

Little liars

James T. Lamiell on a century-old text containing a 'cornucopia of ideas that remain in the forefront of developmental psychology'

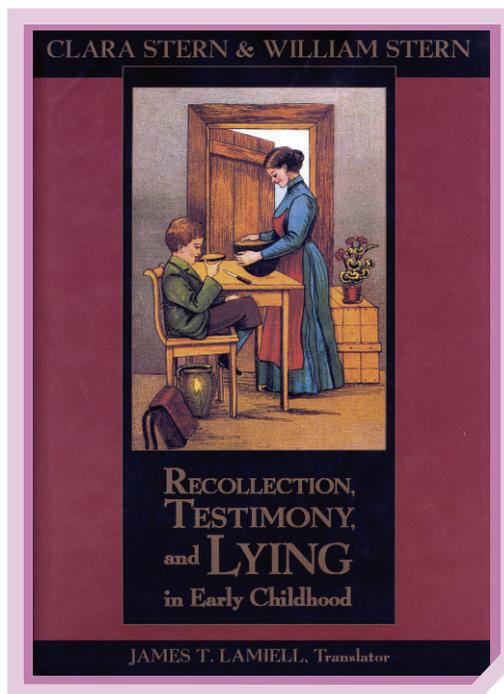
A full century has now passed since the German philosopher and psychologist William Stern (1871–1938) co-authored with wife Clara (Josephine) Stern (1878–1945) a remarkable little monograph titled *Erinnerung, Aussage und Lüge in der ersten Kindheit* (1909). Commenting on my 1999 translation of that work (from which all quotations in this article are taken), *Recollection, Testimony, and Lying in Early Childhood* (Washington, DC: APA), the contemporary developmental psychologists Stephen J. Ceci and Maggie Bruck wrote admiringly:

Much of what...[appears]...in this monograph could, with very minor stylistic changes, be inserted into any modern text on memory development without the reader detecting the slightest hint of its antiquity. ... No matter which current issue in cognitive development you choose, it is covered in...this monograph. It is a cornucopia of ideas that remain in the forefront of developmental psychology. (p.xii)

If the Sterns' pioneering work is indeed of contemporary relevance in a great many ways, this is especially true on the topic of lying. A cursory check of the internet turns up links to numerous sites where parents and educators can find advice on how best to understand – and deal with – lying on the part of children. Given the staying power of the Sterns' work, it seems altogether fitting to mark here (only slightly belatedly) the centennial of their monograph's publication with a brief retrospective on their treatment of this topic.

Recollection, Testimony, and Lying in Early Childhood was based primarily on material that Clara and William Stern recorded in diaries beginning with the

birth of their first child, daughter Hilde, on 7 April 1900. For the ensuing 18 years, the Sterns would maintain their diaries, recording an immense wealth of observations relevant to a great many aspects of the development not only of Hilde, but also of her two younger siblings, brother Günther (born in 1902)



and sister Eva (born in 1904). For the specific purposes of *Recollection, Testimony, and Lying in Early Childhood*, the Sterns drew on the material that had been accumulated over the first half of this 18-year period.

The analysis of lying

In taking up the topic of lying, the Sterns began with the obviously necessary exclusion from the domain of lying of those falsehoods uttered without knowledge of their falseness. Beyond this, however, the Sterns argued that even

when a child asserts something s/he knows at the time to be false, it is not necessarily the case that the child has lied. 'Lies,' the Sterns wrote,

...are consciously false assertions made for the purpose of deceiving another. Both features are necessary: if the awareness of falsehood is absent, then one cannot speak properly of a lie. But by the same token: if awareness of falsehood is present but there is no intention to deceive, then again there is no lie. (p.33)

Pseudo-lies

Though few would contest the claim that a falsehood uttered without awareness of its falseness is no lie, the reader might wonder what the Sterns had in mind in referring to assertions made in full awareness of their falsehood but without the intention to deceive. It is in just this connection that the Sterns introduced the concept of 'pseudo-lies' (*Scheinlügen*).

Playful fantasy is perhaps the most elementary form of pseudo-lying. There must be few modern parents of little girls, for example, who could not relate to this observation by the Sterns concerning their daughter Hilde:

Most of [her] fantasies have to do with dolls, and this is as true at age 5 as it was when she was only 3. She fancies all sorts of activities that she really could have carried out but in fact did not. Example: 'Today I bought another new doll...' [or]... 'I bought a little bed for the doll.' (p.37)

While engaging in such fantasies, a child would normally be fully aware of the falseness of what is being said. Importantly, however, such fantasies do not involve any intention to deceive. Children are by nature full of playful fantasies and, mindful of this, the Sterns emphasised in their work the importance of allowing children to enjoy their fantasy life as an integral and crucially significant aspect of their psychological development.

A second form of pseudo-lie is presented by what the Sterns described as defence against unpleasantness. For example, when Hilde was two-and-a-half years of age, she pinched Günther. She was scolded, and then later, when her mother said to her 'You hurt your little brother', she protested, saying 'No, no.' The Sterns argued that

...this 'no, no' did not mean that she was denying to have hurt her brother, but served only to express the defensive wish 'No, I don't want to

hear about that,' just as in analogous cases an adult will make defensive gestures. (p.35)

As another example of a consciously untruthful assertion made not in order to deceive but instead simply for the sake of warding off some unpleasantness, the Sterns wrote of an incident with Hilde, then three years old, which occurred on an outing. The three were standing on a hill from which they could see far into the distance, and the parents were pointing out various sights to Hilde and asking if she saw them. Hilde always answered yes, to the point where her parents began to doubt the truthfulness of her claims. They tested her by asking her if she could see some fictitious object, and found that then, too, Hilde answered yes. After admonishing her to say 'no' if in fact she did not see the indicated object, Hilde complied briefly but then resorted once again to untruthful 'yes' responses. The Sterns argued that in this context, Hilde's consciously untruthful responses were not genuine lies, because

...Hilde had not the slightest interest in deceiving her parents. Because of her interest and intentness, she simply would have been happy to have caught sight of the bird, or the rider, or whatever. It was just this wish to realize what we were intending for her that was being expressed in her 'yes.' It was not a confirmatory 'yes I see that' but instead a desirous and expectant 'yes, I, too, would like to see that.' (pp.35-36)

Clara and William Stern saw in the phenomenon of harmless blaming yet a third form of pseudo-lie. They illustrated this with an example involving daughter Eva, then three-and-a-half years of age. Finding her hiking stick broken and lying near the cook, Toni, the child complained to her mother that Toni was responsible for the damage.

I asked Eva pointedly: 'Did you see Toni break the stick?' Ashamed, she said 'no,' and at that I warned her to always say only what she had really seen. Soon thereafter, the success of this warning was made apparent: Eva said to the nanny upon her arrival: 'Look, Else, my hiking stick got broken all by itself.' (p.115)

Truth fanaticism

As harmful as lying can be to the fabric of family life and to social relationships more generally, an exaggerated commitment to truth-telling can also be problematic. The Sterns warned of this

danger under the heading of truth fanaticism, and offered some examples of its possible childhood precursor in observations of son Günther. In one instance when he was five years and four months old, Günther expressed concern about having told his aunt that he wanted to become a doctor and then later deciding that he no longer wished that. Clara had to explain to Günther that under these circumstances he had not really lied to his aunt.

On the topic of truth fanaticism, the Sterns also related the following incident involving Günther, noting that even in reference to the future, the child at age five years and four months tried to guard himself against stating untruths. Clara had written in the diary:

[Günther] hit his little sister on the head. I forbade him to do that, explaining the damage he could possibly cause, and then, when I had finished my admonition, asked him: 'So: you won't do that again, right?' Answer: 'I don't know.' He was not being obstinate or stubborn. On the contrary, he was highly contrite. He had tears in his eyes, but he knew his own impulsiveness too well to trust himself to make a firm promise. (pp.123-124)

Genuine lies

At first glance, the reader of *Recollection, Testimony, and Lying in Early Childhood* is astounded by Clara and William Stern's acknowledgement that up to the time of the book's publication they had been unable to definitively establish a single instance of lying in their own children (who in 1909 were nine, seven and five years old). They acknowledged that their children had on occasion made statements that were both known to be false and intentionally deceptive. They argued, however, that a 'genuinely complete lie' (*eine echte Voll-Lüge*), as they termed such happenings, must include a serious persistence in the deception. So if a child is quickly and easily persuaded to retract a false and intentionally deceptive statement, there is evidence of the lack of just this requisite persistence. The Sterns extended this point into the claim that evidence of a genuine lie is found in the persistence in and/or premeditation of a consciously false and intentionally deceptive statement or action:

Persistence alone accompanies

History poster

The '150 years of experimental psychology' poster sent to all Society members with the December issue is now available to download as a PDF (again free to members) or purchase in hard copy form via www.bpsshop.org.uk.

I would like to again extend my gratitude to the Experimental Psychology Society and the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network for their generous practical and financial support in producing the poster. Also, many apologies to Professor John Mollon (University of Cambridge), who advised on the poster and was rewarded by me incorrectly naming him Phil.

Dr Jon Sutton
Managing Editor, The Psychologist

negative lies, which simply deny some happening or doing. Premeditation must be involved in positive lies, that can extend from simple excuse-making to the devious blaming of others. (p.117)

To illustrate this point, the Sterns cited the case of a certain girl to whom they referred as 'Z'. This case was made known to the Sterns by a woman who had been supervising the child while the mother was away. At the time of this particular incident, the child was four-and-a-half years of age:

Once, when Z was alone in the kitchen, she broke a glass. She was observed as she secretly hid the broken pieces in the oven and then went out. After some time, the kitchen staff arrived. Z followed them, pulled the broken pieces of glass out of the oven and asked: 'Now which of you did this?' The helpers said to the girl's face that she had done it. She contested that and even claimed that she had seen the helper who had broken the glass. It was only after lengthy coaxing by the woman who was caring for the child that the child admitted the lie and became ashamed of herself. (p.120)

Clearly, this was an act of premeditated and persistent untruthfulness on the part of the child, carried out in full awareness of its untruthfulness and with the intention to deceive. In short, this was a 'genuinely complete lie' on the Sterns' understanding of matters. Of course, all of this begs the further questions: How does problematic lying develop in

"they had been unable to definitively establish a single instance of lying in their own children"

looking back

children? and What might parents and educators do to ward off such developments? In the latter part of *Recollection, Testimony, and Lying in Early Childhood*, the Sterns directed themselves to these questions.

Habitual lying in children: Development and prevention

At the very outset of their discussion of these questions, the Sterns emphasised their conviction that children do not have any natural, inborn disposition toward lying. On the contrary, they viewed the development of habitual lying as the result of a convergence of certain natural tendencies that children do have with environmental factors. For example, note has already been taken of the child's natural tendency to fantasise, a tendency that by definition entails the ability to represent matters in ways that do not conform to reality. This ability, coupled with the child's additional natural tendency to defend itself against discomforts and unpleasantness can lead to lying among children who happen to be raised in environments where parents and educators rely excessively on corporal punishment in their attempts to control the child's behaviour.

Children also have, according to the Sterns, a natural tendency to imitate what they observe being done by others. This natural tendency might also foster the development of lying among children if they are reared under circumstances where the adults around them are themselves guilty of perpetrating lies with appreciable regularity. In this connection, the authors of *Recollection, Testimony, and Lying in Early Childhood* were particularly emphatic in their admonitions:

Unfortunately, there are indeed families in which the entire lifestyle is based on lying and deception... [For example], even the [supposedly] harmless lies that children are told, or into which they are even sometimes recruited (e.g., by being told to say that 'Mother is not at home' when she does not wish to be visited) perhaps draw the child's attention for the first time to the fact that there is such a thing as an intentional deviation from the truth. In any case, these experiences deprive children of their unquestioning trust in what adults say.

"the Sterns emphasised their conviction that children do not have any natural, inborn disposition toward lying"



It is surprising to see how highly educated persons engage in activities that they seem to regard as harmless to their children. To save 10 cents on the streetcar, a mother will risk damaging what is most precious in the child. She requires the child to lie about his age, and in the process she herself sows the seeds of untruthfulness. Then later, when the same child lies to his mother at home, he will...be punished. 'Children's lies [wrote Rousseau] are the work of the child-raiser.' (pp.137-138).

In addition to their understanding of children's natural tendencies, and of how those tendencies converge with environmental factors in children's

behavioural development, another theoretical concept of major significance for the Sterns' views on how best to prevent the development of habitual lying was that of introjection. This concept refers to the process whereby a person appropriates, or adopts as their own, certain goals, and the values they reflect, that are at first experienced as the goals and values of others (e.g. parents or educators). In this particular context, the goal/value in question was truthfulness. The Sterns highlighted their views on the child-rearing practices conducive to the introjection of this goal/value by pointing out where their views took leave from those of the same Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) whom they had cited approvingly in the previously-quoted passage:

Rousseau goes too far when he teaches, in his *Émile*, that one should not demand the truth from a child and in the process induce the child to conceal the truth, or that one should not demand a promise so that it will not be broken, or that in the case of

some or other incident one should never ask, 'Did you do that?' and so forth. [Rousseau] states, 'The more the child's well-being is made independent, be it of the will of others or of their judgment, the less will be the child's interest in lying.' This artificial isolation, discussed in talk of 'natural' childrearing, is essentially a kind of pampering that will exact its toll as soon as the unnatural conditions maintaining isolation no longer hold. One can well understand Rousseau's pleas as a reaction to prevailing, overly strict child-rearing practices. But to the extent that he is opposing excessive discipline, he also undermines, to a considerable extent, self-discipline; and it is precisely those child-rearing practices that foster self-discipline that offer the best possibility of recruiting the child him- or herself to the collective struggle against lying. Even in the most sheltered environment, real life does not insulate the child from the lies of others, or from his or her own attempts to lie. A child whose parents teach him about the importance of maintaining self-control in general, a child who has learned to curb her own anger, or to forgo a pleasure out of consideration for others, or to tolerate an unfairness - yes, one who can take satisfaction in having achieved self-control - will also overcome the inclination to lie. (pp.145-146).

Plainly, *Recollection, Testimony, and Lying in Early Childhood* still offers valuable insights and lessons for parents and educators, now more than 100 years after its original publication.

James T. Lamiell is Professor and Chair in the Psychology Department at Georgetown University, Washington, DC
lamiellj@georgetown.edu