



Lying and age: An experimental study

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ABSTRACT

Lying and deceiving is present not only in adults but also among children and teenagers and represents an economically and psychologically relevant behavioral trait. It is therefore surprising that evidence from economic experiments on deceptive behavior in children and teenagers is scarce. In this paper, we study how age influences the propensity to tell “black” and “white” lies in a sample of 383 children and teenagers aged 10/11 and 15/16 years. Our results show that a non-negligible fraction of subjects in both age cohorts exhibits lying-aversion and that the propensity to lie decreases significantly with age.

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1. Introduction

Lying and cheating is not uncommon in the human species. Day-to-day evidence suggests that lies are frequently told spontaneously and unintentionally (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). Nevertheless, lies or cheating on others have significant economic impacts. Examples include tax evasion, illegal download of music, riding the bus without a ticket, managers giving a biased feedback in order to increase their employees' effort, claiming sick benefits when healthy, accepting bribes on the job, not returning excessive change in a restaurant (Azar, Yosef, & Bar-Eli, 2013; Bucciol, Landini, & Piovesan, 2013; Ederer & Fehr, 2007; Erat & Gneezy, 2012; Loewen et al., 2013), or teenagers misreporting their age when purchasing alcohol and tobacco or trying to enter a night club.

Two opposing understandings of the justification of lying dominate its normative debate (see Gneezy, 2005, for a short account): While the assumption of “homo economicus” dictates lying whenever it pays off in economic terms, Christian philosophers claim that every lie is a sin, irrespective of its consequences and therefore prohibited. Gneezy (2005) rejects this

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strict distinction by arguing that the frequency of lying depends on its costs and benefits for the sender respectively the receiver of a deceptive message (see also Gibson, Tanner, & Wagner, 2012).

With respect to payoff consequences for the receiver, scholars distinguish between *Black Lies* and *White Lies* (Erat & Gneezy, 2012). *Black Lies* have been investigated extensively in numerous experimental studies (see, for example, Angelova & Regner, 2013; Danilov, Biemann, Kring, & Sliwka, 2013; Dreber & Johannesson, 2008; Erat, 2013; Gneezy, 2005; Gneezy, Rockenbach, & Serra-Garcia, 2013; Hurkens & Kartik, 2009; Ismayilov & Potters, 2013; Lightle, 2013; Sutter, 2009; Sánchez-Pagés & Vorsatz, 2007). Those lies harm the receiver while being profitable for the sender and represent the classic form of deception. Many examples taken from real life correspond to this lying type such as taxi drivers giving wrong information to a foreign passenger in order to overcharge or lies which are told for concealing a theft. *White Lies*, on the contrary, are characterized by the fact that they benefit the receiver. Stating “You look good today!” could be a lie of this type. An economically more important example is a manager who gives too positive a feedback to a badly performing employee. In such a situation, both parties may profit from the lie: the employee receives intrinsic satisfaction and the manager prevents a decrease in productivity as negative feedback may hamper the employee's willingness to work. Doctors who dose their patients with placebos (see Erat & Gneezy, 2012) or parents and teachers who exaggerate their praises towards a poorly performing child in order to avoid decreasing effort levels due to frustration fall into this category as well. Experimental evidence on *White Lies* is still somewhat scarce. Important exceptions represent the work by Erat and Gneezy (2012), Cappelen, Sørensen, and Tungodden (2013), Gino, Ayal, and Ariely (2013) and Lightle (2013).

So far, experimental studies have only considered adults' attitudes towards different types of lies. In this paper we use Erat and Gneezy's (2012) design in order to investigate the lying behavior among 383 children and teenagers, being either 10/11 or 16/17 years old. Deceptive behavior of children is economically relevant in several dimensions. An important example is the consumption of tobacco and alcohol. Consuming these products before the legal age to do so (which is, for instance, sixteen in many EU-countries) is clearly related to deception as misreporting age is an integral part of the acquisition process. Despite its dramatic health consequences, 20% of all 15-year-old Austrians were smokers in 2006.¹ As smoking induces annual net costs of € 511.4 million for the Austrian economy, lying of teenagers as means to illegally acquiring these products has a major impact on the economy² (Pock, Czypionka, Müllbacher, & Schnabl, 2008).

Apart from that, a well-established finding from psychological studies is that lying in childhood is positively related to a broad range of other problematic behaviors such as disruptive behavior, aggression, conduct disorders, stealing, truancy or delinquency (Gervais, Tremblay, Desmarais-Gervais, & Vitaro, 2000; Gervais, Tremblay, & Héroux, 1998; Rutter, Tizard, & Whitmore, 1970; Stewart & DeBlois, 1985; Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1986). Furthermore, longitudinal studies reveal that lying at an early age serves as a good predictor for delinquency or drug use in adolescence and adulthood (Farrington, Ttofi, & Coid, 2009; Mitchell & Rosa, 1981; Pulkkinen, 1983).

The evidence discussed so far emphasizes the importance to extend the economic research towards deceptive behavior in children and teenagers. Nevertheless, lying in children has received little attention in the economic literature so far. A notable exception is Bucciol and Piovesan (2011) who examine the relationship between honesty, age and self-control in an incentivized decision problem. Their subjects (aged 5–15 years) were asked to toss a fair, two-colored coin (black and white) in private and report the outcome to the experimenter. Participants only received a gift if they stated that the outcome was “white”. They find that, on average, more than 85% claimed to have tossed the prize winning color (this fraction is significantly above 50% and lower than 100%). Therefore, quite a few, but not all children cheated. The tendency to cheat is uniform by age, gender and the number of siblings.

A drawback of this approach, however, is that individual behavior is unobservable and thus the possibilities for investigating determinants of the development of lying are limited. We overcome this constraint by using Erat and Gneezy's (2009, 2012) design which yields observable individual deceptive behavior, and thus allows us to disentangle determinants of lying in children and adolescents.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: The experimental design is described in the next section and our results are presented in Section 3. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Experimental design

We use the same cheap-talk sender–receiver game as Erat and Gneezy (2009, 2012). At the beginning of this sequential two-player game, only the sender is informed about the outcome of rolling a six-sided die.³ She is then asked to send one out of six possible messages to the receiver. These messages are “The outcome of the roll of the die is i ” where $i \in \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6\}$. The sender knows that the payment depends on the decision of the receiver and that the message sent is the only information the receiver will get about the die roll. There are two alternative payment options A and B, which constitute the payoffs for

¹ The legal age for drinking and smoking in Austria is 16 years. Dür, Griebler, and Kremser (2010) claim that insufficient child safety locks on cigarette machines lead to easy accessibility, which, in turn, promotes high consumption rates. Some studies report that 80% of adult smokers started before their eighteenth birthday (see Moolchan, Ernst, & Henningfield, 2000).

² See Currie et al. (2012) for similar facts on alcohol consumption.

³ Following Erat and Gneezy (2012), the senders did not roll a die themselves in order to be able to record whether the chosen message was a lie (see Appendix A for details).

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