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Communication, compassion, and computers: Adolescents' and adults' evaluations of online and face-to-face deception

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ABSTRACT

We explored Canadian adolescents', emergent adults', and adults' understandings of deception in computer mediated communication (CMC) compared to face to face (FtF). Participants between 13 and 50 years read vignettes of different types of questionable behaviour that occurred online or in real life, and were asked to judge whether deception was involved, and the acceptability of the behaviour. Age groups evaluated deception similarly; however, adolescents held slightly different views from adults about what constitutes deception, suggesting that the understanding of deception continues to develop into adulthood. Furthermore, CMC behaviour was rated as more deceptive than FtF in general, and participants scoring higher on compassion perceived vignettes to be more deceptive. This study is a step towards better understanding the relationships between perceptions of deception across adolescence into adulthood, mode of communication, and compassion, and may have implications for how adults communicate with youth about deception in CMC and FtF contexts.

The label 'deception' is often used to describe a number of behavioural processes that involve creating false beliefs in others and, thus, have obvious survival value as demonstrated by their presence across the animal kingdom (Brown, Garwood, & Williamson, 2012; King & Ford, 1998; Munn, 1986). Although a conscious intent to deceive is generally seen as necessary for a human's actions to be considered deceptive, researchers have yet to agree further upon how deception in human contexts ought to be defined (Gell-Mann, 2009; Mahon, 2015). Many psychologists who study deception operationalize it in a manner that often describes lying, a verbal form of deception. Lying, which necessitates the deceiver's conscious intention to *verbally* transmit a falsehood, is commonplace in day-to-day human interaction (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010). Though human deception is ubiquitous, given its complexity, it is not something that everyone identifies in the same way.

Sweetser's (1987) folklorist model is a popular approach to explain how people define lying. This model suggests that rather than view a statement as categorically a lie or not, the judgment falls somewhere on a spectrum between 'prototypical lie' and the 'prototypical truth'. The closer a statement is to the definition of a 'prototypical lie', where a speaker knowingly makes a false statement with the intent to deceive the listener, the more likely it is to be considered a lie. Identifying a lie in such a manner increases with age (for review see Talwar & Crossman, 2011, 2012). For example, Peterson, Peterson, and Seeto (1983) found that 95% of 11 year olds consider an exaggeration (e.g., reporting being chased by a chicken "as big as an elephant") to be a lie, but adults were more reluctant to do so (50%); thus, adults appeared to view exaggerations as less lie-like. By early adolescence, a person's

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ability to detect and comprehend a lie is more comparable to that of an adult (Talwar & Crossman, 2012).

The folkloristic approach also considers sociocultural factors in lie identification. For example, a statement meeting the semantic definition of a lie is less likely to be considered deceptive in a politeness setting (e.g., telling a friend her new haircut looks nice even though you think it does not), than in an informational setting (e.g., intentionally giving someone false directions). Lee and Ross (1997) asked Canadian adolescents and young adults to rate the deceptiveness of lies told to either help or harm someone in both these settings. They found that both motive and context affected participants' judgments. Specifically, lies told to harm and in an informational setting were viewed as more deceptive. Xu, Luo, Fu, and Lee (2009) found similar results in Chinese children (7, 9, and 11 years) and young adults (22 years). On the other hand, Fu, Lee, Cameron, and Xu (2001) found cross cultural differences in definitions when judging prosocial deeds. Chinese adults, who come from a culture where modesty is highly valued, were more likely than Canadian adults to view concealing one's good deeds from others as not deceptive.

For the present study, we used a working definition of deception that involves intentionally trying to create a false belief in another person. Further, we will use a more open definition of deception that includes not just lying but nonverbal forms of deception (e.g., doctoring a photo, or using someone else's credit card). Participants were asked to rate a behaviour's deceptiveness on a continuum, similar to the folkloristic approach, rather than make a categorical decision based on veracity. Gell-Mann (2009) suggests that researchers ought to leave deception definitions open, so that multiple definitions can be explored. Therefore, although the folkloristic model was created for lie categorization, we suggest its extension to nonverbal deception as well.

In the same way that the behaviour people consider to be deceptive varies, how people judge the acceptability of deception differs. Thus, the folkloristic model of lie categorization can be extended from lie categorization to moral evaluation (Xu et al., 2009). For instance, Lindskold and Walters (1983) created a taxonomy of six lie motivation categories that were ranked, based on the ratings of American university students, in order of moral acceptability (least severe: lies that guard others from shame; most severe: lies that a person benefits from that hurt others). Lyon, Quas, and Carrick (2013) found that as preschoolers begin to identify lies as lies, they also assign positive moral evaluations to truth statements and negative evaluations to lies. But children also rate lies differently based on motive and context. Australian 4–11 year olds rated antisocial lies (i.e., lies that hide a wrongdoing) as most serious, followed by trick lies (i.e., lies told playfully), and then prosocial lies not intended to harm (Bussey, 1999, see also; Heyman, Sweet, & Lee, 2009). Adolescents' decision to lie to parents has also been found to be related to the types of behaviour involved (Cumsille, Darling, & Martínez, 2010; Villalobos & Smetana, 2012). For instance, Rote and Smetana (2015) found that adolescents were more likely to lie to parents if they were smoking or hanging out with friends their parents dislike.

Though less studied, other research confirms the importance of context in the moral evaluation of deception. For instance, Perkins and Turiel (2007) found that American adolescents judged lying to parents to retain autonomy as more acceptable than lying to a friend. Further, adolescents tended to view these lies as being less morally reprehensible than young adults (Arnett Jensen, Jensen Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004). Likewise, cross cultural research indicates Chinese participants compared to American participants, and adult participants in contrast to adolescent participants, judge modesty based lies as more acceptable (Genyue, Heyman, & Lee, 2011). Another important context that may make a difference to the identification and judgment of deception is computer-mediated communication (CMC) versus face to face interactions (FtF).

As the use of CMC in daily human interaction has become commonplace over the past couple decades, these virtual modes of communication, particularly the Internet, have produced new sociocultural contexts for deception to occur within (Whitty, 2002). A substantial body of research has emerged that documents the ubiquity of online deception (e.g., Buchanan & Whitty, 2014; Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Drouin, Miller, Wehle, & Hernandez, 2016; Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Jön, 2010; Utz, 2005; Warkentin, Woodworth, Hancock, & Cormier, 2010; Whitty, 2008). It is not surprising, then, that internet users are often very suspicious of each other's trustworthiness (Drouin et al., 2016; Hancock & Woodworth, 2013; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Walther, 1996; Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001). Although some research has explored online deception, most studies (e.g., Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Whitty, 2008) investigate participants' own deceptive tendencies, and rarely explore how participants perceive and think about others' deception online (Drouin et al., 2016; Toma, Jiang, & Hancock, 2016).

Even though forms of CMC, such as Facebook and instant messaging, are essential aspects of contemporary adolescents' social lives (Boyd, 2014; Flores & James, 2012; Turkle, 2015) and act as new social contexts with novel challenges that may affect their moral development (Bradley, 2005; Willard, 2007), just one known study has examined how youth morally evaluate deception in CMC. Talwar, Gomez-Garibello, and Shariff (2014) were interested in adolescents' perceptions of cyberbullying and as part of their investigation they contrasted cyberbullying that involved deception with when it did not. They found that adolescents considered cyberbullying involving deception (e.g., spreading a false rumour or doctored photos) to be significantly less acceptable than cyberbullying that did not. Furthermore, younger adolescents (12–13 years) deemed deception to be more morally reprehensible than older adolescents (15–16 years).

Some research has investigated youth's moral reasoning in general in CMC. Poole (2007) found that adolescents and young adults viewed some forms of antisocial conduct online as being more acceptable than in FtF interactions. Flores and James (2012) interviewed American adolescents and young adults and found that 98% of their participants reported engaging in immoral behaviour online at least once (e.g., cheating in online games, downloading music illegally, acting immorally on social media). Forty-seven percent of these participants did not consider these situations to be moral in nature, and 53% viewed these behaviours as immoral, but dismissed this as being unimportant. Furthermore, they found that participants' level of moral thinking was influenced by the online situation they were asked talking about. For example, one young man refused to illegally download music (he viewed it as being highly immoral), yet he admitted to secretly breaking into his girlfriend's Facebook account to read her messages. We acknowledge, though, his decision could have been influenced by his perceptions of the legality of pirating music versus logging into someone else's social media account. Turiel (1989) argues that moral reasoning is influenced by social context; and although scant,

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