many of these studies, white lies were elicited with the disappointing gift paradigm, in which the child received an unwanted gift and was asked by the gift sender whether he or she liked it. Children would usually lie about their true non-preference for the gift so that the feelings of the gift sender were spared. Popliger et al. (2011) showed that preschoolers and elementary school children were able to consider both self-interest and others’ feelings in deciding whether to tell a white lie; the older children tended to consider others’ feelings more than the younger ones.

Children’s considerations behind lie identification and evaluation also change as development progresses (Broomfield, Robinson, & Robinson, 2002; Bussey, 1999; Gao, 2012). Maas (2008) found that 4- and 6-year-olds were able to assess the speaker’s sincerity in deciding whether a lie was told. Lee and Ross (1997) showed that adolescents were more likely to call a false statement a lie when the speaker intended to hurt, rather than help, another person. False statements were also seen as lies more frequently when the situation called for information accuracy rather than politeness. Xu et al. (2009) replicated these results in 7- to 11-year-olds and showed that lies meant to help were judged as less morally wrong than those meant to hurt. Bussey (1992) reported that although preschoolers were concerned with both the falsity of the statement and whether it would lead to punishment when asked to evaluate it, fifth-graders appeared to consider falsity only. Bussey (1999), Heyman, Sweet, and Lee (2009), and Xu et al. (2010) confirmed that white lies told to protect another person’s feelings were evaluated by children as more acceptable than lies without a prosocial motive. When evaluating white lies, 7- to 11-year-olds also consider the actual consequence of withholding the truthful information and the presence of others that would result in more embarrassment if the blunt truth were told (Ma, Xu, Heyman, & Lee, 2011).

Some research has shown that culture may play a role in children’s lie evaluation. Although there is little evidence for cultural variations in selfish lie evaluation, children from different cultures appear to respond differently to lies motivated by non-selfish reasons. For instance, Chinese children in particular may regard staying modest as a good reason for lying about one’s achievements or good deeds. Fu and colleagues (2010) showed that Chinese 7-, 9-, and 11-year-olds rated modest lies more favorably than boastful truths, and this modesty effect increased with age. Other studies demonstrated that Chinese children were more likely than their North American counterparts to rate modest lies more positively than boastful truths (Cameron, Lau, Fu, & Lee, 2012) and ordinary lies to conceal transgressions (Fu, Lee, Cameron, & Xu, 2001; Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, & Board, 1997; Lee, Xu, Fu, Cameron, & Chen, 2001). This cultural effect on lie evaluation may have to do with the emphasis on interpersonal harmony and interdependence in the Chinese culture (Fu et al., 2010; Kim, Kam, Sharkey, & Singelis, 2008; Wang, Bernas, & Eberhard, 2012; but see also Sweet, Heyman, Fu, & Lee, 2010). Cultural factors may also contribute to other variations in the perception of non-selfish lies such as how good or bad it is to lie for the collective benefit of one’s own group against individual interest (Fu, Evans, Wang, & Lee, 2008; Fu, Xu, Cameron, Heyman, & Lee, 2007).

Because lying involves instilling wrong information into other minds and assessing what others know and sometimes how they feel, it calls for organized knowledge about how the mind works in terms of how different mental states are related to one another, to perception, and to behavior. Such understanding is known as theory of mind (ToM). A specific sub-ability under the broader concept of ToM that is particularly relevant to lie-telling and perception is false belief understanding, which is children’s ability to represent an inaccurate representation of reality alongside their own correct representation. A typical false belief understanding task assesses children’s recognition that an agent acts in accordance with his or her own belief, albeit a wrong one because of faulty perception or deliberate deception by others (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Second-order false belief understanding represents a more advanced form of belief understanding concerning children’s recognition that an agent may have a wrong representation of another agent’s knowledge about reality (Hogrefe, Wimmer, & Perner, 1986; Perner & Wimmer, 1985). To use and understand lies, children would need to know how a

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