

# ZJER

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Schools

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## EXPLORING THE EXTENT AND DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERN OF LYING AMONG CHILDREN

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### *Abstract*

*The present study explored the extent and developmental pattern of lying among 7-10-year olds (Grades 1-4 pupils). The study was premised on the assumption that many children lie and that there is a developmental pattern in children's lying. Participants were 80 Grades 1 to 4 pupils randomly selected from one school in one of Harare's high density suburbs. The experimental research design was employed. Interviews were used to collect data. Overall, the study established that, first, the majority of children lied, especially 7-8-year olds (Grades 1 & 2.). There were more liars among the 7-8-year olds than among the 9-10-year olds (Grades 3 & 4). Second, children's ability to conceal their transgressions increased with age. The 9-10-year olds were more successful in sustaining their lie by denying their transgression of peeking than the 7-8-years olds. In view of these findings, the study recommended that people and institutions (e.g. courts, schools, etc) that deal with children should interpret what children say with caution since many children lie. Older children are more able to conceal their lies such that naïve adults may not be able to detect the lies.*

### **Introduction**

This study examined the lying behaviour of children, specifically focusing on the extent and developmental pattern of lying among 7-10-year olds. The present writer was prompted to conduct this study after observing that in life situations, children transgress but many of them deny having committed the transgression. For example, some children may beat others or damage property, but if asked about it, they deny or feign ignorance about the transgression. Do they lie because they fear the consequences? While this may be so in some cases, studies such as those by Talwar & Lee (2002) seem to indicate that in other cases, children's lying is not tied to any fear of consequences. Rather, some children seem to enjoy successfully deceiving others yet, as is argued elsewhere in this study, their lies may have grave consequences on other people's lives.

In the present writer's view, apart from the above, it is indeed necessary to establish the extent of children's lying because, first, in most legal settings, courts tend to be persuaded to accept as true, children's

testimonies (Goodman, 1984; Burton & Strichartz, 1991) yet, they may be lying and thus falsely incriminating innocent people. Second, such a study is important for assessing the concepts of morality among children (Lee, 2000) and for understanding children's theory of mind or how children think as their minds develop (Chandler, Fritz & Hala, 1989; Polak & Harris, 1999). Third, such research has implications for the kinds of religious and moral education programmes that must be developed for schools to help our children to tell the truth.

While research focusing on children's lying behaviour has been conducted in other countries such as Canada, Britain, United States of America and Japan (Talwar & Lee, 2002), to the present writer's knowledge, no similar studies have been conducted in Zimbabwe to test if results obtained elsewhere hold in Zimbabwe, hence, the need and justification for the current study. However, unlike some previous studies such as those by Lewis, Stranger & Sullivan (1989) and Talwar & Lee (2002) which focused exclusively on pre-scholars, the current study focused on children already in school (Grades 1-4) not only for extending research on children's lying behaviour, but also because it was assumed that children in this age group have a better grasp of issues.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study has its basis in the theories of moral development by Piaget and Kohlberg. Piaget identified two stages of moral development; heteronomous moral judgment (birth to 9 years) and autonomous moral judgement (above 9 years). On the other hand, Kohlberg who elaborated Piaget's theory identified six stages of moral development categorised into three levels – the Pre-Conventional level (birth to 9 years) which involves stages 1 and 2; the Conventional level (9-20 years) which involves stages 3 and 4 and finally, the Post-Conventional level (above 20 years) which involves stages 5 and 6.

In short, Piaget conducted experiments in which he deliberately put children in a situation in which one child caused a small damage while stealing cookies and the other one to make an accidental, but much greater damage. Then, with the belief that the moral reasoning of an individual is largely informed by cognitive processes, Piaget asked children which of the two children deserved to be punished more. Piaget was trying to find out not just the answer but also the reasoning they used to arrive at the answers. He concluded that younger children (9 years and below) focus on consequences while older children (above 9 years) took

intent into account when making a decision about the right or wrong of behaviour.

On the other hand, Kohlberg arrived at his conclusions by posing tasks that aroused a cognitive conflict, and observed children and adults struggling with the dilemmas, which they did at different levels depending on their cognitive stage. This prompted Kohlberg to conclude that moral reasoning is largely informed by cognitive development. What we notice is that both Piaget and Kohlberg view moral reasoning from a cognitive perspective. The development of cognitive abilities enhances moral awareness and therefore moral reasoning. The way people think and their ability to reason about moral stories and dilemmas tends to reflect more about their cognitive abilities and educational levels than it does about their moral actions.

So basically the theories by Piaget and Kohlberg see one's level of cognitive maturity as playing a critical role in one's moral reasoning. Older children, everything being equal, because of their higher cognitive levels, tend morally reason at a higher level than younger children. Since in the present study the issue of lying is a moral one, the study therefore attempts to explore whether or not, there is any developmental pattern in the lying of children and by extrapolation, to see whether there is any distinct difference in the lying patterns of these children as a function of their cognitive maturity. It was expected that the lying patterns of Grades 1 and 2 pupils would be different from those of Grades 3 and 4.

### **Background and Literature Review**

The issue of children's lying behaviour has recently been a subject of interest and focus by many developmental psychologists (Talwar & Lee, 2002). This interest has been triggered by a number of reasons such as attempting to understand whether children deliberately lie or they simply fail to differentiate between falsehood and truth because of undeveloped pre-requisite cognitive skills. This latter position is corroborated by research studies such as those by Ackerman, (1993); Robinson, Goelman & Olson, (1983) and Beal & Flavell, (1984) which have shown that in both deceptive and non- deceptive situations, young children are unaware and insensitive to inconsistencies in their own as well as in other people's utterances. If their pre-requisite cognitive abilities were fully developed, they would be aware of the inconsistencies and would therefore avoid them in situations where they want to deliberately lie. While the above argument might be acceptable, the issue of children's

lying behaviour is not as simple as all that. Naturalistic observations of children indicate that children actually lie and they do so for various reasons such as fear of consequences of a transgression. Adults who are familiar with children or those who frequently interact with children such as parents, teachers, or siblings have reported lie-telling among many children. For example, children may break utensils, beat others or damage property and if asked about it, they deny or feign ignorance.

Bringman, Heymans, Jan Boom, Podolsky, Karabanova & Idobaeva (2003) presented children (in the Netherlands and Russia) with a hypothetical moral dilemma to alert them to the concept of moral transgression as a result of lying. The dilemma was about a strict teacher who had to go out of the classroom leaving pupils writing a test. The teacher asked the class-monitor, who was trusted by both the teacher and the other pupils, to ensure that none cribbed. While the teacher was out, some pupils cribbed. The question then was: if you were the class-monitor, what would you say to the teacher on his/her return?

- Tell him/her that some pupils cribbed.
- Tell him/her that none cribbed.
- I am not sure of what I would say.

While Brugman et al. (2003) were not interested in the number of subjects who chose each option, this dilemma suggests a situation where children may be 'forced' to lie to protect either themselves or their friends since the teacher in this dilemma was reported strict. By extrapolation, perhaps the environment or the circumstances in which children find themselves can 'force' them to lie.

Lewis et al. (1989) conducted a study in Canada that involved 3-year olds. The children were instructed not to glance at a toy which had been placed behind them. Lewis et al. (1989) found that while they were away, most children had glanced at the toy but on being asked, they denied glancing at the toy in order to conceal their transgression of flouting instructions. In a recent related study, Talwar & Lee (2002) observed that children who had flouted instructions by peeking (stealthily glancing) at an object placed behind them showed a lot of discomfort when the experimenters returned to the room, suggesting that they were aware that they had transgressed. It is against this background that the present study set out to investigate the extent and developmental pattern of children's lying in one Zimbabwean primary school.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

The study assumed that:

- many children would lie; peekers (those who stealthily glance) would deny that they peeked.
- there would be age patterns in children's lying behaviour. More 7-8-year olds than 9- 10-year olds would lie.
- children's ability to conceal their transgression of peeking would increase with age.

### **Methodology**

The present study was premised on investigations conducted by researchers such as Lewis et al. (1989); Polak & Harris (1999); Cleland & Lewis (2000) and Talwar & Lee (2002) where children were presented with a temptation resistance situation in order to see whether the children would lie or tell the truth about their actions. This study therefore owes much to piloters in this field in terms of both methodological procedures and instrumentation.

#### *Research Design*

The experimental research design was used in this study because of the experimental nature of the study. The design was thus considered appropriate since the study involved experimenting with children to see whether, if placed in a temptation resistance situation, they would lie or tell the truth.

The design involved dividing the children into an Experimental Group (N=40) and a Control Group (N=40). During the experiment, the two groups were placed in two separate rooms and interviewed separately (see Procedure).

#### *Sample*

Participants were 80 Grades 1-4 pupils (7-10-year olds) randomly selected from one primary school in one of Harare's high density suburbs. Of the 80 participants, 40 were Grades 1 and 2 pupils (7-9-year olds) while the other 40 were Grades 3 and 4 pupils (9-10-year olds). Dividing the pupils into these two groups was necessary since the study was also interested in the developmental pattern of lying. Thus, the study also aimed at finding out whether a clear pattern in lying would emerge as a function of the pupils' ages.



Twenty 7-8-year olds (10 from Grade 1 and 10 from Grade 2) and twenty 9-10-year olds (10 from Grade 3 and 10 from Grade 4) were randomly assigned to the Experimental Group while an equal number of 7-8-year olds and of 9-10-year olds was assigned to the Control Group.

Overall, the sample was considered representative not only in terms of the critical issues being investigated (the extent and developmental pattern of lying) but also in terms of the numbers involved ( $N=80$ ). This is because according to Van Dalen (1979), of course depending on the magnitude of the study, 30 subjects should be the minimum in Experimental Research. The current study involved 80 pupils, well above the minimum number (30) recommended in literature (e.g. Van Dalen, 1979).

### *Instruments*

Interviews were used to collect data in this study. Interviews were preferred to questionnaires because very young children such as first and second graders have problems in writing; let alone giving reasons in writing (Mushoriwa, 2003). This is perhaps why Poole & White (1995) assert that one of the problems of conducting research with young children lies with the type of task and questions asked. To this end, the current study took into account the developmental appropriateness of the task and hence, required the children to answer questions orally.

While a video camera could have been used to produce more credible results than the interviews, the costs involved were forbidding. This is therefore a limitation in this study.

### *Procedure*

After randomly selecting participants and assigning them to the Experimental ( $N=40$ ) and Control ( $N=40$ ) groups, the two groups were placed into two separate rooms to ensure that they would not get in touch with each other or with other pupils before the end of the experiment.

The investigator first dealt with the Experimental Group. The children were told that an object (zebra toy) would be placed at the back of the classroom but nobody was allowed to peek at the object. In fact, the children were told that from that moment, no one was supposed to turn back. The investigator's assistant, who had been standing at the back of the classroom all along, placed the zebra toy on the table and moved to the front.

The children were then told that they were supposed to guess what the object was. As the investigator finished this sentence, one of the teachers came to say loudly, that both the investigator and his assistant were urgently wanted at the headmaster's office. Both hurried out, slamming the door with a bang to ensure that all the children saw that they had gone out and away.

After about a minute, the investigator and his assistant returned, talking loudly to ensure that all the children heard that they were coming back. The assistant moved straight to the back of the classroom and removed the toy. For a minute or so, the investigator looked at the children, noting their expressive behaviours such as shyness, avoiding eye contact with the investigator and so on. From this initial assessment, it was clear that many children had peeked at the toy.

The assistant remained in the room to ensure that the children did not discuss anything while the investigator went to another room where the children were called one by one for interviewing, noting their grades and expressive behaviours. Just like in the original experiments by Lewis et al.(1989) and Talwar & Lee (2002), the children were asked four questions, which were in Shona to ensure that the children clearly understood them.

- While we were out, did you turn your head to the side?
- Did you move around in your chair?
- Did you peek to see what the object was?
- What do you think the object was?

To the first three questions, to ensure that the children understood them, the investigator just like in early studies in this area, modelled head turning, moving in the chair and peeking at the toy as he asked each of the questions. As is the procedure in these studies, any 'yes' to each or all the questions was recorded as having peeked at the toy. Thus, the first three questions were rather closed questions, requiring the respondent to simply answer "Yes" or "No".

The fourth question was meant to see whether the children would confess that they had peeked or they would lie that they had not peeked yet they had peeked. To those who simply said that it was a toy, a probe question was asked, "What type of a toy?" Giving a correct answer to this question was enough evidence that the child had peeked.

In the Control group, the same procedures were followed except that the

investigator and his assistant returned to the room within seconds, giving the children no chance to peek at the toy.

Of note here is the fact that these procedures and conditions were assumed to be similar to the natural situations where children lie. In fact, studies by Smith, Wilson, Ross & Ross (1999) and by Newton, Reddy & Bull (2000) found that these experimental conditions were very similar to the natural situations where children lie.

## Results

Figure 1 below shows the numbers of children who lied in the Experimental Group by their grades.

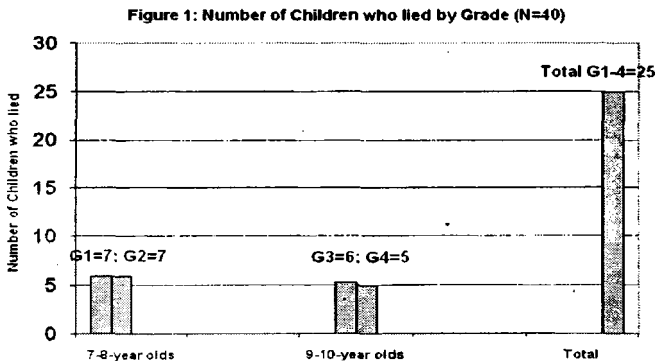


Figure 1 above indicates that a total of 25 (62,5%) children lied; with 7 (17,5%) in Grade 1; 7 (17,5%) in Grade 2; 6 (15%) in Grade 3 and 5 (12,5%) in Grade 4. Clearly we have more liars among the 7-8-year olds than among the 9-10-year olds. Hence, there was a developmental pattern in the children's lying behaviour.

What we observe is that, in the Experimental Group, 25 (62,5%) pupils denied turning their heads to the sides, moving around in their chairs or peeking during the investigator's absence but surprisingly, they correctly identified the object (zebra toy). Those who gave 'toy' as the answer were asked the probe question, 'What type of a toy?' All of them said it was a zebra toy, suggesting that they had actually peeked. All these pupils were interpreted as lying. In fact, many of them, especially Grades I and 2 confessed to peeking on being asked how they knew that the object was a zebra toy.

It was also interesting to note that although these pupils denied peeking, a number of them, especially Grades 1 and 2 pupils, revealed that they had

actually peeked through their expressive behaviour such as being fearful, nervous, unsettled or avoiding eye contact with the investigator. These behaviours, which tended to contradict the lie, may suggest that these pupils are not skilled liars. This is so because according to Lewis et al. (1989) and Talwar & Lee (2002), skilled liars usually show positive behaviours as smiles, being relaxed or confident, failing to report the true identity of the object and so on. Such positive behaviours may make naive adults accept children's lies. This is particularly so with older children who can hide their expressive behaviour to conceal transgressions.

Of the remaining 15 (37,5%) pupils, 10 (25%) mentioned other objects such as tin, bottle top, box and so forth. Although these pupils were interpreted as telling the truth, there is possibility that some of them were feigning ignorance so that they would not implicate themselves in peeking. The fact that some of them were merely feigning ignorance is corroborated by the fact that, out of the 10 pupils, 7 were Grades 3 and 4 pupils while only 3 were Grades 1 and 2 pupils. A study by Talwar & Lee (2002) indicates that children need to acquire certain cognitive abilities if they are to successfully lie. The 7 Grades 3 and 4 pupils might have realised that if they mentioned the real name of the object (zebra toy), they would implicate themselves in peeking, hence, they feigned ignorance by mentioning other objects to mask their transgression of peeking.

What the above indicates is that as age increased, pupils avoid giving incriminating information; resulting in some of them either mentioning names of other objects or claiming that they did not know the object. This finding echoes observations made in some of the early studies such as those by Lewis et al. 1989; Cleland & Lewis (2000) and Talwar & Lee (2002).

The remaining 5 pupils (3 Grades 1 & 2 pupils and 2 Grades 3 & 4 pupils) admitted to peeking and they correctly identified the object. These pupils were telling the truth. Apart from confessing to peeking, these pupils found it difficult to conceal their transgression since most of them, coming face to face with the investigator, showed their transgression through their facial expressions. Some of them looked nervous, fearful or they avoided direct eye contact with the investigator (though of course, some of them may have shown these characteristics as a result of personal or cultural influence/stereotypes).

In the Control group, no pupils peeked and no one was able to tell the correct identity of the object (zebra toy). Eighty-one percent of pupils (32 pupils) in this group gave non-zebra responses while 19% (8) said that they did not know what the object was. In the Experimental group, are pupils who denied peeking (62,5%) but got the true identity of the object lied. This number (62,5%) is sufficiently large to warrant the conclusion that many children lie.

In the present writer's view, children involved in this study seemed to have lied for two reasons. First, many children who peeked denied doing so in order to conceal their transgression of peeking. This suggests that many children lie either to protect themselves or their friends/relatives; especially if the consequences of the transgression are harsh. By extrapolation, it is perhaps the environment or circumstance in which the child finds himself/herself that may cause him/her to lie. While such a position may be acceptable, it is perhaps an over-simplification of children's lying behaviour to think that if children did not fear the consequences of their actions, they would not lie. Studies such as those by Lewis et al. (1989) have demonstrated, to the contrary, that some children derive joy in successfully deceiving others. So, it would appear that some children lie because they enjoy lying.

The second reason and a more subtle one, is that children tend to lie in situations that tend to threaten their ego and/or knowledge. The experimenter in the current study presented a situation in which the children were supposed to choose between two competing options; either to admit that they did not know the object or to transgress and then lie that they did not transgress. To most of them, especially the 7-8-year olds, the latter option was more sensible since is presented them as knowledgeable.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study confirmed the assumptions made in the study. First, many pupils (62,5%) peeked but denied peeking and thus lied. Second, there was a developmental pattern in the pupils' lying behaviour, slightly more 7-8-year olds (14) lied than 9-10-year olds (11). Third, the pupils' ability to conceal their transgression of peeking at the zebra toy increased with age. While seven 7-8-year olds successfully feigned ignorance about the zebra toy, only three 9-10-year olds were able to do so. In all therefore, these results indicate that most children actually lie and that the lying behaviour becomes more subtle or more difficult to detect as children grow older.

## **Recommendation**

In the light of the above observations, there is need for those people and institutions that deal with children (e.g. teachers, schools, courts) to interpret what children say with caution since many of them lie. Older children are more able to disguise and conceal their lies such that naïve adults may not be able to detect the lies.

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