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## Unintentional and intentional falsehoods: The role of morally relevant theory of mind



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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated how theory of mind (ToM) competence is related to children's ability to differentiate between intentional and unintentional false statements regarding claims to resources. Participants (4–10 years old;  $N = 122$ ) heard about individuals who had different access to knowledge about resource ownership when making resource claims, and they were asked to make an evaluation, attribute intentions, assign punishment, and predict the teacher's assigned punishment. Two measures of ToM were assessed: a prototypic false belief ToM assessment and a contextually embedded, morally relevant false belief theory of mind (MoToM) assessment. Children's ToM competence reliably predicted more favorable evaluations of the individual who made the unintentional false claim than of the one who did so intentionally. Furthermore, the contextually embedded MoToM assessment predicted children's responses for all of the assessments above and beyond age and prototypic ToM competence. The findings indicate that children's contextually embedded MoToM competence bears on their moral assessments of the intentions of transgressors and underscores the importance of ToM in the ability to discriminate intentional and unintentional false statements.

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### Introduction

Navigating the social world is a complex process that requires the ability to understand others' beliefs, intentions, and desires. Understanding that others have beliefs, intentions, and desires that

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may be different from one's own—referred to as theory of mind (ToM) competence—reflects an important developmental milestone in children's understanding of their social world. This ability has been shown to be necessary for everyday communication as well as the acquisition of a vast range of social skills (Hughes & Devine, 2015; Wellman & Liu, 2004). Without the ability to understand that others may have different beliefs, for example, individuals approach problems assuming that others have the same access to information as they do, which is often not the case. Interpersonal exchanges require thinking about what others know, as well as what they do not know, and acting appropriately based on these beliefs and expectations. The ability to understand others' mental states emerges early in development, with a long trajectory that stems from early in infancy into adolescence (Sodian et al., 2016; Hughes & Devine, 2015).

Research examining the intersection of mental state knowledge and moral judgment has used everyday contexts to assess how mental state knowledge is related to the evaluation of moral transgressions. One example is research on age-related changes regarding deception and lying (Bussey, 1992; Evans & Lee, 2013). Deception requires knowing that one has access to information that is not available to others and reflects a form of ToM competence. However, in the case of deception and lying, there is also another element, a moral violation, caused by the speaker's intention to deceive others (Evans & Lee, 2013). Some research has suggested that preschool-aged children struggle to distinguish between lies and truthful statements and that second and fifth graders are significantly more accurate in this capacity (Bussey, 1992). However, other studies have shown that, even at a young age, children are able to accurately discriminate between intentional lies and unintentional false statements in the form of mistakes (Siegal & Peterson, 1996, 1998). In addition, a growing body of research has shown that young children not only have the ability to recognize lies when they occur but also can discriminate between prosocial lies (e.g., "white lies") and antisocial lies and that they evaluate prosocial lies as more acceptable than antisocial lies (Bussey, 1999; Talwar, Williams, Renaud, Arruda, & Saykaly, 2016). Thus, lying is an interesting case in which an understanding of intentions intersects with moral knowledge. Children need to have some form of mental state knowledge understanding in order to recognize both that one person has access to information that another individual does not (the informational asymmetry necessary to lie) and that one individual had an intention to deceive another individual.

In fact, research has demonstrated that children's ToM abilities are connected to their comprehension and production of lies (Cheung, Siu, & Chen, 2015; Fu, Sai, Yuan, & Lee, 2017; Talwar & Lee, 2008). In a study by Peterson (1995), children between 5 and 7 years of age were presented with stories in which a character experienced a memory lapse (made an untrue statement without an intent to deceive). Following this story, participants were asked whether they believed that the character was telling a lie, was telling the truth, or was trying to tell the truth. Those children who identified that the character tried to tell the truth stated that it was not a lie, whereas those who said the character was not trying to tell the truth misidentified the unintentional false statement as a lie. Thus, in some contexts, children have trouble in differentiating false statements that are intentional from false statements that are unintentional.

In this study, we proposed that unintentional false statements may be especially difficult for children to differentiate from intentional false statements when their ToM abilities are not fully developed. In these cases, children may interpret unintentional false statements as wrong and deserving of punishment because children do not have the ToM capacities required to recognize the unintentional nature of the false statements. No research to date has directly examined how children's mental state knowledge (as assessed by various ToM assessments) is related to their ability to distinguish between intentional and unintentional false statements. Moreover, research has not yet examined the role that mental state knowledge plays regarding children's ability to distinguish between these different types of false statements, nor has it investigated the ways in which mental state knowledge predicts differences in children's moral evaluations of these two types of false statements.

#### *Prototypic and morally embedded ToM*

One aim of the current study, then, was to measure children's false belief mental state knowledge and relate it to their evaluation of intentional and unintentional false statements, specifically

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