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Young children will lie to prevent a moral transgression

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ABSTRACT

Children believe that it is wrong to tell lies, yet they are willing to lie prosocially to adhere to social norms and to protect a listener's feelings. However, it is not clear whether children will lie instrumentally to intervene on behalf of a third party when a moral transgression is likely to occur. In three studies ($N = 270$), we investigated the conditions under which 5- to 8-year-olds would tell an "interventional lie" in order to misdirect one child who was seeking another child in a park. In Study 1, older children lied more when the seeker intended to steal a toy from another child than when the seeker intended to give cookies to the child. In Study 2, the transgression (stealing) was held constant, but harm to the victim was either emphasized or deemphasized. Children at all ages were more likely to lie to prevent the theft when harm was emphasized. In Study 3, harm to the victim was held constant and the act of taking was described as either theft or a positive action. Children at all ages were more likely to lie when the transgression was emphasized. We conclude that by 5 years of age, children are capable of lying to prevent a moral transgression but that this is most likely to occur when both the transgression and the harm to the victim are salient.

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Introduction

Parents and teachers often remind children that lying is wrong and punishable, and children themselves will typically say that lies are wrong (Bussey, 1999). However, in many situations lying can be

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normative and even prosocial; complying with social norms often requires lying to be polite, and complying with moral norms often requires lying to avoid hurting another person's feelings. Indeed, despite their general view of lying as bad, children as young as 3 years engage in these positive forms of lying. Although preschoolers can anticipate the immediate effect of simple prosocial lies, the problem of when to lie becomes more complicated when third parties are affected. For example, a famous critique of Kant's position that lying was always wrong posited a murderer who asks you to reveal the location of his potential victim (Kant, 1787/1949; Varden, 2010). Lying in this case seems intuitively correct, but it requires using a lie instrumentally to prevent an action by another person that ultimately affects a third party. The prosocial nature of the lie depends on understanding the consequences of one's intervention. For lack of a better term, we call these "interventional lies," and in the current study we investigated when and why children use them.

Most research on children's prosocial lies has focused on situations in which the liar is directly involved in the outcome of the lie. For example, children as young as 3 years will use a "white lie" to avoid telling an experimenter about an unwanted mark on the experimenter's face (Talwar & Lee, 2002) and to express pleasure for a gift that they do not want (Popliger, Talwar, & Crossman, 2011; Talwar, Murphy, & Lee, 2007). Between 3 and 11 years of age, children become better at telling white lies but are more likely to lie with parental encouragement (Talwar et al., 2007). However, the reasons why children tell white lies appear to change with age. When asked why they told a white lie in a disappointing gift paradigm, 7-year-olds were more likely to refer to avoiding punishment from an adult, whereas 11-year-olds referred to politeness or concern for hurting another person's feelings (Xu, Bao, Fu, Talwar, & Lee, 2010). Alternative paradigms have found that 7-year-olds are also capable of lying in order to prevent harm. When children were asked to evaluate an experimenter's bad artwork, 7-year-olds were more likely to say that the artwork was good when they knew that the experimenter would be sad if told the truth (Warneken & Orlins, 2015). Children as young as 5 or 6 years are also more likely to use white lies to prevent harm after this behavior is modeled or explained by an adult (Broomfield, Robinson, & Robinson, 2002; Warneken & Orlins, 2015).

Prosocial lies also take different forms in different cultures. So-called "blue lies" or "modesty lies," for example, are more common in Eastern societies such as China and are used to adhere to modesty norms. These lies emphasize group cohesion and group success over individual achievement (Fu, Evans, Wang, & Lee, 2008). For example, children may deny their own good deeds or skills in order to avoid self-promotion and comply with norms of modesty (Fu, Heyman, & Lee, 2016). Chinese children between 7 and 11 years of age rate blue lies more positively than Canadian children (Fu, Xu, Cameron, Heyman, & Lee, 2007; Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, & Board, 1997) and become more willing to engage in this form of lying with age (Fu et al., 2008).

Combined, this research shows that by at least 7 years of age, children use prosocial lies for two reasons: to prevent harm to others and to comply with social norms. However, it is not clear when children extend prosocial lies to intervene in third-party situations, as in the murderer-at-the-door dilemma. Such interventional lies can be prosocial if the lies are told to prevent a moral transgression or to prevent harm from befalling the potential victim. Yet one can also lie to prevent positive events from happening, an antisocial intervention. We next consider research on children's interventional behavior in other contexts.

Children's willingness to intervene

Much research has demonstrated that young children are quite willing to intervene directly in both first-person and third-party transgressions. By 2 years of age, children actively protest when they themselves are the victims of property damage or theft (Dunn & Munn, 1987; Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011) and also engage in normative protests ("You must not do that!") when game rules have been violated (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2009). At 3 years of age, children will protest third-party violations of property rights (Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011) using normative protests in these cases as well (Rossano et al., 2011). In fact, young children will often spontaneously protest when observing adults commit small transgressions (Heyman, Loke, & Lee, 2016). Intriguingly, 3-year-olds protest equally when social conventions and moral norms are violated, but by 5 years of age children are more willing to tattle, although they are less likely to intervene directly, for moral violations

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