



# Love the Way You Lie: Lying and Truth-Telling in Individualist and Collectivist Societies

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HH/PSYC 3350: Cultural Psychology

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## Abstract

There is a lack of consolidated knowledge on the relationship between culture and deception. To address this, I conducted a literature review of three studies, all of which explore the cross-cultural differences of lying and truth-telling behaviours and present a new aspect to consider. Using individualist and collectivist cultural standards, I also evaluated the occurrence of lying and truth-telling in two real life contexts: 1) my group of friends; 2) the film, *The Farewell* (2019) by Lulu Wang. My findings from the literature and real-world applications suggest that culture shapes lying and truth-telling behaviours.

## Research Question

What are the cross-cultural differences of lying and truth-telling behaviours and what are their real-life applications?

## Method

- Literature review using York University Libraries' OMNI search engine
  - Keywords: "lying," "deception," "truth-telling," "honesty," "culture"
  - Review of three peer-reviewed articles which were selected to cover a variety of Western individualist and non-Western collectivist countries:
    - Fu et al. (2001)
    - Park et al. (2018)
    - Karim (2003)
- Observation of my friend group
- Examination of *The Farewell* (2019) dir. Lulu Wang

## Findings

### Fu et al. (2001) – Chinese and Canadian Adults' Categorization and Evaluation of Lie- and Truth-Telling about Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors:



- No favour for modesty-motivated lying about prosocial behaviours
- Less concern for modesty as they prioritize accomplishments
- Desire to view oneself positively



- Modesty-motivated lying about prosocial behaviours is favourable
- Modesty maintains the peace and unity of the group
- Desire to not come off as prideful

### Park et al. (2018) - Differences and Similarities Between Koreans and Americans in Lying and Truth-Telling:



- ↑ intention to tell the truth to boss about work friend's tardiness
- Positively viewed a person who told the truth
- Independent selves that are not bound to others
- Value individual responsibility and truth-telling



- ↑ intention to lie to boss about work friend's tardiness
- Positively viewed a person who lied for their friend
- Defined by relationships with others
- Lying for another's benefit preserves relational harmony

### Karim (2003) - Informing cancer patients: truth telling and culture:



- Patient is more likely to be told the truth about their cancer diagnosis
- Patient makes their own medical decisions
- Value the rights of the single person regardless of emotional toll



- Families lie to patient about their cancer diagnosis to prevent premature death
- Families make decisions on behalf of the patient
- Desire to protect those in their ingroup from emotional distress

### Observation of friend group:



- 4 members all born and raised in Canadian individualist culture
- Like Fu et al.'s (2001) findings, they do not demonstrate modesty-motivated lying:
  - When Member 1's volunteer work was brought up, they spoke of it with pride
- Like Park et al.'s (2018) findings, they disapprove of being lied to even for someone else's protection and benefit
- Value the truth in all forms, even if it may hurt their feelings:
  - Member 2 dyed their hair blue and asked "Does it look okay? Please don't lie."

Chinese people have a saying: When people get cancer, they die. It's not the cancer that kills them, it's the fear.

### Examination of *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019):



- Follows a Chinese collectivist family who lies to the matriarch about her cancer diagnosis
- Like the British South Asian families described by Karim (2003), the family withholds news of a cancer diagnosis from their loved one in order to prevent premature death; this is seen as being morally acceptable
- Interdependent characters who see the emotional burden of their relative's illness as their responsibility

## Conclusion

- I found that Western individualist and non-Western collectivist cultures differ in lying and truth-telling when it comes to modesty, relationships with others, and the cancer diagnosis of a loved one
- This knowledge allows us to better understand each other in the multicultural world we live in today
- Potential for future research → change in deception behaviours among immigrants who have lived in an individualist country for years but are originally from a collectivist country or vice versa