Culture and the Development of Self-Knowledge

Qi Wang
Cornell University

ABSTRACT—Although a great deal of work in the past decades has shown cultural variations in self-knowledge among adults, not until recently have researchers started to examine developmental processes and mechanisms that give rise to the variations. I discuss our research on the development of two kinds of self-knowledge: autobiographical memory and self-concept. Our findings indicate that children develop culture-specific self-knowledge early in life; the two kinds of self-knowledge reinforce each other at both individual and cultural levels; and early narrative practices constitute an important resource from which children draw cultural views about the self to incorporate into their self-understanding and remembering.

KEYWORDS—culture; self-knowledge; self-concept; autobiographical memory; narrative

I am a wonderful and very smart person. A funny and hilarious person. A kind and caring person. A good-grade person who is going to go to Cornell. A helpful and cooperative girl.

I’m a human being. I’m a child. I like to play cards. I’m my mom and dad’s child, my grandma and grandpa’s grandson. I’m a hard-working good child.

The above self-descriptions were given by a Euro-American 6-year-old and a Chinese 6-year-old, respectively. While the first focuses on the child’s own positive depositional traits and qualities, the second attends to the child’s social roles and significant relations.

In the past two decades, a great deal of theoretical and empirical work has shown that self-knowledge in adults often integrates and reflects the prevailing cultural views of self (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In cultures that subscribe to an autonomous self and the inherent separateness of distinct persons, such as that of the United States, individuals often view themselves in terms of their unique personal attributes and qualities. In contrast, in cultures such as those of China and Japan, where prominence is given to interrelatedness and collectivity and the self is largely defined by one’s place in a matrix of social networks, individuals tend to perceive themselves by focusing on their social roles and relationships. Yet not until recently have researchers started to examine the developmental origins of culture-specific self-knowledge.

TWO KINDS OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

My colleagues and I have studied the development of two kinds of self-knowledge: autobiographical memory and self-concept (Neisser, 1988). Autobiographical memory, or the “extended self,” refers to long-lasting memory of significant personal experiences from an individual’s life. Self-concept, or the “conceptual self,” refers to an individual’s conceptual representations of him- or herself. We view the development of self-knowledge as a process of cultural adaptation in which children, guided by socialization agents, internalize cultural views about the self into their own self-understanding and remembering (Wang, 2004; Wang & Ross, in press). This process is further facilitated by the interplay between the two kinds of self-knowledge: Self-concept enables privileged encoding of and access to autobiographical information that confirms the views about the self favored by the culture; autobiographical memory, in turn, sustains the development and maintenance of a self-concept that integrates cultural views about the self as its central component.

We use open-ended, free-narrative methods, which, compared with psychometric measures that have a preexisting norm often in favor of Western samples, allow children to describe themselves and their experiences in their own terms and from their own perspectives. Our findings address three interrelated questions, which I discuss in turn.

DOES CULTURALLY CONSTRUED SELF-KNOWLEDGE EMERGE EARLY?

Let’s first consider self-concept. One important dimension of self-concept concerns whether individuals focus on their unique
personal attributes or on their social roles and relationships in defining themselves. We have examined this self-dimension in children of different ages. Our youngest group was from an ongoing longitudinal study of Chinese families in China, first-generation Chinese immigrant families in the United States, and Euro-American families. We interviewed children three times at home when they were 3, 3.5, and 4.5 years of age. We told children that we would like to write a story about them and asked them what things we should put in the story. Compared with their Chinese and Chinese immigrant peers, Euro-American youngsters were more likely to focus on their personal, as opposed to social, aspects of self across all age points (see Fig. 1). Interestingly, the pattern of cultural differences in preschool children’s self-descriptions is not dissimilar to that of adults (Wang, 2001).

Cultural beliefs may also influence other dimensions of self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The emphasis on autonomy in Euro-American culture endorses a context-independent self; such a self is defined by an individual’s dispositional qualities and inner traits that are invariant over time and unconstrained by social situations. The high value placed on self-enhancement and self-esteem further encourages positive self-views that are considered crucial to one’s psychological well-being. In contrast, the emphasis on social relatedness in Chinese culture advocates the situation boundedness of persons; in this view, the self is experienced and expressed in specific interpersonal contexts and characterized by an individual’s overt behaviors. Self-criticism and humility are encouraged, to facilitate self-improvement and group solidarity.

In line with these analyses, I examined self-concepts in Euro-American and Chinese preschoolers, kindergartners, and second-graders (Wang, 2004). Children provided self-descriptions in a storytelling task. Across all age groups, Euro-American children described more abstract dispositions and inner traits (e.g., “I am smart”) than did Chinese children, who referred to more situation-bound characteristics (e.g., “I play with my friend Yin-Yin at school”) and overt behaviors (e.g., “I practice the piano every day”). Euro-American children also gave more positive self-evaluations (e.g., “I’m beautiful”) than did Chinese children, who more frequently described themselves in neutral terms. And again, Euro-American children focused more on their personal and less on their social aspects of self than did Chinese children.

Cultural views about the self can further shape how individuals sample, process, and retain autobiographical information; they thus affect memory accessibility, style, and content. An emphasis on autonomy may direct cognitive resources toward elaborate encoding of personal experiences, especially specific, one-moment-in-time events unique to the individual and focusing on the individual’s own roles and perspectives (e.g., “the time I won the spelling-bee competition”). Such memories are likely to become richly represented and highly accessible during recall. They help individuals distinguish themselves from others and reaffirm their unique identity. An emphasis on relatedness may, instead, prioritize the retention of social knowledge critical for social harmony and group solidarity. Detailed remembering of one’s own experiences may not be accentuated in this context. And when remembering the
past, individuals may attend to generic routine events (e.g., “going to parties”), which, in contrast to memories of specific episodes, are often skeletal, have few sensory-emotional details, and generally serve to direct one’s (appropriate) behavior in particular, oftentimes social, situations (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Individuals may also focus on information about group activities and interactions, helping them relate to significant others and to the community.

Studies have supported this perspective. Compared with Asians, European and Euro-American adults are able to access more distant and more detailed very-long-term memories, such as early childhood experiences; retrieve more frequently unique, one-time episodes (as opposed to generic events); and focus more on their own roles and predilections (e.g., Mullen, 1994; Wang, 2001). We find the same pattern of cultural differences in children as young as age 3 or 4 (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Wang, 2004). For instance, in Wang (2004), Euro-American and Chinese preschoolers, kindergartners, and second-graders were asked to recount four personal events such as a recent time when they did something special and fun. Across all age groups, Euro-American children provided lengthier, more detailed accounts and recalled more specific episodes than Chinese children did. They also more frequently commented on their preferences, opinions, and agency (e.g., “I liked the birthday present,” and “My mom didn’t let me go out but I did anyway”) than did Chinese children, who more often spoke of other people relative to themselves (see Fig. 2).

Interestingly, Euro-Americans attend to specific episodes and focus on their own roles and perspectives not only when remembering events that happened to them personally but also when remembering things about other people. In a recent study (Wang, 2006), Euro-American and Taiwanese young adults were asked to recall their earliest childhood memories in response to cue words of self, mother, family, friend, and surroundings. Euro-Americans frequently reported specific events and focused on their own roles and predilections, even when recalling memories about their mother and their family. Taiwanese, in comparison, more often described generic events and emphasized the roles of others, across all memories.

**HOW ARE THE TWO KINDS OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE RELATED?**

Given that self-concept and autobiographical memory are both culturally constructed from an early age, they may be linked not only at the cultural level but at the individual level as well. Thus, individuals with a greater autonomous sense of self should have more detailed, specific, and self-focused autobiographical memories. Consistent with this reasoning, our studies show that regardless of culture, children and adults who dwell more on personal attributes and qualities when describing themselves are more likely to provide detailed, specific, and self-focused memories, compared with those who dwell more on social roles and group memberships (Wang, 2001, 2004). In a more recent study, it was found that a focus on personal aspects of self in 3-year-olds uniquely predicted the amount of event details they recalled, independent of culture, gender, and language skills (Wang, in press).
Self-concept and autobiographical memory may further correspond across an individual's life periods. Theorists contend that individuals, no matter where they live, develop both personal (self-perceived distinctiveness) and social (self-perceived connectedness) identities in response to basic human needs and universal societal expectations (e.g., Kagitcibasi, 2005). The increasing autonomy and relatedness during ontogeny, then, should be reflected in individuals' lifespan retrieval. That is, when asked to recall personal experiences from their lives, individuals should exhibit an increase in both personal and social focuses in memories from earlier to later life periods. This prediction was confirmed in our study with Euro-American and Chinese middle-aged adults (Wang & Conway, 2004). Compared with participants' reported memories from childhood and youth, their memories from midlife periods were more likely to be specific episodes, focused more on the preferences and perspectives of the rememberer; midlife memories also attended more to social groups and significant others, independent of memory length. Thus, autobiographical remembering appears to be in concert with the lifespan development of personal and social identities.

If individuals possess both personal and social-relational aspects of self, it should be possible to prompt them to focus temporarily on either. We found that such shifts in attention can affect the content and accessibility of early memories (Wang & Ross, 2005). We asked European and Asian American adults to describe themselves by listing either ten unique personal attributes (personal prime) or ten memberships in social groups (relational prime). We then asked them to recall their earliest childhood memory. Regardless of culture, the personal prime elicited memories that focused more on the rememberer and less on social interactions than did the relational prime. The personal prime also helped Asians access more distant childhood memories, such that the first memories they reported were as early as those of Euro-Americans.

So, the focuses on autonomy and relatedness in self-views vary across individuals; they both increase within an individual with development; and they can change temporarily across circumstances, which further shape the content, style, and accessibility of autobiographical memories. These individual cognitive processes may elucidate how cultural differences in self-knowledge are formed and sustained: People incorporate into their self-concepts differing cultural views about the self that facilitate culture-specific forms of autobiographical remembering (i.e., which memories and which aspects of the memories are most likely to be accessible and enduring); their memories, in turn, support and regulate different modes of self-concept endorsed by their cultures.

**NARRATIVE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF**

How do children come to incorporate cultural views of self into their own self-knowledge? Family memory sharing may serve as a critical forum for cultural transmission, in which parents model to children the appropriate ways of organizing, evaluating, and sharing their past experiences and further help children build the critical link between autobiographical memory and self-concept (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). This joint activity embodies rich cultural messages and parents' socialization goals pertaining to the self (Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997). A cultural emphasis on individuality and the use of memory to promote an autonomous sense of self may encourage memory sharing as a means of helping children construct elaborate personal stories to build a unique individual identity; a cultural emphasis on relatedness and collectivity may prioritize the use of memory sharing to instill social knowledge and a sense of belonging.

In a series of studies, we observed Euro-American and Chinese mothers sharing memories at home with their 3-year-olds in semi-structured interviews (see Wang & Ross, in press). Mothers selected past events in which both mother and child had participated, and then discussed the events with their children. Euro-American mothers frequently supplemented embellished information and commented and expanded on children's memory responses (e.g., “Yes, you got a balloon! A yellow balloon doggy. That was exciting.”). In doing so, they scaffolded children's participation and meanwhile provided a narrative structure for the construction of elaborate personal stories. Furthermore, the conversations often centered on the child, and mothers frequently referred to the child's roles and predilections. Chinese mothers, in comparison, tended to take a directive role in posing pointed questions to children and provided less embellishment or feedback. They frequently referred to social norms and behavioral expectations and placed past events in a more social-relational context. These cultural differences are illustrated in the conversational excerpts about an emotionally salient event between two mother-son pairs (Table 1).

Here, both conversations were about an incident involving conflicts between the child and adults and, given the emotional nature of the events, both mothers referred to their children's feeling states. However, the style and content focus of the two conversations differed. The Euro-American mother frequently confirmed and elaborated on her child's speech. She focused the discussion on the child's actions and predilections, and further acknowledged the child's emotional tantrum as an expression of individuality. Such conversations facilitate children's detailed remembering of personal experiences that highlight their uniqueness and socialize children into an autonomous sense of self. In contrast, the Chinese mother initiated a directive and didactic talk with her child. The focus of the conversation was not to construct an elaborate personal story but to instill proper behavioral conduct in the child. The child's emotions were treated as part of his wrongdoing, which resulted in punishment so that a lesson could be learned. Such conversations situate children in a relational hierarchy, encourage them to abide by
rules and develop a sense of belonging, and yet downplay the use of memory to construct a unique individual identity.

These different narrative practices are mirrored in children’s developing self-knowledge. Euro-American youngsters focus more on their unique attributes in defining themselves and provide more detailed and self-focused autobiographical accounts than their Chinese peers do (e.g., Han et al., 1998; Wang, 2004). Our longitudinal data (Wang, 2005) further showed that, regardless of culture, children whose mothers more frequently engaged them in the construction of elaborate personal stories came to recall more detailed and self-focused autobiographical memories. Maternal style further served as a potent mediator in explaining cultural differences in children’s memories (Wang, in press). These findings suggest that family memory sharing directly contributes to the development of culturally construed self-knowledge.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The development of self-knowledge diverges early across cultures. It is a process taking place through individual cognitive processes and in adult-guided participation in the sharing of memory narratives. Our findings highlight the importance of studying developmental origins in order to understand cultural diversity in human cognition and behavior. Future research will continue to identify mechanisms for the development of culture-specific self-knowledge. For example, at which stage(s) of personal remembering (e.g., encoding, retention, retrieval) does culture exert an influence? How do children develop culture-specific self-knowledge in different life domains (e.g., family, school life)? How do language and culture interact in the process of narrative self-making? More specifically, which aspects of cultural self-knowledge most reflect the linguistic constraints of a language, and which aspects are relatively independent of language influences? It is also timely to study the impact of immigration and intercultural exchange on self-development to uncover the dynamic and adaptive nature of the cultural construction of the self.

Recommended Reading

Kagitcibasi, C. (2005). (See References)
Nelson, K., & Fivush, R. (2004). (See References)
Wang, Q. (2004). (See References)
Wang, Q., & Ross, M. (in press). (See References)

Acknowledgments—Part of the research was supported by NIMH Grant R01-MH64661 to the author. I thank Charles Brainerd, Lee Lee, and the Editor for helpful comments.

REFERENCES


This document is a scanned copy of a printed document. No warranty is given about the accuracy of the copy. Users should refer to the original published version of the material.