Children's Perceptions of Lie-Telling in Modesty Contexts: A Qualitative Study

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Introduction

According to classic literature, children perceive lying fairly straightforwardly until a certain age. A lie is considered "bad" and a truth is "good" according to their early socialization (Heyman et al., 2008). Piaget represented children's acquisition of rules and moral absolutes in his book, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, in which he analyzes children's games. He describes that around age 10, children shift away from viewing rules as moral absolutes, and into an autonomous stage of morality in which it is permissible to violate or challenge rules in order to benefit other people. It is also the case that judgments of right and wrong should focus less on objective outcomes and more on intent (Heyman et al., 2008).

However, recent research asserts that development of a sense of morality, especially with regard to lie-telling, is firmly in place before the age of seven (Heyman et al., 2008). A study by Talwar, Murphy, and Lee, 2008, found that children as young as three-years-old were able to tell white-lies when receiving undesired gifts out of consideration for the gift-giver (Talwar et al., 2007). A white-lie is usually something that does not carry strong moral or social implications. Politeness contexts are situations in which there are social ramifications for lie-telling and truth-telling. Talwar's study suggests that very young children recognize politeness contexts, and have the ability to respond accordingly.

A study by Bussey, 1999, Peterson et al., 1983, and Walper & Valtin, 1992, found that elementary school-aged children evaluate truth-telling less acceptable and lie-telling more acceptable in politeness contexts, compared to transgression contexts (Heyman et al., 2008). A transgression context is a situation in which a person commits a wrongdoing in an intentional and self-serving manner. Children are keen to evaluate these transgressions as morally wrong the majority of the time.

Research by Walter and Valtin (1992) examined children's understanding of white-lies and lying behaviors in their study, "Children's Understanding of White-Lies" in politeness situations. The results revealed that as children get older, older children begin evaluating other's lie-telling behaviors in politeness contexts as less negative, and were more inclined to tell situational lies themselves (Walter and Valtin, 1992). The key point, however, of this study, was that children's sociomoral knowledge about lying was significantly related to their behaviors, especially when their moral judgments were consistent with their motives for truth or lie-telling in the politeness situation. As such, what may account for this is, "the development of role-taking skills which allow one to infer and take into account the wants and needs of individuals, and to coordinate different perspectives" (p. 249).

The question remains if age is a correlate of moral evaluation among children. It appears to be the case in the aforementioned study, and early research by Piaget suggests the same. This is because between the ages of six and ten-years-old, children increase substantially in their understanding of socially desirable motives. "This greater understanding of mental life may facilitate children's ability to reason about the relation between motives and verbal behavior" (Heyman et al., 2008). So, it seems logical to assume that older children would be more aware of the impact of lie-telling and truth-telling behaviors than younger children.

The study by Heyman et al., revealed more about the subject of children's moral evaluations in politeness contexts, particularly with an emphasis on social awareness. The study involved participants (children) that were read stories about a character that described politeness situations in which the protagonist received an unwanted gift. In each story, the character had to report what he or she thought of the gift in one of two variations of the story. In both situations, the character disliked the gift. In variation one, the character honestly reported not liking the gift,

whereas in variation two, the character lied, claiming to like the gift. The results of the study revealed a pattern that children focused on the truth value of statements, evaluating truth-telling as more favorable than lie-telling. However, when children focused on emotional impact of a statement, they evaluated lie-telling more favorably (Heyman et al., 2008).

Focusing on the social impact of lie-telling and truth-telling in modesty contexts is well researched from a cultural perspective. Cultural experiences and socialization effects are crucial to the development of children's evaluations of truth telling, lie-telling, and moral consequences. From a cross-cultural perspective, it is interesting to note the philosophical differences between cultures, especially in the literature comparing Chinese and Western cultures (Lee et al., 1997). This is because Chinese philosophy is rooted in collectivism and the greater good for the society, whereas Western (primarily American culture) values individualism, self-confidence, and self-esteem. (Lee et al., 1997).

As children gradually gain awareness of their cultures and contexts these values become more evident as children grow, especially with regard to modest lie-telling (Cameron et al., 2012). For example, it has been found that Chinese, and Canadian children (Cameron et al., 2012) prefer modest lie-telling to immodest truth-telling in social modesty contexts. It was hypothesized that this phenomenon (with specific reference to Chinese children) was the result of the Chinese culture as being more prosocial than independent. However, findings are beginning to show interesting data that preference for modest lie-telling in a pro-social way is not limited to Chinese children. (Banerjee, 2000).

Based on the general findings, our study further investigates how American children evaluate the morality of both lies and truths told in different social contexts (collaborative versus non-collaborative) and with different social pragmatic outcomes (pro-social vs. self-serving).

Our specific hypotheses are: that there will be an age effect between younger and older children regarding their reasons for moral evaluations of truth-telling and lie-telling. We expect to see a significant difference between reasoning strategies based on an overall preference for one justification type.

Methods

Participants

A total of 24 children, 12 boys and 12 girls, were recruited from the Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi Early Childhood Development Center for participation in the study. The ECDC is a dual language school (English and Spanish), serving children who are at risk (such as low SES, linguistic developmental difficulties, etc.), and/or are selected for admission by lottery. Seventeen of the 24 children were 7 to 8 years old, (constituting the younger age group), and seven children were 10 to 11 years old (comprising the older age group).

Materials

The researchers collected children's demographic information on university iPads including their name, age, grade, and primary language. Afterwards, the children were read a series of 10 short vignettes (2 practice stories and 8 study stories), and asked three questions about each story at the end. The three questions included whether children perceived the character's response to be a truth or a lie, an evaluation of the morality of the character's response using a 5-point Likert scale, and an open-ended question as to why they rated the character's response as such to the previous question. Four of the eight study stories contained a character that told a lie, and four of the stories contained a character telling the truth. Of the four involving telling a lie, two of the stories depicted the telling of a lie in a pro-social situation,

while the other two stories depicted the telling of a lie in a non-prosocial situation. One of the

two stories involving telling a lie in a pro-social situation had two characters that collaborated to

do a single task, whereas the other story depicted only one character in a non-collaboration

situation.

The children's answers to the first two questions were recorded on an iPad, using

Qualtrics software, and the open-ended questions were recorded on audio tape recorders. The

audio-recordings were then transcribed word for word on the university lab computer as

Microsoft Word documents. The transcriptions were used to inductively develop codes designed

to capture the differences in reasoning and moral evaluations children gave about the character's

actions and reports in the stories.

Procedure

This is the second part of a two part study, and as such, will focus on the qualitative

analysis and methods of the study. Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in

that it generates categories from the data, as opposed to developing categories before collecting

the data. Using an inductive approach, we are exploring the data in an effort to gain deeper

insight into children's perceptions of lie-telling behaviors. Similar to Piaget's work with

children about their reasoning regarding certain cognitive understandings, such as the rules of a

game (Piaget, 1956).

After transcribing all 24 interviews, we focused on the open-ended responses the

children gave to the question, "Why do you think it was good or bad?" Answers to this question

were then coded into 3 different categories:

1. **Restatement** was when a child restated what the story character said was good or bad: "because he/she lied."

2. Focus on the **Truth Value** of a statement. For example, if in the vignette, a character cleaned their room, and reported that they cleaned their room, then the character's report was not only considered "true" but also "good". Or, if the story character did not clean their room, but reported that they did, this was considered a lie and therefore "bad". In this case, the report and action do not match.

3. The third category, **Social/Pragmatic Reasoning**, includes responses that reflect the child's social awareness to consequences. For example, if one character blamed another character for a wrongdoing, even if the child was "telling the truth", the children often identified the report as bad, stating that the other (blamed) character "could get in trouble" as a result. Similarly, responses in which a child reasoned that it was "good" when one character gave credit to the other and didn't take credit for themselves in a collaborative setting, also falls into this category.

Analysis

Participants' use of justifications of different lie-telling and truth-telling situations were analyzed in SPSS using a 2(Age: Older vs Younger cohort) X 3(Reasons: Restatement vs Truth Value vs Social/Pragmatic Reasoning) chi square for all children's evaluations. Results are presented on Table 1.

Participant's use of justifications were analyzed using a 2(Modesty: Modest vs Immodest) X 3(Reasons: Restatement vs Truth Value vs Social/Pragmatic Reasoning) chi-square for when the child perceived characters to be reporting a truth. Results are presented on table 2.

Participant's use of justifications were analyzed using a 2(Collaboration: With Collaboration vs Without-Collaboration) X 3(Reasons: Restatement vs Truth Value vs Social/Pragmatic Reasoning) chi-square for when the child perceived characters to be reporting a lie. Results are presented on table 3.

Results

Quite notably, there was *not* a significant difference between reasons used between age groups to justify evaluations of all reports (F(2, 190) = 5.671, *p* = .059). This was surprising given the literature, but the same was true for the quantitative portion of this study. It may be that there was not enough evidence in this current study to detect a difference between older and younger children.

There was a significant difference between reasons used to justify evaluations of modest and immodest reports (F(2, 92) = 7.019, *p* = .03) when children perceived the character in the vignette was telling the truth. When children used social/pragmatic reasoning strategies to explain behavior, it occurred more often in modest contexts than immodest contexts. What this means is that children were more likely to justify prosocial truth telling with reasoning strategies that took positive social impact into account. For example, accepting credit given from the teacher for bringing your sick friend their homework assignment so they can turn it in on time the next day.

In addition, there was a significant difference between reasons used to justify evaluations of reports with collaboration and without collaboration (F(2, 98) = 16.644, *p* < .001) when children perceived the character in the vignette was telling a lie. Children were more likely to use social/pragmatic reasoning for behavior when the characters in the vignette collaborated than

when the characters acted alone. What this shows is that children are more concerned about the social impact of a lie if two characters are involved. Children are likely to evaluate a lie from a social/pragmatic strategy so long as the character collaborated with another, for example, such as one child blaming another for a wrongdoing in an attempt to avoid trouble.

Generally, children evaluated truth-telling as good, and lie-telling as bad, but overall had different reasons for their evaluations that fell into one of the three categories for justifying their evaluations. Interestingly, the most common reasoning strategy children gave was the matching strategy. For children, what you say and what you do *should* match. Stories presented in this context may be difficult for children because they can be considered ambiguous.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

The present study investigated American children's reasons for their moral evaluations of lie-telling and truth-telling in modest and immodest social contexts, with and without collaboration. In terms of age, all children use all categories of reasoning: Restatement, Truth Value, and Social/Pragmatic Reasoning, in similar fashion. Truth Value was the greatest concern for children across all ages, accounting for at least half of all evaluations. Social/Pragmatic Reasoning, or the concern for social impact of the report, was more of a concern for children when they perceived the report to be a lie than when it was a truth. Negative social impact acted as a mediating factor in children's perceptions of how severe a lie was, even for children as young as seven.

However, in terms of moral evaluations of lie-telling and truth-telling, we were able to capture a glimpse of the kinds of reasoning strategies children might employ. We know they are aware of social impact (suggesting successful development of Theory of Mind), and that the

consistency of the report and action (Truth Value) is important in the determination. This is especially true with regard to modesty and collaboration.

In the case of modesty, children considered modest truths that are socially positive to be important, but these truths are especially "good" when the Truth Value matches, as depicted in Table 2. If the character actually did bring his sick friend his homework assignment so he could complete it on time, and reported that he did so, then children consider this to be a complete truth – no ambiguity, *and* socially good.

Collaboration plays a big role in children's justification strategies, as previous literature has found, particularly when social consequence and Truth Value is concerned with regard to telling lies. Table 3 shows that children will use Social/Pragmatic Reasoning to justify lies that are told in collaboration, which suggests awareness of social impact. When lies are told without collaboration, children use the Truth Value strategy to evaluate the lie instead, suggesting that the lie is of low social impact and of higher personal consequence.

This research project is ongoing, and will next examine if children have fully developed Theory of Mind before the age of five, contrary to existing literature. We will test this by including younger children (age yet to be determined) in the study, asking them the same open-ended questions. Their evaluations of the same material is expected to differ from the trends found in the present study and previous literature.

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Table 1. Age Effects for Reasons for All Evaluations

		Social/Pragmatic	Truth Value	Restatement	Total
Age	Younger (7-8 Year olds)	41	68	32	141
	Older (10-11 Year olds)	20	25	4	49
	Total	61	93	36	190

There was not a significant difference between reasons used between age groups to justify evaluations of all reports ($F(2, 190) = 5.671$, $p = .059$).

Table 2. Modesty Effects for Reasons for Truth Evaluations

		Social/Pragmatic	Truth Value	Restatement	Total
Modesty	Modest	20	24	13	57
	Immodest	4	23	8	35
	Total	24	47	21	92

There was a significant difference between reasons used to justify evaluations of modest and immodest reports ($F(2, 92) = 7.019$, $p = .03$) when children perceived the report to be true.

Table 3. Collaboration Effects for Reasons for Lie Evaluations

		Social/Pragmatic	Truth Value	Restatement	Total
Collaboration	With	29	16	6	51
	Without	8	30	9	47
	Total	37	46	15	98

There was a significant difference between reasons used to justify evaluations of reports with collaboration and without collaboration ($F(2, 98) = 16.644$, $p < .001$) when children perceived the report to be a lie.