Author response

The colour spectrum of lies

Felix Warneken* and Emily Orlins
Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

In this reply to Ceci, Burd, and Helm, we discuss future directions for developmental research to (1) study the motivations underlying white lies and (2) how to classify lies that reflect other-regard and self-interest simultaneously.

In an episode of the TV show ‘Orange Is the New Black’, inmate Piper Chapman goes on furlough. During her trip out of the prison, she is tasked by her cellmate Galina ‘Red’ Reznikov to check on the beloved store that Red had to leave in the hands of her unreliable husband. Red has become suspicious of the husband’s repeated assurance that he had everything under control. Arriving at the destination, Piper discovers that the store has gone out of business, locked up behind bars of plywood. To spare Red from being robbed of her last hope, Piper claims that she found the store filled with customers, lines going out the door. When Red later finds out the truth, she expresses more anger towards Piper for telling a white lie to protect her feelings than towards the husband for his cowardice not to admit his own failure. This fictional example highlights the complex reality of lying when we consider the motives and social expectations than can go into the decision to tell the truth or paint reality in a different colour.

One complexity Ceci, Burd, and Helm (2015) point out are various motives that could lead children to tell a white lie. Our study aimed to contrast two possible reasons that children might tell a white lie: Children might simply follow a politeness norm to say good things about people and their actions, or they might have a deeper understanding that takes into account another person’s emotional states. Our results show that children’s default response is in fact to tell another person the truth about the poor quality of their drawing – as long as the artist is not upset about her incompetence. However, when it is emphasized to the child that the person needs some cheering up because she feels sad about her lack of skill, they often pretend that the drawing actually looks fine – a tendency that increases with age. However, Ceci et al. point out that this development shift could be driven by different motives that should be teased apart in future work. We agree that our study leaves open whether older children are more likely to tell a white lie because they are more responsive to the demand to cheer the other person up, more sensitive to the artist’s affect, or are better at finding a viable way to meet both goals. However, we think that other studies provide an important clue as to which motives drive children’s responses in this type of situation. Specifically, the developmental trajectory of white lie telling seen in our study corresponds to the findings from other studies in which children were interviewed about hypothetical scenarios to examine their explicit awareness of

*Correspondence should be addressed to Felix Warneken, 33 Kirkland Street, William James Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA (email: warneken@wjh.harvard.edu).

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white lie telling (Broomfield, Robinson, & Robinson, 2002; Gnepp & Hess, 1986; Popliger, Talwar, & Crossman, 2011). These studies show a striking developmental increase between 7 and 11 years of age in the understanding of white lie telling as aiming to improve another person’s mood. This developmental trajectory corresponds to what we found in children’s practice of white lie telling as well. Therefore, the cognitive ability to comprehend the connection between their own communicative act and the other person’s situation seems to be an important aspect of their decision to tell a white lie. The developmental increase is likely related to children’s growing understanding about the consequences of white lie telling. It is also important to note that our study did not involve explicit references to white lies in the first part of the study. Although another adult asked the child to ‘make the other person feel better’, children had to still come up with the idea to tell a lie in order to achieve this goal – something that at least children at 7 years and older mastered in the first part of our study. That is, children could have tried to comfort the artist in another way, but they specifically chose to tell a white lie. This suggests that older children do not simply exhibit an increasing willingness to respond to the experimenter’s suggestion to make the artist feel better, but also are more likely to realize that white lie telling would be a means to achieve this goal. This insight may go hand in hand with an increase in wanting to please the experimenter and be prosocial towards the artist. As we briefly mention in the discussion section of our paper, it may be worthwhile to give children an alternative action to cheer the artist up that does not require them to misreport their opinion about the artwork. In doing so, we may be able to quantify if this developmental trajectory reflects a general increase in wanting to please others as compared to white lie telling as a new social tool.

A second complexity that Ceci and colleagues mention is that some lies may not clearly fall into one category. Their example is a lie that children tell to protect a parent. How shall we classify such a lie that seems to not simply serve another person’s interest, but also the child’s own? As this type of lie is perhaps not spotless white, we suggest to expand the colour spectrum. One other type of lie that is particularly relevant are ‘blue lies’ that serve to protect the members of a collective. A prototypical example is the case of police officers making false statements to protect each other (often wearing the blue uniforms from which this type of lie apparently received its colour). It has been shown that children tell such blue lies, e.g., by hiding a classmates’ transgression from others to win a chess competition – with a steep increase in this behaviour between 7 and 11 years of age (Fu, Evans, Wang, & Lee, 2008). Interestingly, there appear to be striking cultural differences in children’s motivations in these situations: Whereas Chinese children tend to use lies to benefit their group over their own individual interests, Canadian children prefer the individual over the group (Fu, Xu, Cameron, Heyman, & Lee, 2007; Fu et al., 2008). Although the ‘group’ in these studies are peers, the example of lie telling within the family mentioned by Ceci and colleagues may involve similar psychological processes. This may occur in more mundane situations as well and even be encouraged by parents. For example, Stern and Stern (1909/1999) suggest that parents may occasionally have their children tell a white lie for them by telling others that ‘Daddy is not here’, if they do not want to be disturbed. This type of situation may be a child’s first introduction to the fact that people sometimes intentionally do not tell the truth. Children may also lie to protect a parent in high stakes situations, which has major implications for child testimony, as Ceci and colleagues point out. Hence, children may gain experience of lie telling early on, not just to protect themselves, but because they want to protect those with whom they hold strong ties. In these cases, by helping others, children thus indirectly help themselves. This practice may originate within families to help one’s own blood relatives and later
extend to other groups as well. By analogy, we may call lies to protect family members ‘red
lies’. In development, perhaps blue is the new red.

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