

Lying in the name of the collective good: A study on developmental “blue lies”*

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The present study investigated the understanding and evaluation, at a developmental age, of the “blue lie”, i.e. lying to benefit one’s own collectivity. 150 subjects of both sexes, divided into three groups (M a. 8,5; 11,7 and 20,4) were asked to evaluate the statements of the main character of each of 4 short stories involving a conflict between the benefit for the self *vs.* the collectivity, requiring them to choose between the two. There was a variation both in the type of statement (a lie or a truth) and the beneficiary (the self or the collectivity).

The results show that there was a significant age-related difference in both identifying the beneficiary of the main character’s statement and in categorizing the answers as a lie or as a truth, although not in the sense of a linear improvement. Moreover they signalled that the positive evaluation of lying to benefit the collective increased with age. There was a significant difference between the children on the one hand and the pre-adolescents and young adults on the other. This indicated a complex influence as regards the socio-cultural context, and a need for further investigation.

Key words: *lie, collectivism, cultural influence, social cognition.*

I Introduction

The topic of this study is the developmental origin of lies which are told to benefit one’s own group. This type of behaviour is usual in the adult world but so far has not been studied so much as regards the developmental age.

Studying children’s lying goes back a long way in psychological literature. But it was Piaget (1932) who introduced us initially to a scientific study on children’s representation and evaluation of lies. He set out stages and characteristics in children’s representation and evaluation of lies, and the children by developing their logical thinking there came about the understanding of its effects on mutual trust and the importance of the intention of whoever told the lies. In more recent times, there have been considerable contributions on this topic which have examined various aspects of why children end to lie. In fact recent studies have

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shown that children begin lying in pre-school years (Newton, Reddy, Bull, 2000) and these lies increase with age (Wilson, Smith, Ross, 2003).

As regards the theme of this research, it needs to be pointed out that there has been little research on children telling lies to benefit their own group – these lies in English are defined as “blue lies”¹. What we know about adult behaviour shows that individuals generally tend to justify lies told in the name of a collective good for pro-social purposes (Bok, 1978; Barnes, 1994). This is due to social pressure which makes them adapt to the rules of the society in which they live (Fu *et al.*, 2008). An interesting problem here arises, in our opinion: does the same attitude exist in children? Is it social pressure that leads them to believe that the lie which they have told for the benefit of their own group is morally acceptable, both for themselves and for others?

One way in which this study can make this last point clear is to investigate the influence that the cultural context has on such an evaluation. Previous research has shown that, although children strongly condemn lies to hide their own transgressions (Lewis, 1993), Western 4- to 11-year old children endorse white lies told to appear polite (Xu, Luo, Fu, Lee, 2009; Donsì, Menna, de Gruttola, 2011). However Chinese children value lies told to show their modesty (Lee *et al.*, 1997; Lee *et al.*, 2001) and Italian Catholic children do not consider untruths as lies when they have a priest’s blessing (Siegal *et al.*, 2000). Besides, and this is an issue which particularly interests us, Fu *et al.* in their 2008 study found that Chinese children start understanding blue lies when they are about 7-years-old and from then up to the age of 11 there increased their inclination to evaluate more positively lies told to benefit the collective, even when the lies were told against themselves. Western children, on the other hand, show the opposite tendency (Fu *et al.*, 2007). It should be underlined that in Chinese schools a sense of community is greatly sought after both through formal training and collateral activities. This teaching tends to come to the fore more clearly when the lie is told for the sake of the group. Thus teaching plays an important role during developmental transformations (Wu, 1996; Lu, Gao, 2004).

These references suggest that like many other behavioural aspects, the understanding and evaluation of lies can be influenced by socialization. A child absorbs more and more the moral values in line with of their own culture. Thus they may also be influenced in their evaluation a regards lying.

These are the framework and the considerations which this work proposes to present.

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Motivation

This study, whose initial results have already been presented elsewhere (Donsì, Toscano, 2011), proposes to verify also in an Italian context, as the child grows up,

if lies told in the name of the collective good were evaluated more positively than lies told to favour oneself, or whether, as psychological literature has reported, in a Western context the trend was the opposite.

We also decided to include in our experiment a group of young adults, not present in the original research, given the absence in our context of specific data related to this age group.

The specific objective of this study was to test three groups of young people. They are from three different age groups. The study will evaluate their truthful and untruthful statements made in different situations where there was a conflict between who benefitted from them, i.e. the person themselves or the collective, where in this conflict they had to choose between one or the other.

With regard to earlier research results (see Fu *et al.*, 2007; Fu *et al.*, 2008) we hypothesized that in the Italian context as the subject got older there was more accuracy in identifying the beneficiary of the statement and in categorizing whether it was a truth or a lie. Whereas as regards the moral judgement of the lie, this would be influenced more by the sense of the collective good. However this should happen at an older age for the Italian subjects compared to their Chinese counterparts.

3 Method

3.1. Participants

150 subjects took part in the study. 50 students were from the third year of primary school (23 males, 27 females; a. a.: 8.5). There were 50 students from the first year of Neapolitan middle schools (23 males, 27 females; a. a.: 11.7) and finally 50 undergraduates from the University of Naples (20 males, 30 females; a. a.: 20.4).

The students' participation was in all cases voluntary and anonymous.

3.2. Procedure

The participants were asked to evaluate the statements of the protagonists from four short stories which involved a conflict between benefitting oneself or the group. All the students were required to choose one option or the other (Fu *et al.*, 2008). In the first story, which involved a mathematics competition, by lying the self was at an advantage and the group harmed. In the second story, a skateboard competition, by telling the truth the group was helped and the self harmed. In the third story, which involved a drawing competition, the lie helped the group and harmed the self. Finally in the fourth story, in this case a volleyball match, telling the truth helped the self and harmed the group. The groups referred to in the stories were a group of students from the same class, a sports team and

a group of friends who all shared the same hobby. In adapting the stories to an Italian context, the themes chosen were all significant to the three age groups.

As regards each story, the participants were asked firstly who would benefit from the choice (the collective, the main character or nobody). Secondly whether the statement was a lie, a truth or something else. Thirdly they were asked to evaluate what the main character had said by indicating the level of goodness/badness in the statement through the use of circles on a 7-point scale which ranged from very good to very, very bad.

Certain rules were respected, i.e. two versions of each story ensured the same gender for both the character and the person interviewed, and two different sequences likewise ensured the control of any possible influence of the order of the stories.

The primary school and high school students were interviewed individually while the undergraduates were interviewed as a group with the interview being a written one.

3.3. Data Analysis

As regards the questions dealing with *beneficiary identification* and *lie/truth classification*, an χ^2 test was carried out to verify the relationship between the *Age* and *Gender* variables and the participants' answers.

So as to verify if there existed or not statistically significant differences due to their *Age* and *Gender* with respect to the *moral evaluation* of the statements in the stories, the participants' evaluations, arrived at through graphic symbols, were converted into scores ranging from 1 (very, very good) to 7 (very, very bad). Then two ANOVA (one-way) analyses were carried out on the average resulting scores of the subjects for each of the stories. *Age* and *Gender* were assumed as being independent variables.

After the ANOVA tests, some post-hoc comparisons (Fischer LSD) were used on the average scores obtained from the three age groups, to study in more depth the effects which emerged.

4 Results

No significant differences due to the variable *Gender* resulted from the analyses, so here the analyses only refer to the *Age* variable.

As to the identification of the beneficiary of the main character's statements among the *Group*, *Oneself*, *Nobody* and the classification of the answers among *Lie*, *Truth*, *Other*, the results show a significant age-related difference. It shows that respectively for Story 1 ($\chi^2 = 38,43$; $df = 4$; $p < 0,05$) and Story 3 ($\chi^2 = 20,36$; $df = 4$; $p < 0,05$) as regards lying, and Story 2 ($\chi^2 = 41,96$; $df = 4$; $p < 0,05$) and Story

3 ($\chi^2 = 15,03$; $df = 4$; $p < 0,05$) as regards both lying and truth-telling to benefit the group, while harming oneself.

The highest percentage of correct answers always belongs to the pre-adolescents.

Any differences between the error percentages recorded in the participants' answers could be explained by the following hypotheses: some possible difficulties in understanding the text by the children, a tendency for the pre-adolescents to give "standard" answers and a tendency for the young adults to give a personal interpretation to the text.

With regard to the moral evaluation of the main character's behaviour, the ANOVA Variance analysis carried out on the average scores obtained from the participants relative to the four stories in order to determine whether the Independent Variables *Age* and *Gender* caused a statistically significant effect on the evaluation, show that such an effect was only relative to the I.V. *Age* $F(2,147) = 3,308$; $p < 0,05$.

The post-hoc statistical analysis (Fischer LSD) on the average scores obtained from the three age groups revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0,05$) between the average score assigned by children (average = 3,63) and what the undergraduates had assigned (average = 3,39) ($MS = 0,90143$; $df = 147,00$).

As regards lying in one's own interest, there prevailed in all three groups a "condemnation" of the lie. The analysis of variability on the difference here pointed out that there was a statistically significant difference ($p < 0,05$) only between the average scores assigned by the children (average = 4,64) and those assigned by the pre-adolescents (average = 5,22).

We can assume that the children's condemnation was less defined because the assignment of a negative value was above all given to the lie, while the intentions which led to such behaviour seemed to have had less importance in their judgement. In this case it was the pre-adolescents who were more severe in evaluating the lie told for one's own benefit. Such an evaluation could be due to attributing a negative value to three different aspects, i.e. the lie, the intention of benefitting oneself and harming the collective.

"Truth-telling in the interest of the group while harming oneself" tended to be considered positive by children, pre-adolescents and young adults. The variability analysis regarding differences among age groups showed here a statistically significant difference ($p < 0,05$) only between the average scores assigned by the children (average = 1,92) and by the undergraduates (average = 2,52).

A possible explanation for this could be that for the children truth-telling – better still if it is altruistic – could only be evaluated as positive, while the undergraduates' less positive evaluation could be due mainly to their personal interpretation of the text.

With regard to the “blue lie”, i.e. a lie told to benefit a collective while harming oneself, the tendency on the part of the children seemed to be more oriented to assigning this behaviour a negative value, while as the age increased there was a tendency to value it more positively.

The statistical analysis indicated that the children’s average score (average = 4,50) was significantly different ($p < 0,05$) from the pre-adolescents’ one (average = 3,26) and the young adults’ one (average = 3,00). On the other hand the difference between the pre-adolescents’ average score and the young adults’ one is not statistically significant.

A possible explanation for this trend could be that the children were likely to consider lying as something which should always be condemned and therefore the end-goal (in our case, benefitting the collective) was not considered a valid “excuse”. Pre-adolescents and young adults agreed on the fact that they considered a “blue lie” as something which was mostly good. This was probably because they assigned a more positive value to the intent of benefitting the group, rather than to the means – the lie – through which this end-goal was pursued.

When evaluating the assertion “Truth-telling in one’s own interest while harming the group”, the children, pre-adolescents and undergraduates chose a middle-of-the-road position between neutrality and a mildly positive value. In this case there was no statistically significant difference between the average scores assigned by the three subject groups (averages: children = 3,46; pre-adolescents = 3,28; young adults = 3,32).

The reasons for these results could be explained not only by the subjects attributing a generally positive value to truth-telling, as in the text when the main character, who is the team’s best player, refused to play because he had a sore arm but also because he did not want to worsen his situation. Therefore the choice could in some way be justified.

5 Conclusions

What considerations could these results suggest?

Contrary to our hypotheses, an increase in age did not lead to a linear increase in precision in both the indication of the beneficiary and the categorization of the truth and lie. Young adults tended to the answers *No one* and *Other* and generally showed a tendency to interpret those questions that went beyond the assignment. In particular when they said that for a lie that harmed the group and benefitted the self there was no beneficiary that demonstrated, in our opinion, how, with growing maturity, they increasingly tended to see themselves as part of a wider community. Thus it was impossible to have a clear separation between one’s own interest and that of the group’s. Therefore with an answer which implied complex and articulate reasons, there

were ethical evaluations involved in it together with greater maturity – both from a cognitive and social point of view – that led them to evaluate truth – and lie-telling also on the basis of motivations and intentions.

As regards the moral evaluation of the behaviour of the main character, in relation to lies there was a tendency in children to consider the lie as always being bad, without taking into consideration intentions and beneficiaries. With an increase in age, lie-telling was, instead, evaluated in relation to the group's advantage (hence good) or to benefit oneself while harming the group (and therefore bad). The statistical analysis confirmed such an articulate way of reasoning by the resulting significant difference between the children's and young adults' average scores.

The most interesting aspect, in our opinion, concerned precisely the main theme of this study, i.e. the moral evaluation of the behaviour of lying in the name of the collective good. Contrary to what we had hypothesized, the results showed even in the Italian context an increase with age, in the positive evaluation of lying in the name of the collective good. This implied a significant difference between the children on the one hand and the pre-adolescents and young adults on the other.

This led us to further considerations linked to a comparison with the corresponding results in China (Fu *et al.*, 2008). As has already been underlined in the introduction, it was difficult to assume that intense socialization regarding community values did not have an influence on Chinese children who assigned a strong value to the collectivity and thus this led them to be more inclined to protect the group, even through their lie-related behaviour.

In the Italian socio-cultural context, where school is organized differently, the handing down of rules has been passed on mainly, if not exclusively, by adults (Molinari, Bertocchi, 2008). Curricular activity has not generally been organized around groups, nor have programmes aimed at encouraging the development of collectivist ideas been passed on. What's more sports' teams, religious or friendship groups outside school have functioned as additional reference groups. This is why the "stories" we chose for our subjects also referred to sports or spontaneous groups.

We know that towards the end of primary school (around 10-11 years of age) our children have begun to understand the reasons that underlie social rules and have started considering them necessary for the proper functioning of a group (Donsì, 2000). But differently from the Chinese culture, where team spirit has been encouraged through formal teaching, in our context such an awareness would require individual development as a pre-condition for adequate, autonomous growth.

We were surprised when we obtained results which were similar to our Chinese colleagues' ones. In the Chinese case the enhanced value of the community definitely came about because of an inner adhesion to something

they had been presented with from the outside from early infancy whereas in Italian culture the explanation would appear to be more complex.

From pre-adolescence onwards the group definitely acquired a central value for the individual. The individual found mutual emotional ties in the other members of the group, as well as interaction rules and shared values (Tonolo, 1999). It would seem that the experience of a collective life ended up by favouring an increase in lying in the name of the collective.

The enhanced value of the group, greater than that of the individual, therefore appeared to be the result of a process of internalization, the effect of active experimentation, a conscious, autonomous choice whose roots were to be found in affectivity and a more mature, cognitive development.

There remained constantly active a dialectic between the individual and his social group, whose results appeared open and whose further investigation implied the careful consideration of various, different aspects such as monitoring the differences between evaluations of lie-telling based on the type of group benefitting from it (the class, a formal group, a spontaneous group) or, even, an attention to the difficulties in understanding issues experienced by the children. All this led us to consider the possibility of using methods other than the ones proposed and therefore stimulating us to opening up to new research possibilities.

Notes

¹ This definition is purportedly originated from the colour of the uniforms of American policemen, whose conduct had been using false statements to protect the police forces from allegations in a legal case (Barnes, 1994).

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Riassunto

Questo lavoro ha indagato la comprensione e la valutazione, in età evolutiva, della “bugia blu”, ovvero della menzogna detta a beneficio di una collettività. A 150 soggetti di entrambi i generi, suddivisi in tre gruppi di e. m. 8,5, 11,7 e 20,4, è stato richiesto di valutare le affermazioni del protagonista di 4 brevi storie che implicavano un conflitto tra il beneficio del sé e quello della collettività, che richiedeva di preferire l’uno o l’altra: in esse variava sia il tipo di affermazione (bugia o verità) che il beneficiario (gruppo o se stesso). I risultati mostrano che esiste una differenza significativa legata all’età sia nell’indicazione del beneficiario dell’affermazione del protagonista che nella classificazione delle risposte come bugie o verità, ma non nel senso di un miglioramento lineare. Inoltre, segnalano l’incremento, con l’aumentare dell’età, della valutazione positiva del mentire a vantaggio della collettività, con una differenza significativa tra bambini da una parte e preadolescenti e giovani adulti dall’altra, che indica una complessa influenza del contesto socioculturale che spinge ad ulteriori approfondimenti.

Parole chiave: *bugia, collettivismo, influenza culturale, conoscenza sociale.*

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