

## Elements Affecting Children's Moral Judgment of Lying: A Review

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### Abstract

*This paper synthesized recent empirical literature on the elements affecting children's moral judgment of lying. Overall, 25 published empirical studies investigated the effects of 14 salient elements on the way children made moral judgments about others' lying behavior. These 14 elements were found related to one of four broad categories, including the lie itself, the lie-teller, the target, and the research subjects. Specifically, the differences in children's moral judgment of lying were rooted in variations in the elements of the lie (namely, the likelihood of message, belief, and consequence), the lie-teller (intention, status differentials and occupation), of the target (including status differentials and social distance), and the research subjects (age, gender, social-cultural differences, group vs. individuals, educational background and personal morality, and social group). Suggestions for further research were discussed.*

**Key words:** elements, child, moral judgment, lying

### 1. Introduction

This article reports on one study that synthesized the recent empirical research on the elements affecting children's moral judgment of lying. The issue of how various elements affect children's evaluations of lying was raised by Piaget (1932/1965), who reported that children based their judgment primarily on the degree of likelihood of the falsehood, the consequences of the lying behavior, and/or the intentions of the lie-teller. Recent researchers, however, argued that this domain includes more than the question of how falsehood, consequences and intentions affect children's moral judgment of lying (Grueneich, 1982). To unpack the psychological functioning of various elements affecting children's moral judgment of lying, researchers since 1970s have conducted a wide range of empirical studies.

However, morality of lying is so complex an area that no single research can answer all the important questions; what each study can do is no more than explore a small facet of the problem. Recent empirical research on the elements affecting children's ratings of lying demonstrates great variations in theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and the scope, depth, and quality of analysis. Moreover, studies conducted before 1970s have received systematic examination (Burton, 1976; Duska & Whelan, 1975), but studies conducted since 1970s have not systematically evaluated yet. Although Lee (2000) reviewed five recent studies, he only cast a narrow lens on how children apply two elements, namely, intention and convention, to guide their moral judgment of lying, without drawing attention to the full range of the recent advances in this area. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically re-assess the current state of knowledge and synthesize the findings and insights of previous investigators so as to provide guides for further research. This inquiry is such an attempt.

According to Bandura (1991), moral judgment is a process involving multidimensional rules or standards fashioned from varied sources; and the elements entering into judging the reprehensibility of conduct fall into four major categories, including the characteristics of the transgression, the wrongdoer, the recipient, and the human person who makes judgment. This social cognitive perspective provided a 4-category conceptual framework for the present inquiry: the lie itself as the transgression, the lie-teller as the wrong-doer, the target of the lying behavior as the recipient, and the subjects participating in each study as the human person who makes judgment. This inquiry seeks to answer two major research questions: (1) what are the elements that affect children's moral judgment of lying? (2) What are the effects of the elements on children's moral judgment of lying? Answers to this question will help bring together the diverse sources of material so as to conjure up a fine-grained picture of the various elements entering into judging the reprehensibility of lying.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Searching for the Literature**

The studies to be reviewed are primarily psychological in nature. PsycINFO appears to be the most relevant search engine for the current purposes and was thus used to facilitate the literature search. Considering the multidisciplinary nature of these studies, I also searched the databases JSTOR and ERIC. To guide the search, I employed a variety of key words. They included: (1) moral judgment and its relevant phrases such as moral evaluation, rating, reasoning, and attitude; (2) lying and its synonyms or antonyms such as deception, cheating, truth-telling, honesty, fabrication, and prevarication; (3) combinations of moral judgment and lying or lies such as moral judgment, acceptability, permissibility, and reprehensibility of lying or lies; and (4) combinations of elements and moral judgment of lying. In addition, the bibliographies in initially identified studies were also employed to help identify other relevant studies. The search stopped at the point when the same studies were repeatedly found.

### **2.2 Analyzing the Literature**

Obtained studies ( $n = 25$ ) were systematically analyzed. The process of literature analysis was ongoing in nature and included three stages. The first stage involved case analysis. Each study was closely examined to identify specific elements investigated and relations tested between the elements and children's moral judgment of lying. At the second stage, cross-case analysis was conducted between all the obtained studies. Each study was compared and contrasted with others, with particular attention paid to information on the following items: characteristics of the subjects, methods and measures for data collection, methods of data analysis, relations tested, and results obtained. It was found that the reviewed studies investigated up to 14 different elements, each of which, more or less, accounts for children's moral judgment of lying. The third stage of analysis focused on classifying the investigated elements in terms of the 4-category conceptual framework. It was found that all 14 elements were related to one of the four categories, that is, the lie itself, the lie-teller, the target, and the research subjects. Specifically, of the fourteen elements, three (namely, likelihood of message, belief, and consequences) fall into the category of the lie itself, another three (intention, status differentials and occupation) into the lie-teller, two (status differentials and social distance) into the target, and six (age, gender, social cultural differences, group vs. individuals, and educational background and personal morality, and social classes, ethnicity and region) into the research subjects. Results were reported as follows.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 Elements of the Lie**

#### **3.1.1 Likelihood of message**

The term 'likelihood of message' refers to the extent to which an utterance reflects the factual state of affairs (Lee, 2000). Piaget (1932/1965) first reported that the likelihood of message dominates children's moral judgment of lying, and that for 9-year-old or younger children, "the more unlikely the lie, the more its contents mark a departure from reality, the worse it is" (p. 154). However, recent literature did not support Piaget's findings. Wimmer, Gruber, and Perner (1984) designed an experiment (the 5<sup>th</sup> of 6 consecutive experiments) involving four different stories of varied speaker's intention and likelihood of message: one story of truthful intention but false message, one of truthful intention and likely message, one of deceptive intention and false message, and one of deceptive intention but likely message. Six-year-old participants ( $n = 16$ ) were asked to reward or punish the story protagonist. It was found that while controlling the effects of intention, the likelihood of message as suggested in the stories has little effect on 6-year-olds' decisions of rewarding or punishment.

#### **3.1.2 Belief**

The term 'belief' refers to whether or not the lie is believed by the target. According to Isenberg (1964), a lie is an utterance told by a liar who does not believe it but with the intention that the target should be led to believe it. Accordingly, a lie is either believed or not believed by the target. Two recent studies (Bussey, 1992; Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto, 1983) explored the effects of belief on children's moral judgment of lying but reported controversial results. Bussey (1992) asked preschoolers, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders ( $n = 72$ ; equal group size; and no gender difference) to rate on a 6-point scale the badness or goodness of vignette characters' statements of misdeeds. Through comparing lies explicitly believed with those not believed, Bussey (1992) found that children did not differ in their ratings of both believed and not-believed lies, nor did the preschoolers and the older children evaluate lies believed any differently from lies not believed.

On the contrary, Peterson et al. (1983) reported significant effects of belief on children's moral judgment of lying. Peterson and colleagues compared 5-, 8-, 9-, and 11-year-olds' (n = 160) evaluations of two anti-social lies: one believed and one not believed. As found out, when controlling for other elements, belief has a significant effect on children's moral judgment of lying, and the believed lie is rated worse compared to the not-believed one.

### **3.1.3 Consequences**

Piaget (1932/1965) documented that the consequences of lie-telling have strong effects on children's moral judgment of lying; young children mostly rate lies that are punished as much "naughtier" than those not punished; and for young children, "... punishment is the criterion of the gravity of the lie" (p. 169). Since the 1970s, six empirical studies (Author, 2010; Barnett et al., 2000; Bussey, 1992; Maier & Lavrakas, 1976; Peterson et al., 1983; Wimmer et al., 1984) specifically re-examined the consequence of lie-telling and its effects on children's moral judgment of lying. Overall, children's moral judgment of lying correlates significantly with the consequence of lie-telling but varies with the types of consequence. Through comparing children's evaluations of lies either punished or not punished, Bussey (1992) found that the punishment contrast has a significant effect, so does the interaction between punishment and age. For 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, the punished and non-punished lies are equally reprehensible. However, for preschoolers, the punished lies are more reprehensible compared to the non-punished. This finding is consonant with Piaget's (1932/1965) theory that observable physical consequences are major determinants of preschoolers' evaluations of lies and truthful statements.

However, Bussey's (1992) finding is incongruent with Peterson et al.'s (1983). Peterson et al. explored children's evaluations of anti-social lies ending up with or without punishment. They found that 5-, 8-, 9-, and 11-year-olds judged the punished and unpunished lies as equally reprehensible, and even 5-year-olds did not judge the punished lie to be any worse than the non-punished lie. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Peterson et al. (1983) only mentioned that the lie was punished but did not specify what kind of punishment it was. Should Peterson et al. have specified the kind of the punishment, there might have been some different results, as suggested by Barnett et al. (2000) and Maier and Lavrakas (1976).

According to Barnett et al. (2000), 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders' moral judgment of lying correlates significantly with the types of consequence of lie-telling. Lies that reward the lie-teller at the cost of the target are generally rated more reprehensible compared to the lies that benefit the target. For lies that reward the lie-teller with material gain at the cost of the target, children's ratings tend to be more negative compared to lies that reward the liar with psychological gains. Moreover, lies that reward the target with material gains are rated more positively compared to lies that help achieve a psychological benefit. The finding seems to suggest that one who tells an anti-social lie to obtain something tangible from another is perceived as engaging in a more reprehensible deception compared to one who merely makes him- or her-self feel better. On the contrary, one who tells an altruistic lie to give something tangible to another tend to be perceived as engaging in a more benevolent act compared to one who merely makes the other feel better.

Maier and Lavrakas (1976) also reported that children's moral judgment of lying correlates significantly with the types of consequence of lie-telling. The researchers compared children's moral evaluations of a lie that causes monetary harm (e.g., not admitting damaging a car) with evaluations of a lie that causes no monetary harm. It was found that lies potentially costing the target money and causing trouble are rated as reprehensible, and less harmful lies are more acceptable, suggesting that monetary and psychological cost has a significant effect on the reprehensibility of lies. To explore whether emotional consequence has a significant effect on children's moral judgment of lying, Wimmer et al. (1984) designed an experiment in which the lie-teller tells a lie and makes the target either delighted or sad. It was found that 6-year-olds' moral evaluations of lying correlates little with the emotional consequences of lie-telling. Wimmer et al. (1984) also examined whether social consequence of lie-telling has a significant effect on children's moral judgment of lying. They found that 6-year-old's moral judgment of lying does not correlate with psychological consequence. In a recent study (Author, 2010), children (n = 41) were found based their evaluations of lie-telling on social consequences in the sense of maintaining and developing strong social networks with peers.

## **3.2 Elements of the Lie-teller**

### **3.2.1 Intention**

Intention is a necessary condition in defining whether an untrue statement is a lie.

According to Isenberg (1964), a false statement that is misleading or deceptive is not a lie unless it is intended by the speaker to mislead or deceive the target. Just as Bok (1979) put it, “the moral question of whether you are lying or not is settled by establishing the truth or falsity of what you say. In order to settle this question, we must know whether you intend your statement to mislead” (p. 6). Therefore, it is fair to assume that intention would unavoidably enter into judging the reprehensibility of lying.

Piaget (1932/1965) reported that intention does not influence young children’s moral judgments of lying. Only by approximately 10 years of age would children begin to treat the intention of the speaker as an important factor in their moral judgment, and only at this stage would children judge the character with deceptive intentions as “naughtier” or “worse.” Developmentally related changes in recognizing the intention to deceive are foregrounded as the main topic of research. However, recent researchers (Peterson et al., 1983; Wimmer et al., 1984, 1985) furthered Piaget’s findings and reported that children even as young as 4 or 5 years old have begun to use intention information to guide their moral evaluations of lying. Peterson et al. (1983) designed an experiment in which 5-, 8-, 9- and 11-year-olds ( $n = 40$ , respectively) made moral evaluations of anti-social, white, and altruistic lies. Approximately, 80% of the 5-year-olds and 95% of the 8- and 9-year-olds assigned worse ratings to lies intended to benefit the lie-teller compared to lies intended to benefit the target.

Recent researchers (Lindskold & Han, 1986; Lindskold & Walters, 1983) also investigated the relationship between different types of intention and children’s moral judgment of lying. Lindskold and Walters (1983) asked children ( $n = 331$ ) to rate the permissibility of a total of 19 untruthful statements. They found variable reprehensibility running through six categories of lies, with lies altruistically intended rated as least reprehensible and lies selfishly intended most reprehensible. The six general categories—in order of most to least acceptable—included: save others’ shame, protect others from punishment, influence officials, enhancing appearance and protecting gain, exploitative persuasion, and direct harm with self-gain. The more self-oriented the lie, the more reprehensible it was judged. Lindskold and Walters established an intention-determined spectrum of reprehensibility of lie-telling. This finding was repeated by Lindskold and Han (1986).

In addition, Barnett et al. (2000) also examined the magnitude of the effect of the liar’s intention for telling the lie on children’s moral judgment of lying. Children of grades 4 through 6 rated on a 5-point scale the reprehensibility of 8 lies either self-oriented or other-oriented. They displayed a more positive attitude toward lies intended to benefit the target compared to lies intended to benefit the lie-teller. Antagonists who lied for other-oriented reasons were more favorably judged compared to self-oriented lie-tellers.

### **3.2.2 Status differentials of the lie-teller**

Maier and Lavrakas (1976) investigated the effects of status differentials of adult lie-tellers on children’s moral judgment of lying. They used a research design that generated lies within an employer-employee relationship. Child participants evaluated a lie told by an employer as more negative compared to the same lie uttered by an employee, suggesting that children’s moral judgment of lies told by adults is affected by the status differentials of the liars.

### **3.2.3 Occupation**

Maier and Lavrakas (1976) also examined whether and how the occupation of the lie-teller affects children’s ratings of lying. They found that children’s ratings of lying vary with the occupation of the lie-tellers, and children see lies told by a politician as most reprehensible. Maier and Lavrakas concluded that a lie told by a person with an occupation affecting many people is more reprehensible compared to a lie told by a person in an occupation affecting fewer people.

## **3.3 Elements of the Target**

### **3.3.1 Status differentials of the target**

Status differentials here refer to the differences in the age, ranks, position, or other identity-related elements of the target. Piaget’s (1932/1965) observed that for younger children, lying between children is allowed but lying to adults is wrong, and for older children, while lying to adults is wrong, it is as bad or even worse to lie to other children. Walper and Valtin (1992) further investigated the issue of how status differentials of the target affect children’s evaluations of lie-telling, paying particular attention to the issue of whether politeness towards adults is evaluated differently than politeness among peers.

They asked 6-, 8-, and 10-year-olds to rate white lies told by children to peers and adults, and found that both 6- and 8-year-olds evaluated white lies told to peers as negatively as those told to adults, with 10-year-olds' evaluations of white lies correlating significantly with status differentials of the target.

### **3.3.2 Social distance**

Social distance here refers to the familiarity between the lie-teller and the target. When a lie is told to two (or more) targets of different familiarity with the lie-teller, differences in social distance affect children's judging the permissibility or reprehensibility of the lie. According to Maier and Lavrakas (1976), lying to a friend is more reprehensible compared with lying to an associate or a stranger, suggesting that shorter social distance grants less permissibility of lying. Since Maier and Lavrakas (1976) only included a single age group in their study, it is unclear whether the social distance effects are universal or age specific.

To answer this question, Walper and Valtin (1992) investigated 6-, 8-, and 10-year-olds' ratings of white lies in a study involving two situations. In Situation 1, white lies were told by a child to either an unfamiliar peer or a familiar sibling, and in Situation 2, white lies were told by a child to either an unfamiliar adult or a familiar adult (the liar's mother). It was found the social distance effects are both age and situation specific. 6- and 8-year-olds rated white lies in Situations 1 and 2 as negative, suggesting no significant differences in the negativity of both situations. However, the 10-year-olds' evaluations were specific to the differences of social distance. Moreover, the lies told to unfamiliar targets were judged as positive, and those told to familiar targets were rated as negative. In the situation of lying to unfamiliar targets, lying to peers was less permissible than to adults, and in the situation of lying to familiar targets, lying to peers (siblings) was more permissible than to adults (one's mother).

## **3.4 Elements of the Research Subjects**

### **3.4.1 Age**

Piaget (1932/1965) reported that only by approximately 10 years of age do children begin to treat the intention of the speaker as an important factor in their moral judgment of lying. This observation was rewritten by recent researchers (Peterson et al., 1983; Wimmer et al., 1984), who found that for children 4 or 5 years of age, intention has begun to guide their moral judgment of lying. Piaget (1932/1965) also reported that as age increased, children's moral judgment of lying becomes increasingly moderate. This observation was supported by recent efforts (Author, 2010; Barnett et al., 2000; Corson, 1984; Peterson et al., 1983; Peisach & Hardeman, 1983). Younger children tended to be harsher about lying (Barnett et al, 2000). For instance, 92% of 5-year-olds, 88% of 8-year-olds, 78% of 9-year-olds, and 28% of 11-year-olds, 20% of 12-year-olds, and 5% of 15-year-olds believed that lying is always wrong (Peterson et al., 1983; Corson, 1984).

This developmental sequence varies across different types of lie. For anti-social lies, children's evaluations tended to be more negative as age increased while indicating differences in terms of consequence and belief (Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, & Board, 1997; Lee, Xu, Fu, Cameron, & Chen, 2001). Preschoolers judged lying more negatively when it was punished, but older children (2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders) did not differ in their judgment, whether punishment being present or absent (Bussey, 1992). This finding is partially consistent with Peterson et al.'s (1983) observations that 5- to 11-year-olds did not differ significantly in their evaluations of punished anti-social lies, and the same groups of participants rated anti-social lies that were believed by the target as more and more negative with the increase of age.

It should be noted that adolescents' moral evaluations of anti-social lies seem to conjure up a picture different than that mentioned above. Keltikangas-Jarvinen and Lindeman (1997) explored the age effects on adolescents' (n = 2,594) moral evaluations of anti-social lies. Overall, participants showed more tolerance to anti-social lies with the increase of age. In all age groups, 14-year-olds approved anti-social lies more than 11-year-olds, but the difference between 14- and 17-year-olds is only marginally significant. It was found that the majority of the lying examples were better tolerated at mid-adolescence than in pre- or late adolescence.

For altruistic lies, children's moral judgment tends to be more and more positive as age increases. Peterson et al. (1983) reported that 5-year-olds gave altruistic lies significantly lower scores compared to 8- and 9-year-olds, who did not differ significantly from each other, and that 11-year-olds gave the highest scores to altruistic lying.

For white lies, however, controversial findings were reported. Peterson et al. (1983) found no age difference existing among children at age 5, 8, 9, and 11 in ratings of white lies. On the contrary, Walper and Valtin (1992) indicated that children at age 6, 8, and 10 became increasingly tolerant of white lies.

Moreover, Lee et al. (1997, 2001) found that students at age 7 to 15 rated white lies decreasingly negatively (see also Author, 2010). In addition, Keltikangas-Jarvinen and Lindeman (1997) documented that 11-, 14-, and 17-year-olds considered white lies curvilinearly more and more acceptable.

### 3.4.2 Gender

Gender difference in moral judgment has long been a prominent assertion in theories of moral development. Gilligan (1982) argued that males approached moral issues by emphasizing preserving rights, exercising justice, autonomy, and rules, whereas females based their morality on relationship, sensitivity, and responsibility to people. Five recent studies specifically addressed potential gender differences in children's moral judgment of lying (Keltikangas-Jarvinen & Lindeman, 1997; Lindskold & Walters, 1983; Maier & Lavrakas, 1976; Peisach & Hardeman, 1983; Walper & Valtin, 1992). The findings of these studies indicate controversy over the effects of gender on children's moral judgment of lying.

Keltikangas-Jarvinen and Lindeman (1997) explored the effects of gender on children's moral judgment of lying. 2594 (1307 girls, 1287 boys) pupils in Finland participated in the study: 419 girls and 419 boys at age 11, 406 girls and 431 boys at age 14, and 479 girls and 440 boys at age 17. Evaluations of lying were measured with an 8-item questionnaire, part of a bigger project. In all age groups, boys accepted all the lie examples, but girls did not. In each age group, boys accepted lying more easily compared to girls.

However, three recent studies found no significant gender difference in children's moral judgment of lying. Maier and Lavrakas (1976) explored the effects of gender on children's evaluations of lying, but found no significant main effects. This finding was confirmed by two later studies. Peisach and Hardeman (1983) reported that while gender affects children's moral reasoning of lying, the gender effect is non-significant for their decisions of the rightness or wrongness of lying. This result was replicated by Walper and Valtin (1992). It should be noted that Walper and Valtin (1992) found no gender interaction with age or situation, while Maier and Lavrakas (1976) found a significant interaction effect of gender: female subjects rated it least reprehensible when a female lied to a male and most reprehensible when a male lied to a female. The exact opposite trend occurred with males; they rated a male lying to a female as least reprehensible, and a female lying to a male as most reprehensible.

Lindskold and Walters (1983) reported contradicting results with regard to the effects of gender on moral judgment of lying. Lindskold and Walters conducted a series of three experimental studies. In Study 1, participants rated the reprehensibility of 18 lies. No gender difference was found. The ratings fall into a six-category continuum of lying from most reprehensible to most permissible. Study 2 involved a questionnaire. Two forms (Form A and Form B) of the questionnaire were developed, each containing similar items. Late adolescents ( $n = 135$ ) rated each item on an 11-point scale ranging from extremely wrong (scored 1) to permissible (scored 11). The overall mean ratings on Form A showed that girls granted less permissibility compared to boys, whereas there was no gender difference on Form B. In Study 3, a main effect of gender was found, but no significant interaction effect was reported. The gender effect once again indicated that males granted lie-telling more permissibility compared to females.

### 3.4.3 Social-cultural differences

Two studies addressed children's moral judgment of lying from the social-cultural perspective. Lee et al. (1997) compared Chinese ( $n = 120$ ) and Canadian ( $n = 120$ ) children's moral evaluations of 2 anti-social lies and 2 white lies, each involving a physical or social condition. Seven-, 9-, and 11-year-old Chinese and Canadian children evaluated the lie-teller's statements. For white lies, Canadian children of all ages overall rated white lies negatively, while the ratings of Chinese children clearly changed from negative to positive as age increased. For anti-social lies, both Chinese and Canadian children rated it negatively, and the rating changed with age irrespective of culture.

To examine the social-cultural differences, Lee et al. (2001) compared Taiwan and Mainland Chinese and Canadian children's moral judgments of lying. Participants at aged 7, 9 and 11 in those locations were read stories similar to those in Lee et al. (1997) and then were asked whether a story character's verbal statement was good or bad. This study replicated the findings of Lee et al. (1997). The major cultural difference existed in ratings of white lies. For Taiwan and Mainland Chinese children, as age increased, white lies were judged from negative to increasingly positive, while Canadian children's evaluations suggested no significant age difference.

### **3.4.4 Educational background and personal morality**

Maier and Lavrakas (1976) investigated the effects of the subjects' educational background and personal morality on their ratings of the reprehensibility of lying. They found that compared to subjects with public school backgrounds, subjects with parochial school backgrounds not only estimated that there was a greater incidence of lying but perceived the act of lying as more reprehensible. Moreover, Maier and Lavrakas noted that persons who claimed to lead their lives in accordance with a personal moral code rated lying as more reprehensible than those who were less guided by a moral code.

### **3.4.5 Group vs. individuals**

Maier and Lavrakas (1976) compared individual child's moral judgments of lying to that made by children as a group. Eight groups of 4 subjects (2 females and 2 males) were shown an audio-clip of students in a professor-student role-playing situation. Each single subject was first asked to rate the dishonesty or honesty of the student's utterance on a seven-point scale (the lower the point the more reprehensible the utterance). Right afterward, the Ss were asked to arrive at a group consensus over the reprehensibility of the lying behavior. Then each group's consensus rating was compared to the mean of the individual ratings for that group. Results suggested that the group ratings in all eight cases were lower (more suspicious of one's honesty) than the individual mean rating, meaning that children as a group judged one's lie-telling behavior more negatively than did each individual child in the group.

### **3.4.6 Social classes, ethnicity, and regions**

Corson (1984) addressed the effects of social classes, ethnicity, and regions on children's moral judgment of lying. This study involved 12- and 15-year-olds ( $n = 64$  and  $68$ , respectively) with different social classes (working class vs. middle class), ethnicity (indigenous English, indigenous Australian, West Indian English, Macedonian Australian, and Romance Australian), and region (Yorkshire and London in England vs. Sydney and Wollongong in Australia). All the participants answered the question "Is lying always wrong or not always wrong?" and justified their judgments with reasons as well. Their moral judgments and reasoning were recorded, collated, and compared. The results suggested that at age 12 there was little difference between social classes, ethnicity, and regions in moral judgments and justifications. At age 15 there was consistency across social classes, ethnicity, and regions in their moral judgments of lying. Noteworthy is that Corson's (1984) findings were based on subjects' answers to very general questions regarding the rightness or wrongness of lying without considering the specific effects of lie types.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1 Findings**

The findings of this synthesis of recent empirical literature reveal that children's moral judgment of lying is affected by at least 14 elements. These elements relate to four broad: the lie itself, the lie-teller, the lie target, and the research subjects. This general finding shows evidence confirming the position of Grueneich (1982) that this area includes more than the question of how intention and consequence affect moral judgments. Of all 14 elements emerging from the literature, some deserve special attention. One is intention, which was found entering preschoolers' moral judgment of lying much earlier than reported by early developmental psychologists. It is possible that compared to younger children, older ones are more complicated in more thinking and are able to weigh more elements while making moral judgment. Another element deserving special attention is status differentials of the lie-teller and the target. For instance, a lie told by persons of different status was found rated differently, as was a lie told by the same person to persons of different status.

In addition, the element social-cultural differences in general affected children's moral judgment of lying. Children's ratings of white lies were characteristic of cultural differences, but for anti-social lies, no major cultural differences were found; to date, no studies were found investigating if children's evaluations of altruistic lies were culturally specific. Still another is the element group vs. individuals. This finding is interesting in that it shows evidence confirming the theory of responsibility diffusion (Bem, Wallach, & Kogan, 1965). This theory asserts that compared to an individual making the accusation on his or her own, the same individual in a group is more likely to give harsher judgment due to bearing less responsibility for accusing (falsely or not falsely) somebody of lying. Similarly, people in a group are more likely to act in a certain way (good or evil).

## 4.2 Suggestions

A number of major questions need to be addressed in future research in order to develop a comprehensive theory about the development of children's moral judgment of lying. First, more research on the process of children's socialization in honesty is needed. Most current studies focus on the cognitive process in which children employ their moral knowledge of lying to make moral judgments, without asking how children have acquired their moral knowledge about lying. If individuals come to grips with what is right and what is wrong to tell and do in the process of acculturation and socialization (Schein, 2004), then future research has good reasons to pay particular attention to the process of acculturation and socialization in honesty, namely, how a child acquires what Aristotle called *phronesis* — practical wisdom of lying or truthfulness (Flanagan, 1992).

Secondly, more research is needed on whether and how children's moral judgment of lying relates to their actual lie- and truth-telling in different settings. Current research on the development of lying tends to address exclusively one of the four areas: children's concepts, moral knowledge, production, and detection of lying (Lee, Cameron, Doucette, & Talwar, 2002). It is unclear, for example, whether children who judge white lies as more positive are more inclined to tell white lies, or whether children who give positive ratings to lying for one's own good deed are more likely to conceal their own pro-social behavior.

Last but not the least, more research on how children make moral judgment about lying in real life is needed. What we know about the elements affecting children's moral judgment of lying mostly is the product of fairly sanitized settings in which children are asked to make judgments about either fictitious events that hold little interest or emotion for them or hypothetical moral situations that are "emotionally neutral and motivationally weak" (Ceci, Leichtman, & Putnick, 1992, p. vii). Should children be assessed in settings that are highly meaningful and affectively laden, their moral judgment of lying might show a different picture than when they are assessed in weak or affectively limited contexts. Future researchers should venture outside the current hypothetical paradigms and embed their studies in affectively laden contexts, contexts that in some cases push the outer envelope of ethical permissibility by subjecting children to their own lived experiences.

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