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Deceptive Behavior In Young Children Confronted With Physical Evidence Of Their Transgressions: Links With Executive Functioning And Internalizing Or Externalizing Symptoms

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Abstract

The present study investigated deceptive behavior in 3-5 year old preschoolers by using a modified temptation resistance paradigm, and related the results to individual differences in executive functioning (short-term memory, inhibition and shifting) and to parental reports of problematic behavior (internalizing and externalizing symptoms). In the experimental part of the study, children were told not to peek at two toys successively hidden under some cups in the experimenter's absence. Peeking under one of the cups left behind physical evidence of the transgression, while peeking under the other one didn't. Unlike findings from other cultures, most of the Romanian young children (around 70%) did not peek under any of the cups, and the majority of the ones who did, peeked under both cups. No significant relationships were found between the presence of peeking behavior and executive functioning, or internalizing/externalizing problems.

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1. Introduction

Deception has been regarded as an important part of human interactions across cultures (Mahon, 2008). Essentially, "lying refers to the act by which one deliberately makes a false statement with the intent to instill false beliefs into the mind of the recipient" (Talwar, Gordon, & Lee; 2007, p. 804). The literature indicates that the number of false statements begins to increase as early as 2 years of age (Talwar & Lee, 2002a; Talwar, Lee, Bala, &

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Lindsay, 2002). Children become successful lie tellers by the time they are 3 years old, nearly all of them being able to deny transgressions (Talwar & Lee, 2002b), and their abilities to deceive and maintain consistency in their subsequent statements keep improving well into middle childhood (Talwar & Lee, 2008). Around this time, they eventually end up developing a sense of conscious concealment, meaning that they are able to deliberately keep secrets or hide relevant information (Watson & Valtin, 1997).

Executive functions are considered among the cognitive processes most likely to be involved in the production and maintenance of deceptive behavior (EFs; e.g. Gombos, 2006). Miyake et al. (2000) proposed an executive functioning model that suggests the existence of three distinct, yet not unrelated, components: working memory, response inhibition and set-shifting (Miyake et al., 2000).

Talwar & Lee (2008) discovered no significant relations between working memory and deception skills in 3- to 8-year-olds. The relation between deception and inhibition was more consistently documented by using Stroop tasks or deceptive pointing paradigms (see Evans, Xu, & Lee, 2011 for a review and extension of the available empirical evidence). The ability to deceive in relation to individual differences in set-shifting skills was only investigated in adults and a few studies found this relationship to be significant (Morgan, LeSage, & Kosslyn, 2009; Visu-Petra, Miclea, & Visu-Petra, 2012). In contrast with these studies focusing on cognitive factors, there has been little research on how *emotional* factors shape a child's ability to conceal critical information. The only existing study on preschoolers that we know of (Ostrov, Ries, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008) documents a prospective relation between observed increases in physical and relational aggression and increases in deceptive behavior. Research regarding internalizing symptoms and deception skills across the lifespan is even more limited (see Visu-Petra et al., 2012, for a review of the available evidence in adults).

The most widely used method of testing deceptive behavior in children is inspired by *the temptation resistance paradigm*, initially developed by Sears, Rau, and Alpert (1965). In this paradigm, the child is explicitly told not to peek at or not to play with a certain toy while he/she is alone in a room. The paradigm closely mimics natural situations in which children lie. In their classic study, Lewis, Stranger and Sullivan (1989) investigated deceptive behavior in 3-year-olds by using the temptation resistance paradigm and found that 29% of the children cheated and 38% of them lied about cheating. The results have been replicated by Talwar and Lee (2002a), who found that 36% of 3-year-olds lied about cheating. Furthermore, the majority of 4- to 7-year-olds also lied about cheating.

The main objective of the present study was to investigate preschoolers' naturally occurring deceptive behavior in the context of a modified temptation resistance paradigm. Three research questions were formulated. *Will modifying the temptation resistance paradigm by combining it with the physical evidence of transgression paradigm make children less prone to peeking?* Theoretically, by applying this modification, the children should peek less on a second trial if the physical evidence condition was presented to them first. The second question was: *How will individual differences in executive functioning relate to children's ability to conceal/deny relevant information in this modified paradigm?* Finally, our third question was: *Is deception related in any way to parental reports of internalizing/externalizing problems in preschoolers?* This question was more of an exploratory nature since the limited previous studies on the matter have not brought conclusive results.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample included in this study consisted of 63 children (27 boys) with ages between 3 and 5 years ($M=55.68$ months, $SD=9.11$ months). The participants were recruited from kindergartens in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. A written informed consent was obtained from the parents and a verbal assent was elicited from the children before proceeding. Children were tested individually, in a one hour session and received a reward (toy) at the end. The tasks prepared for the children were administered in a fixed order.

2.1.1. Deception measures

In order to assess preschoolers' deceptive or truth telling behavior, we used a guessing game based on a modified temptation resistance paradigm. It is modified in the sense that it is a combination between the temptation resistance paradigm (Sears et al., 1965) and the physical evidence of transgression paradigm (Evans et al., 2011). In this task,

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