DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 285 PS 013 556

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TITLE In Defense of Children's Lies: On Ethics and Methods of Studying Children's Communication of Deception.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Canada, April 11-14, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Children; Cognitive Development; *Communication Skills; *Ethics; Interpersonal Competence; Nonverbal Communication; *Research Methodology; Research Problems; *Role Playing; Social Cognition; *Spontaneous Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Deception; Human Subject Protection

ABSTRACT

Studies of children's deceptive behavior have scientific merit and can be carried out in an ethically defensible manner. Many arguments against studies requiring children to deceive others in an experimental context are relatively easy to refute. It is true, though, that the debriefing phase of deception studies presents ethical problems, particularly when the researcher employs a confederate. There are substantial arguments for and against informing children after a study of the nature of any deception incorporated in the research design. Clear ethical problems would exist, of course, if subjects were put in a situation leading them to spontaneously lie or cheat. Two factors support the claim that research on deception is ethical: subjects are at negligible risk, and benefits of the research are high. Further, certain questions can be answered with no other technique. In comparison to results of studies of role-played emotional states, results of deception studies involving spontaneous behavior are more illustrative of skill in the actual use of nonverbal behavior. Recent research suggests that the ability to be deceptive successfully is a social skill related to the development of other abilities in children. The finding of a significant correlation between role-taking abilities and ability to be deceptive illustrates the importance of research in which children are led to be deceptive. (RH)

In Defense of Children's Lies: On Ethics and Methods of Studying Children's Communication of Deception

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A paper presented as part of a symposium at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association

Montreal

April, 1983

There are few areas of research that evoke as much concern on the part of observers as that involving research on children's communication of deception. It turns out, however, this interest is not always predicated upon scientific curiosity about the topic, but rather is based upon the ethics of the research. As an investigator with strong interests in children's nonverbal behavior, I have learned the hard way: Research on the topic proves to be an almost irrestible magnet for the concerns of members of institutional Human Subjects Review Committees. By its very nature, work investigating children's ability to lie strikes observers as unethical. In this paper, I hope to counter much of this concern, using as a point of reference some of my own--of course ethical--research.

Let me first describe the method that I typically use to study children's nonverbal behavior while being deceptive. I tell subjects that they will be participating in a game in which they will be given two drinks of Kool-Aid. One drink is mixed correctly, with the proper (unconscionably large) amount of sugar, and the other is mixed without any sugar and consequently tastes pretty awful. The subjects are then told that their job is to "fool" an interviewer into believing that both drinks taste equally good. Thus, in one instance they are telling the truth, while in another they are being deceptive when describing the drinks. The subjects are then given sips of both drinks, an interviewer (blind as to which

drink tastes good or bad) is brought in, and the subjects are asked a series of questions concerning how much they enjoyed the drink. While they are responding to the questions, we videotape their nonverbal behavior, and judges later try to rate whether subjects were truthful or deceptive on the basis of the recordings.

Having spent some time at the Human Subjects Review Committee docket defending research employing this paradigm to study children's deception, I am familiar with the arguments that are raised. Let me give you some examples:

"You are teaching children to lie";

"You are condoning lying";

"You should not be videotaping a population that is unable to understand the implications of such a procedure";

"Any debriefing you employ will leave children feeling betrayed--but you need to employ debriefing".

Some of these questions are easy to answer, but some are problematic. We are clearly not teaching children to lie; society and parents have already done that for us. Many children's games are based on the ability to be deceptive, to hide something, or to fool someone else. Moreover, few parents can resist telling their children to say that they like the concoction that Aunt Ethel has cooked up, even if they hate it, and few would refrain from telling their children to express thanks for a gift of socks and handkerchiefs, items that are clearly not high on any child's list of preferred gifts.

The notion that we are condoning lying is also relatively easy to refute. We do suggest to subjects that they should

"pretend" to do or say something, but it is in a very limited context of a particular setting of an experiment. Most children have not been in a laboratory before, nor have they been in an experiment previously. Although we do take pains to aclimate them and put them at ease, the situation is still one with which they are unfamiliar, and it is unlikely that the behaviors that they learn--if indeed they do learn anything--will generalize to other situations. If there is generalization, we suspect that the behavior that is reinforced relates to obedience to adult authority, not to lying per se.

Videotaping our subjects also does not present particular ethical problems, in our view. Prior to participation, we generally inform subjects that at some point in the experiment, they may be taped, and we have their parents sign an informed consent form. After the experimental session is complete, we very explicitly tell them that they have been videotaped, and we offer to let them see themselves on television. This offer is rarely refused. We also inform them that judges will be observing the tapes to see if they were able to fool someone else, but that, if the subject so desires, the tape will be erased then and there. Of the hundreds of subjects that we have employed over the years, none has ever taken us up on this offer.

To me, the question that presents the most ethical problems relates to the debriefing, particularly when we employ a confederate. Consider, for instance, a study that we carried out using a different paradigm from that which I

discussed earlier. We used a tutoring situation in which grade-school age children acted as tutors to a confederate who was playing the role of student (Feldman, Devin-Sheehan, & Allen, 1978). The study investigated the tutors' nonverbal behavior when their positive verbal reinforcement was truthful or untruthful. The tutors were instructed always to praise the responses of the student, regardless of whether the answers were correct. The confederate students gave primarily correct responses in one condition and incorrect ones in another condition. Thus, the tutor's response was veridical when the student performed well, and dissembled in the condition in which the student performed poorly. We hypothesized that the nonverbal behavior of the tutors would differ under the two conditions due to the fact that the tutors were telling the truth or lying.

We use third- and sixth-grade children as subjects, each of whom was assigned a same-sex student who was one grade level below the tutor. The student was actually a carefully-trained confederate who answered in a predetermined manner according to a code visible only to him. In the truthful condition, the confederate answered 90% of the items on a test administered by the tutor correctly; in the lying condition, he or she responded incorrectly 90% of the time. To provide a degree of control over subjects' verbal behavior, tutors were told that in administering the test, they should say "good" or give some verbal indication of approval after the student's response to each item regardless of whether the response was correct or incorrect. As a

rationale, subjects were told that one purpose of the study was to provide encouragement and reassurance toward the student.

The results of the study were pretty much as we predicted. There were objective differences in the nonverbal behavior of truthful, compared with lying, subjects. Dissembling subjects smiled less, showed less pleasant mouth expressions, greater nervous hand movements, and paused more when speaking than did subjects who were being truthful. In addition, a sample of untrained third-grade judges, who rated short, silent samples of the subjects' nonverbal behavior while providing honest or dishonest praise, discerned that subjects were significantly more pleased when being truthful than when being dishonest.

While the results of the study confirmed our hypothesis, we were uneasy with certain elements of the methodology. Note the deceptive elements of this study of deception. Subjects were not actually teaching another student but rather a confederate. We were not interested primarily in the tutoring process as we had told the subjects, but rather in their nonverbal behavior while they were being deceptive. We had told our subjects to be deceptive, albeit for the worthy rationale of making the student feel good. Finally, we had secretly videotaped the subjects while they were providing the deceptive or truthful praise.

Most of the deceptive elements were not troubling to us, as my earlier comments suggest, but the use of the

confederate was. The question was not so much one of whether we should employ a confederate, but rather whether we should inform the subject after the study that a confederate was employed. A long tradition of use of confederates with adults dictates that the subject be informed fully as soon as possible of the nature of any deception involved. The tradition is less clear with children, and arguments for and against could be made. The arguments in favor say that anyone in an experiment deserves to be made aware that given elements were not genuine, if that is the case, and that a subject's full knowledge is always beneficial. But another argument is equally compelling: that to minimize the aversive consequences to the subject, information that might damage an individual's morale, self-esteem, or sense of perspicacity about the world should be withheld. In the present case, this argument suggests that the children's suspiciousness of adults in general (and psychologists in particular) would be increased, and there might be a corresponding decrease in the confidence with which the world is viewed.

We have no absolute answer for these problems, but can tell you what we did in the case of this particular study. While the subjects were informed that they were videotaped, the fact that their student was a confederate, responding in a prearranged manner, was not revealed. We did ask them to indicate any suspicions they had and, if they had expressed any, we were prepared to tell all. In no case, however, did this occur.

What this study does indicate is that the locus of ethical problems with deception studies does not reside in the study of deception per se but in the other, concomitant features that are related to the procedures that must be employed to increase the experimental realism and involvingness of the experiment for the subjects. Asking children to be deceptive does not, in and of itself, represent an unethical or even particularly troublesome experimental manipulation.

There is one particular instance in which the study of deception would represent clear ethical problems. If we were to put subjects in a situation in which they were led spontaneously to lie to someone else, without doing so because the experimenter directly asked them to be deceptive, we would be in dangerous territory. Consider, for instance, the well-known early work in deception of Hartshorne and May (1928). In one of their studies, they placed children in a situation where it was easy to cheat on a test--and in fact the researchers probably would have been disappointed if they hadn't. Providing such temptation, I would argue, is not an ethically-defensible procedure, since there is the very real possibility that the children will suffer guilt and remorse over their behavior if they did, in fact, act deceptively--and no amount of reassurance from the experimenter would be likely to assauge the subjects' negative emotional responses.

For me, (and let me hasten to add that this is an opinion clearly open to dispute), the ethicality of research on

deception rests on two factors. First, the degree to which subjects are placed at risk is negligible, as I have already discussed. The second is that the benefits of doing this sort of research are high, and the questions that can be answered by asking children to be deceptive cannot be answered using any other technique.

To support this second assertion, it is necessary to refer to the nature of previous research which has looked at the broad issue of how children learn to maintain control over their nonverbal behavior. There have been two divergent approaches to this question in the literature. Some research has examined the ability of individuals to pose specific emotional states or to convey particular messages through their nonverbal behavior. This type of research can be referred to as "role-played", since the experimenter typically directs the subject to encode nonverbally particular emotional states.

An alternative approach, one which I employ, makes the assumption that nonverbal behavior can reveal a person's actual emotional state, even if the person intends to hide it. In this type of research, an emotional state is induced in an individual, and the person is led to verbally lie about how he actually feels. As the subject is being deceptive verbally, the concomitant nonverbal behaviors are studied. If the person is adept at controlling his nonverbal behavior, the fact that the individual is being deceptive is not disclosed, but less skilled subjects tend to reveal their actual feelings. This type of research can be termed

"spontaneous" because the researcher does not specify that the person's nonverbal behavior is to be controlled; rather, its spontaneous variation is the focus of interest.

The goals of role-played and spontaneous research are usually quite different. In the role-played approach, the purpose is to show a range of emotions a person is capable of producing and communicating to an observer through skill in the use of nonverbal behavior. In the spontaneous approach, the research is more concerned with an individual's deficits in the ability to control his or her nonverbal behavior. Such research is typically carried out within the context of the study of verbal deception, and the nonverbal behaviors that accompany the subject's verbalizations are measured. In these studies, differences in nonverbal behavior between truthful and dissembling subjects can be taken as a lack of skill in manipulating and controlling nonverbal behavior.

Although both role-played and spontaneous types of research can be seen to be necessary for a full understanding of how nonverbal behavior functions in social interaction, I would argue that results of the spontaneous deception studies are more illustrative of skill in the actual use of nonverbal behavior, as control of nonverbal behavior while being deceptive requires not only possessing the ability itself, but awareness and knowledge of the circumstances under which the skill must be brought to bear--a critical question that cannot be answered from role-playing studies alone.

The efficacy of the prior analysis is demonstrated by

some of my own research which suggests that the ability to be deceptive successfully is a social skill that is related to the development of other sorts of abilities in children. We have reasoned that as children develop, they grow both in cognitive ability (e.g., Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) and fine muscular control (Charlesworth & Kreutzer, 1973). Furthermore, as children gain more awareness of the social ecology and become less egocentric, they develop the skill to put themselves in the position of an observer and see the situation from the observer's point of view. Flavell and associates have referred to this ability, in reference to verbal communication skill, as "taking the role of the other" (Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, & Jarvis, 1968).

The development of role-taking skills fits with our analysis of the ability to control and use nonverbal behavior while being deceptive. In order to be deceptive successfully, an individual would have to possess not only the skill to control his behavior, but the awareness that his nonverbal behavior could have an effect upon others. Relating this to the role-taking literature, it seems reasonable that role-taking ability would be correlated with the ability to control nonverbal behavior while being deceptive, and that skill in controlling nonverbal behavior would show a developmental progression. Specifically, we expected that there would be an increase, concomitant with growth of role-taking skills, in the ability to encode and control nonverbal behavior.

To test the hypothesis that role-taking ability is

related to nonverbal social skills, in one study we administered an objective measure of role-taking to a group of children aged five through twelve, and then led them to be verbally deceptive and truthful while describing their reaction to a drink which varied in pleasantness. Untrained, adult judges then rated whether they thought the children were being truthful or deceptive. As we predicted, role-taking abilities and ability to be deceptive successfully were significantly correlated--independently of age (Feldman, White, & Lobato, 1982.

These results illustrate the importance of research that employs methodology in which children are led to be deceptive. Because role-taking is one of the crucial developments in the growth of social cognition and the ability to interact with others effectively, we view the positive correlation between role-taking and deceptive skill as important. Indeed, this knowledge is intrinsic to an understanding of how social cognition develops generally and how children learn effective impression management techniques and self-presentational strategies.

It can be seen from this research that we are not directly interested in children's lying ability per se. Rather, our interest is in the process that underlies successful verbal deception, which we posit to involve both a muscular skill component (being able to manipulate one's nonverbal behavior) and a knowledge component (knowing what one ought to manipulate in a given situation). Studies of

the role-playing variety simply would not suffice.

In sum, research that studies children's deception has both scientific merit and can be carried out in an ethically-defensible manner. Moreover, the questions that such studies address go far beyond the mere study of deception per se, but can answer broader and potentially more important questions about the development of communication processes in children.

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