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Children trust people who lie to benefit others



Genyue Fu^a, Gail D. Heyman^{a,b,*}, Guowei Chen^a, Peilong Liu^a, Kang Lee^{a,c}

^a Department of Psychology, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang Province 321004, China

^b Department of Psychology, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA

^c Erick Jackman Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The current research examined whether children consider who benefits from lies when judging the trustworthiness of liars. Across two studies (total $N = 214$), 6- to 11-year-olds trusted individuals who lied to promote the interests of others, but not those who lied to promote their own interests. In contrast, children trusted individuals who told the truth regardless of who benefited. Trust in individuals who lied to promote the interests of others was evident even in the absence of moral approval for their actions. These results demonstrate that children take into account both the truth value of a speaker's statements and who benefits when assessing trustworthiness and that moral approval is not a prerequisite for trust.

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Introduction

To avoid being misinformed and manipulated, children must learn to judge whether the individuals they interact with can be trusted. Over the course of the preschool years, they come to appreciate that knowledge has implications for trust (Lane, Wellman, & Gelman, 2013), and they take into account a range of cues relevant to this assessment such as whether the individuals in question have good track records of accuracy (Birch, Vauthier, & Bloom, 2008; Corriveau & Harris, 2009; Harris, 2007; Jaswal & Neely, 2006; Koenig & Harris, 2005; Koenig & Woodward, 2010) and whether they express confidence (Birch, Akmal, & Frampton, 2009; Sabbagh & Baldwin, 2001). During the preschool years, children also come to appreciate that even when individuals know what they are talking about, they

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang Province 321004, China
E-mail address: gheyman@ucsd.edu (G.D. Heyman).

might not honestly communicate what they know (Heyman, Sritanyaratana, & Vanderbilt, 2013; Lane et al., 2013; Mascaro & Sperber, 2009; Vanderbilt, Liu, & Heyman, 2011). The current research examined the nature of this honesty-relevant skepticism once it is in place by examining whether it is applied differentially depending on who benefits from the lie.

Prior research suggests that children first begin to realize that lying has implications for trust by 3 years of age (Lane et al., 2013); at this age, they already understand that it is preferable to ask someone who is honest about the hidden contents of a box than to ask someone who is dishonest. This understanding becomes more robust between 3 and 5 years of age (Heyman et al., 2013; Mascaro & Sperber, 2009; Vanderbilt et al., 2011), and by 5 years they show selective trust even when asked to make independent evaluations of individual informants rather than relative judgments about which of two individuals is more trustworthy (Vanderbilt et al., 2011).

Although there has been almost no research examining whether different types of lies have different implications for trust, it is clear that by early elementary school children are at least capable of making distinctions between different types of lies. Most relevant to the current research is evidence that by 6 or 7 years of age children consider lies to avoid getting into trouble more negatively than they consider lies to protect others' feelings (Bussey, 1999; Heyman, Sweet, & Lee, 2009; Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto, 1983). For example, in Heyman et al. (2009), participants in all age groups tested (7-, 9-, and 11-year-olds) rated a protagonist who falsely denied having damaged a book more negatively than one who falsely claimed to like a gift. This study also showed that children in all of these age groups viewed prosocial goals as the primary motivation of lies that benefit others and self-interest goals as the primary motivation of lies that benefit self.

In one study that did look at the implications of different lies for trust, Xu and colleagues (2013) asked 7-, 9-, and 11-year-olds to reason about characters who told different kinds of lies. One character told lies that were likely to protect the feelings of the recipient (e.g., falsely claiming to think that the recipient's shoes looked great), and the other told lies that were likely to hurt the feelings of the recipient (falsely claiming to think that the recipient's coat was ugly to hurt the recipient's feelings). Findings indicated that participants' ratings of the benevolence of these characters mediated the influence of their honesty judgments on their trust evaluations, suggesting that the negative impact of dishonest statements on trust may be buffered by the way the motivations of the lie-teller are perceived. Additional research on honesty and trust suggests that 6- and 7-year-olds consider whether bad information was provided with deceptive intent when deciding whether to trust the individual who provided the information (Liu, Vanderbilt, & Heyman, 2013). This suggests early sensitivity to intent information even when it is not confounded with outcome information.

In the current research, we focused on a different question—whether children make a distinction between lies that promote their own interest and lies told to promote the interests of others when evaluating trustworthiness. This question is important because trust judgments have broad implications for children's social relationships and for their vulnerability to being misinformed and manipulated (Heyman, 2008). Consequently, it would benefit individuals interested in the welfare of children to understand the nature of these vulnerabilities in order to find optimal ways to protect them. Addressing this question is also important in assessing the potential psychological and social consequences of the lies to which children are exposed (Hays & Carver, 2014; Heyman, Luu, & Lee, 2009).

The question of whether children view different types of lies as having different implications for trust has important theoretical implications because it helps to inform debates about the extent to which children are merely computing records of prior accuracy when assessing whether specific individuals are trustworthy or are engaging in more theory-driven reasoning processes (Liu et al., 2013; Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009a, 2009b). Previous research on this topic suggests that when assessing the trustworthiness of individuals who provide inaccurate information, children can sometimes take into account the reason why inaccurate information was given. We build on this research by addressing whether children still take into account the reason why individuals give inaccurate information even when it is clear that the individuals in question are lying.

We asked the question of whether children use information about who benefits from a lie when evaluating the trustworthiness of the liar, both with reference to statements about committing good deeds and with reference to statements about committing bad deeds, because it is possible that children have different expectations about reporting on these types of behaviors. For comparison

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