Culture, Memory, and Narrative Self-Making

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Abstract
Narrative entails an active act of sense making through which individuals discern meaning from their experiences in line with their cultural expectations. In this article, we outline a theoretical model to demonstrate that narrative can be simultaneously used to examine cognitive processes underlying remembering on the one hand and to study the process of meaning-making that holds implications for self and well-being on the other. We argue that these two approaches, oftentimes overlapping and inseparable, provide critical means to understand the central role of culture in shaping memory and self-identity. We further demonstrate that the integration of culture in narrative research can, in turn, greatly enrich our understanding of the cognitive and social underpinnings of narrative.

Keywords
cultural dynamic model, culture, memory, narrative, meaning-making, self

The word narrative derives from the Latin verb narrare, meaning “to recount,” and is related to the adjective gnarus, meaning “knowing.” Narrative thus entails a process of storytelling to reach a state of understanding. It is an active act of sense making through which individuals discern meaning from their experiences in line with their cultural expectations (Bruner, 1990). The value of narrative has
been highlighted in psychological research in recent decades that strives to understand the experiential specificity of human action and intentionality through the narrative mode of organizing experience and constructing reality (McAdams, 2013; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Miller, Fung, & Koven, 2007; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Wang, 2013a). Yet, the research often divides into two separate areas of investigation of cognitive processes underlying remembering on the one hand and of the process of meaning-making that holds implications for self and well-being on the other. Here, we outline a theoretical model to demonstrate that narrative can be simultaneously used to examine the processes of remembering and meaning-making and that culture plays a central role in shaping memory and self-identity through the act of narration. To illustrate this model, we detail three recent studies that embodied this dynamic approach of studying culture, memory, and narrative self-making.

**A Cultural Dynamic Model of Memory and Narrative Self-Making**

The model we propose here is an extension of the cultural dynamic theory of autobiographical memory (Wang, 2016, in press). The theory posits that autobiographical memory is an open system that emerges, develops, and transforms under the multitude of influences of culture. In the extended model, we incorporate narrative meaning-making as another key component in construing the dynamic relations among culture, memory, and narrative. Following the original theory, the model comprises three major themes: First, the processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making simultaneously take place in the dynamic transaction between an active individual and his or her changing environment. Second, the processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making are continually conditioned by culture in time and space, over a multitude of timescales from seconds to a lifetime. Third, remembering and narrative meaning-making both develop in the process of children acquiring cultural knowledge about the self and personal stories through early socialization (see Figure 1).

**Theme 1:** The processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making simultaneously takes place in the dynamic transaction between an active individual and his or her changing environment that constitutes multiple levels of social, cultural, and historical variables. Individual and group differences in these processes emerge as a result of the transaction.

This theme highlights the culturally constructive nature of autobiographical memory and narrative, whereby the processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making take place not in isolation, in the individual mind or brain, but is thoroughly contextual. They are situated in the micro and macro contexts of culture that, as a symbolic system of mediation, deeply conditions
information processing and sense making (Bruner, 1990). The micro and macro contexts of culture comprise and further take effect through layers of variables in beliefs and values as well as everyday routines and practices that themselves evolve with individual development and historical transformation (Holland & Quinn, 1987; McLean, 2016; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002). The processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making are thus open to the influence of a variety of cultural forces, and they further entail an active construction through which selves and cultures became mutually constitutive.

The theme further highlights the dynamic relationship between cognitive processes underlying remembering and the process of narrative meaning-making, which oftentimes are overlapping and inseparable. Although memory formation and retention may not depend on narrative or even language, such that information can be encoded and retained in images and other
sensory-perceptual formats, language lends “relative stability” to personal encounters (Valsiner, 2001, p. 87). It makes possible for an experience to be simultaneously temporary, as it is taking place in a given moment, and permanent, as it is linguistically coded into a stable meaning system (Nelson, 2001, 2014). Narrative further imposes temporal-causal structures on event information to produce enduring memories (Rubin, 2006). Thus, the representational function of language and the inherent temporal-causal structures of narrative greatly increase the chances for memories to be formed and retained (Bauer, 2007; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Wang, Bui, & Song, 2015). Furthermore, from the current perspective, narrative embodies cultural messages through its linguistic features, temporal-causal structures, and communicative contexts (McLean, 2016; Miller et al., 2007; Wang, 2013a, 2014). Consequently, the narrative formulation process during remembering greatly increases the power of cultural variables in shaping the content and accessibility of memory. As such, narrative supports memory representations and contributes to the persistence of memory and, in the meantime, constrains or conditions memory in culturally prescribed ways.

**Theme 2:** The processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making are continually conditioned by culture in time and space, over a multitude of timescales from seconds to a lifetime. The dynamic interaction between culture, memory, and narrative thus takes place as the information is being encoded, retained, and later recalled.

This theme highlights the dynamic processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making, which are simultaneously shaped by culture from the very beginning of information processing. Given the culturally situated beliefs, goals, and practices, people from different cultures often perceive and interpret event information differently, which in turn influences what, how, and whether at all event information becomes encoded and consolidated in memory. These culturally situated beliefs, goals, and practices may further guide people to selectively retrieve from memory what is most important or salient to them and thus determine whether and how much the encoded information remains accessible at recall. Cultural variables can also influence post-encoding remembering and memory reconstruction over the course of long-term retention. In particular, the cultural templates of life stories, or narrative templates (Wertsch, 2008), constrain the ways of thinking, recounting, and sharing personal experiences and, in turn, ways of remembering the past (Wang, 2013a).

Furthermore, this theme highlights the utility of narrative that allows us to examine the influence of culture on different stages of remembering, from encoding to retrieval. Narrative is not merely a form of individual expression or communication that enables people to relive their experiences and share them with others, it is deeply intertwined with memory representations from the
very beginning. Narrative that is created as events unfold does not simply reflect the characteristics of the events, but rather, individuals’ interpretations—in line with their cultural beliefs—of the characteristics of the events. As such, remembering and narrative meaning-making are the two sides of the same token thoroughly conditioned by culture throughout different stages of information processing.

Theme 3: The skills for remembering and narrative meaning-making develop in the process of children acquiring cultural knowledge about the self and the purpose of constructing life stories from their everyday actions and interactions with parents and important others. As a result, cultural differences in remembering and narrative self-making emerge early in ontogeny.

This theme highlights the mediational role of early socialization practices that institutionalize culture-specific modes of autobiographical remembering and narrative self-making in children. Parents and other socialization agents uphold beliefs and goals endorsed by their culture when engaging their children in everyday mnemonic activities. Through their daily interactions, the culturally endorsed beliefs and goals are transmitted to and internalized by children into their own memory operations and meaning systems. In particular, during parent–child joint reminiscing, parents model to children the narrative structures of organizing past events, show children how to interpret and evaluate personal experiences, and further instill in children the purposes and ways of remembering and sharing the personal past appropriate to their cultural assumptions (McLean, 2016; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002). Children play an active role in the process of joint reminiscing, constructing meaning from the past in line with their internalized cultural self-goals and motives (Wang & Song, 2017). As such, the cultural embeddedness of remembering and narrative meaning-making initiates interpersonally and eventually functions intrapersonally.

This theme also reveals the indispensible role of narrative in understanding the processes of collaborative remembering and meaning-making through the lens of culture. Although intersubjectivity and joint attention may be studied through perceptual processes (i.e., eye movement) and other channels (Abels & Hutman, 2015; Kuwabara & Smith, 2016), narrative interaction provides rich contextual information of the target event in question as well as the actions and intentions of all parties involved. It makes possible for us to truly appreciate the dynamic process in which information is attended to, evaluated, disputed, agreed upon, and shared among different interlocutors and, furthermore, how these transactions unfold in culturally unique patterns.

In sum, the cultural dynamic model of memory and narrative self-making provides a framework to understand how the process of remembering is indeed a process of meaning-making and how the intrapersonal and interpersonal
cognitive operations are deeply saturated in culture. This process-based model not only shows how and why culture plays such an important role in memory and narrative but also illustrates that both remembering and narrative meaning-making serve culture-specific goals and functions (Alea & Wang, 2015). As such, there are no particular ways of remembering or personal storytelling that are “better” or “more advanced” than others. Instead, the differences reflect individuals’ conscious or unconscious responses to varied cultural expectations (Wang, 2013a). In other words, memories and narrative practices are conditioned by culture to serve goals and purposes important to specific cultural contexts and, as a result, may carry different implications for self and psychosocial functioning (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2015). A few concrete examples are called for to illustrate the process of meaning-making in personal remembering and joint reminiscing, the consequences of this process for self-identity and well-being, and the role of culture in moderating the process.

**Case Study 1: Interpersonal Transgression Memory and Self-Acceptance**

People’s interpretation and memory for social interactions, particularly interpersonal transgressions, can greatly influence their relationship satisfaction (e.g., Karney & Coombs, 2000), evaluations of themselves and others (e.g., Takaku, Green, & Ohbuchi, 2010), and subjective well-being (Kitayama, Markus, & Masaru, 2000). Among the many factors that influence memory for interpersonal transgressions, self-serving motivation has been shown to play a particularly important role (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). Specifically, people often exhibit role-based biases for the purpose of maintaining a positive self-evaluation: “Perpetrators” who hurt or wronged others tend to minimize the interpersonal harm in their transgression memories, such as to include happy endings, justify their behaviors, and diminish their culpability. In contrast, “victims” often maximize in their memories the harm imposed on them, such as to attribute perpetrators’ intentions as malicious and emphasize negative outcomes and consequences (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990; Mikula, Athenstaedt, Heschgl, & Heimgartner, 1998). The same memory biases have been observed in the recall of hypothetical stories where participants were randomly assigned to identify with either the perpetrator or the victim (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997).

Thus, regardless of the characteristics of the events, people exhibit different interpretive or meaning-making processes depending on the role they played in the events. They selectively attend to some aspects of the events and downplay others in their memories to maintain favorable self-views. More important from the current perspective, culture may moderate the effect of self-serving motivation on narrative meaning-making and remembering of interpersonal
transgressions, given the different views of the self and self-in-relation across cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). We examined this question by comparing perpetrator and victim memories in Asian and European American young adults (for details, see Song & Wang, 2014).

Given the inherent social nature of transgression events, self-serving biases (i.e., minimizing harms done by oneself in perpetrator memories and maximizing harms done by others in victim memories) may also be apparent among Asians for whom maintaining positive self-regard in interpersonal contexts is of paramount importance (Ross, Heine, Wilson, & Sugimori, 2005; Yashima et al., 1995). Yet, given their great relationship concerns (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), Asians may further exhibit a relationship-serving bias when interpreting and remembering interpersonal transgressions. Research has shown that people who greatly value their relationships are motivated to perceive important others and their relationships in a positive light and often construct memories in ways that enhance positive evaluations of others and their relationships (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000; Endo, Heine, & Lehman, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2005). Accordingly, relationship-serving motivation may drive Asians to minimize harms done by both themselves and others to promote social harmony.

In line with previous studies (Baumeister et al., 1990; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mikula et al., 1998; Takaku et al., 2010), we expected European Americans to exhibit self-serving biases in the construction of interpersonal transgression memories. We also expected Asians to exhibit such biases for the enhancement of positive self-views in interpersonal contexts, as well as to show relationship-serving biases to promote interpersonal affiliation and belongingness. Furthermore, given that the construction of interpersonal transgression memories has direct implications for one’s self and well-being (Kitayama et al., 2000; Takaku et al., 2010), we examined the relation of the memory biases to individuals’ self-acceptance. We hypothesized that for Asians, self-acceptance would be positively associated with harm minimization and negatively associated with harm maximization in both types of memories. For European Americans, self-acceptance would be positively associated with harm minimization in perpetrator memories and harm maximization in victim memories and negatively associated with harm maximization in perpetrator memories and harm minimization in victim memories.

A total of 168 undergraduate students, including 76 Asians and 92 European Americans, participated in the study. Participants each recalled two interpersonal transgression memories in which they acted as either a perpetrator (perpetrator memory) or a victim (victim memory). They were instructed to provide the full story of each event and include as many details as possible. They also completed a survey that assessed self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989). We coded the memories for content categories adapted from previous studies (Baumeister et al., 1990; Kearns & Fincham, 2005) to evaluate the presence or absence of
a series of themes. We then computed two composite scores: The minimization score reflected the extent of downplaying the harms caused by an offender (e.g., stressing the positive outcome of the event), and the maximization score reflected the extent of amplifying the harms caused by an offender (e.g., stressing the malicious or hurtful intention of the perpetrator). Accordingly, for the perpetrator memory in which the rememberer was the offender, minimizing the harm from the offender incurs positive evaluations of the self and maximizing the harm incurs negative evaluations of the self. For the victim memory in which the rememberer was the victim and another person was the offender, minimizing the harm from the offender incurs positive evaluations of the other person and the relationship and maximizing the harm incurs negative evaluations of the other person and the relationship (see Table 1).

The findings showed that, as we expected, both European Americans and Asians exhibited self-serving biases in interpersonal transgression memories: They were more likely to minimize the harm in the perpetrator memory than in the victim memory, such that they blamed victims for provoking the incidents, expressed their regrets and self-blame, and framed their behaviors as impulsive, justifiable, or excusable due to external or mitigating circumstances. On the other hand, they were more likely to maximize the harm in the victim memory than in the perpetrator memory, whereby they described perpetrators’ behaviors as incomprehensible or inconsistent and justified the victims’ anger. These findings suggest that the self-serving motivation shapes narrative meaning-making and remembering across cultures, and that Asians also remember themselves in a favorable light, at least when the events are situated in interpersonal contexts.

Relationship-serving biases also emerged in Asians’ interpersonal transgression memories. Compared with European Americans, Asians downplayed interpersonal conflicts by minimizing the harm to a greater degree in both the perpetrator memory and the victim memory. For example, in the perpetrator memory, Asians were more likely than European Americans to refer to the perpetrator’s apologies or amendment and to include external or mitigating circumstances for the incident. In the victim memory, they were more likely to emphasize positive consequences or deny negative consequences, describe the

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<th>Table 1. The Implications of Minimization and Maximization for Evaluations of the Self and Others in Perpetrator and Victim Memories.</th>
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perpetrator’s behavior as impulsive, and share the blame by admitting themselves as partly responsible. It appears that by taking a holistic perspective, Asians might view interpersonal conflicts as a result of external circumstances or shared responsibilities of all parties involved. In this way, they justified perpetrators’ behaviors and downplayed the severity of interpersonal harms. This is in line with their motivation to promote social harmony and maintain positive views of important others and relationships (e.g., Endo et al., 2000; Ross et al., 2005; Sedikides, Gaertner, Toguchi, 2003).

Furthermore, self-serving and relationship-serving biases in the victim memory were differently related to self-acceptance in the two cultural groups. Asians who made more harm maximization in the victim memory tended to have lower self-acceptance. Amplifying harms done by others is not conducive to relationship harmony, and as a result, for Asians who greatly value interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), this tendency was associated with negative self-evaluations. In contrast, European Americans who made more harm minimization in the victim memory, namely, those who exhibited less self-serving bias, tended to have lower self-acceptance. Downplaying others’ fault may imply that the self should be partially blamed for the incident and thus resulted in negative self-evaluations. This finding is consistent with the general literature that among Westerners, people with higher self-esteem exhibit greater self-serving biases in memory than those with lower self-esteem (Crary, 1996; Silverman, 1964; Wilson & Ross, 2001, 2003).

Interestingly, the relation of memory biases to self-acceptance was not found in the perpetrator memory in which one’s own transgression was at the center. This is possibly because minimizing one’s transgression or blaming the victim may not be sufficient to facilitate self-acceptance when people have to deal more directly with their moral weakness in such incidents (see Song & Wang, 2014, for additional analyses). In addition, intentionality is a critical feature of perpetrator experiences and perpetrator memories (e.g., Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). Thus, narrative meaning-making about whether one intended to cause harm versus did not intend to cause harm, rather than simply minimizing harm, may be more conducive to self-acceptance and understanding the self as a moral agent.

Taken together, this study illustrates the first theme of the cultural dynamic model, whereby narrative meaning-making and remembering go hand-in-hand in the cognitive process of memory construction in cultural contexts. Depending on the roles they played in specific past events, people take differential moral stance and interpretive framework to evaluate and in turn, remember the events. Furthermore, the process of memory construction is not simply “personal” but culturally situated. It serves culturally prioritized goals and motives and further contributes to different patterns of memory narratives across cultures. The findings further highlight the functional nature of memory and narrative: People process information and make sense of it in response to different cultural norms.
and expectations, which, in turn, has different implications for self and well-being. Importantly, narrative as the dependent measure was used in this study to simultaneously examine the processes of remembering and meaning-making, where narrative supports memory representations on the one hand and shape memory construction in culturally prescribed ways on the other. This study focuses on memory retrieval. Next, we provide an example in which narrative was used to study both memory encoding and retrieval and to illustrate the second theme of the cultural dynamic model.

Case Study 2: Gender and Acculturation in Everyday Event Memory

Culture takes many different forms, including race, ethnicity, gender, social-economic status, religion, and more (Cohen, 2009). Researchers have examined the influence of gender on the processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making. It has been shown that women are able to recall more details from past episodes than men on a variety of memory tasks (Herlitz & Rehnman, 2008; Pillemer, Wink, DiDonato, & Sanborn, 2003). Women also often exhibit a greater social orientation than men when remembering life experiences, such that they tend to focus more on social interactions and the roles of significant others in past events (Merriam & Cross, 1982; Ross & Holmberg, 1990; Thorne, 1995). The gender differences in memory emerge early in life (Bauer, 2007; Nelson & Fivush, 2004) and have been observed across cultures (Herlitz & Rehnman, 2008; Wang, 2001a, 2009; Wang, Hou, Tang, & Wiprovnick, 2011).

Furthermore, cross-cultural research that examines narrative accounts of past events has identified cultural differences in memory accessibility and content. European American adults and children often access a greater number of details of recent and distant past events than do their Asian counterparts (Wang, 2006, 2009; Wang, Capous, Koh, & Hou, 2014; Wang et al., 2011). They also focus more on their own roles and perspectives than Asians and Asian Americans, who recall more information about other people and social interactions (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Wang, 2001a, 2004; Wang & Conway, 2004).

Importantly, most studies that examine gender and culture effects on memory have focused on the retrieval process, where participants are asked to provide narrative accounts of past experiences. This raises an intriguing question: To what extent gender and cultural differences in memory narratives reflect different ways of encoding event information, retaining information over time, or accessing information at retrieval? Are women, as well as Asians, more attentive than men and Westerners to social information at the perceptual and encoding stage or are they more selective in retaining social information and retrieving such information at recall? This study set out to answer these questions in a sample of 60 Asian and European American young adults (for details, see Wang, 2013b).
A random sampling method was used (Brewer, 1988). Participants received a text message, “What’s going on?” three times a day in a period of one week. They were asked to write down as soon as they read the message what was happening during the past 30 minutes. At the end of the week, they were asked to recall the events that they had recorded in a surprise memory test. The immediate event entry reflected the amount of episodic detail being perceived and encoded, and the delayed recall tabulated retention and retrieval. The total number of propositions was tallied for each event entry and event recall to index the number of details at encoding and retrieval, respectively. Propositions concerning participants’ own emotions, actions, thoughts, preferences, and agency in their event descriptions were coded as personal (e.g., “I went over my stats homework.”). Propositions referring to social interactions, group activities, and the roles of others were coded as social (e.g., “Me and my roommate were watching a TV show online.”). Furthermore, the consistency between event entry and event recall was coded to index memory accuracy (Talarico & Rubin, 2003).

The results (see Figure 2) showed that compared with men, women perceived a greater number of event details at the encoding phase across all seven days of event recording and, subsequently, they provided more detailed memories at the delayed recall. Women also provided more consistent information between the encoding and retrieval phases and thus had greater memory accuracy than did men. These findings were corroborated in a more recent study by Grysman (2017) who found that women reported more event details than did men shortly after an event took place and that the gender differences remained stable 10 to 13 weeks later. Interestingly, gender difference in memory content in the present study was not apparent until recall, whereby women recalled more social details relative to personal details at the retrieval phase than did men. There was a trend that while social orientation in memory content increased from encoding to retrieval for women, it decreased from encoding to retrieval for men.

The Asian participants (N = 30) in this sample were from a variety of Asian cultural backgrounds and moved to the United States at different ages ranging from 0 to 18 years. Given this diverse sample, directly contrasting Asian and European American groups in preliminary analyses showed no significant cultural differences. On the other hand, this sample provided a great opportunity to examine the impact of acculturation on memory and narrative meaning-making. Research has shown that acculturation decreases with age at immigration and increases with years in the United States (Chudek, Cheung, & Heine, 2015). The age of moving to the United States was therefore used as a proxy for the level of acculturation. The results showed that among Asians, those who moved to the United States at an earlier age and were thus likely more Americanized perceived and, subsequently, recalled more event details than those who moved at an older age. This is consistent with previous cross-cultural findings that Asians tend to
Figure 2. (a) Mean number of event details, (b) mean social orientation score at encoding and retrieval, and (c) mean consistency score between encoding and retrieval as a function of gender and date of event recording. Error bars indicate standard errors of the mean (Wang, 2013b).

This study reveals a complex picture of the interaction between culture (in the forms of gender and acculturation), memory, and narrative across different stages of information processing. The general advantage women have over men in episodic memory (Grysman, 2017; Herlitz & Rehnman, 2008; Pillemer et al., 2003) appears to be a result of both greater attention to event information at encoding and greater accessibility to the information at recall in women than men. Narrative and verbal processing, of which women tend to have an advantage over men, may have directly contributed to the gender differences in encoding and retrieving event information (Herlitz & Rehnman, 2008). Pertaining to memory content, however, women did not initially encode event information with a greater social orientation than did men, but they recalled more social information by the time of retrieval. This pattern of results suggests that narrative meaning-making in memory construction may take place over time in a gendered fashion, such that the content of memories becomes increasingly reflective of gendered ideologies and practices that emphasize relatedness and care to women and autonomy and agency to men (Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Gilligan, 1992; Cross & Madson, 1997). It further indicates that memory narratives are not a simple reflection of the characteristics of the events, but individuals' interpretations of the events in line with their cultural beliefs and goals.

The effect of acculturation adds additional complexity to the picture. It has been proposed that in Western, particularly European American, cultures that embrace autonomous self-goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), individuals may be motivated to attend to, encode, and retain personal event information that serves as a central ingredient for self-identity. In contrast, many Asian cultures prioritize relational self-goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Remembering detailed personal experiences is not particularly valued in this cultural context and individuals may instead be motivated to retain information—not necessarily in the form of memory—that is critical for social harmony and collective solidarity (Wang, 2013a). This is indeed what cross-cultural studies have found, whereby European Americans tend to encode and recall more event-specific details than do Asians (Wang, 2006, 2009; Wang et al., 2011, 2014; Wang & Song, 2017). Findings from this study further suggest that the influence of culturally prioritized self-goals also takes place at the individual level, such that people perceive and remember event information in line with their internalized cultural framework through the acculturation process. Notably, the findings were based on a small sample and thus require future corroboration.

Taken together, this study illustrates the second theme of the cultural dynamic model, whereby the dynamic processes of remembering and narrative meaning-making manifest in complex ways pertaining to different aspects of memory and different stages of remembering. Narrative as both a cognitive tool and a cultural carrier empowers the encoding and representation of
memory and in the process deeply saturates memory over time to reflect cultural expectations and, ultimately, cultural templates of life stories (McLean, 2016; Wang, 2013a; Wertsch, 2008). The examination of cultural influences at group (i.e., gender) and individual levels (i.e., acculturation) shed critical light on the work of narrative in the cognitive process of personal remembering. It also has important implications for the role of narrative in the social process of joint reminiscing, which we turn to the next to illustrate the third theme of the cultural dynamic model.

**Case Study 3: Mother–Child Reminiscing About Peer Experiences: The Relation to Children's Relational Self-Concepts**

How children understand themselves in relation to others, particularly peers, is critical for their psychosocial adjustment and well-being (for reviews, see Rudolph & Asher, 2000). The relational self-concepts develop in increasing complexity and sophistication during middle childhood and are closely associated with children's everyday experiences with peers (Boivin & Hymel, 1997). Yet, they are not a mere reflection of children's peer experiences. For instance, aversive peer experiences only partially account for children's negative self-perceptions in relation to peers (Hymel, Franke, & Freigang, 1985), and there is not always a direct connection between peer aggression and children's self-evaluation of social competence (Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993; Patterson, Kupersmidt, & Griesler, 1990). This gap between children's peer experiences and relational self-concepts suggests other intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that may modulate children's interpretation of their experiences and, in turn, their self-making processes through the experiences. One interpersonal factor that may be of particular importance is parent–child joint reminiscing about peer experiences.

Family reminiscing practices in which parents and children recount, explain, and evaluate past peer experiences together may provide an important venue for children to form positive relational self-concepts (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Song & Wang, 2013). During such joint reminiscing, parents may supply an interpretive framework to help children make sense of their experiences and further construct coherent narrative representations of the self in relation to peers. Parents and children may also engage in active meaning-making by highlighting children's subjective perspectives on the past events, such as their thoughts, feelings, and personal judgments. In the face of negative experiences, parents may further suggest strategies to help children deal with peer difficulties and resolve negative affects (Bird & Reese, 2006; Fivush, Berlin, Sales, Mennuti-Washburn, & Cassidy, 2003; Kliewer et al., 2006).

Important from the current perspective, joint reminiscing is deeply situated in cultural contexts in which cultural norms and beliefs shape the process and
consequence of narrative meaning-making (Miller et al., 2007; Wang, 2013a; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002). To cultivate individuality and an autonomous sense of self, European-American mothers frequently refer to children’s roles and perspectives in the past events and discuss the causes and consequences of children’s internal states. In contrast, mothers in East Asian cultures, with the goal of promoting self-other relatedness and a sense of belongingness, often focus on social interactions and emphasize behavioral rules and disciplines while downplaying children’s subjective experiences (Fivush & Wang, 2005; Mullen & Yi, 1995; Wang, 2001b; Wang, Doan, & Song, 2010). Notably, past cross-cultural research on join reminiscing has focused on events that mothers and children participated together. It is possible that when discussing children’s experiences with peers, European-American mothers may continue to focus on their children’s roles and perspectives, whereas East Asian mothers may pay greater attention to peers and also frequently discuss with their children strategies to deal with peer conflict and maintain positive peers relations.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a longitudinal study on mother–child joint reminiscing of peer experiences in European-American and Chinese immigrant families, in relation to children’s relational self-concepts (Song & Wang, 2017). A total of 70 European-American and Chinese immigrant mothers and their 9- to 11-year-old children were interviewed twice at home, with an interval of 1 year. At both time points, mothers and children were asked to discuss two specific past events involving children and their peers, one event being emotionally positive to children and one being negative. Mother–child conversations were transcribed and coded for a set of meaning-making variables that included references and explanations about children’s internal states, references to peers, as well as coping strategies in discussing negative events. Children’s relational self-concepts were assessed with an open-ended task in which children provided free-narrative descriptions about the self in relation to peers. A composite score of positive relational self-concepts was constructed.

As expected, European-American mothers and children generally referred more frequently to children’s subjective experiences and made more causal explanations about children’s internal states than did their Chinese counterparts. In contrast, Chinese immigrant mothers and children more frequently referred to the roles of peers in the past events. This pattern of results was especially evident in the discussion of negative peer experiences, consistent with previous observations that group and individual differences are particularly salient in reminiscing of negative events, which likely involves greater meaning-making efforts in relation to the self (Bird & Reese, 2006; Marin, Bohanek, & Fivush, 2008; Reese Bird, & Tripp, 2007; Wang et al., 2010). Thus, in line with their respective cultural self-goals, European-American mothers attended more to their children’s thoughts and feelings when discussing interpersonal events, particularly negative ones, whereas Chinese immigrant mothers and children paid more attention to other people.
Furthermore, compared with European-American mothers, Chinese immigrant mothers suggested more active-cognitive strategies when discussing negative peer events, such as to provide positive interpretations of the events or the peers’ intentionality during conflict. This is in line with past research showing that Asian American individuals often adjust their feelings and thoughts to adapt to the reality and cope with interpersonal stressors (Lam & Zane, 2004; Song & Wang, 2014). Moreover, Chinese immigrant mothers and children also discussed more frequently behavioral strategies to deal with peer conflicts, including both active actions such as to directly solve problems or seek adult support, and passive actions such as problem avoidance and social withdrawal. Thus, to maintain social harmony and positive peer relations, joint reminiscing in the Chinese immigrant families focused on helping children understand and solve peer conflicts.

Across the entire sample, mother–child joint reminiscing that frequently referred to and explained about children’s internal states, particularly in negative events, was associated with children’s positive relational self-concepts concurrently and longitudinally. This is consistent with previous studies showing that emotion talk helps children discern meaning from past experiences and further construct self-identity through narrative (Laible & Song, 2006; Reese et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2010; Wang & Song, 2013). Furthermore, references to peers in negative events were associated with positive relational self-concepts concurrently and longitudinally, although the relations were only significant for Chinese immigrant children. Focusing on the roles of peers may allow children to understand the negative incidents from the peers’ standpoints, which may facilitate a broader perspective to reflect on, reconstrue, and make positive meaning out of the experience (Kross & Ayduk, 2011). This may be particularly important for Chinese children for whom cultural beliefs and practices emphasize attentiveness to others for the understanding of oneself (Miller et al., 2007; Wang, 2013a; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002). Interestingly, whereas mother–child reminiscing that involved cognitive strategies of positive framing of negative events was positively associated with children’s positive relational self-concepts for Chinese, the relation was negative for reminiscing that involved behavioral strategies for both groups. These results reflect the notion that cognitive reconstruction and meaning-making is critical in mediating the effect of experiences on self-views (Abaied & Rudolph, 2011; Bird & Reese, 2006), and that positive reappraisal of negative social encounters may be particularly important for Asians for whom relationships largely constitute who they are (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Song & Wang, 2013). Behavioral strategies may help children solve peer conflict at hand, but the lack of meaning-making may prevent children from integrating the information in constructive ways to build positive self-views.

Taken together, this study illustrates the third theme of the cultural dynamic model, whereby reminiscing, just like personal remembering, is deeply
conditioned by cultural self-goals and beliefs, which dictate what, how, and why everyday conversations about the past are carried out. During this joint activity, parents and other socialization agents guide children to re-experience past events, evaluate what happened from their current perspectives, make sense of the causes and consequences, relate the past to the child’s present sense of self, and in this process transmit to children culture-specific modes of personal remembering and narrative self-making. These dynamic narrative interactions further serve culture-specific purposes for self and psychosocial functioning.

The role of narrative in the context of joint reminiscing is multifold. It is the tool of communication of personal stories that goes above and beyond the sheer communicative function of language, whereby it provides temporal-causal structures to make the past events tellable and communicable. Narrative is also a tool of meaning-making, where different interlocutors compare, negotiate, and share their perspectives on the past events and in the process co-construct a collective memory. Narrative further serves as a representational tool to encode individual versions of a past experience and later the shared version of a collective memory. More important from the current perspective, all these processes unfold in the cultural context that supplies narrative templates and further gives rise to personal stories and narrative identities appropriate to cultural expectations (McLean, 2016; Miller et al, 2007; Wang, 2013a).

**Conclusions**

The process of meaning-making serves as the essential glue to connect together the cognitive processes of remembering, the active acts of narration and personal storytelling, and the manifestation of cultural influences within and between individuals (Figure 1). The cultural dynamic model of memory and narrative self-making, we outlined in this article, provides an important framework to understand the dynamic relations between culture, memory, and narrative. It construes remembering and narrative self-making as two simultaneous constructive processes thoroughly immersed in a social-historical-cultural milieu and deeply conditioned by a multitude of cultural beliefs and practices. Cultural influences operate not only on how we recall our experiences and tell our life stories but also what we perceive as our experiences unfold and thus what is later available to us for remembering and personal storytelling. Such influences are further sustained by mnemonic practices in the family and in the society at large (Miller et al, 2007; Wang, 2013a; Wertsch, 2008). Parents, in particular, scaffold a communicative context in line with their cultural beliefs and socialization goals. Through joint reminiscing, they instill, consciously or unconsciously, in their children culture-specific ways of remembering and personal storytelling. This enculturation process perpetuates cultural influences on memory and narrative identity across generations.
Our case studies further illustrate that narrative and its inherent process of meaning-making facilitates the formation and representation of personal and collective memories on the one hand, and transmits the power of culture in shaping the form, content, and function of memories and personal stories on the other. The temporal-causal structures of narrative afford interpretive meanings, personal and cultural ones, to experiences as they are perceived, encoded, retained, and later retrieved and shared. Thus, remembering is a process of cultural reconstruction facilitated by narrative, and the outcome of such reconstruction that is often expressed via narrative reflects individuals’ interpretations of what happened in line with their cultural beliefs and goals. The resulting products of memories and personal stories, in turn, contribute to self-identity and psychosocial functioning corresponding to cultural expectations, thus perpetuating culturally endorsed self-goals and motives. As such, selves and cultures became mutually constitutive.

Through our analysis, it becomes clear that the act of narrative meaning-making is indeed a process of cultural interpretation and reconstruction (Bruner, 1990). As long as individuals live in a sociocultural world and assume memberships of the society, they engage in cultural learning and acquire cultural knowledge that guides their behavior and cognition. Thus, whereas narrative is indispensable for the study of cultural influences on remembering and meaning-making, the integration of culture in narrative research is critical to further our understanding of the nature and utility of narrative.

The cultural dynamic model has been applied to the study of various aspects of autobiographical memory and personal narrative, including content, specificity, valence, function, general accessibility, and the developmental origin, in cultural contexts (Wang, 2016, in press). Future studies will continue to identify cultural variables that affect the processes of remembering and meaning-making, delineate their effects on various stages of remembering, and examine how they are transmitted to children through early socialization. The cultural dynamic model can further shed light on the interplay between personal memory and collective memory, whereby the dynamic influence of culture on personal memory and storytelling may forge a culture-specific mode of remembering and storytelling in a given community and further shape the formation of collective memory and identity. Furthermore, the model can be applied to examining exciting new questions pertaining to our changing time and culture. For example, the emergence of Internet technology provides new cultural tools that have profoundly influenced the development and expression of the autobiographical self (Wang, 2013a). To study how the “Internet’s storytellers” (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) remember and share their experiences online will be a fruitful area of inquiry for narrative and memory researchers in the years to come.
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