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Instrumental Lying by Parents in the U.S. and China

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Abstract

The practice of lying to one's children to encourage behavioral compliance was investigated among parents in the U.S. ($N = 114$) and China ($N = 85$). The vast majority of parents (84% in the U.S. and 98% in China) reported having lied to their children for this purpose. Within each country, the practice most frequently took the form of falsely threatening to leave a child alone in public if he or she refused to follow the parent. Cross-cultural differences were seen: a larger proportion of the parents in China reported that they employed instrumental lie telling to promote behavioral compliance, and a larger proportion approved of this practice, as compared to the parents in the U.S. This difference was not seen on measures relating to the practice of lying to promote positive feelings, or on measures relating to statements about fantasy characters such as the tooth fairy. Findings are discussed with reference to sociocultural values and certain parenting-related challenges that extend across cultures.

Keywords

deception; socialization; interpersonal communication; cross-cultural differences

Moral dilemmas regarding the acceptability of different forms of lying are pervasive across human societies. Although lying can damage interpersonal relationships by undermining trust, it can also provide speakers with a means to obtain a number of desired outcomes. By lying, a person may be able to protect another person's feelings, gracefully disengage from an unpleasant interaction, or persuade others to do things they would not otherwise do. Dilemmas regarding the acceptability of lying can take on particular moral significance when they involve parents and their children. This significance derives from a range of factors, including the extent to which children are dependent upon their parents, limitations

in children's cognitive ability and social experience, and the special obligations parents have to promote their children's well being (Bok, 1978).

It is important to investigate parental lying because this practice may play a role in children's lying behavior and evaluations of others who lie, two issues that are widely recognized as central to moral development (Bussey, 1999; Fu, Xu, Cameron, Heyman, & Lee, 2007; Perkins & Turiel, 2007; Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto, 1983). Because promoting honesty is a major focus of socialization efforts (Barnes, 1994; Lewis, 1993; Robinson, 1996; Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986), parents often teach children that lying is wrong in all cases, and commonly use stories such as *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* to emphasize the negative consequences of lying (Heyman, Luu, & Lee, 2009). Children who discover that their parents have lied to them to achieve a desired goal may wonder why different standards of conduct should apply to different people, and they may begin to justify their own lying with reference to lies their parents have told. The study of lying as a parenting practice also has the potential to provide insights into contexts in which the goals and desires of parents are likely to clash with those of their children. In addition, this research can reveal how parents grapple with the question of whether lies can ever be morally justified, a subject of longstanding philosophical debates (Austin, 1962; Bentham, 1843; Kant, 1797/1949).

Although previous research has yielded a wealth of valuable information about the contexts in which children lie to their parents (Cumsille, Darling, & Martínez, 2010; Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004; Knox, Zusman, McGinty, Gescheidler, 2001; Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005; Perkins & Turiel, 2007; Smetana, Villalobos, Tasopoulos-Chan, Gettman, Campione-Barr, 2009; Wilson, Smith, & Ross, 2003), the topic of parents lying to children has been almost completely ignored. In one of the only studies addressing this topic, Brown (2002) observed Tzeltal-speaking Mayan corn farmers who lived in the rural community of Tenejapa, in southern Mexico. Brown reported that parents in this community often lied to their children in an attempt to influence their behavior, and that they did not consider it morally problematic because they believed there is a general expectation within their community that each person will lie at times in the service of self-interest.

Heyman, Luu, and Lee (2009) investigated a phenomenon among parents in the U.S. that they described as "parenting by lying." Nine example statements were presented that described a parent lying to a child to influence his or her behavior or emotions. Participants were asked whether they had made similar statements to their own children. Seventy-eight percent of parents reported saying something similar to one or more of the example statements, and the parents who reported that they were strongly committed to the goal of teaching their children that lying is always wrong were no less likely to have lied to their children than were other parents.

The Present Research

This study focuses on instrumental lying, which we define as lying to influence the behavior of others. This definition appears straightforward but it can be difficult to apply, which is not surprising given the longstanding philosophical debates about the definition of lying. For example, there is widespread disagreement about whether an intentionally misleading

statement that is not strictly false should be considered a lie (Kind, 2010). It is also difficult to develop an operational definition of lying because it is often difficult to ascertain a speaker's beliefs or motives. A false statement can be made because the speaker is trying to be entertaining, or for more sinister reasons. In addition, a lie that appears to serve one purpose can also be based on other motives as well.

In light of the theoretical challenges of developing a sound operational definition of instrumental lying, as well as the limited amount of prior research on instrumental lying as a parenting practice, we focused on cases of parental lying that were relatively unambiguous and in which the desired behavioral outcome was clear, such as when a parent tries to encourage a child to finish his or her dinner. However, we were not so restrictive in our choice of items that we expected universal agreement among adults that each of our statements would constitute a lie. For example, we included statements that could be interpreted as being partially true, or having some basis in folk beliefs.

We examined instrumental lying by parents from a cross-cultural perspective by comparing the reports of parents from the U.S. and China. Like the question of parental lying itself, conducting cross-cultural research is never a straightforward proposition. Samples often differ in important ways other than culture, and they may not be representative of the broader culture in which the participants live. Despite these limitations, we determined that a cross-cultural comparison would provide a means to gain insights into the extent to which certain types of instrumental lies tend to be culturally specific.

We were particularly interested in making a cross-cultural comparison between parents in the U.S. and China, in light of recent evidence that individuals in Eastern and Western societies tend to hold different beliefs about lie-telling that are associated with broader differences in cultural values. For example, children and adults in East Asian countries tend to view telling a lie for the purpose of appearing modest (e.g., by assigning credit for one's own work to others) more favorably than do children in the West (Fu, Lee, Cameron, Xu, 2001; Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, and Board, 1997; Heyman, Itakura, and Lee, 2011), and this difference is associated with a greater cultural emphasis on modesty in East Asia (e.g., Bond & Hwang, 1986). Cultural differences have also been seen in relation to lying for the benefit of the self versus the collective. Fu, Xu, Cameron, Heyman, and Lee (2007) found that a group of children ages 7 to 11 in China were more likely to disapprove of lies that were told to benefit a specific individual rather than a group, whereas Canadian children of the same ages showed the reverse pattern. It is possible that there are cross-cultural differences in reasoning about parental lying in particular. Heyman, Luu, and Lee (2009) found that within a sample from the U.S., Asian American parents were more likely to endorse the practice of parental lying than were other parents, a finding that parallels a greater emphasis on promoting obedience and respect among people who live in East Asia (Chao, 1995; Lin & Fu, 1990).

We asked parents in both the U.S. and China to report about their own instrumental lying, and the extent to which they approve of a set of specific lies that had been collected from individuals in each country. We also asked parents about untrue statements that were designed to influence children's emotions, and ones that involve fantasy characters (Clark,

1995), to serve as a basis for comparison. Additionally, parents were asked about their beliefs concerning lying by children.

Method

Participants

Participants were parents from U.S. ($N = 114$) and China ($N = 85$) who had at least one child who was 3 years old or older. Most of the participants from each country were recruited using letters or emails that were sent from their child's school that invited them to participate. Parents were given the option of responding on a printed form or using a confidential web-based survey. According to self-reported ethnicity, participants from the U.S. were 15.8% Asian American, 8.8% Latino, 0.9% Middle Eastern, 71.9% Caucasian, 0.9% biracial, and 1.7% other. The Chinese sample was 100% Han Chinese.

Participants from the U.S. reported having an average of 2.2 children (range 1 to 7, mean 1.0 girls and 1.2 boys), and participants in China reported having an average of 1.2 children (range 1 to 3, mean 0.6 girls and 0.6 boys). Among participants from the U.S., 91% reported having some college education and 77% reported having a college degree; among Chinese participants, 59% reported having some college education and 29% reported having a college degree. The sample from the U.S. was 80% female and the sample from China was 48% female.

Materials and Procedure

Before answering any questions, participants were told, "We are interested in how parents socialize their children, and we are collecting information through this survey to learn about parents in general rather than to assess individual people." Parents were also told that they should only participate if they have at least one child age 3 or older, that their responses will be confidential, and that they should feel free to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

Participants were presented with a set of lies (see Table 1) that included a series of different categories. The overall reliability for the lying items was .92, as assessed by Cronbach's alpha. Reliabilities for individual categories are also presented in Table 1.

Of central theoretical interest were four categories of instrumental lie items, with four items in each category. The four categories of instrumental lies consisted of lies related to eating (e.g., telling a child, "you need to finish all your food or you will get pimples all over your face"), leaving or staying at a specific location (e.g., an insincere threat such as "if you don't come with me now, I will leave you here by yourself"), misbehavior (e.g., an insincere threat such as, "If you don't behave, I will call the police"), and spending money (e.g., falsely telling a child, "I did not bring money with me today. We can come back another day.").

In addition to the instrumental lie items, parents were also asked to respond to a set of untruthful comparison statements, including statements intended to promote positive emotional outcomes (e.g., telling a child "That was beautiful piano playing," when the

playing was terrible) and a set of statements concerning supernatural beings (e.g., “If you put this tooth under your pillow, the Tooth Fairy will come and change it into a gold coin”).

Items were developed through an iterative process involving teachers, school officials, and college students from both countries. An initial set of items was developed based on discussions with parents and school officials in both countries, and students described lies that their parents had told them. The resulting statements were then grouped into categories based on the apparent goal that the statement was intended to achieve. The most common topical categories were chosen, and another group of college students in each country were asked to generate example items from within each category. From this set, items were chosen that could be explained in simple terms, and that were mentioned frequently (especially if they were generated by individuals in each country, a category that comprised about half of the final list of items). The final list contained four items in each category, with at least two being mentioned by individuals in the U.S., and at least two being mentioned by individuals in China.

After participants were presented with each item, they were asked whether they had ever said something similar to their own child or children (the *parent lie measure*). The possible response options were *yes*, scored as 1, and *no*, scored as 0. Each statement was also assigned a *lie category score* of 1 if it matched one of the four examples in a given category, and 0 otherwise. Category scores were summed across the four instrumental lie categories to create a *parent instrumental lie score* that ranged between 0 and 4.

After each response to the parent lie measure, participants responded to a *moral approval measure* in which they were asked, “On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning very bad/extremely not okay and 5 meaning very good/extremely okay, rate whether it is okay for a parent to say something similar to this example to his or her child.”

All participants were also asked to provide demographic information, such as their ethnicity, and were asked to report on how religious they are on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all religious*) to 7 (*very religious*). Participants in the U.S. were asked to rate their political philosophy on a scale ranging from 1 (*liberal*) to 7 (*conservative*). These items were included for exploratory purposes. The religious items were included because Heyman, Luu, and Lee (2009) found that some parents brought up factors associated with their religious beliefs when discussing topics of lying and honesty with their children (e.g., a parent reported telling her child that he should always tell the truth because Baby Jesus knows when he lies). Additionally, it has been suggested that religiosity may be associated with differences in fundamental moral beliefs (Graham & Haidt, 2010). The political philosophy questions were included in light of evidence that moral judgments sometimes differ as a function of political philosophy (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). For example, having a politically conservative orientation has been found to be associated with greater concern with authority and respect.

Participants in both countries completed a *child lie acceptability scale* that involved the following child lie scenarios: (1) a child breaks his mother’s rule by eating cookies before dinner, and then tells her that the cat ate the cookies, (2) after a child knocks over his

friend's cup of juice, the friend explains to their teacher that the cup was knocked over by the wind, (3) a child tells her father that she has read a book that she did not actually read, and (4) a child tells his classmates that his father is an astronaut when his father is actually a truck driver. For each item, parents rated the lie on a scale that ranged from 1 (*very bad*) to 5 (*very good*). Responses were averaged across these items to create a *child lie acceptability rating* for each participant. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .75.

Results

The percent of parents who reported telling each specific type of lie and the percent of parents who reported telling at least one lie in each category are presented in Table 1.

The most common lie, which was reported by at least two-thirds of participants in each country, involved a false threat to leave a child alone if he or she refused to follow a parent. Another lie that was told by nearly half of participants in the U.S. and more than two-thirds of participants in China was the false promise to buy a toy on another occasion in response to a child's request for it.

Preliminary analyses showed no systematic differences in responses between mothers and fathers in either country, so parent gender was not included in further analyses. Parent instrumental lie scores were significantly correlated with a tendency to approve of instrumental lying in both the U.S. ($r = .562, p < .001$) and China ($r = .308, p = .004$). However, parent instrumental lie scores were not significantly correlated with the tendency to approve of children's lie telling in either country. Parent instrumental lie scores were not significantly correlated with religiosity in either country, or with political ideology, which was measured in the U.S. only. There was no effect of the number of children in the family in the U.S., and this relation was not tested for participants in China due to the very small proportion of families with more than one child. Parental instrumental lie scores were not related to parental education in the U.S., but in China, parents with a higher level of education tended to have higher parental instrumental lie scores: among Chinese college graduates the average score was 3.88, as compared to 3.15 for those with no college degree, $t(84) = 3.32, p < .001$.

Parent instrumental lie scores were significantly higher in China ($M = 3.4$) than in the U.S., ($M = 2.4$), $t(198) = 5.3, p < .001$. This cross-cultural difference was also seen on the measure of moral approval for instrumental lies: for participants in China the mean score was 2.3 and for participants in the U.S. it was 2.0, $t(198) = 4.0, p < .001$.

The cross-cultural differences that were seen on the parent instrumental lie measure did not extend to the comparison statements. There were no significant differences between parents in China and the U.S. in their reports about telling their children untrue statements to make them feel happy, or untrue statements about fantasy characters. Approval of telling untrue statements about fantasy characters to children was greater among parents in the U.S. ($M = 3.0$) than in China ($M = 2.6$), $t(198) = 3.3, p < .01$, which was the reverse of the pattern seen for telling instrumental lies to children.

Cross-cultural comparisons of beliefs about the acceptability of lying by children showed that while parents in both countries tended to disapprove of such lies, ratings were significantly more negative in China ($M = 1.5$) than in the U.S. ($M = 1.8$), $t(198) = 3.8$, $p < .01$. This suggests that even though Chinese parents were more approving of instrumental lying by parents, they were less approving of lying by children.

Discussion

The present findings indicate that the vast majority of parents in both the U.S. and China lie to their children in an attempt to influence their behavior. In the U.S., 84% of parents reported telling their own child at least one lie that was similar to the sixteen examples they were asked about, and 98% of parents in China did so. A clear majority of parents in each country reported telling lies to their children concerning three of the four categories they were asked about: food, leaving and staying, and spending money. Lies in the final category, misbehavior, were also very common (reported by 45.6% of parents in the U.S. and 80.2% of parents in China). The pervasiveness of instrumental parent lying is striking, given that parents in both the U.S (Heyman, Luu, & Lee, 2009) and China (Zhang, 2001; Zhang & Du, 2007) consider socializing children to tell the truth to be an important cultural value.

In both countries, the most commonly endorsed lie to influence behavior was a false threat that a child who refuses to follow a parent will be left alone. The pervasiveness of this lie may relate to the universality of the challenge parents face in trying to leave a place against their child's wishes. Another lie that was among the most common in both countries was a false promise to buy a requested toy at some indefinite time in the future, a lie that may relate to the challenges posed by consumer culture, in which parents often feel pressure to make purchases that they consider unwise.

Our results suggest that instrumental lying may be more common among parents in China than in the U.S., a difference that was most evident with reference to lies concerning eating and misbehavior. Chinese parents reported telling 15 out of the 16 specific instrumental lies at higher rates than parents in the U.S. The only exception was a false claim that there is no more candy in the house, which was reported by 57.5% of parents in the U.S. as compared to 42.9% of Chinese parents. Chinese parents also expressed greater acceptance of parent instrumental lies. These findings parallel differences that have been seen between Asian Americans and Americans of European descent (Heyman, Luu & Lee, 2009). This cross-cultural difference may reflect greater concern with social cohesiveness (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Fu et al., 2007) and a greater emphasis on respect and obedience (Chao, 1995; Lin & Fu, 1990) in Asian cultures that encourages parents to be more willing to lie to achieve these ends. As is consistent with this possibility, many Chinese parents made comments indicating that they think lying can be an effective tool for socializing children. For example, one parent said, "When teaching children, it is okay to use well-intentioned lies. It can promote positive development and prevent your child from going astray."

Another possible explanation for the greater willingness on the part of Chinese parents to tell instrumental lies is that they are more accepting of lying in general. However, Chinese parents made more negative evaluations of children's lies. They also expressed a more

negative view of lies concerning fantasy characters than did parents in the U.S. Many parents in the U.S. commented on the importance of these characters for children's development, or spoke negatively of parents who denied the existence of such characters to their children. As one such parent commented, "Santa and the tooth fairy are harmless, fanciful stories that kids seem to find out the truth about slowly. To deny them these characters seems mean-spirited."

If parents are concerned about socializing their children not to tell lies, why do they lie to them? One possible reason is that parents often feel considerable stress about their children's noncompliance, as was suggested by one parent in the U.S. who explained, "When a parent is going nuts, they will do whatever it takes." Another said, "Most of the lies I've told my children are last resorts and out of despair. If I could get them to do what I'm asking another way, I would."

Some parents appeared to be engaging in a sort of cost/benefit analysis. One parent reported, "My policy would be to go ahead and lie about [what a store sells] because it saves time and anxiety and isn't hurting them." Others reported lying to their children when they felt the truth would be too difficult for them to understand, such as concerning the family budget. Some parents appeared to be focused on the immediate goals they hoped to achieve, as with a parent who told us, "We sometimes tell our 2-year-old daughter that something is broken when it's not so she'll leave it alone." This view of lying as a means to an end is also consistent with findings that have been seen among adults outside of the context of parenting relationships (Camden, Motley & Wilson, 1984; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Lindsfold, & Walters, 1983).

One limitation of the present research is that parents may not have always been completely accurate in their reports about lying. Presumably, any social desirability effects would translate into an underestimation of lying rates, but it is unclear whether these effects could be expected to differ between the two countries.

There are also limitations relating to the fact that participants were asked whether they had ever told lies such as those that were presented to them. It is possible that some parents underreported their own lying because they forgot about incidents that occurred months or years before. It is also likely that parents sometimes responded using general heuristics rather than based on memories of specific episodes, for example by asking themselves whether it was the kind of thing they could imagine themselves saying. Although the use of such heuristics still provides information about the kinds of lies parents tend to tell, it will be important to separate them out from more concrete memories. For example, it will be valuable to ask parents about lies they have told very recently. This approach would also allow for the investigation of the frequency of particular types of lies, something that was not examined in the present research.

As noted previously, there were also limitations related to the cross-cultural comparison. Ideally, one would compare two samples that differ only in terms of culture, but our samples differed in other ways, such as the average number of children per family, the proportion of mothers versus fathers, and the participants' level of education. However, it is unlikely that

these factors alone can explain our results, given there was no effect of the number of children among children in the U.S., or of parent gender, and that higher levels of education were associated with higher rates of reported lying in China. Still, it is likely that there were important differences between the samples that were not assessed. In addition, because we were not able to collect data from random samples in either country, there remain important unanswered questions about the generalizability of effects within each country.

Another limitation concerns the specific way we investigated parenting by lying. We focused on reports of untruthful statements that were aimed at achieving instrumental goals, and compared them to reports of untruthful statements aimed at helping children to feel better, and to reports of untruthful statements about fantasy characters. However, it is important to note that these categories are not always well defined. For example, telling a child who has played the piano poorly that she is playing well was classified as a lie aimed at making a child feel better, but such a statement could also be made for instrumental reasons, such as to encourage her to practice more often. Similarly, telling a child that Santa Claus is coming was classified in the fantasy characters category even though such statements can also be made for instrumental reasons (e.g., to motivate a child to behave properly). It may also be that there are more effective ways to categorize lies than what we have done in the present research (e.g., in term of high-level goals). Additionally, the same information might be conveyed for different reasons in different countries (Heyman, Fu, & Lee, 2008).

Because we only asked parents about simple statements in straightforward social situations, the results do not extend to complex situations in which parents face decisions about lying to their children, such as when a teenager asks his mother about her experiences with illegal drugs. Some of these situations involve difficult emotional issues, as was the case for the mother who reported that she told her son that the phone was broken when his biological father neglected to call him.

The present investigation also leaves broader issues unresolved concerning what it means to lie. Several parents in the U.S. stated that they do not consider false statements about fantasy characters to be lies because of their positive implications for their children. Some participants mentioned statements could be seen as examples of parental lying or as figurative speech, depending upon the child's state of knowledge. For example one parent stated, "I used to tell my kids I had eyes in the back of my head. They thought it was literally true. I still say this, but they now get that it is a figurative statement."

Despite the limitations of this research, it helps to fill a void in an understudied area that may have strong implications for children's social and moral development. The work documents many of the types of lies that parents tell, and provides information about the extent to which different types of instrumental lies tend to be culturally-specific. These findings provide a descriptive basis from which to begin to understand the consequences of parent lying.

One aspect of this topic that deserves further scrutiny is the implications for the parent-child relationship. It seems plausible that the most commonly reported lie, a false threat to abandon a child who refuses to follow a parent, could increase children's fears of

abandonment. Given the evidence that deception and lying can undermine trust among friends in elementary school (Kahn & Turiel, 1988), it also seems plausible that if children find out their parents are intentionally providing incorrect information it could undermine trust within the relationship. Additionally, it will be important to determine whether parental lying should be interpreted as love withdrawal in some cases (see Siegal & Cowen, 1984), whether the exposure to parental lying makes children more likely to tell lies themselves (see Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986), and how parental lying affects children's compliance immediately and in the long term.

More research is needed to examine how mothers and fathers differ in their beliefs about parental lying in light of common differences in their roles within the family. Although the present research did not find any evidence of differences between mothers and fathers, it is possible that such differences could be uncovered by more nuanced measures. There might also be cross-cultural differences. For example, gender differences might be weaker in cultures such as China where fathers' involvement in childcare may tend to be greater than in the U.S. It will also be important to look at factors related to family structure, such as the role of single parenting.

More research is also needed to examine how parental lying influences children's developing beliefs about themselves and the world. Several parents reported telling their children untruthful statements about specific foods, such as that failing to eat carrots makes people become blind, or that the parent can see the child grow after every bite of broccoli. It may be that children quickly learn the truth about these kinds of statements, but it also may be that such statements influence children's developing beliefs about nutrition and biology.

Taken together, our findings suggest that the vast majority of parents in the U.S. and in China lie to their children to obtain behavioral compliance. The findings raise questions about how this practice influences children's developing beliefs about themselves, their parents, and the world. They also raise important moral questions for parents about when, if ever, parental lying is justified (Bok, 1978; Kind, 2010) and broader questions for society about how to support parents in dealing with the challenges they face.

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Table 1

Complete set of instrumental lies and comparison lies, by category. The percent of participants in each country who reported telling a lie similar to the item is also shown. Category reliabilities are shown in parentheses.

Category	U.S.	China
Instrumental Lies		
Untrue statements related to eating (.75)		
“You need to finish all your food or you will get pimples all over your face.”	6.3	52.3
“If you swallow a watermelon seed, it will grow into a watermelon in your stomach.”	13.5	29.4
“Finish all your food or you’ll grow up to be short.”	9.9	60.7
“There’s no more candy in the house.” (even though there actually is)	57.5	42.9
<i>reported at least one item in category</i>	63.2	90.7
Untrue statements related to leaving or staying (.79)		
“If you don’t come with me now, I will leave you here by yourself.” (when parent has no intention of doing it)	67.5	77.9
“I won’t go out while you’re taking a nap.” (when parent intends to go out)	6.2	48.8
“If you don’t follow me, a kidnapper will come to kidnap you while I’m gone.”	17.5	67.4
“Daddy is not out having fun. He is at an important business meeting.” (when the father is actually out for fun)	9.7	38.4
<i>reported at least one item in category</i>	71.9	87.2
Untrue statements related to misbehavior (.79)		
“If you don’t behave, I will call the police.” (when parent has no intention to)	13.4	47.7
“If you lie to someone, your nose will grow longer.”	21.2	40.7
“If you don’t quiet down and start behaving, the lady over there will be angry with you.” (it is clear the lady wouldn’t care)	34.5	49.4
“If you don’t behave, we will throw you into the ocean to feed the fish.”	4.4	21.2
<i>reported at least one item in category</i>	45.6	80.2
Untrue statements related to spending money (.84)		
“We don’t have enough money to buy you that toy.” (when family has plenty of money)	35.4	54.1
A child wants to buy candy and his mother says, “there is no candy in this store.” (when it’s not true)	21.1	33.7
When passing by a toy shop, child asks to go in and buy a toy. Parent says, “we will come back to buy toys next time.” (when parent has no intention to do so)	47.8	61.6
“I did not bring money with me today. We can come back another day.” (when the parent did have money and has no intention to go back)	32.7	62.8
<i>reported at least one item in category</i>	59.6	77.9
Comparison Lies		
Untrue statements related to positive feelings (.79)		

Category	U.S.	China
“That was beautiful piano playing.” (the playing was terrible)	59.3	50.0
“It’s not your fault that the plate broke. It broke because it was too old.” (when child accidentally drops a dish)	15.9	37.2
“Your pet went to live on your uncle’s farm where he will have more space to run around.” (pet has passed away)	7.1	21.2
“I never liked that teapot anyways. I was going to get a new one anyways.” (child broke mom’s favorite teapot)	15.8	16.3
<i>reported at least one item in category</i>	66.7	70.9
Untrue statements related to fantasy characters (.74)		
“If you put this tooth under your pillow, the Tooth Fairy will come and change it into a gold coin.”	65.8	72.1
“Santa Claus will come to deliver your present on Christmas Eve.”	87.6	44.1
“Your Fairy God Mother can see all the things that you do.”	15.8	25.9
“The moon is not round because the Moon Rabbit took a bite out of it.”	2.7	30.6
<i>reported at least one item in category</i>	92.1	83.7

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