Emotion Talk in Mother-Child Conversations of the Shared Past: The Effects of Culture, Gender, and Event Valence

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We examined how mother–child emotional reminiscing is affected by culture, gender, and the valence of the event. Thirty-one Euro-American and 30 Chinese middle-class mothers and their 3-year-old children discussed 1 highly positive and 1 highly negative experience. Mothers and children in both cultures used a greater variety of negative emotion words than positive emotion words and were more likely to confirm a shared emotional perspective when discussing the positive event but to negotiate emotion when discussing the negative event. Moreover, Chinese dyads used more negative emotion words overall than did Euro-American dyads but Euro-American dyads engaged in more negotiations of emotion than did Chinese dyads. Surprisingly, there were no effects of gender. Implications of these findings for emotional socialization are discussed.

The ways in which we remember the emotional events of our lives may be particularly important for the development of self-concept. Highly emotional events tend to be more distinctive and more durable in memory (Christianson, 1992; Fivush, 1998) and therefore these events may come to form the core of an autobiographical knowledge base. Moreover, emotional events may be more informative about the self by providing more information about the “internal landscape of consciousness” (Bruner, 1987) than do more mundane or neutral events. Previous research

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has established that children learn how and what to remember about their lives through participating in adult-guided reminiscing (see Nelson & Fivush, 2000, for a review). How might adults reminisce about highly emotional events with their young children and how might this differ across culture and gender in ways that might influence children’s developing representations of autobiography and self?

Parents in different cultures tend to use varied ways of engaging their young children in memory conversations (Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997; Mullen & Yi, 1995; Wang, 2001a; Wang, Leichtman, & Davies, 2000), differences that reflect distinct socialization goals. During memory sharing between Euro-American parents and children, children often are the focal point of the conversation, and parents assist children’s participation by providing elaborate details and encouraging children to express their own opinions and feelings. In contrast, Korean and Chinese parents often take a leading and directive role during memory conversations, asking pointed questions and correcting children’s responses. When conversing with children about shared emotional experiences (Wang, 2001a), Euro-American parents often elaborate on the cause of children’s feeling states and discuss in great detail why and how children felt a specific emotion. In comparison, Chinese parents do not seem particularly concerned about explaining the antecedents of their children’s feeling states but instead emphasize psychological discipline. They also tend to view emotion as a consequence of children’s social acts (e.g., feeling sad as a result of violating rules) and to use it to instill in children proper behavioral conduct. It appears that American parents use memory talk to help children develop a unique autobiographical self and understand and cope with negative feelings, whereas Chinese parents use it to teach children cultural values with respect to self-criticism, social hierarchy, and moral rectitude (Wang, 2004; Wang & Fivush, 2003).

Research with Euro-American populations has further demonstrated that both mothers and fathers talk about emotion more with preschool daughters than with sons (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Fivush, 1989, 1991; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Kuebli & Fivush, 1992). These differences may be especially pronounced for negative emotions: Both mothers and fathers talk more about sadness and more about general emotional negativity with daughters than with sons but there is some indication that they talk more about anger with sons than with daughters. Parents also engage in more elaborative conversations about emotions with daughters than with sons and use a more varied emotional vocabulary (see Fivush & Buckner, 2000, 2003, for reviews). Mother–son conversations about negative emotions are often brief, passing references, whereas mother–daughter conversations tend to be longer interchanges, using a large number of unique emotion words focusing on the expression, negotiation, and resolution of the emotional reaction. Cross-cultural studies have also shown that both Euro-American and Chinese parents refer more frequently to positive emotions with sons than with daughters (Wang et al., 2000) and they provide more causal expla-
nations of feeling states to daughters than to sons regardless of the emotion under discussion (Wang, 2001a).

The ways in which emotions are discussed in everyday conversations influence children’s developing understanding of emotion and emotional regulation. At least within Euro-American culture, mothers who talk more about emotions early in their children’s development have children who come to talk more about emotions later in development (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994; Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991) and parents who discuss emotions in more integrative and elaborative ways have children who develop better prosocial skills and more positive peer interactions (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). In addition, different conversational styles about emotions in Euro-American and Chinese families appear to affect developmental outcomes such that American preschoolers are found to have better emotional understanding than their Chinese peers (Wang, 2003).

Talking about past emotions may be a particularly important avenue for emotional socialization for at least two reasons. First, in discussing past emotions, mothers and children are not in the heat of the moment and may be better able to reflect on and interpret children’s emotional experience. Second, in reminiscing, certain emotions may be highlighted and expressed whereas other emotions may be backgrounded. For example, mothers and children can choose to discuss an infrequent temper tantrum multiple times or rarely discuss temper tantrums that happen every day. In this way, children may be learning both what kinds of emotions are self-defining and which are appropriate to express and share with others (Fivush, 1993; Fivush, Berlin, Sales, Menutti-Washburn, & Cassidy, 2003).

Whereas there has been extensive research on parent–child reminiscing about everyday emotional events, very little research has examined parent–child reminiscing about highly emotional experiences. This is an important question for several reasons. First, as already mentioned, highly emotional events are generally better remembered over time than less emotional events and this holds for children as well as for adults (see Christianson & Lindholm, 1998; Fivush & Sales, 2003; and Pezdek & Taylor, 2001, for reviews). Further, highly emotional events, especially highly negative events, may be particularly difficult, and yet important, for children to understand and cope with, and thus the ways in which parents help young children to structure and understand these experiences may have implications for children’s emotional well-being (Fivush, 1998; Fivush & Sales, 2003; Sales & Fivush, 2003).

Sales, Fivush, and Peterson (2003) examined parent–child conversations about a highly stressful experience, an injury requiring emergency room treatment, and a positive experience, such as a family outing or a visit to or from relatives. Parent–child conversations about the negative events included more causal talk than did conversations about the positive event but there was more talk about emotion in the positive than the negative event conversations. In contrast, Ackil, Van Abbema, and Bauer (2003) found more talk about both causes and emotions in mother–child
conversations about a devastating tornado than in conversations about an emotion- ally positive experience. Finally, Sales, and Fivush (2003) compared mother–child conversations about a highly traumatic event, the child’s life-threatening asthma attack, to a moderately stressful event, a parent–child conflict. Euro-American mothers discussed causes more in conversations about the moderately stressful event than about the highly stressful event, but there were no differences in the amount of emotion talk. Most interesting, mothers who talked more about causes and emotions when discussing the moderately stressful event had children who showed fewer psychological symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, and aggression.

Overall, it is clear that parents focus more on causal talk when reminiscing about negative than about positive experiences. This kind of talk most likely helps the child to understand how and why the event occurred and to construct a more coherent narrative framework. The role of emotion in these conversations is less clear, however. Further, the positive and negative, even traumatic, events in these studies might not be comparable in terms of their emotional intensity. Do parents discuss emotions more or less when reminiscing about highly positive versus negative experiences? Exactly what kinds of emotions are discussed in these conversations, how are they discussed, and how might this vary as a function of culture, gender, and the emotional valence of the event? To date, a few studies have examined the number of emotions mentioned in these conversations, but the way in which emotions are embedded in longer conversations focusing on the expression, elaboration, and negotiation of emotional reactions has not yet been examined for highly emotional events nor has that been compared between highly positive and negative events, or across cultures.

In this study, we therefore conducted an in-depth examination of the emotional content of Euro-American and Chinese mother–child dyads discussing a highly positive and a highly negative event. Integrating across the research on parent–child reminiscing about everyday and more highly emotional experiences, we predicted that Euro-American mothers and children would engage in more elaborated conversations focused on emotions than would Chinese mothers and children, although the two groups might not differ in the sheer frequency and variety of emotions they discussed given the focus on highly emotional events. We also predicted, within each culture, that mothers would initiate more conversations about emotion and more elaborated conversations about emotions with daughters than with sons and, more specifically, that mothers would talk about negative emotions, especially sadness, more with daughters than with sons. Given the mixed findings in the literature on emotion talk between highly positive and negative events, we could not make any clear predictions but we assumed that mothers and children would use appropriately valenced emotion words in each context (i.e., positive emotion words when discussing the positive event and negative emotion words when discussing the negative event). We also assumed that, because parents may
be more concerned with helping their children to understand and interpret their emotional experiences during negative events than during positive events, mothers and children would have more elaborated conversations about negative emotions than about positive emotions.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Thirty-one Euro-American (abbreviated “U.S.”) mother–child pairs from Ithaca, New York (14 girls and 17 boys, age range = 31–47 months, \( M = 40.16 \)), and 30 Chinese mother–child pairs from Beijing, China (16 girls, 14 boys, age range = 35–42 months, \( M = 39.13 \)), participated. In both cultures, families were middle class and most mothers had at least a college education. In the U.S. families, 1 child was an only child, 12 were firstborn, 15 were later born, and 3 mothers did not provide birth order information. All of the Chinese children were only children. Children were given a small gift for participating.

**Procedure**

Mothers were initially contacted through the preschools their children attended. Trained native research assistants informed mothers that we were interested in children’s memory and that to collect information in as natural a way as possible we would ask mothers to discuss several past experiences with their children during home visits. Once a mother agreed to participate, a research assistant visited the home and asked the mother to nominate as many specific, one-time very emotionally positive and emotionally negative experiences that she and the child had participated in together. The researcher then asked the mother to select from the nominated events an extremely positive experience, one of the best things that had ever happened to her child, and an extremely negative event, one of the worst things that had ever happened to her child. The mother and child then sat together in a quiet place in the home and the mother was asked to discuss these two events with her child in as natural a way as possible. Order of discussion of positive and negative events was counterbalanced within each culture group. No time restrictions were placed on the mothers. All conversations were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim in the original languages for coding and analysis.

**Coding**

Coding focused on characterizing the emotional content of these conversations in two ways, as the number and type of specific emotion words used by participants
and as the number and type of conversational exchanges focused on emotional experience.

**Emotion words.** Each emotion word mentioned by either the mother or the child was counted. Emotion words were both specific emotional reactions (e.g., happy, scared, upset, angry, excited) as well as emotion behaviors (e.g., crying, laughing). Words such as *good* and *bad* were only counted when they referred to a feeling state (e.g., the mother asks, “How did you feel about that?” and the child responds, “Good”) but not when they referred to behavior (e.g., the mother says, “You were a good girl”). Once all emotion words were identified, they were further identified as expressing positive or negative valence. In addition to counting the total number of words used, we also counted the number of unique emotion words used; that is, mothers could use the word “sad” several times in a conversation and for the total number of words used, each and every time she used this word it would be counted. In the count of unique words, this would only be counted once. In counting the number of unique emotion words, we collapsed across valence within positive and negative events because there were so few cross-valenced words in the conversations. Further, because we were specifically interested in cultural and gender differences in the use of specific types of negative emotion words, we counted the number of times specific negative emotion words expressing sadness (e.g., *sad, unhappy, shang-xin, nan-guo*), anger (e.g., *angry, mad, sheng-qi, fa-pi-qi*) and fear (e.g., *frightened, scared, hai-pa*) were used.

Thus, we calculated (a) the total number of positive and negative words used in each event conversation; (b) the total number of unique emotion words used in each event conversation; and (c) the total number of times specific emotion words referring to sadness, anger, or fear were used, and these counts were done separately for mothers and children. Note that words referring to sadness, fear, and anger were used so rarely in the positive event conversations that we collapsed the use of these words across the two conversations. Finally, we initially coded for the reference of the emotion word, whether it referred to the emotion of the child or someone else, but virtually all emotion words used by both mothers and children referred to the children’s emotion, so we did not include this variable in our analyses.

**Emotion exchanges.** Once all emotion words were identified, the types of exchanges in which these words were embedded were further coded to characterize the interaction about this emotion into one of the following four categories (adopted from Fivush, 1989):

- **Attribution**—The mother or child attributes an emotional state to self or other, but the other conversational participant does not respond to this initiation. For example, the mother (M) says, “Were you scared of the thunder?” and the child (C) responds, “It was raining hard.”
Confirmation–Denial—The mother or child attributes an emotional state to self or other and the other participant confirms (e.g., M: “Were you scared? C: “Yes”) or denies it (e.g., M: “Were you scared?” C: “No”) and no further discussion of the emotion ensues. Note that although we coded for denials, these were so rare that we collapsed them into the simple confirmation category.

Elaboration—The mother and child engage in an extended conversation about an emotion on which they agree. By definition, in contrast to an attribution or a simple confirmation, this must extend over at least three conversational turns (e.g., M: “Were you scared?” C: “Yes” M: “Yes, I had never seen you so scared. What was so scary?” C: “The loud noise”).

Negotiation—The mother and child have an extended conversation about an emotion in which they disagree about the emotional reaction. Again, in contrast to a simple negation, by definition a negotiation must consist of at least three conversational turns. Negotiations can either be extended denials (e.g., M: “Were you scared?” C: “No” M: “No? You seemed really scared. You came into Mommy and Daddy’s room” C: “I wasn’t scared”) or disagreements about the actual emotion experienced (e.g., M: “You were angry when Jenny wouldn’t play with you” C: “No, sad” M: “Sad? I thought you were angry. Were you sad?” C: “Yes” M: “OK, I guess you were sad and angry”).

Note that, by definition, when an exchange extended over more than two conversational turns, it was categorized as an elaboration or a negotiation, not as an attribution or confirmation. Emotional exchanges were coded for the dyad, not for the mother and child independently.

Reliability. Coders were trained to criteria on these coding schemes and then the U.S. transcripts were coded by native English speakers and the Chinese transcripts by native Chinese speakers. For each set of transcripts, two coders independently coded approximately one third of the transcripts for reliability. For the number and type of emotion words, reliability was 94% for the U.S. transcripts (range from 88–100%) and 97% for the Chinese transcripts (range from 87.5–100%), and for the type of exchanges, reliability was 88% for the U.S. transcripts (range from 82–98%) and 92% for the Chinese transcripts (range from 82–100%).

RESULTS

Analyses focused on differences by culture, gender of child, and valence of emotional event being discussed in the number and type of emotion words and exchanges. All significant ($p < .05$) repeated measures effects were followed up with univariate tests for within-subjects factors and Tukey’s post hoc tests for between-subject factors at the $p < .05$ level. Before detailing statistical analyses,
we first provide a descriptive overview of the types of emotional events mothers nominated.

**Description of Nominated Events**

As described in the method section, we first asked mothers to generate a list of highly positive and highly negative events that they had experienced with their children. Overall, U.S. mothers generated about twice as many events ($M = 10.97$ events) than did Chinese mothers ($M = 6.10$ events). Further, many of the events generated by Chinese mothers were general rather than specific (e.g., nominating “going to the park” for a positive event, rather than “last Sunday in the park”). In total, 52% of the positive events and 61% of the negative events Chinese mothers generated were a specific event located in a particular time and place, whereas 100% of the events generated by U.S. mothers were specific. Mothers in both cultures generated more positive ($M = 5.05$) than negative ($M = 3.60$) events, but similar numbers of events for males ($M = 8.42$) and females ($M = 8.73$).

Examination of the types of events mothers nominated indicated that the events could be classified as expressing interpersonal themes, in which the event focused on social interactions or other people, and personal themes, in which the child was the focus of the event. Categories of events were empirically derived from the nominated events (see Table 1), and each event was placed in one of these mutually exclusive categories. A second coder independently categorized all events and achieved 92% agreement. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. Table 1 lists the types of events mothers in each culture generated by valence, gender, and type of theme. Because of the cultural differences in the number of events generated, these are presented as percentages. Percentages of the types of events actually selected for discussion are shown in parentheses.

Positive interpersonal events included family outings to such places as amusement parks, zoos, and museums, as well as family vacations, holiday celebrations, and birthday parties. Positive interpersonal events also included visits to or from relatives or friends and a few events about the child compromising to maintain family harmony. Finally, praise was an interpersonal event in that it focused on how others viewed the child’s behavior or accomplishment. Positive personal events were rare and focused on getting a new coveted possession. Negative interpersonal events included separations from parents when being left at school or with a babysitter; a conflict between the parent and child or between the child and another person, usually a peer or sibling; or events about the death or injury of another, such as a grandparent or pet dying or a parent being hurt. Scolding was also in this category because these events involved adult punishment to the child for his or her wrongdoing. Finally, negative personal events focused on medical events concerning the child, including injuries, doctor visits, and medical procedures; losing a prized possession or experiencing a disappointment about being unable to do
something the child wanted; or being scared by things such as thunder and roller coasters. In addition, a few Chinese mothers nominated events in which the child was scared by having to participate in a new experience, such as a new school.

As Table 1 shows, the overwhelming majority of positive events were interpersonal across culture and gender. In contrast, only about half of the negative events were interpersonal for U.S. mothers of sons and daughters and Chinese mothers of daughters. Chinese mothers of sons still nominated a large majority of interpersonal themes for the negative event. Although there were many similarities across cultures and genders in the specific types of events nominated, a few differences were particularly apparent. First, U.S. mothers nominated many more vacations,
holidays, and birthday celebrations than did Chinese mothers, who nominated a
greater percentage of events concerning relationships and interactions. For the
negative events, Chinese mothers, especially mothers of sons, nominated many
more parent–child conflicts than did U.S. mothers, and U.S. mothers nominated
more medical procedures and doctor visits and scary things as negative events than
did Chinese mothers. Finally, whereas scolding was a reasonably frequently gener-
ated event for Chinese mothers, it was never mentioned by U.S. mothers.

Table 1 also displays the percentage of each type of event that was selected for
discussion by U.S. and Chinese dyads. All events selected for discussion were spe-
cific, one-time events, and, as can be seen, the pattern is quite similar to the events
nominated overall. More specifically, Chinese dyads and U.S. mother–daughter
dyads overwhelmingly discussed family outings as their positive event, but U.S.
mother–son positive conversations covered a greater variety of themes. For nega-
tive events, Chinese dyads seemed more likely to discuss a parent–child conflict
than U.S. dyads, whereas U.S. dyads seemed more likely to select a lost possession
or scary things as their negative event. Finally, only U.S. mother–daughter dyads
selected another’s illness or death as their negative event.

A preliminary 2 (culture) × 2 (gender) × 2 (type of event: positive versus nega-
tive) analysis on the total number of propositions mothers used indicated no cul-
tural difference for either event (\(M = 88.00, SD = 59.16\) for positive events, and \(M =
49.52, SD = 28.82\) for negative events for U.S. mothers, and \(M = 61.40, SD = 45.38\)
for positive events, and \(M = 41.63, SD = 34.49\) for negative events for Chinese
mothers) but mothers in both cultures used a greater number of propositions when
discussing the positive as compared to the negative events, \(F(1, 57) = 27.61\). Simi-
larly, children in both cultures used more propositions when discussing the posi-
tive (U.S. \(M = 50.54, SD = 43.43\); Chinese \(M = 38.28, SD = 33.23\)) than the nega-
tive events (U.S. \(M = 27.97, SD = 17.73\); Chinese \(M = 21.19, SD = 21.20\)), \(F(1, 57)
= 23.91\) (see Wang & Fivush, 2003, for additional details of the types of proposi-
tions used by culture and event type).

### Emotion Words

Means and standard deviations for the total number of emotion words used by
mothers and children are displayed in Table 2 by culture, event type, and emotional
valence of the word. A 2 (culture) × 2 (gender) × 2 (event: positive or negative) × 2
(valence: positive or negative) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA),
with event and valence as within-subjects repeated measures, on the number of
emotion words used by mothers revealed no main effects but did reveal interac-
tions between culture and valence of word used, \(F(1, 57) = 6.39\), between type of
event and valence, \(F(1, 57) = 67.77\), and between culture, event, and valence, \(F(1,
57) = 4.93\). When discussing the emotionally positive event, mothers in both cul-
tures used more positive emotion words than negative emotion words, \(F(1, 59) =

When discussing the negative event, mothers in both cultures used more negative emotion words than positive emotion words, \( F(1, 59) = 31.46 \). This was especially pronounced for Chinese mothers, who used more negative emotion words when discussing the negative event than did U.S. mothers, \( F(1, 59) = 13.24 \) (see Table 2).1

A parallel analysis on the number of words children used revealed a main effect of culture, \( F(1, 57) = 5.48 \), and significant interactions between event and valence, \( F(1, 57) = 39.19 \), and between culture, event, and valence, \( F(1, 57) = 8.88 \). Chinese children used more emotion words overall than did U.S. children. Similar to mothers, children in both cultures used more positive emotions words than negative emotion words when discussing the positive event, \( F(1, 59) = 20.98 \), and more negative emotion words than positive emotion words when discussing the negative event, \( F(1, 59) = 26.93 \); again, this was especially pronounced for the Chinese children, \( F(1, 59) = 9.58 \) (see Table 2).

A 2 (culture) × 2 (gender) × 2 (event type) repeated measures ANOVA on number of unique emotion words used by mothers revealed only that mothers in both cultures used a greater variety of emotion words when discussing the negative event (\( M = 2.74, SD = .23 \)) than when discussing the positive event (\( M = 2.13, SD = .21 \)), \( F(1, 57) = 4.25 \). Chinese children used a greater variety of emotion words overall than U.S. children (\( M = 1.47, SD = .16 \), compared to \( M = 0.90, SD = .16 \)), \( F(1, 57) = 6.02 \); this was especially pronounced when discussing the positive event (\( M = 1.51, SD = .21 \), for the Chinese children, and \( M = 0.52, SD = .20 \), for the U.S. children), \( F(1, 57) = 5.33 \). Finally, when discussing the positive event, boys used a

<table>
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<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Children</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. China</td>
<td>Mean U.S. China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive event</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive valence</td>
<td>4.54 5.29</td>
<td>4.40 4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative valence</td>
<td>0.35 0.84</td>
<td>0.54 0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative event</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive valence</td>
<td>1.74 1.88</td>
<td>0.93 1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative valence</td>
<td>2.87 2.75</td>
<td>6.24 5.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Although mothers and children in both cultures spoke more when discussing the positive than the negative event, there were no main effects of event and so the obtained differences were not simply a function of overall amount of talk.
greater variety of emotion words (\(M = 1.12, SD = .20\)) than did girls (\(M = 0.91, SD = .21\)), \(F(1, 57) = 4.19\).

The final analysis examined the use of specific emotion words referring to sadness, fear, and anger (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations). For mothers, a 2 (culture) × 2 (gender) × 3 (type of word used) repeated measures ANOVA revealed a Culture × Type of Word interaction, \(F(2, 114) = 4.97\). As can be seen in Table 3, U.S. mothers mentioned sadness more than Chinese mothers did but there were no cultural differences in mention of anger or fear. Indeed, U.S. mothers mentioned sadness significantly more than fear, \(t(30) = 2.67\), and anger, \(t(30) = 1.96\). Chinese mothers mentioned sadness less than anger, \(t(29) = 2.22\), but not less than fear. The patterns of means were similar for the children but frequencies of mention of these words were too low to allow for statistical comparison. As we reported earlier, Chinese dyads used more negative emotion words overall than did U.S. dyads. In addition to sadness, fear, and anger, Chinese mothers and children referred to a variety of negative emotions (often moral emotions) including dislike (bu-xi-huan, bu-ai), pity (ke-lian), embarrassment (bu-hao-yi-si), not being brave (bu-yong-gan), feeling guilty inside (kui-xin), and being wronged (wei-qu). The frequency of each type of these emotion words was too low to warrant analysis.

In summary, mothers and children in both cultures used emotion words appropriate to the valence of the event under discussion, and there were no differences in overall number of emotion words used between positive and negative events. However, Chinese mothers and children used substantially more negative emotion words overall when discussing a negative event than did U.S. mothers and children, although U.S. dyads discussed sadness more than Chinese dyads. Mothers and children in both cultures used a greater variety of emotion words when discussing a negative than a positive event. Chinese children used a greater number and variety of emotion words overall than did U.S. children and boys used a greater variety of emotion words than did girls when discussing a positive event.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion word</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Emotional Exchanges

The next set of analyses focused on the kinds of conversational exchanges in which the emotion words were embedded. As described in the method section, exchanges were coded for the dyad as attributions, confirmations, elaborations, or negotiations. These means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 4 by culture and type of event. A preliminary analysis on the percentage of emotion exchanges initiated by the mother revealed no significant effects. Overall, mothers initiated 84% of all exchanges. However, a 2 (culture) × 2 (gender) × 2 (event type) × 4 (exchange type) repeated measures ANOVA, with event and exchange type as within-subjects repeated measures, on the number of exchanges revealed a main effect of type of exchange, $F(3, 171) = 9.67$, and significant interactions between event type and type of exchange, $F(3, 171) = 4.80$, and culture and type of exchange, $F(3, 171) = 2.19$.

Across conversations, dyads engaged in more elaborations ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 2.11$) than attributions ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.61$), $t(60) = 2.70$; confirmations ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 1.33$), $t(60) = 3.35$; or negotiations ($M = 0.89$, $SD = 1.79$), $t(60) = 4.68$. Attributions were also more frequent than negotiations, $t(60) = 2.25$, but did not differ from confirmations. Further, dyads engaged in more confirmations during the positive event conversations than the negative event conversations, $t(60) = 2.05$, and more negotiations during the negative event conversations than the positive event conversations, $t(60) = 6.73$. There were no differences in attributions or elaborations between positive and negative events. Finally, U.S. dyads engaged in more negotiations overall ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 2.27$) than did Chinese dyads ($M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(59) = 1.91$, $p = .06$. There were no cultural differences for attributions, confirmations, or elaborations. In summary, elaborations were the most frequent type of emotional exchange in both cultures. Confirmations were more frequent when discussing positive experiences than negative experiences. Negotiations were more frequent when discussing negative experiences than positive experiences, and more frequent among U.S. dyads than among Chinese dyads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation type</th>
<th>Positive Event</th>
<th>Negative Event</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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Mean Number and Standard Deviations of each Type of Conversation by Culture and Event Type.
Our major objective in this study was to examine the emotional content of memory conversations of mother–child dyads from two cultures discussing highly emotional experiences. We found both similarities and differences in the ways that U.S. and Chinese dyads engaged in talking about emotions. Specifically, when discussing negative experiences, mothers and children in both cultures used a greater variety of emotion words and engaged in more negotiations about the child’s emotion than when discussing positive experiences. In comparison, when discussing positive events, emotional conversations in both cultures were more likely to confirm the child’s emotional experience.

This pattern most likely reflects the different functions that emotional reminiscing may play for positive versus negative events (Fivush et al., 2003; Sales et al., 2003; Wang & Fivush, 2003). Whereas reminiscing about positive events maintains and strengthens emotional bonds between the conversational partners and creates a sense of shared history, reminiscing about negative events is focused on helping children understand and resolve negative affect. Thus, when reminiscing about positive events and their concomitant emotions, confirmations may help create a shared perspective between mother and child. When reminiscing about negative experiences, however, the dyad must work harder to express, explain, and resolve the negative affect, thus yielding more negotiated emotion talk.

Although differences between positive and negative events were similar across these two cultures, there were still intriguing cultural differences. First, Chinese mothers and their children used more negative emotion words than did U.S. mothers and children. Fivush et al. (2003) have argued that discussion of negative emotion serves a didactic function, helping children learn appropriate emotional reactions and regulations. Perhaps Chinese mothers are more concerned than are U.S. mothers with socializing their children into appropriate display and regulation of aversive affect. In contrast, U.S. dyads were more likely to negotiate about emotional experiences than Chinese dyads. In this way, U.S. mothers seem to be more focused on understanding their children’s emotional experiences, discussing and negotiating how and what their children are feeling in more extended conversations. This pattern suggests that, even at this early point in development, U.S. children are more likely to disagree and argue with their mothers about their own emotional experience than are Chinese children. In this way, U.S. dyads assume that children have independent emotional experiences and have privileged knowledge of those experiences, whereas Chinese dyads seem to assume that mothers have as much access to their children’s emotional experiences as do the children themselves.

Moreover, U.S. and Chinese dyads focused on different negative emotions. Whereas sadness was the most frequent negative emotion discussed by U.S. dyads,
sadness was rarely discussed by Chinese dyads. Sadness is obviously an emotion that is linked to internalization of negative affect and may be linked to rumination and depression (Fivush & Buckner, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). In addition, sadness may be particularly difficult to resolve, because it reflects a loss of an irretrievable goal, such as the loss of a personal relationship or a prized possession (Stein, Wade, & Liwag, 1996). In some sense there is nothing to do to resolve sadness other than to share it with others for social and emotional support (Fivush et al., 2003). In U.S. culture, sharing this kind of emotion is considered particularly important, but in Chinese culture, this may not be so to the same extent. Indeed, Chinese dyads discussed more anger than sadness in their conversations. Anger reflects a negative emotional state focusing on the cause of goal failure, with an expectation of goal reinstatement, such as getting back a prized possession taken away by someone or retaliation (Levine, 1995; Wang, 2003). It is therefore an especially dangerous emotion and needs to be resolved to maintain and promote social harmony (Wang, 2001a). Talking about anger thus helps children understand and unravel interpersonal conflicts (a concern reflected in both the nominated and discussed events by Chinese mothers, particularly the mothers of sons), which is central in Chinese culture.

Furthermore, when nominating shared emotional events, Chinese mothers generated about half the number of events than did U.S. mothers, and almost half of the events Chinese mothers nominated were general rather than specific episodes located at a particular time and place in the past. That Chinese mothers have difficulty generating specific highly emotional events is in accord with general findings of cultural differences in autobiographical memory. As adults, Chinese report a later age of earliest childhood memory, report sparser memories of their childhood, and narrate these memories in less elaborated detail than U.S. adults (Pillemer, 1998; Wang, 2001b; Wang, Conway, & Hou, 2004). Chinese adults are also more likely to narrate generic memories of their childhood than are U.S. adults. Parallel differences are further observed among children. U.S. preschoolers often provide more elaborate and detailed memory accounts and are more likely to recall specific, one-time events than their Chinese peers (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Wang, 2004). Our findings add to the literature by suggesting that Chinese adults may have more difficulty than U.S. adults in accessing specific highly emotional events that they had shared with their children. These cultural variations in memory specificity and elaboration may result from different reminiscing styles between parents and children in the two cultures (see Fivush & Nelson, 2004, and Wang & Brockmeier, 2002, for reviews). Because of the less elaborated reminiscing early in development within Chinese compared to U.S. families, Chinese children may not develop elaborated narrative schemes for recalling the past, thus leading to less detailed and sparser memories in adulthood. Once they become parents themselves, they are therefore likely to adopt a less elaborated
reminiscing style when sharing the past with their own children, thus perpetuating the cultural genres of autobiographical memory across generations.

To our surprise, we found no differences in how either U.S. or Chinese mothers discussed emotion with daughters compared to sons. In particular, in the context of the highly negative experiences, gender differences seem to be attenuated, suggesting that when discussing highly emotional events, explanation and resolution of negative affect is as important for mother–son dyads as for mother–daughter dyads. When discussing more everyday kinds of emotional experiences, however, gender differences are robust (see Fivush & Buckner, 2003, for a review; Wang, 2001a). This suggests that girls may be learning that emotions are an integral part of everyday experiences but both girls and boys are being socialized to express and explore their negative feelings in highly aversive events. Thus, like many of the gender differences in emotional expression among adults, differences emerge in everyday interactions but are attenuated when males and females are in highly emotional situations, such as recalling traumatic events (Porter & Birt, 2000) or participating in psychotherapy (Snell, Belk, Flowers, & Warren, 1988).

Finally, we must acknowledge several limitations to this study. Although we were interested in exploring possible cultural differences, only two relatively homogeneous cultures and one age group were sampled. Additional research exploring a wider variety of cultures and a wider variety of socioeconomic classes and ages is certainly needed. Further, we only sampled two events, one positive and one negative, and these events varied from dyad to dyad. Different types of negative events are likely to be discussed in different ways (see, e.g., Sales & Fivush, 2003). Finally, whereas we document here how highly emotional events are discussed, we do not provide any information about the developmental consequences of this kind of reminiscing. This, too, is clearly a critical question for future research. Thus, this study provides a beginning step that raises as many questions as it addresses.

Still, our results are provocative. Our results indicate that we must look beyond the sheer frequency of use of emotion words: We should study the specific types of emotion words used and the ways in which these emotions are embedded in conversational exchanges to examine both how children are learning to understand and express their emotional experiences and how these developmental lessons vary by culture and valence of the event.

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