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Parental mind-mindedness but not false belief understanding predicts Hong Kong children's lie-telling behavior in a temptation resistance task



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ABSTRACT

Children can tell lies before they understand the concept of false belief. This study investigated the relationship between parental mind-mindedness, defined as the propensity of parents to view their children as mental agents with independent thoughts and feelings, and the lie-telling behavior of Hong Kong children aged 3–6 years. The results confirmed earlier findings indicating that Hong Kong children's understanding of false belief is delayed; nevertheless, the participants appeared to lie just as well as children from other cultures. The lie-telling behavior of Hong Kong children was predicted by parental mind-mindedness and children's age but was unrelated to children's false belief understanding. It is suggested that children of mind-minded parents are more likely to exercise autonomy in socially ambiguous situations. Future studies should focus on the roles of parenting and children's multifaceted autonomy when addressing children's adaptive lie telling.

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Introduction

Children as young as 2 years are able to tell lies (Chandler, Fritz, & Hala, 1989; Evans & Lee, 2013); long before they achieve false belief understanding (FBU), a landmark theory of mind (ToM) achieve-

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ment occurs at approximately 4 or 5 years of age (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). This apparent discrepancy calls for an explanation of children's lie-telling behavior other than the widely held recognition that "lying in essence is ToM in action" (Lee, 2013, p. 91). It is proposed here that the socialization process, specifically parental mind-mindedness (MM), precedes children's own FBU and predicts their lying behavior.

Lying, a common component of social interaction (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), is defined as the intentional delivery of a false statement by one person or group to another person or group (Talwar & Lee, 2008). Lying to conceal one's own misdeeds is the most common and earliest form of deception exhibited by children (Wilson, Smith, & Ross, 2003), although it is viewed very negatively by both children and adults (Bussey, 1999; Talwar & Lee, 2008). This type of lie serves the interests of the tellers by protecting them from the consequences of their transgressions (Evans, Xu, & Lee, 2011), but it violates trust and breaks rules of communication by contravening the assumption of information equality (Williams, Kirmayer, Simon, & Talwar, 2013). Although often viewed as a type of antisocial behavior, lying is an important social skill (Bond, Kahler, & Paolicelli, 1985; Talwar & Crossman, 2011); its emergence reflects children's flexibility in dealing with complex social situations to ensure their own preservation.

It has been proposed that early lie-telling behavior reflects the emergence of ToM, the understanding that one's own mind and thinking are distinct from and independent of others' minds and thinking (Talwar & Lee, 2008). For example, false denial of a transgression has been shown to be predicted by first-order FBU (Talwar & Lee, 2008), and liars scored higher on first-order false belief tests than truth tellers (Talwar et al., 2012). In a recent study, training in first-order false belief tasks caused previously honest 3-year-old children to lie (Ding, Wellman, Wang, Fu, & Lee, 2015). Whereas first-order FBU refers to the realization that someone might have a false belief about an event, the more advanced, recursive second-order FBU refers to the realization that someone might have a false belief about someone else's belief (Miller, 2009). Consequentially, second-order FBU was found to correlate to even more sophisticated lie-telling behavior. Several studies have shown that children's maintenance of a lie, which requires a higher level of mental state reasoning than that required when telling a lie, was predicted by their second-order FBU (Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007; Talwar & Lee, 2008). Hsu and Cheung (2013) tested the understanding of lies of 5- and 6-year-old Hong Kong children and found that second-order FBU was associated with their understanding of transgression denial.

Although numerous studies have shown that children's lie-telling, lie maintenance, and understanding of lies increased with their FBU, there is still a discrepancy between the emergence of lying and the time at which FBU is achieved. Evidence has suggested that children's earliest lies occur before FBU. Children from both North America and China passed false belief tasks at approximately 4 years of age (Liu, Wellman, Tardif, & Sabbagh, 2008), but began lying to conceal transgressions at around 3 years of age (Chandler et al., 1989; Evans & Lee, 2013; Evans et al., 2011; Talwar & Crossman, 2011; Talwar & Lee, 2002; Talwar & Lee, 2008). Canadian children passed false belief tasks earlier, at around 3 years of age (Liu et al., 2008), but they could lie at as young as 2 years (Evans & Lee, 2013). Deaf children showed a significant developmental delay in false belief tasks but performed similarly to their hearing peers in deception tasks when the language demands of both tasks were minimal (de Villiers & de Villiers, 2012).

Given this discrepancy, mind related variables other than FBU are called for in explaining the early emergence of socially sophisticated behavior such as lying. A developmental model of lying (Talwar & Lee, 2008) suggests that, unlike secondary lying (which emerges with first-order FBU) or tertiary lying (which emerges with second-order FBU), primary lying to conceal rule violation at 2 or 3 years of age does not necessarily require FBU, although it does imply intentional falsification. The findings of a recent study suggested that awareness of knowledge ignorance (the possibility that someone might not know something that is true, a lower level of ToM reasoning than FBU; Wellman & Liu, 2004) was related to children's lie-telling (Ma, Evans, Liu, Luo, & Xu, 2015). This study also revealed that controlling parenting predicted 3-year-old children's primary lie-telling to deny transgression, with ToM ability as a mediator. These findings suggested that parental socialization and mental state reasoning more rudimentary than FBU could potentially account for children's lie-telling behavior before children achieve FBU.

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