Moral Evaluations of Lying for One’s Own Group

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This study investigated the development of moral judgments of blue lies, which occur when a speaker makes false statements to benefit a group of which he or she is a member. We investigated this issue in China, where there is substantial emphasis on the nature of children’s associations with groups they belong to. Participants ranged in age from 9 to 17, and we asked them to evaluate lies that were told to benefit a team representing a speaker’s class, school, or country. Judgments varied systematically as a function of age, with the 17-year-olds rating lying for any form of collective less negatively than did the younger age groups. In addition, across the age groups, children’s affinity tended to shift from smaller groups to broader and more abstract collectives: 9- and 11-year olds were least critical of blue lies told to benefit a speaker’s class, 13-year olds were least critical of blue lies told to benefit a speaker’s school, and 17-year olds were least critical of blue lies told to benefit a speaker’s country. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Although the importance of honesty is a central focus of moral socialization (Bussey, 1992; Heyman, Luu, & Lee, 2009), the goal of honest communication sometimes conflicts with other moral and social values (Lee 2000). For example, there are
The Present Research

In the present research, we examined the possibility that younger children will place a greater emphasis on membership in smaller groups in which they know all of the individual members (e.g. one’s class), and with development they will come to place a greater emphasis on membership in larger groups (e.g. one’s country), at least within societies that promote these values. We propose that this is the case because it is more difficult for children to view themselves as members of bigger groups where there are not personal intergroup dynamics (e.g. reciprocal interactions), but that they can be taught to generalize the feelings that emerge in small group settings to larger and more abstract groups. This possibility is also generally consistent with evidence that children’s sense of identity broadens with age. For example, in a study of 5- to 11-year-olds, Bennett, Yuill, Banerjee, and Thomson (1998) found that only older children believed that wrongdoing committed by people one associates with has negative implications for one’s reputation.