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Predictors of children's prosocial lie-telling: Motivation, socialization variables, and moral understanding

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ABSTRACT

Children tell prosocial lies for self- and other-oriented reasons. However, it is unclear how motivational and socialization factors affect their lying. Furthermore, it is unclear whether children's moral understanding and evaluations of prosocial lie scenarios (including perceptions of vignette characters' feelings) predict their actual prosocial behaviors. These were explored in two studies. In Study 1, 72 children (36 second graders and 36 fourth graders) participated in a disappointing gift paradigm in either a high-cost condition (lost a good gift for a disappointing one) or a low-cost condition (received a disappointing gift). More children lied in the low-cost condition (94%) than in the high-cost condition (72%), with no age difference. In Study 2, 117 children (42 preschoolers, 41 early elementary school age, and 34 late elementary school age) participated in either a high- or low-cost disappointing gift paradigm and responded to prosocial vignette scenarios. Parents reported on their parenting practices and family emotional expressivity. Again, more children lied in the low-cost condition (68%) than in the high-cost condition (40%); however, there was an age effect among children in the high-cost condition. Preschoolers were less likely than older children to lie when there was a high personal cost. In addition, compared with truth-tellers, prosocial liars had parents who were more authoritative but expressed less positive emotion within the family. Finally, there was an interaction between children's prosocial lie-telling behavior and their evaluations of the protagonist's and recipient's feelings. Findings contribute to understanding the trajectory of children's prosocial

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lie-telling, their reasons for telling such lies, and their knowledge about interpersonal communication.

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Introduction

From an early age, children are socialized to be truthful in most social contexts. However, they are also taught, explicitly or implicitly, not to tell the blunt truth in some social situations where the truth may be trivial or hurtful to the recipient (Sweetser, 1987). Learning to tell lies for the benefit of others (i.e., prosocial lies) is arguably important if children are to be perceived as polite and considerate. Prosocial lies are motivated by the desire to make others feel good or to spare the feelings of the recipient and foster amicable social relationships (DePaulo & Bell, 1996; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Unlike antisocial lies, which are told solely for personal benefit (e.g., to escape punishment, for material gain), prosocial lies have some benefit for the lie recipient (e.g., to be polite, to make another feel better) and are not intended to cause harm to another individual. These lies are rated less negatively and considered more socially acceptable (e.g., Bussey, 1999; Walper & Valtin, 1992). For adults, prosocial lies are common, told daily (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), and a significant part of maintaining social relationships (DePaulo & Jordan, 1982). Less is known about children's prosocial lie-telling behavior.

To date, the majority of research on the development of children's lying has focused on whether children lie to conceal transgressions (e.g., Lewis, Stanger, & Sullivan, 1989; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar & Lee, 2002b), on when children begin to lie intentionally to trick others (Peskin, 1992), and on how successful children are in telling lies of trickery (Feldman, Jenkins, & Popoola, 1979). Findings suggest that these lies emerge during the preschool years and that children's ability to maintain their lies improves with age. However, it remains unclear how motivational and socialization factors affect children's prosocial lie-telling and whether children's moral understanding and evaluations of prosocial lies predict their prosocial behaviors. These issues were explored in the current studies.

The development of prosocial lying has important implications for understanding social development. It provides a window to view the process by which children learn social skills necessary to communicate with others and form social relationships. Prosocial lies are considered a form of speech act that both violates and upholds the basic rules of interpersonal communication. On the one hand, Grice (1980) suggested that one of the most fundamental conventions governing interpersonal communication is the maxim of quality. This maxim requires speakers to be truthful to their communicative partners. Prosocial lies violate this maxim. On the other hand, Lakoff (1973) and Sweetser (1987) suggested that there are just as many, if not more, fundamental communication rules that require speakers to be amicable and to help, not harm, their communicative partners. Prosocial lies adhere more to this set of rules. Brown and Levinson (1987) stressed that there is always tension between satisfying fundamental conventions of communication (e.g., maxim of quality) and maintaining "face" toward others. Although in most situations these two considerations promote consistent behaviors to achieve a common communicative goal, in politeness situations they often collide. Such circumstances might require a strategic trade-off between the two goals. Thus, children's developing ability to tell prosocial lies provides a unique opportunity to examine their developing knowledge about rules governing interpersonal communication. By examining children's prosocial lying, we can explore whether children are capable of reconciling seemingly contradictory rules of communication and using them adaptively across social situations.

Children's moral evaluations of prosocial lies

Several studies have addressed children's perceptions of prosocial lies, focusing on the development of children's conceptual understanding and moral evaluations of prosocial lying. Bussey (1999) reported that children (4–11 years of age) labeled all untrue statements as lies regardless of whether they were antisocial or prosocial in origin. On the other hand, Lee and Ross (1997) found that adolescents (12–17 years of age) and college students were less likely to identify false statements told

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