

**WHEN CAN LYING START?**

**John Morton**

Some of the discussion of the use of child witnesses hangs on the reliability of their testimony. Issues of suggestibility and compliance have received particular attention and have been approached experimentally. What I would like to do in this note is to discuss the concept of lying and attempt to establish some cognitive prerequisites for lying to be possible.

Suppose a person P produces an utterance U which refers to an event E. We would say that he was lying under roughly the following conditions:

1. P has a set of beliefs, B, about the nature of E.
2. U is inconsistent with B, and is known to be so by P.
3. P intends to mislead the listener into believing U.

The term 'belief' has been used rather than 'knowledge' to cover the case that P is wholly or partially mistaken. There are some variations on these conditions, the most relevant of which is the case in which P has no direct knowledge of E. In principle, B could be null here; in practice, P will have some hypotheses about E which, for the purpose of the discussion, have the status of beliefs.

Of these conditions, the third is the vital one. It is the intention of P that characterizes lying, in most everyday uses of the word. I will contend that this is a vital cognitive distinction as well. The relationship between U and E, while important - and vital from a legal point of view - is an issue requiring separate analysis.

We can now pose a direct question: what are the cognitive prerequisites for a child to be able to lie? It is clear that a minimum requirement is that the child should believe that the listener is capable of being deceived. That is, the child must believe that the listener can believe things about E that are, in fact, not true. There are some complex implications, but this will suffice since it enables us to bring experimental evidence to bear.

**The Sally-Ann test**

In this test, based on Wimmer and Perner (1983), the child is presented with two dolls, called Sally and Ann. The following story is acted out by the experimenter for the child. Sally has a marble. She puts the marble in her box. Then she goes out to play. Ann takes the marble and puts it in her basket, covered by a cloth. Ann then goes out. Sally comes back. She wants to play with her marble.

The child is then asked a series of questions that establish that he or she has understood the story, and knows that Sally did not see what Ann did with the marble. Children are then asked: 'where will Sally look for her marble?' The data show that before the age of four, children claim that Sally will look for the marble in the basket. From four onwards children respond in the way adults do.

The Wimmer and Perner study has been extended by Baron-Cohen et al. (1985), who confirmed that normal four year olds performed perfectly on the study. They also found that a group of Down's syndrome children with a mean mental age of six could do the task without problem, but that a group of autistic children with a mean mental age of nine largely failed on the task. This result establishes that the developmental factor cannot be intelligence, but has to be something else. The generally accepted hypothesis is that the limiting factor is the ability of a child to conceptualize the possibility of other minds representing events in a way at variance with their own representations (see also Leslie, in press). This ability does not emerge until four years of age.

It should be clear that the requirements for lying are more complex than those for the Sally-Ann test. To lie, one not only must believe that others can have counter-factual beliefs, but one must believe that one can induce such beliefs. A person who cannot pass the Sally-Ann test cannot lie. Three year old children cannot lie.

It might be objected that it is commonplace for three year olds, or even two year olds to make claims that are manifestly untrue. A child accused of breaking something may say 'It wasn't me' or may even accuse a (younger) sibling. One may wish to call such behaviour lying. However, I would submit that it is different from lying in respect of intention. A child of three who denies a breakage does not intend the listener to believe him or her. The intention is, rather, simply to avoid the consequences of such actions. Cover stories are as likely to be ridiculous as plausible. The teddy bear may be accused of the act as often as the sibling. In one case known to me, mother was in the kitchen with a baby of 18 months. A child of three was in the living room. A crash was heard. After a pause the child came into the kitchen saying: 'it wasn't me, Baby did it'. This utterance cannot be regarded as propositional in nature, nor can we suppress that it indicates an intention to set up an alternative representation of the events in the mind of the mother.

The claim that a three-year-old child cannot lie is only a small step. It is, however, a clear beginning. Three year olds may be malleable, compliant or mistaken. To know that they cannot be intending to deceive makes things a little simpler.

#### References

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