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Chinese and Canadian Adults' Categorization and Evaluation of Lie and Truth-Telling about Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors

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This study examined cross-cultural differences in Chinese and Canadian adults' concepts and moral evaluations of lying and truth-telling about prosocial and antisocial behaviors. Although Canadian adults categorized lies concealing one's prosocial deeds as lies, their Chinese counterparts did not. Also, Chinese adults rated deception in such situations positively while rating truth-telling in the same situations negatively. These cross-cultural differences appear to reflect differential emphases on the virtue of modesty in the two cultures.

CHINESE AND CANADIAN ADULTS' CATEGORIZATION AND EVALUATION OF LIE- AND TRUTH-TELLING ABOUT PROSOCIAL AND ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIORS

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Over the past two decades, there has been extensive research on adults' and children's concepts and moral evaluations of lying (see Lee, 2000, for a review). The existing literature, however, has two major limitations. First, current knowledge regarding the concept of lying has been exclusively derived from studies involving Western participants. Second, although there has been a considerable amount of research on Western children's moral evaluations of lying, none but one (Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, & Board, 1997) has examined non-Western individuals' moral evaluations of lying. This lack of cross-cultural data makes it unclear whether our concepts and moral judgments of lying are universal or culturally specific.

The present study was conducted to bridge this gap in the literature. Specifically, it was conducted to extend the findings of Lee et al. (1997). In their study, Canadian and Chinese children were shown stories involving child-story characters who intentionally carried out prosocial or antisocial deeds. When story characters were questioned by a teacher as to who had committed the deed, they either lied or told the truth. Children were asked to evaluate the story characters' verbal statements. Overall, there were no cross-cultural differences in children's evaluations of lie- or truth-telling in antisocial situations. The major cross-cultural difference lay in prosocial situations, in which Chinese children rated truth-telling less, and lie-telling more positively than Canadian children: These differences increased with age. Lee et al. (1997) suggested that this cross-cultural effect reflects the impact of a Chinese cultural

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emphasis on self-effacement and modesty on Chinese children's moral evaluations. Furthermore, with increased acculturation, the emphasis on modesty leads Chinese children to believe that lying for reason of modesty has positive moral value whereas truth-telling about good deeds is morally undesirable.

Because Lee et al. (1997) focused exclusively on children, it is not clear whether there are similar cross-cultural differences in moral judgment between Asian and Western adults in modesty situations. With regard to the concept of lying, Lee (2000) reported that Chinese children, like their Canadian counterparts, categorize a false statement about one's good deed as a lie. It is not clear whether Chinese adults make the same classifications in the same situations. Thus, the present study specifically examined cross-cultural differences in adults' concepts as well as their evaluations of lying in contexts in which modesty might pertain.

Chinese and Canadian university undergraduate students, teachers, and parents participated in the present study. The samples were chosen to be consistent with Lee et al. (1997), in which Chinese and Canadian children were studied. In addition, the choice was based on previous cross-cultural research establishing that Canadians, though living in a multicultural society, hold relatively individualistic cultural values, whereas Chinese hold more collectivist values. The three adult groups (university students, teachers, and parents) were targeted to examine whether individuals with different roles, and degrees of experience in socializing children, would differentially categorize and evaluate children's lying and truth-telling.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Canadian participants were as follows: 33 university students (28 females), 23 elementary school teachers (19 females), and 23 parents (17 females), who had at least one child under 12 years of age. They were largely Caucasian and born and raised in Canada (none were Chinese Canadians). Chinese participants were as follows: 30 university students (13 females), 35 elementary school teachers (29 females), and 32 parents (19 females), who had at least one child under 12 years of age. They were all Chinese, born and raised in the People's Republic of China.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

Eight stories used in Lee et al. (1997) were included in a questionnaire completed by participants. The stories were developed together by the multicultural/lingual research team. Back translation methods were also used for cross-cultural comparability. Stories fall into the following four categories: (a) a child-story character does something good and tells the truth when asked by a teacher (truth-telling/prosocial deed situation), (b) the story character does something good and denies it (lie-telling/prosocial), (c) the character does something bad and confesses (truth-telling/antisocial), and (d) the story character does something bad and denies it (lie-telling/antisocial). There are two set of stories: (a) physical stories that depict the story character committing a deed that affects the physical environment, and (b) social stories in which the character commits a deed that affects another child. The use of the physical and social stories was to ascertain intrasubject reliability. For each story, the following questions were asked:

1. Is what X (the child story character) said a lie or not a lie? If the participant replied "not a lie," then a follow-up question was asked: "Is what she/he said the truth or not truth?"
2. Is what X (the child story character) said good or bad? To answer this question, participants were asked to indicate their rating on a 7-point Likert-type scale: 3 (*very, very good*), 2 (*very good*), 1 (*good*), 0 (*not good nor bad*), -1 (*bad*), -2 (*very bad*), and -3 (*very, very bad*).
3. Why did you give such a rating?

RESULTS

Preliminary inspection of the data from the physical and social conditions revealed no significant differences. The data for both conditions were therefore combined for subsequent analyses.

CATEGORIZATIONS OF LIE- AND TRUTH-TELLING BEHAVIORS IN PROSOCIAL AND ANTISOCIAL DEED SITUATIONS

Table 1 shows the percentage of Canadian and Chinese undergraduate students, teachers, and parents who consistently categorized untruthful statements told in the prosocial and antisocial deed/lie-telling stories as "a lie." The table also shows the percentage of adults who consistently categorized truthful statements told in prosocial and antisocial/truth-telling stories as "the truth." Overall, with a few exceptions, most Canadian adults labeled truthful statements "the truth," and untruthful statements "lies," regardless of the situations in which the statements were made. Most Chinese adults, like Canadian participants, labeled truthful statements the "truth" in both the prosocial or antisocial situations. Nearly all adults also categorized untruthful statements in antisocial situations "lies." By contrast, for prosocial/lie-telling stories, although about half of the Chinese adults categorized untruthful statements as lies, the other half considered them not to be lies.

To examine whether there were cross-cultural differences between Chinese and Canadian adults' categorizations of the statements made in the four different situations, four separate hierarchical logistic regression analyses were conducted. In the regression model for the prosocial/lie-telling story, the adults' categorization of statements as lies or not was the predicted variable. The group variable (student, teacher, and parent) was entered first as a predictor and the country variable (Canada vs. China), second. The group effect was not significant, $\chi^2 (N = 186, df = 2) = .67, p > .05$. After partialing out the group effect, the country effect was significant, $\chi^2 (N = 186, df = 1) = 28.75, p < .001$, Nagelkerke R^2 change = .20. Chinese adults overall were less inclined to label a false statement made in the modesty situation as a lie than Canadian adults. For the prosocial/truth-telling stories, the predicted variable was adults' categorization of truthful statements either as "the truth" or not. The group and country effects were not significant, $\chi^2 (N = 186, df = 2) = 5.68, p > .05$, and $\chi^2 (N = 186, df = 1) = 1.02, p > .05$. Both Canadian and Chinese adults overall tended to categorize the truthful statement made in the prosocial situation to be "the truth."

For antisocial/lie-telling stories, the predicted variable was adults' categorizations of untruthful statements as either "lies" or not. The group effect was not significant, $\chi^2 (N = 186, df = 2) = 2.06, p > .05$. After partialing out the group effect, the country effect was significant, $\chi^2 (N = 186, df = 1) = 4.53, p < .05$. Nagelkerke R^2 change = .06. This effect was likely due to the fact that two groups of Canadian participants reached ceiling, whereas none of the Chinese groups did so. Overall, both Canadian and Chinese adults tended to categorize

TABLE 1
Percentage of Chinese and Canadian Adults Who Categorized
Truthful Statements as Truth-telling and Untruthful
Statements as Lying in Prosocial and Antisocial Deed Situations

	<i>Student</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Parent</i>
Prosocial deed/lie-telling story			
Lie (Canada)	82 (27/33)	91 (21/23)	91 (21/23)
Lie (China)	55 (21/38)	56 (20/36)	44 (14/32)
Antisocial deed/lie-telling			
Lie (Canada)	100 (33/33)	100 (23/23)	91 (21/23)
Lie (China)	92 (35/38)	89 (32/36)	88 (29/33)
Prosocial deed/truth-telling story			
Truth (Canada)	100 (32/32)	91 (21/23)	100 (23/23)
Truth (China)	95 (36/38)	86 (31/35)	97 (32/33)
Antisocial deed/truth-telling			
Truth (Canada)	94 (31/33)	91 (21/23)	87 (20/23)
Truth (China)	92 (35/38)	94 (34/36)	94 (31/33)

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses indicate number of participants giving a particular response/total number of participants.

untruthful statements made in antisocial situations to be “lies.” For the antisocial deed/truth-telling story, the predicted variable was adults’ categorizations of truthful statements either as “the truth” or not. Neither group effect or country effect was significant, $\chi^2 (N = 186, df = 2) = .22, p > .05$, and $\chi^2 (N = 186, df = 1) = .37, p > .05$, respectively. Both Canadian and Chinese adults tended to categorize truthful statements in antisocial situations as “the truth.”

EVALUATIONS OF LIE- AND TRUTH-TELLING BEHAVIORS IN PROSOCIAL AND ANTISOCIAL DEED SITUATIONS

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the evaluations of Canadian and Chinese undergraduate students, teachers, and parents for the four situations. Because Chinese participants were divided as to whether to classify untruthful statements in the prosocial/lie-telling situations as either a lie or not a lie, the means and standard deviations for these two groups of Chinese participants were calculated separately.

To compare whether the adults in the two countries gave different evaluations to lie- and truth-telling in prosocial and antisocial deed situations, five separate 3 (group) \times 2 (country) analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted on the rating data. For prosocial/lie-telling, the ratings of Chinese adults who categorized untruthful statements as lies were compared with those of Canadian adults who made the same categorizations. Only the country effect was significant, $F(1, 132) = 25.95, p < .001$. Chinese adults gave positive ratings to lying to

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Chinese and Canadian Adults'
Ratings of Lie- and Truth-Telling in Prosocial and Antisocial Deed Situations

	<i>Student</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Parent</i>
Prosocial deed/lie-telling story			
Lie (Canada)	-.73 (1.03)	-.50 (.61)	-.68 (1.20)
Lie (China)	.66 (1.37)	.46 (1.44)	.02 (1.01)
Not lie (China)	1.47 (1.92)	1.50 (.95)	1.15 (1.47)
Antisocial deed/lie-telling			
Lie (Canada)	-2.35 (.55)	-1.91 (.60)	-1.75 (1.41)
Lie (China)	-2.03 (.69)	-2.15 (.73)	-2.09 (.67)
Prosocial deed/truth-telling story			
Truth (Canada)	2.22 (.86)	1.68 (1.02)	2.14 (.95)
Truth (China)	.72 (1.06)	1.25 (.96)	1.16 (1.15)
Antisocial deed/truth-telling			
Truth (Canada)	2.27 (1.17)	2.18 (.45)	1.95 (1.27)
Truth (China)	1.01 (1.17)	1.35 (1.01)	1.13 (1.13)

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

conceal one's own good deed whereas Canadian adults, on average, gave negative ratings. However, these Chinese adults' ratings were significantly less positive than those of the Chinese adults who did not categorize untruthful statements as lies (Table 2). This observation was confirmed by a 3 (group) \times 2 (type of categorization by Chinese adults: lie vs. not lie) ANOVA. The type-of-categorization and group effects were significant, $F_1, 101 = 10.16, p < .01$, and $F_2, 101 = 3.63, p < .05$. Chinese university students and teachers overall gave more positive ratings to making untruthful statements to conceal one's good deed than parents did.

By contrast, for prosocial/truth-telling, Canadian adults' ratings were more positive than those of Chinese adults and the difference was the greatest between university students of the two countries. These observations were confirmed by a 3 (group) \times 2 (country) ANOVA that revealed a significant country effect, $F_1, 173 = 18.61, p < .001$, and a significant country by group interaction, $F_2, 173 = 3.31, p < .05$. The significant interaction was mainly due to the fact that Chinese university students gave less positive ratings than did teachers and parents.

For antisocial/lie-telling, a 3 (group) \times 2 (country) ANOVA revealed a significant country by group interaction, $F_2, 174 = 3.49, p < .05$. Chinese parents and teachers gave more negative ratings to lie-telling in this situation than did their Canadian counterparts, whereas Chinese university students gave less negative ratings than Canadian students. For antisocial/truth-telling, a 3 (group) \times 2 (country) ANOVA revealed a significant country effect, $F_1, 171 = 18.61, p < .001$. Canadian adults overall gave significantly more positive ratings to story-characters who confessed their own misdeeds than did Chinese adults.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to ascertain whether cross-cultural differences exist in adults' categorization and evaluation of lie- and truth-telling about prosocial and antisocial behaviors. We also investigated whether different levels of experience with children and roles in socializing children have an impact on adults' responses within each culture. Overall, within each culture, although differing in experiences and roles as socializers of young children, the three adult groups were relatively consistent within their cultural groups in both their classifications and their value ratings of the four scenario-types presented in this study.

Between cultures, adults tended to be consistent in categorizing truthful statements to be "the truth" and untruthful statements to be "lies" in antisocial deed situations. By contrast, a substantial proportion of Chinese adults categorized untruthful statements made to conceal one's own good deeds not to be lies, whereas nearly all Canadian adults labeled such statements lies. This finding is a first in the literature to provide direct evidence that concepts of lying may not be universal. It supports the general proposal of Sweetser's (1987) folkloristic theory that the concept of lying is determined by sociocultural conventions. According to her theory, in some cultures, certain untruthful statements, even though meeting a classic definition of lying (Chisholm & Feehan, 1977), may not be considered lies because such untruthful statements serve one of the culture's highly valued interpersonal functions. In the present case, modesty is considered by the Chinese collectivist culture to be an important virtue because of its function for maintaining group cohesiveness in a collectivity (Lee et al., 1997). Thus, some Chinese adults allow untruthful statements made for modesty purposes to fall outside of the realm of lying. This finding is different from Chinese children's categorizations of the same statements in the same situations (Lee, 2000). Chinese 7-, 9-, and 11-year-olds, like their Canadian counterparts, tended to view modesty-motivated untruthful statements as lies, even though the older children tended to give them positive evaluations. This discrepancy between children and adults suggests that the development of the notions of modesty and conceptualization of "lying" about good deeds may continue well into adulthood.

Adults' ratings of untruthful statements about prosocial behaviors revealed that about half of the Chinese adults, even though categorizing them as lies, gave them positive ratings, whereas their Canadian counterparts gave negative ratings. Furthermore, the other half of Chinese adults who did not categorize them as lies gave even more positive ratings. Inspection of Chinese adults' justifications confirmed that their positive ratings of lying were based on a modesty evaluation. Most of them responded that the child-story character's attempt to conceal his or her good deed is consistent with Chinese cultural principles regarding modesty and therefore should be rated positively. This finding is consistent with Lee et al.'s (1997) finding that older Chinese children also gave positive ratings to modesty-motivated lie-telling. By contrast, only about 15% of the Canadian adults gave positive ratings to story characters who lied about good deeds and their justifications were either that the story characters were commendable for not wanting the recognition for their good deeds or that they told harmless lies. The majority of the Canadian adults held different views. They believed that it was unnecessary for the story characters to lie, or not to take credit, or avoid recognition for their good deeds. They stated that the story characters deserved the credit and should tell the truth because they did the right thing. Clearly, the Chinese and Canadian adults have sharply different views about whether individuals should publicize their good behaviors. Taken together, the results from Chinese and Canadian children and adults fail to support the notion that lying has a universal, constant moral disvalue (Kupfer, 1982).

With regard to truth-telling in prosocial situations, Chinese adults' ratings were significantly lower than the ratings of Canadian adults, for whom this sort of self-promotion was rated quite highly. Inspection of Chinese respondents' justifications revealed that their relatively low ratings of truth-telling in this situation were also derived from Chinese modesty values. The majority of the participants suggested that truth-telling about one's good deeds is immodest and may diminish the value of the good deed. Many pointed out that one should not leave names after doing a good deed. By contrast, only one Canadian participant gave negative ratings to truth-telling about one's own good deed and gave the same justification as those of many Chinese adults. Most of the Canadian participants justified their positive ratings of the child-story characters' truth-telling about their own good deeds by saying that they were honest, they took the credit that they deserved, and they should take credit, or responsibility, for their good behaviors. Again, these findings are consistent with the child results (Lee et al., 1997).

Another noteworthy finding was that Canadian adults gave significantly more positive ratings to confessing one's misdeeds than did Chinese adults. Inspection of Canadian and Chinese adults' justifications of their ratings revealed that Canadian adults tended to make clear distinctions between misdeeds and telling the truth about them. Although they condemned misdeeds, they highly valued telling the truth about them. Most of the adults (about 80%) believed that it was admirable for child-story characters to be honest, to admit their own misdeeds, or take responsibility for them. Perhaps confession of misdeeds is a core cultural precept in Judeo-Christian cultures. Therefore, truth-telling about a misdeed is rated as positively as good deed ratings. Certainly, Western courts of law view a guilty plea as a mitigating factor in sentencing. By contrast, Chinese adults believed that although confessing one's bad deed was commendable, it did not redeem the negativity of the bad behavior, thus, giving less positive ratings.

Overall, the present findings suggest that the concept of lying is not a universal one; different cultures may categorize untruthful statements differently depending on specific social contexts. Also, lie- and truth-telling have inconstant moral values: Certain forms of lie- and truth-telling, though valued negatively in one culture, may be evaluated positively in another culture.

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