The Emergence of Cultural Self-Constructs: Autobiographical Memory and Self-Description in European American and Chinese Children

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This study examined the emergence of cultural self-constructs as reflected in children’s remembered and conceptual aspects of the self. European American and Chinese children in preschool through 2nd grade participated (N = 180). Children each recounted 4 autobiographical events and described themselves in response to open-ended questions. American children often provided elaborate and detailed memories focusing on their own roles, preferences, and feelings; they also frequently described themselves in terms of personal attributes, abstract dispositions, and inner traits in a positive light. Chinese children provided relatively skeletal accounts of past experiences that centered on social interactions and daily routines, and they often described themselves in terms of social roles, context-specific characteristics, and overt behaviors in a neutral or modest tone. Findings are discussed in light of the self as a constructed meaning system of culture that emerges early in life.

The emergence and development of the self in traditional Western understanding are functionally related to a process of individual formation, a development directed toward achieving an increasingly autonomous entity that actively distinguishes itself from other selves and from its physical and social contexts. Empirical data on Western children further reinforce the notion that this pattern of self-development results directly from children’s cognitive progress toward higher order abstractions (see Harter, 1998, for a review). Although it is widely accepted that there exist different conceptions of selfhood across cultures (e.g., Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Geertz, 1973; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus, & Miller, 1998; Triandis, 1989), little empirical work has been done to examine the development of a culture-specific construct of the self in children, that is, of self-representations that integrate the framework of a child’s culture. As a result, traditional theories of self-development remain largely unchallenged. The present study examined cultural self-constructs in preschoolers, kindergartners, and second graders in the United States and China, two societies that hold drastically divergent views of selfhood deriving from centuries of differences in religious, philosophical, and political traditions.

European American culture holds a faith in the inherent separateness of distinct persons, “whose behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one’s own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 226; also see Kagitcibasi, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Shweder & Miller, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Individuals are encouraged to seek and maintain their independence from others by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing their unique inner attributes. The formation of a self-construct with higher order abstractions and internal consistency is further regarded as an essential component of intellectual maturation. In addition, the culture promotes self-enhancement, in which a positive view of the self is seen as a necessity for an individual’s psychological well-being and adaptation to societal demands. In contrast, Chinese culture promotes interdependence among people, especially among kinship members (Chao, 1995; Hsu, 1953/1970; Shweder et al., 1998; Wang & Hsueh, 2000). The existence of an individual is viewed as being realized through the process of reciprocal relating to significant others. As Chin (1988) nicely puts it, “A (Chinese) person is born into a web of human relatedness; he is a link in the human nexus, his identity predetermined by his relations to others. Who he is becomes clearer as he fulfills his social responsibilities” (p. 18). This interdependent, relational self is further regulated and monitored by social rules embedded in specific interpersonal contexts and is often characterized by an individual’s overt behaviors. In addition, self-criticism and humility are highly encouraged and regarded as an impetus for an individual to better serve the benefit of the collective.

These cultural differences in the conception of selfhood can be characterized along four dimensions: (a) organization—the extent to which the self is defined by unique individual attributes versus social categories; (b) evaluation—the extent to which the self is viewed in a positive, self-serving manner; (c) abstraction—the extent to which the self is composed of abstract dispositions versus specific, situation-bound characteristics; and (d) content—the extent to which the self is characterized by inner personality traits versus overt behaviors. These dimensions are further reflected in individuals’ self-concepts. When describing themselves, European American adults often refer to personal attributes, dispositional qualities, and inner traits that are invariant over time and context and depicted in a generally positive light. In comparison, Chinese adults tend to focus on specific relationships to significant others...
and on social roles, situation-bound features, and observable behaviors, which are often portrayed in a modest tone (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Cousins, 1989; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Wang, 2001a).

By what age have children internalized the prevailing views of self in their culture in the process of understanding themselves? The few cross-cultural data to date have foreshadowed some intriguing cultural differences in children's self-constructs. For example, Stigler, Smith, and Mao (1985) administered the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC; Harter, 1982) to 714 fifth graders in Taiwan and compared the results with those of equivalent U.S. samples. They found that Chinese children rated their own competence significantly lower than did their American counterparts, downgrading themselves in relation to other children. As Stigler et al. (1985) suggested, this finding reflects the Chinese cultural endorsement of humbleness and self-effacement as a means of enhancing social harmony. However, because the PCSC focuses on the evaluative dimension of children's self-concepts, cultural variations in other dimensions remain unexplored. In addition, studies like this one suffer from methodological limitations in that measures developed for Western populations were administered to non-Western samples (see Greenfield, 1997, and Harter, 1999, for critiques of this strategy).

Recent work has started to use more culture-sensitive methodologies. Open-ended, interpretive methods, in which children "generate their own self-descriptions, using their own vocabularies and guided by their unique perspectives on themselves" (Hart & Edelstein, 1992, p. 304), have been found particularly effective for uncovering cultural variations in children's self-constructs. Researchers contend that, compared with psychometric measures with preexisting norms that often favor Western children, open-ended techniques are more neutral and are perceived as more natural by children in different cultures (e.g., Harter, 1999; Shweder et al., 1998; Wang & Leichtman, 2000; Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, Cole, Mizuta, & Hiruma, 1996). For example, Hart, Lucca-Irizarry, and Damon (1986) used an open-ended format to elicit self-descriptions from children and adolescents (6- to 16-year-olds) from the United States and from a small, communally oriented fishing village in Puerto Rico. In response to questions such as "What kind of person are you?" Puerto Rican children frequently described themselves in terms of their social qualities (e.g., "I have a brother" and "I try not to hurt my friends' feelings"), whereas U.S. children tended to focus on their psychological qualities (e.g., "I am a happy person" and "I believe in world peace").

Building upon previous research, the present study used an open, free-narrative method to examine the development of cultural self-constructs in European American and Chinese children 3.5 to 8.5 years of age. The self was viewed as a multifaceted, complex, dynamic construct encompassing many interacting aspects or components (Baumeister, 1998; Jopling, 1997; Neisser, 1988). To capture such complexity, in this study I investigated two interrelated aspects of the self—autobiographical memory and self-description. These represent, respectively, the "extended self" (or the remembered self) and the "conceptual self" (or the self-concept; Neisser, 1988). Autobiographical memory refers to distinct, long-lasting memory of significant personal experiences from an individual's life. Self-description indexes an individual's conceptual representations of himself or herself. Many theorists have discussed the interplay between these two aspects of the self. They posit that the conceptual self operates on the encoding, organization, and retrieval of personally meaningful events and that autobiographical memory, in turn, sustains the development, expression, and maintenance of a dynamic self-concept (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Fivush, 1994; Neisser, 1994; Nelson, 1996; Pillemer, 1998; Ross & Wilson, 2000; Wang, Leichtman, & White, 1998). Some researchers further maintain that the onset of autobiographical memory and the emergence of the conceptual self are ontogenetically interconnected (Harley & Reese, 1999; Howe & Courage, 1993; Povinelli, 1995; Welch-Ross, 2000). These two aspects of the self are both sensitive to social influences and have been underscored in contemporary theories of the self (Fivush, 1994; Harter, 1998; Nelson, 1993).

I expected that culture-specific self-constructs would emerge early in life and become more prevalent as children grew older. Recent studies on parent–child interactions in middle-class European American and Chinese families have provided converging evidence of micro-level enculturational processes embedded in a myriad of daily exchanges between parents and their preschool-age children that transmit to children cultural ideologies and beliefs pertinent to the self (Fung & Chen, 2001; Haight, 1999; Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997; Shweder et al., 1998; Wang 2001b; Wang, Leichtman, & Davies, 2000; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998). It has been observed that during shared activities such as pretend play or personal storytelling, American mother–child dyads often display a child-centered interaction style in which the mother plays an auxiliary role and gives the lead to the child as quickly as possible, supporting and elaborating on the child's ideas, preferences, and feelings. In contrast, Chinese mother–child dyads tend to use a mother-centered, hierarchically organized style in which the mother leads the interaction, introducing topics, providing instructions, and teaching culturally valued rules and conduct to the child (Haight, 1999; Wang, 2001b; Wang et al., 2000). In addition, Miller et al. (1996, 1997) observed that Chinese parents often explicitly evaluated or criticized their children's behavior by narrating their past transgressions in front of a nonfamily member, whereas American parents, in the rare instances when they acknowledged their children's past transgressions, tended to downplay the wrongdoing and to tell such stories in a humorous, nonserious manner.

It appears that early parent–child interactions serve important but culture-specific functions in fashioning the self. By operating within a parent-centered, self-critical framework, Chinese parents encourage children's compliance with authority, appropriate conduct, humility, and a sense of belonging. In contrast, by operating within a child-centered, self-affirming framework, European American parents scaffold children's individuality and self-expression while protecting or enhancing their self-esteem. During such daily interactions, parents also convey descriptive and evaluative information about their children's qualities and attributes, by saying, for example, "You are so smart," "You really enjoy __ don't you?" and "You shouldn't have done __." Children may not only incorporate these labels and evaluations into their self-constructs but may also internalize culture-specific ways of perceiving and evaluating themselves (e.g., whether to focus on..."
abstract personality traits or situation-bound behaviors and social categories, and whether to be self-affirming or self-criticizing. As children grow older, their increasing cognitive abilities further facilitate such social learning.

Different cultural self-constructs formed during early socialization should be reflected in children's memories about themselves. From a cognitive perspective, independent selves tend to be sensitive and responsive to self-focused information, whereas interdependent selves are often attuned to information about significant others and collective activities (Fiske et al., 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, 1989; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002). This selectivity in information processing and representation may result in differential memory content that focuses on either the self or the self in relation to others. From a functional perspective, personal memories of discrete, one-moment-in-time events with specific details and elaboration and with the individual cast as the central character (e.g., “the time I won the spelling bee competition”) help to differentiate the self from others and thereby reaffirm the self as an autonomous entity. In contrast, memories of skeletal, scripted events with a salient social orientation (e.g., “family dinners”) help to engage individuals in ongoing relationships and thereby reinforce the self as a relational entity (Mullen, 1994; Pillemer, 1998; Wang, 2001a; Wang et al., 1998). In addition, different cultural views of emotion in relation to the self can affect the emotional content of memory. European American culture regards emotion as a source of self-authenticity and individuality and encourages emotion expression to facilitate the articulation and consolidation of the individual's self-concept. Chinese culture, in contrast, views emotion as potentially destructive to social relations and promotes moderation in all matters of the heart (Bond, 1991; Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Lupton, 1998).

Empirical studies on adults' childhood recollections and children's autobiographical reports in the two cultures have revealed cultural differences consistent with these theoretical outlines (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Mullen, 1994; Wang, 2001a; Wang & Leichtman, 2000). The childhood memories of European American adults tend to be lengthy, detailed, and emotionally elaborate, focusing on the individual's own roles, predilections, and opinions. In contrast, the childhood memories of Chinese adults are often brief and centered on collective activities, significant others, and daily routines. In addition, European American preschoolers tend to provide more elaborate, more specific, and more self-focused autobiographical accounts than do Chinese preschoolers. In line with this suite of research, in the present study I expected that, compared with their Chinese peers, European American children would provide lengthier memories of detailed, specific events, talk more frequently about emotions and autonomy, describe fewer other people and social interactions, and focus more on their own roles in memory events. These cultural differences were expected to become larger and more stable among older children.

Furthermore, the study systematically examined the four dimensions of children's self-concept: organization, evaluation, abstraction, and content. As discussed earlier, these dimensions reflect the characteristics of cultural conceptions of selfhood (Kitayama et al., 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, 1989) and appear to differ cross-culturally among adults (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Cousins, 1989; Rhee et al., 1995; Shweder & Miller, 1991; Trafimow et al., 1991; Wang, 2001a). Given the effects of early socialization, I predicted that, when describing themselves, European American children would more frequently focus on their personal attributes, provide positive self-evaluations, and describe dispositional qualities and inner traits, whereas Chinese children would more often talk about social roles and relationships, portray themselves in a modest tone, and provide descriptions of situation-bound characteristics and observable behaviors. The magnitude of these cultural differences was also expected to increase with age.

In addition, the present study examined the interplay between autobiographical memory and self-concept at the individual level. In a recent study (Wang, 2001a), European American and Chinese college students' earliest childhood memories were examined with a memory questionnaire, and their self-descriptions were examined with a shortened Twenty Statements Test (TST; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). It was found that with group factors (i.e., culture, gender) controlled for, individuals who described themselves in more self-focused and positive terms provided more detailed and self-focused memories. Although the magnitude of the direct relationships between memory and self-description variables was moderate (Wang, 2001a), the findings have important implications for the functional organization of the self-system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Neisser, 1988; Nelson, 1993; Pillemer, 1998; Wang, 2003). Accordingly, in the present study, children who frequently described themselves in terms of positive personal attributes and abstract traits were expected to provide lengthy and emotionally elaborate memories that focused on their own roles and predilections.

**Method**

**Participants**

Ninety-three European American children from Ithaca, New York, and 87 Chinese children from Beijing, China, participated. They were recruited with the help of preschool and elementary school teachers and administrators. The American children included 33 preschoolers (12 boys and 21 girls; mean age = 4 years 1 month; range = 3 years 3 months to 4 years 10 months), 31 kindergartners (16 boys and 15 girls; mean age = 6 years 4 months; range = 5 years 2 months to 7 years 0 months), and 29 second graders (15 boys and 14 girls; mean age = 8 years 2 months; range = 7 years 2 months to 8 years 11 months). The Chinese children included 30 preschoolers (13 boys and 17 girls; mean age = 4 years 0 months; range = 3 years 5 months to 4 years 5 months), 29 kindergartners (16 boys and 13 girls; mean age = 5 years 11 months; range = 5 years 6 months to 6 years 10 months), and 28 second graders (14 boys and 14 girls; mean age = 7 years 11 months; range = 7 years 5 months to 8 years 5 months). All Chinese children were from only-child families. The U.S. sample consisted of 29 only children, 15 firstborns, and 29 second-born, 12 third-born, 6 fourth-born, and 2 fifth-born children. All children came from middle-class backgrounds in their respective cultures.

**Procedure**

Native female interviewers collected the data in China and the United States. Each child was interviewed once, individually, at school. Before the

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1 The initial U.S. sample included 11 children who were older than 9 years of age, 1 child who was African American, and 2 children who did not give any response during the interview. Two Chinese children’s interviews were not recorded because of equipment failure. All of these children were excluded from the study.
procedure began, the interviewers spent several days in participating classrooms allowing children to become familiar with them. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer chatted with the child to establish rapport. When the child seemed relaxed and comfortable, the interviewer asked the child to tell a warm-up story about the things he or she did over the past weekend, in order to prepare the child for the narrative task. Following the chatting, the interviewer told the child, “You and I are going to play a fun game. It’s called the ‘question-and-answer game.’ I’m going to ask you some questions. You can reply in any way you want. There are no right or wrong answers. You’ll see it’s really fun. Are you ready?”

Then the interviewer asked the child four standardized open-ended memory questions adapted from the work of Han et al. (1998). They were as follows: (a) “Tell me how you spent your last birthday.” (b) “Now, can you tell me about a time, these days, when your mom or dad scolded you for something?” (c) “Now, I’d like you to tell me just one thing you did recently that was really special and fun.” (d) “You know, some kids can remember things that happened to them when they were very little. What is the first thing that you can remember?” These questions tapped memories from both the recent and the more distant past and concerned autobiographical events common in young children’s lives (e.g., a fun trip to the amusement park, being scolded for spilling soda on the rug). They were previously found equally effective in eliciting memory responses from European American and Asian children (Han et al., 1998). Following each question, the interviewer used standard prompts such as “What else happened?” and “Can you tell me some more?” until the child indicated by speech or gesture that the memory was finished. After the last question (on the earliest memory), the interviewer also asked the child, “Do you know how old you were at that time?” To maintain children’s interest, the interviewer gave each child some stickers to keep upon the completion of the memory questions.

Next the interviewer used two open-ended techniques to elicit children’s self-descriptions, a method adapted from Keller, Ford, and Meacham (1978). First, children were asked to spontaneously say as many things as possible about themselves. The interviewer told the child, “[Child’s name], I would like to write about you, to write something that will tell about [child’s name]. What’s the first thing I should put in what I write about you?” The interviewer prompted the child after each response, “And what else should I write to tell about you?” until the child indicated by speech or gesture that he or she was finished. Following the story-writing task, children were asked to complete sentences starting with “I am ___” in as many ways as possible. The interviewer told the child, “Now, [child’s name], let’s see if we can think of some more things about you. How about if you finish a sentence, like this, [child’s name] is ___.” After each response, the interviewer asked the child, “Can you finish the sentence in another way to tell about you? [Child’s name] is ___,” until the child indicated by speech or gesture that he or she was finished. Each interview lasted approximately 20 min and was tape-recorded. At the end of the interview, the interviewer gave each child a small gift to keep.

**Coding**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim onto paper. Coding was performed in the original languages.

**Memory Variables**

The four memories children provided were tabulated separately.

**Volume.** The volume of the memory narrative was coded by counting the total number of English words or Chinese characters spoken by the children. Utterances irrelevant to the task were excluded (e.g., utterances about the tape recorder).

**Specificity.** Each memory was coded as either **specific**, referring to events that happened at a particular point in time (e.g., “Once I said a bad word at home, then they got mad at me”), or **general**, referring to events that took place regularly or on multiple occasions (e.g., “My mom told me stories every night”; Pillemer, 1998). Specific memories were scored as 1, and general memories were scored as 0. Research has shown that people tend to provide either type of memories even when they are explicitly probed for specific episodes, and this tendency appears to vary among individuals and between culture groups (Han et al., 1998; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Williams & Scott, 1988).

**Emotion.** The number of times children spontaneously mentioned emotions was counted. This included both emotion words (e.g., happy, sad, mad) and feeling states expressed by verbs (e.g., “I laughed”).

**Autonomous orientation.** Children’s tendency to express autonomy and self-determination in their memories was coded using the narrative content analysis scheme developed by Wang and Leichtman (2000). The frequencies of the following instances were counted and combined to produce a score of autonomous orientation for each child: (a) references to personal needs, desires, or preferences (e.g., “I really wanted to open the birthday present”); (b) references to personal dislikes or avoidance (e.g., “I didn’t like that ride”); (c) references to personal evaluations, judgments, or opinions regarding other people, objects, or events (e.g., “I saw a lot of animals on the track and it was fun”); and (d) references to retaining control over one’s own actions and resisting group or social pressure (e.g., “My mom didn’t let me go out but I did anyway.”).

**Number of others.** The number of other people children introduced in their memories was counted.

**Interaction scenario.** The number of instances in children’s memories that involved social interactions or group activities was counted (e.g., “We went to the amusement park,” “My Dad spanked me,” and “The teacher gave John a time-out”).

**Other/self ratio.** The number of times children mentioned themselves and the number of times they mentioned other people in their memories were counted. An “other/self ratio” was then calculated for each child to index his or her social orientation.

**Self-Description Variables**

Children’s responses to the two open-ended questions were pooled together for coding. Repetitions and meaningless responses (e.g., “I’m a shark”) were not coded. Propositions, defined by Fivush, Haden, and Adam (1995) as subject–verb constructions, were used as the coding unit, with each unique or implied verb in an independent clause forming a new propositional unit. For example, “I play Ping-Pong” was one proposition, and “I swim and ski” was two. Propositions about other people (e.g., “My mom is a teacher at IC”) and “My big brother goes to Princeton”) were coded as “other-descriptions.” Each self-description was coded according to the following four coding schemes focusing on different dimensions of children’s self-concepts:

**Organization.** Children’s self-descriptions were coded as referring to private, collective, or public aspects of the self, according to the definition provided by Triandis and colleagues (Trafimow et al., 1991; Triandis, 3985; Bond & Cheung, 1983; Rhee et al., 1995; Trafimow et al., 1991; Triandis, 1998; Wang, 2001a).

2 This task resembles the TST (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), in which participants describe themselves by completing 20 sentences, each beginning with “I am.” The TST has been widely used to assess variation in the organization and salience of self-related information across cultures and is regarded as a reliable measure of cultural self-con structs (e.g., Bochner, 1994; Bond & Cheung, 1983; Rhee et al., 1995; Trafimow et al., 1991; Triandis, 1989; Wang, 2001a).

3 In a previous study (Wang, 2001a), it was found that the number of words or characters was highly correlated with the number of propositions for both English and Chinese materials (r = .91). The former was used here to measure narrative volume. It is a relatively reliable method for cross-linguistic comparisons between English and Chinese (C. E. Snow, personal communication, June 24, 1999).
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1989). These three coding variables were mutually exclusive and exhaustive: (a) Responses referring to personal qualities, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors unrelated to other people were coded as private self-descriptions (e.g., “I’m a very smart person,” “I’m kind,” and “I like hockey”). (b) Responses concerning demographic categories or groups with which the child might experience a common fate were coded as collective self-descriptions (e.g., “I am from Albany” and “I am in second grade”). (c) Responses about interdependence, friendship, responsiveness to others, or sensitivity to the viewpoints of others were coded as public self-descriptions (e.g., “I like to help my mom wash dishes” and “All my friends are crazy about me”). Each child received three separate scores, indicating the number of his or her responses that corresponded to each of these categories.

Evaluation. Each self-description was further coded as positive, negative, or neutral, following a method used in previous studies (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Ip & Bond, 1995; Wang, 2001a). This coding was achieved by deciding whether a self-description implied a clearly positive or negative evaluation. For example, “I’m a good grade person who is going to go to Cornell” and “I’m beautiful” were coded as positive, whereas “I’m annoying” and “I sometimes forget my manners” were coded as negative. Each child received three separate scores corresponding to these three self-evaluation categories.

Abstraction. Two mutually exclusive but not exhaustive coding categories were used to capture the abstract–specific dimension of children’s self-descriptions, a method adapted from Eder (1989) and Rhee et al. (1995): (a) Responses referring to qualities, opinions, or personality traits invariant over time and context were coded as abstract self-descriptions (e.g., “I am funny,” “I’m good at sports,” and “I like candy”). (b) Responses concerning situation-bound behaviors or attributes, often with references to particular contexts, people, time, or locations, were coded as specific self-descriptions (e.g., “I go to church on Saturdays and Sundays,” “I broke my arm a couple of weeks ago,” and “I play Snowmoon with my neighbor David”). Each child received two separate scores corresponding to these two categories.

Content. The content of children’s self-descriptions was coded into two mutually exclusive but not exhaustive categories according to a coding scheme adapted from Eder (1989): (a) Responses concerning attributes or internal states such as emotions and thoughts were coded as trait self-descriptions (e.g., “I’m a good child;” “I’m happy;” and “I believe in God”). (b) Responses about “observable” activities, actions, or behaviors were coded as behavior self-descriptions (e.g., “I play soccer;” “I collect bottle caps;” and “I practice the piano every day”). Each child received two separate scores that corresponded to these two categories.

One American research assistant coded the American data, and one Chinese research assistant coded the Chinese data. Both coders were blind to the hypotheses. Repeated joint coding sessions were held to ensure that the same definitions were applied to the two data sets. Twenty percent of all narratives were coded for intercoder reliability estimates ($r$), which ranged from .85 to .99 for memory variables and from .94 to .99 for self-description variables.

Results

In connection with the hypotheses, I first present the results pertinent to autobiographical memory and self-description and then turn to the findings on how these two aspects of the self were related at the individual level. Preliminary analyses showed no main effects for gender and birth order and no interpretable interactions involving either of these variables. Gender and birth order were therefore not considered further. Subsequent analyses focused on culture and age effects, with 2 (culture) $\times$ 3 (age) analyses of variance (ANOVA$s$) performed across all memory and self-description variables. Some of the children did not answer every question, and thus the degrees of freedom varied slightly across tests.

Autobiographical Memory

The core results of interest are children’s memories of recent and distant events across cultures and age levels. Preliminary analyses revealed identical patterns in children’s responses to the three recent memory probes, consistent with Han and colleagues’ (1998) findings. The final reported results are therefore based on the means across the three recent memories. The earliest memory was analyzed separately in order to compare the pattern of its results with that of the more recent events. Table 1 lists the means and standard deviations for the memory variables by culture and age group.

Volume

It was predicted that European American children would provide lengthier memory narratives than Chinese children. The cultural difference was confirmed for recent memories, $F(1, 169) = 4.66, p = .03$. Age effects emerged for both recent and earliest memories, $F(2, 169) = 15.55, p < .0001$ and $F(2, 146) = 11.25, p < .0001$, respectively, with older children providing lengthier memories than younger children. In both cases, the differences between kindergartners and preschoolers were not significant, but the differences between second graders and children from the two younger groups were significant (Tukey–Kramer honestly significant difference [HSD] tests, $ps < .05$).

Specificity

As predicted, European American children scored higher on memory specificity than Chinese children for recent memories, $F(1, 169) = 8.75, p = .004$, and for the earliest memory at a marginally significant level, $F(1, 146) = 3.20, p = .08$. Older children provided more specific memories than younger children for both recent, $F(2, 169) = 3.82, p = .02$, and earliest memories, $F(2, 146) = 3.93, p = .02$, with the differences being significant between second graders and preschoolers (Tukey–Kramer HSD tests, $ps < .05$).

Emotion

Consistent with the hypothesis that European American children would make more spontaneous references to emotions in their memories than would Chinese children, there was a significant culture effect for recent memories, $F(1, 169) = 29.20, p < .0001$. A main effect of age also emerged for recent memories, $F(2, 169) = 10.43, p < .0001$, whereby second graders talked more frequently about emotions than did preschoolers (Tukey–Kramer HSD test, $p < .05$). No effects for the earliest memory reached significance.

Autonomous Orientation

It was expected that European American children would make more comments on personal preferences and opinions than would their Chinese peers. Analyses of autonomous orientation scores confirmed the predicted cultural difference for recent memories,
Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Memory Variables by Culture and Age Group

| Memory variable | European American children | | | | | Chinese children | | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|                 | Preschool                  | Kindergarten | Grade 2 | Average | Preschool | Kindergarten | Grade 2 | Average | Preschool | Kindergarten | Grade 2 | Average |
|                 | M  | SD | M  | SD | M  | SD | M  | SD | M  | SD | M  | SD | M  | SD |
| Volume          | 45.60 | 39.38 | 75.68 | 54.00 | 111.27 | 106.23 | 76.39 | 75.12 | 37.26 | 22.45 | 49.71 | 32.50 | 89.49 | 51.62 | 58.71 | 43.22 |
|                 | 36.95 | 40.55 | 55.07 | 42.84 | 88.65 | 104.82 | 61.47 | 71.99 | 49.58 | 40.08 | 49.70 | 37.66 | 106.00 | 60.19 | 66.17 | 52.31 |
| Specificity     | 0.81  | 0.32 | 0.88 | 0.19 | 0.89 | 0.17 | 0.86 | 0.24 | 0.71 | 0.27 | 0.67 | 0.26 | 0.87 | 0.22 | 0.75 | 0.26 |
|                 | 0.62  | 0.50 | 0.73 | 0.45 | 0.81 | 0.40 | 0.73 | 0.45 | 0.42 | 0.50 | 0.56 | 0.51 | 0.77 | 0.43 | 0.57 | 0.50 |
| Emotion         | 0.42  | 0.53 | 0.91 | 0.79 | 1.36 | 1.47 | 0.88 | 1.05 | 0.04 | 0.13 | 0.29 | 0.54 | 0.43 | 0.63 | 0.25 | 0.50 |
|                 | 0.33  | 0.86 | 0.30 | 0.79 | 0.35 | 0.69 | 0.32 | 0.77 | 0.54 | 1.45 | 0.30 | 0.82 | 0.36 | 0.79 | 0.40 | 1.07 |
| Autonomous orientation | 0.28  | 0.48 | 0.61 | 0.68 | 1.18 | 1.05 | 0.68 | 0.84 | 0.24 | 0.43 | 0.46 | 0.40 | 0.62 | 0.74 | 0.44 | 0.56 |
|                 | 0.05  | 0.22 | 0.23 | 0.50 | 0.42 | 0.64 | 0.25 | 0.52 | 0.08 | 0.27 | 0.37 | 0.74 | 0.45 | 0.67 | 0.29 | 0.61 |
| No. of other people | 2.19  | 1.84 | 2.67 | 1.30 | 3.67 | 1.79 | 2.81 | 1.75 | 1.75 | 1.31 | 1.81 | 0.96 | 2.59 | 1.31 | 2.05 | 1.25 |
|                 | 2.67  | 3.73 | 1.90 | 1.83 | 2.35 | 2.10 | 2.26 | 2.55 | 1.42 | 1.10 | 1.67 | 1.41 | 1.86 | 1.32 | 1.64 | 1.28 |
| Interaction scenario | 1.84  | 2.56 | 2.07 | 1.30 | 4.62 | 5.27 | 2.79 | 3.57 | 2.26 | 1.12 | 2.78 | 1.58 | 4.82 | 2.46 | 3.28 | 2.10 |
|                 | 2.05  | 3.22 | 1.53 | 1.72 | 2.19 | 3.93 | 1.90 | 3.00 | 1.92 | 2.23 | 2.26 | 1.72 | 4.32 | 2.46 | 2.75 | 2.34 |
| Other/self ratio | 0.59  | 0.49 | 0.72 | 0.48 | 0.82 | 0.31 | 0.70 | 0.44 | 1.35 | 1.17 | 1.13 | 0.66 | 1.11 | 0.55 | 1.20 | 0.83 |
|                 | 0.68  | 0.76 | 0.48 | 0.38 | 0.56 | 0.50 | 0.56 | 0.54 | 0.73 | 0.87 | 0.79 | 0.69 | 0.86 | 0.62 | 0.79 | 0.73 |
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memories and did so more than kindergartners for the earliest interactions than either kindergartners or preschoolers for recent memories and scored higher than preschoolers for the earliest memory (Tukey–Kramer HSD tests, ps < .05).

Number of Others

Contrary to prediction, European American children introduced more people in both recent and earliest memories than did their Chinese peers, F(1, 169) = 13.00, p = .0004 and F(1, 146) = 3.86, p = .05, respectively. Most American children in the current sample came from larger families than did the Chinese children, who were all only children, which might have contributed to these results. In order to partial out this possibility, further comparisons were performed between the 29 only children in the U.S. sample (Ms = 2.50 and 2.42 [SDs = 1.89 and 3.41] for recent and earliest memories, respectively) and the Chinese children. The cultural difference remained the same for both recent and earliest memories, F(1, 108) = 4.47, p = .04 and F(1, 95) = 3.95, p = .05, respectively. Older children introduced more people in recent memories than did younger children, F(2, 169) = 10.01, p < .0001, with second graders doing so more frequently than either kindergartners or preschoolers (Tukey–Kramer HSD tests, ps < .05).

Interaction Scenario

As predicted, Chinese children described more social interactions than did European American children in both recent and earliest memories, although the difference was significant only for the earliest memory, F(1, 146) = 4.49, p = .04. Compared with younger children, older children described more social interactions in both recent and earliest memories, F(2, 169) = 15.90, p < .0001 and F(2, 146) = 4.13, p = .02, respectively. Tukey–Kramer HSD tests (ps < .05) showed that second graders described more social interactions than either kindergartners or preschoolers for recent memories and did so more than kindergartners for the earliest memory.

Other/Self Ratio

It was expected that Chinese children would show a greater social orientation such that they would make more references to other people as opposed to themselves when compared with their American peers. Consistent with this prediction, a culture effect emerged in the other/self ratio for both recent and earliest memories, F(1, 169) = 24.01, p < .0001 and F(1, 146) = 4.40, p = .04, respectively. There were no other effects for this variable.

Age at Earliest Memory

For exploratory purposes, the children’s age at the time of the earliest memory they provided was tested across groups. No effects neared significance. The mean age at the earliest memory across the entire sample was 28.28 months (SD = 15.85).

Self-Description

Table 2 lists the means and standard deviations for self-description categories by culture and age group. The total number of self-descriptions children provided was 12.89 on average (SD = 16.29). Chinese children (M = 15.33, SD = 17.19) provided more self-descriptions than did American children (M = 12.35, SD = 15.73), and older children provided more self-descriptions than did younger children (Ms = 19.98, 13.64, and 7.18 [SDs = 20.94, 15.11, and 7.72] for second graders, kindergartners, and preschoolers, respectively). A 2 (culture) × 3 (age) ANOVA showed only a significant age effect, F(2, 156) = 8.95, p = .0002, whereby preschoolers provided fewer self-descriptions than either kindergartners or second graders (Tukey–Kramer HSD tests, ps < .05). Note that self-description variables were all based on the same coding unit, that is, the proposition. In order to rule out the possibility that any group effects were due to the different numbers of self-descriptions (i.e., numbers of propositions) children provided, the total number of self-descriptions was treated as a covariate and partialed out across all the analyses.4

Organization

It was predicted that European American children would provide more private and fewer collective and public self-descriptions than Chinese children. A significant culture effect emerged in private self-description scores, F(1, 155) = 11.98, p < .0007, qualified by a Culture × Age interaction, F(2, 155) = 7.14, p = .001. American children referred to proportionally more personal attributes and qualities than did their Chinese peers across all age groups, although the cultural difference reached significance only among second graders, F(1, 52) = 17.95, p < .0001.

The analysis of collective self-description scores revealed significant culture and age effects, F(1, 155) = 20.78, p < .0001 and F(2, 155) = 14.94, p < .0001, respectively, qualified by a Culture × Age interaction, F(2, 155) = 5.71, p = .004. Chinese children had higher collective self-description scores than American children across all age groups, with the difference among second graders most prominent: F(1, 46) = 7.98, p = .007 for preschoolers, F(1, 55) = 5.43, p = .02 for kindergartners, and F(1, 52) = 12.66, p = .0008 for second graders. Although in both cultures older children more frequently described themselves in terms of social categories than did younger children, there was a greater age-linked increase in the Chinese sample than in the U.S. sample, F(2, 77) = 11.89, p < .0001 and F(2, 77) = 2.98, p = .06, respectively. In both cultures, second graders had higher collective self-description scores than either kindergartners or preschoolers, whose scores in turn did not differ (Tukey–Kramer HSD tests, p < .05).

A marginally significant Culture × Age interaction emerged in public self-description scores, F(2, 155) = 2.54, p = .08. Although

4The same pattern of results was obtained from analyses based on the proportion of responses in each self-description category. Past studies of children’s narratives (e.g., Fivush, 1988; Han et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2000) have shown that, compared with proportions, frequencies are more informative because they reflect the sheer amount of the different types of responses children provide. The present study therefore reports results based on the frequency of each self-description category, with the effect of the total number of self-descriptions partialed out.
Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Description Categories by Culture and Age Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-description</th>
<th>European American children</th>
<th>Chinese children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Organization</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstraction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As hypothesized, European American children provided proportionally more positive self-descriptions than did Chinese children (Tukey-Kramer HSD tests, p < .05). In addition, younger children provided proportionally more abstract dispositions and fewer specific, situation-bound self-descriptions. A significant age effect emerged in abstract self-descriptions, F(2, 155) = 13.53, p = .001, self-content characteristics than would Chinese children. The cultural difference was confirmed for both abstract, F(1, 155) = 4.75, p = .03. No significant group differences were found for negative self-descriptions. Chinese children referred to more inner traits than did younger European American children (M = 6.84; SD = 2.43, p = .05). With preschoolers and kindergartners, children mentioned proportionally more overt behaviors than did older children (Tukey-Kramer HSD tests, p < .05). In contrast, younger children referred to more inner traits than did older children, M = 3.47, 2.05, and 1.92 (SDs = 8.25, 6.66, and 6.95) for second graders, kindergartners, and preschoolers, respectively. Because children were explicitly asked to talk about themselves, their descriptions of others did not significantly differ in number across groups. Nevertheless, Chinese children provided more other-descriptions than did younger children, M = 6.84 (SD = 2.43, 2.05, and 1.92 (SDs = 8.25, 6.66, and 6.95) for second graders, kindergartners, and preschoolers, respectively). Because children were explicitly asked to talk about themselves, their descriptions of others did not significantly differ in number across groups. Nevertheless, Chinese children provided more other-descriptions than did younger children, M = 6.84 (SD = 2.43, 2.05, and 1.92 (SDs = 8.25, 6.66, and 6.95) for second graders, kindergartners, and preschoolers, respectively.)
number of self-descriptions controlled for. Means between recent
and earliest memories were calculated and submitted to analyses.
The difference between private and collective self-description
scores (i.e., private–collective scores) was used to index children’s
orientation toward private aspects of the self, and the difference
between positive and negative self-descriptions (i.e., positive–
negative scores) was used to index children’s tendency to give
positive self-evaluations, a method adopted from a previous study
(Wang, 2001a). In addition, the difference between abstract and
specific self-description scores (i.e., abstract–specific scores) was
used to index children’s tendency to describe situation-free quali-
ties, and the difference between trait and behavior self-description
scores (i.e., trait–behavior scores) was used to index children’s
tendency to provide inner attributes or states in describing them-
selves. Table 3 lists the partial correlations between the memory
and self-description variables.

As predicted, children who had higher private–collective scores
tended to provide lengthier and more autonomous memories.
They also had fewer other/self ratios in their memories, with
the correlation at a marginally significant level. Children who
had higher positive–negative scores and those who had higher
abstract–specific scores mentioned significantly more emotions in
their memories and showed a greater autonomous orientation. In
addition, children who had higher trait–behavior scores tended to
refer more frequently to emotions and autonomy in their memo-
ries, with the correlations being marginally significant.

In order to explore the interrelations among the four dimen-
sions of self-concept, partial correlations among the self-description
scores were further calculated, with culture, age, and the total
number of self-descriptions controlled for (see Table 3). Private–
collective scores were positively correlated with abstract–specific
scores. Positive–negative scores were positively correlated with
abstract–specific scores and trait–behavior scores, which, in turn,
were positively correlated with each other. It appears that, at
the individual level, children who provided more descriptions about
their private, inner attributes were more likely to describe them-
selves in terms of abstract traits and qualities in a positive light. In
contrast, children who provided more self-descriptions in terms of
social roles and group memberships tended to focus on context-
specific behaviors and less favorable features when describing
themselves.

Discussion

The present study examined the emergence of cultural self-con-
structs in children from two diverse societies, the United States
and China. It focused on both the remembered self and the con-
ceptual self, two interrelated aspects of the self that have been
stressed in contemporary self theories but rarely tested simulta-
neously in empirical developmental research. The open-ended,
free-narrative method used reflected on the meaning children
themselves ascribed to the various facets of the self. The data
revealed critical differences in the structure and content of auto-
biographical memories and self-descriptions in European Ameri-
can and Chinese children as young as age 3 or 4.

Compared with their Chinese peers, American children provided
lengthier memory accounts that often focused on detailed, one-
moment-in-time events and contained rich spontaneous references
to emotions and comments on personal predilections and opinions.
In contrast, Chinese children provided relatively skeletal accounts
of past experiences that tended to center on daily routines and had
fewer emotional expressions. They also talked more frequently
about social interactions and group activities and made more
references to other people as opposed to themselves than did
American children. This pattern of cultural differences was evident
for both recent and earliest memories and became more prominent
among older children. Contrary to prediction, however, American
children introduced more people in their memories than did Chi-
inese children. I speculate that this finding may reflect the different
organizations of in-groups and out-groups in the two cultures.
According to Triandis (1989), in-groups in European American
culture tend to be inclusive and large, with no salient boundaries
between in-groups and out-groups. In contrast, the in-group/out-
group distinction is vital in Chinese culture, where the subjective
boundaries of one’s in-groups are often restrictive. As a result,
American children might be more inclined than Chinese children

Table 3
Correlations Between Memory and Self-Description Variables With Culture, Age, and the Total
Number of Self-Descriptions Partialed Out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Organization (private–collective scores)</th>
<th>Evaluation (positive–negative scores)</th>
<th>Abstraction (abstract–specific scores)</th>
<th>Content (trait–behavior scores)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volume</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>−0.10</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.16†</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
<td>0.12†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous orientation</td>
<td>0.14†</td>
<td>0.16†</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
<td>0.12†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of other people</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction scenario</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/self ratio</td>
<td>−0.11†</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private–collective scores</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.21*</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive–negative scores</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract–specific scores</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>0.53*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait–behavior scores</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† p = .08 (one-tailed). * p < .05 (one-tailed).
to perceive a great number of other people as relevant to their personal stories. Nevertheless, Chinese children placed greater emphases on social interactions and on the roles of other people than did their American peers, who tended to focus on their own roles, feelings, and opinions. It appears that children in both cultures situated their autobiographical events in interpersonal contexts, with American children playing the central character in their stories and Chinese children sharing the spotlight with significant others.

As predicted, European American children more often described themselves in terms of personal attributes and beliefs than did Chinese children, who talked proportionately more about social categories and relationships. American children also gave more positive self-evaluations and described more dispositional traits and inner states such as emotions and thoughts than did Chinese children, who more often talked about themselves in a neutral tone and referred to more situation-bound characteristics and overt behaviors. Furthermore, these cultural differences increased with age. Thus, children’s autobiographical memories and self-descriptions show systematic structural and content differences that mirror those between European American and Chinese adults (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Trafimow et al., 1991; Wang, 2001a). They reflect divergent views of selfhood as well as contrasting emphases on autonomy versus relatedness in the two cultures (Chin, 1988; Hsu, 1953/1970; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989).

The early acquisition of culture-specific self-constructs in children challenges researchers to rethink the nature of self-development. Traditional theories of the self, mostly built on data from Western children, focus on how developing cognitive structures impact the structure and content of self-representations (e.g., Eder, 1989; Higgins, 1991). Development of the self is viewed as movement toward increasing autonomy, complexity, coherence, and abstraction that directly results from cognitive advances. Abilities such as being able to form dispositional traits are considered crucial for “children to construct a more general evaluation of themselves as a person” (Harter, 1998, p. 572). The present study indeed lends support to this cognitive explanation, showing that, in both cultures, older children more frequently described themselves in terms of abstract, dispositional traits and inner qualities, whereas younger children referred proportionally more concrete features and observable behaviors. Older children also provided more elaborate and detailed memories than did younger children. However, although this pattern of self-development corresponds with children’s increasing cognitive skills across cultures, it does not reflect the wide range of individual variation in social experiences, especially in the context of culture.

Children participate in their cultures, which provide frameworks for selfhood that are enacted in social practices. In particular, many contemporary researchers contend that parent–child conversations about the shared past serve as an important medium in which children develop an autobiographical self and, further, an enduring self-concept (e.g., Fivush, 1994; Miller et al., 1996; Nelson, 1996; Shweder et al., 1998; Wiley et al., 1998). From parents’ modeling of conversational styles and ways of thinking and talking about the past, children learn to create narratives about their own experiences and to further ascribe personal significance to these experiences. Furthermore, cross-cultural data reveal different narrative styles and thematic contents of such joint personal storytelling in European American and Chinese families (Miller et al., 1996, 1997; Wang, 2001a, in press; Wang et al., 2000). Consider, for instance, the following interchanges between mothers and their 3-year-old daughters from the two cultures (Wang et al., 2000):

**American Mother–Child Dyad**

*Mother:* Do you remember when we were at Nana’s on vacation, and we went down to the dock at Grandmommy’s? You went swimming?

*Child:* Um-hum.

*Mother:* What did you do that was really neat?

*Child:* Jump off the dock.

*Mother:* Yeah. That was the first time you’ve ever done that.

*Child:* That was like a diving board.

*Mother:* You’re right, it was. And where did Mommy have to stand?

*Child:* In the sandy spot.

*Mother:* In the sandy spot, right. Mommy said, “Wait, wait, wait! Don’t jump ‘til I get into my sandy spot!”

*Child:* Why?

*Mother:* ‘Cause you remember how I told you all the leaves pile up on the bottom of the lake? And it makes it a little mushy. And so, you jumped off the dock and then what did you do?

*Child:* Swim.

*Mother:* To . . .

*Child:* Nana.

*Mother:* Yeah. All by yourself with what on your back?

*Child:* Bubbles.

*Mother:* Yeah.

**Chinese Mother–Child Dyad**

*Mother:* That day, mom took you to take a big bus and go skiing in the park. What did you play at the place of skiing? What did you play?

*Child:* Played . . . played the . . .

*Mother:* Sat on the ice ship, right?

*Child:* Yes. Then . . .

*Mother:* We two rowed together, right?

*Child:* Then . . . then . . .

*Mother:* Then we rowed and rowed, rowed round a couple of times, right?

*Child:* Um.

*Mother:* We rowed around a couple of times. Then you said, “Stop rowing. Let’s go. Go home.” Right?
Intriguingly, the Chinese mother–child dyad referred to fewer people (i.e., mother and child) in their conversation than did the American dyad (i.e., mother, child, and Nana), a difference paralleled in children’s independent memories in the present study. Nonetheless, the American conversation focused on what the child did (accomplished) in the past event, with the mother providing elaboration and support to encourage the child’s active participation. In contrast, the Chinese conversation centered on concerted group actions, with the mother playing a leading role in posing pointed questions. Thus, family narrative practices in the two cultures serve to instill different self-constructs with differing orientations toward autonomy versus relatedness. Conversations that depict the child as the protagonist in coherent, elaborate stories that depict the child as the protagonist in coherent, elaborate stories are well suited to the goal of facilitating the development of a unique autobiographical history and an autonomous, independent self. Conversations that focus on collective activities and significant others downplay the use of memory to construct a unique personal history while situating the child in a nexus of social relations and facilitating the development of a relational, interdependent self (Miller et al., 1996, 1997; Mullen & Yi, 1995; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, 1989; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002). The different forms of autobiographical memories, in turn, would reflect, express, and sustain an independently oriented versus an interdependently oriented self-concept.

Notably, although the present study focused on differences between the self-constructs of European American and Chinese children, one should not dichotomize autonomy and relatedness as two distinct categories. Cultural variation in the relative salience and prominence of different components of the self may be only a matter of degree. As many researchers have argued (Costanzo, 1992; Damon, 1983; Harter, 1998, 1999; Spiro, 1993), socialization serves two seemingly opposite goals: to establish social connections and to achieve individuation. It consequently creates individuals with both social (self-perceived connectedness) and personal (self-perceived distinctiveness) identities. Indeed, the current data revealed age-related increases in both autonomous and social orientations in children’s self-constructs. Compared with younger children, older children in both cultures made more comments on their personal opinions and predilections in their memories; they also introduced a greater number of people and social interactions in their memories and more frequently described themselves in terms of social roles and group memberships. Thus, although cultures differ in their emphases on individuality versus relatedness, neither aspect is replaceable in constituting the human self. It is in the process of achieving a balance that both individual diversity and commonalities within each culture are formed.

The pervasive effects of culture on the content and style of children’s autobiographical memories and self-descriptions indicate that the framework of culture is embodied in the construct of the self as an integral part from the very beginning. The development of the self is not merely a cognitive achievement, nor is it solely constrained by an individual’s immediate social setting. Differing cultural values and beliefs about the self embedded in everyday activities shared between parents and children play a crucial role in shaping the mode in which a self-construct is established and maintained. The early emergence of cultural self-constructs further prepares children to become competent mem-

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bers of their respective societies. A comprehensive theory of the development of the self should encompass cognitive, social, and cultural variables of the developmental niche in which children actively solve problems, participate in social activities, collaborate with others, and construct knowledge of themselves.

References


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