Mother–Child Conversations of Emotionally Salient Events: Exploring the Functions of Emotional Reminiscing in European-American and Chinese Families

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Abstract

This study explores the functional variations in mother–child conversations of emotionally salient events in European-American and Chinese families. Thirty Chinese and 31 European-American 3-year-old children and their mothers participated. Mothers were asked to discuss with their children at home two specific one-point-in-time events in which they both participated. One event was extremely positive to the child, one extremely stressful. American mothers initiated more interactive and elaborative conversations that focused on the child's roles and predilections in the story, and they employed a 'cognitive approach' to emotional regulation by providing explanations for the cause of children's feeling states. Chinese mothers took a directive role in posing and repeating memory questions and focusing on social interaction, and they used a 'behavioral approach' to emotional regulation by emphasizing discipline and proper conduct to their children. Findings are discussed in light of cultural influences on the functions of emotional reminiscing for self and relationship construction and emotional regulation.

Keywords: culture; reminiscing; self; emotion

Parent–child conversations of shared emotionally salient events serve important psychosocial functions. Such conversations intensify self-awareness, strengthen social bonding between the child and significant others, teach children effective ways of coping with emotional experiences, and further build the critical link between autobiographical memory and self-concept (Ackil, Van Abbema & Bauer, 2003; Farrar, Fasig & Welch-Ross, 1997; Fivush, 1993; Fivush, Berlin, Sales, Mennuti-Washburn & Cassidy, 2003). However, little is known regarding how these functions manifest in different cultural contexts. As embodiments of cultural messages, early narrative environments may constitute important resources from which parents and children co-construct shared life stories that are precipitates of perceived societal requirements.
and purposes (Miller, Wiley, Fung & Liang, 1997; Mullen & Yi, 1995; Wang, Leichtman & Davies, 2000). Cross-cultural studies are therefore crucial to not only reveal cultural variations in the use of emotional reminiscing but also to identify important functions not readily observed in Western samples, thus extending our theoretical understanding of emotion socialization. To explore the multiple functions of emotional reminiscing consonant with divergent cultural goals, values, and belief systems, we examine in the present study the reminiscing style and thematic content of conversations of highly emotional experiences between European-American and Chinese mothers and their 3-year-old children.

**Style and Content of Mother–Child Reminiscing**

The style and content of mother–child reminiscing provide a unique lens by which to understand the psychosocial functions of such joint activities. Research with Western families has shown individual differences in parental reminiscing styles when conversing with their children about the shared past (Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Fivush, Haden & Adam, 1995; Harley & Reese, 1999; Leichtman, Pillemer, Wang, Koreishi & Han, 2000; Tessler & Nelson, 1994). High-elaborative parents often initiate lengthy conversations with their children, provide detailed memory information and feedback to scaffold children's participation, and model to children the ways and importance of constructing a coherent story of oneself. Low-elaborative parents, in contrast, tend to have short and directive conversations with their children during which they take a leading role in posing pointed questions and often switch topics without commenting on children's responses, with the conversation resembling a memory test. Importantly, parents who are highly elaborative early in development have children who come to remember and tell their personal stories in more detailed and narratively coherent ways by the end of the preschool years (Harley & Reese, 1999; Peterson & McCabe, 1994; Reese, Haden & Fivush, 1993).

In addition to stylistics differences, memory conversations also differ significantly in thematic content, particularly between genders. Parents with daughters more frequently situate the past event in an interpersonal context than do parents with sons, who place a greater emphasis on the autonomous role of the child. In addition, when discussing emotional events, parents with daughters often make more references to the child's feeling states and are more elaborative and evaluative than parents with sons (Fivush, 1994; Fivush et al., 2003).

If parent-scaffolded reminiscing reflects cultural values and beliefs regarding what is and what is not appropriate to recall, as well as how to relate self and other to autobiographical memories, then we would expect cultural differences in both the style and content of parent–child reminiscing. Indeed, cross-cultural studies have revealed that Asian (Chinese, Korean) parents often resemble low-elaborative parents in that they less frequently engage their children in talking about past events and often pose and repeat factual questions without providing embellished information (Wang, 2001a; Wang, Leichtman & Davies, 2000). In comparison, Euro-American parents more often use a high-elaborative style where they elaborate on and supplement children's responses and invite children to co-construct the story together. Furthermore, American parents tend to focus on the child's roles, predilections, and opinions in the memory event, whereas Asian parents frequently discuss social interactions and collective activities and refer to behavioral norms and expectations to children (Choi, 1992; Miller, Fung & Mintz, 1996; Miller, Wiley, Fung & Liang, 1997; Mullen & Yi,
1995; Wang, 2001a; Wang et al., 2000). When the events involved emotional experiences of the child, Euro-American mothers tend to provide rich explanations of the causes of emotions, whereas Chinese mothers often give moral judgments regarding children’s emotional experience or behavior (Wang, 2001a). No study as we know of, however, has examined how parents in different cultures discuss with their children highly emotional experiences. Such conversations, especially those of highly negative events, are crucial in helping children understand and regulate emotions and relate themselves to significant others (Ackil et al., 2003; Fivush, 1993; Sales, Fivush & Peterson, 2003). They may further differ in systematic ways across cultures that reflect specific cultural variations in the functions that parent–child reminiscing serves, namely, self-defining, social or relational, and emotional regulation (Bluck & Alea, 2002; Fivush et al., 2003; Wang, 2004a).

The Self and Relationships

Early parent–child reminiscing serves to facilitate the development of an autobiographical memory system, which helps the child to construct an enduring self-concept (Fivush, 1994; Nelson, 1996; Welch-Ross, Fasig & Farrar, 1999). Like other important socialization practices, family reminiscing acts to establish social connections and achieve individuation in the child, and thus creates individuals with both social (self-perceived connectedness) and personal (self-perceived distinctiveness) identities (Costanzo, 1992; Damon, 1983; Harter, 1998; Spiro, 1993). Although the processes of acquiring autonomy and relatedness often take place simultaneously and may hold true across cultures, one process may be more predominant than the other in a given society (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus & Nisbett, 1998; Kagitcibasi, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, 1989; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002).

The societal emphasis on individuality and personal uniqueness in Euro-American culture places a premium on the development of the autonomous aspects of the self. Individuals are encouraged to seek and maintain their independence from others by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing their unique inner attributes, thoughts, and feelings (Geertz, 1973; Kagitcibasi, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). In contrast, Chinese culture values group solidarity and social harmony, where the existence of an individual is viewed as being realized through reciprocally relating to significant others (Bond, 1991; Hsu, 1953). The development of the related aspects of the self that focus on one’s social roles, duties, and responsibilities is thus crucial in this cultural context (Chao, 1995; Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus & Miller, 1998; Wang, 2001b, 2004b).

The prevailing self-views in respective cultures may affect the self-defining and social-relational functions of memory conversations in terms of the type of self parents perceive as culturally adaptive (e.g., focusing on autonomy versus relatedness), and this may shape the ways parents reminisce with their young children. To facilitate the development of a unique personal identity and an autonomous self, parents may initiate lengthy memory conversations with children about events significant to the child, elaborate on specific details, and depict the child as the central character of the co-narrated story. In contrast, to encourage the development of a social identity and a relational self, parents may take a leading or directive role when carrying out memory conversations (thus defining the hierarchical relation between the parent and the child), prompting facts from the child with little elaboration or feedback and emphasizing to the child group activities and significant others.
Emotional Regulation

The ways in which emotions are discussed in reminiscing may help children learn how to interpret and regulate their emotional experience in relation to both self and other, especially negative affect. The therapeutic function of recounting stressful experiences has long been valued in Western traditions and has drawn wide attention in both empirical and clinical research (e.g., Antze, 1996; Herman, 1992; Pennebaker, 2003). Studies with Western families reveal that early family emotional discourse, that is, references to feeling states and causal explanations, plays an important role in helping children understand and regulate their emotions (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler & Ridgeway, 1986; Denham & Kochanoff, 2002; Denham, Zoller & Couchoud, 1994; Dunn, Brown & Beardsall, 1991; Fivush, 1993; Fivush et al., 2003). It is less clear how the emotional regulatory function of sharing memory narrative manifests in Chinese culture that tends to de-emphasize conversing about emotions (Bond, 1991; Hsu, 1953).

Divergent cultural beliefs regarding emotions entail different ways of emotional reminiscing across cultures. In Euro-American culture, emotion is regarded as a source of self-authenticity and a direct expression of the individual (Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Lupton, 1998). Parents are often eager to ‘help children to convey or articulate their own emotions and feelings so that ultimately they can “get their needs met”’ (Chao, 1995, p. 339). In contrast, in Chinese culture that puts a premium on social harmony and group interests, emotion is often viewed as disruptive or even dangerous to interpersonal relations and therefore needs to be strictly controlled (Chao, 1995; Chen, Hastings, Rubin, Chen, Cen & Stewart, 1998; Ho, 1986; Wang, 2001a, 2003). Consequently, Euro-American and Chinese parents may differ in the degree to which they encourage their children to express their emotions and to attend to the causes of the emotions.

Of particular importance, the use of emotional experiences as a vehicle for teaching children moral lessons may further highlight the function of emotion talk in regulating individual emotion and behavior. Chinese culture has a long tradition of valuing the moral importance of the past. According to Confucian ethics, a person should examine himself every day on three things: ‘Have I done my best in doing things for others? Have I been trustworthy in my dealings with friends? And have I failed to revise what the Master had taught me?’ This practice of self-reflection (zi-xing, 自省) entails the ultimate moral purpose of the past. Although individuals in Euro-American culture also refer to the past for moral guidance (Lambek, 1996; Pillemer, 1998), this use appears to a lesser extent and in a more subtle manner than in Chinese culture (Wang & Conway, 2005). Indeed, the past is often used as a means of augmenting one’s self-esteem rather than self-criticism (Ross & Wilson, 2003). The different views of the past in the two cultures may affect the degree to which parents use didactic instructions during reminiscing to help children regulate their emotions and behavior.

The emotional functions of reminiscing may differ as well by the valance of the event. Reminiscing about positive past experiences may serve to create and enhance emotional bonds between parent and child, whereas reminiscing about negative experiences may serve a more regulatory function, helping to teach children how to cope with and resolve negative affect, or even how to avoid experiencing such events in the future. In accord with this, Ackil et al. (2003) and Sales et al. (2003) both found that Euro-American parents focus more on explaining the causes and consequences of
emotions when discussing highly stressful experiences with their children (a tornado and a visit to the emergency room, respectively) than when discussing positive events. Further, Euro-American parents with girls talk more about negative emotion overall, talk more about the causes of negative emotion, and place negative emotions in a more social-relational context than do parents with boys, suggesting that parents are especially interested in helping their daughters to understand their aversive emotional experience in the context of ongoing social interactions and relationships (Fivush et al., 2003; Fivush & Buckner, 2003).

**Purposes of the Present Study**

To explore the multiple functions of parent–child emotional reminiscing in cultural contexts, we examined Euro-American and Chinese mothers reminiscing about a highly salient emotionally positive and negative event with their preschool children. Given the differences in cultural belief systems, we expected American mothers to engage in longer, more elaborate, and more evaluative conversations, as well as to focus more on the child’s autonomous behavior, than Chinese mothers in order to facilitate an autonomous sense of self. In contrast, Chinese mothers would focus more on social interaction and other people than American mothers in order to facilitate a more relational sense of self. We also expected American mothers to attribute more emotion to the child during reminiscing and to include more explanations about the child’s emotion in order to facilitate emotional expression and regulation. In contrast, we expected Chinese mothers to use more didactic talk to help children regulate emotions and behavior, and to focus more on conflict resolutions and moral lessons in order to establish social harmony and proper conduct. We further assumed that these differences would be more pronounced when discussing negative events, in which aversive affect must be dissipated. Finally, we expected mothers in both cultures to be more elaborative, evaluative, and emotional when reminiscing with daughters than with sons.

We also examined children’s contributions to these conversations. Although previous research has established that maternal style and content is not simply elicited by child input (Haden, 1998; Reese et al., 1993), we assumed that children would mirror their mothers’ contributions such that Euro-American children would engage in longer, more elaborated, more self-focused, and more emotional reminiscing, whereas Chinese children would talk less about the past, less about themselves, but more about other people and behavioral norms. We further expected high consistency in conversational style and content between individual mothers and their children.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were 31 Euro-American (abbreviated ‘U.S.’) mother–child pairs from Ithaca, New York, and 30 Chinese mother–child pairs from Beijing, China. The U.S. children were 14 girls and 17 boys (age range = 31–47 months, \( M = 40.16 \)). The Chinese children were 16 girls and 14 boys (age range = 35–42 months, \( M = 39.13 \)). All children were from middle-class families, with the majority of the mothers in both cultures having at least a college education. Among the U.S. children, there were one only-child, 12 first-borns, 15 later-borns, and three whose mothers did not provide birth-order information. All Chinese children were only-children.
Procedure

Two trained native female research assistants in each culture collected data. In an initial contact at the children’s school, the researcher told the mothers that we were interested in what information young children remember about significant personal experiences, and in order to elicit children’s memories in as natural a way as possible, we would ask mothers to talk with their children about past events in which both the mother and child participated. The researcher then made appointments with participating families for a home visit.

During the visit, the researcher first talked to the mother, out of the earshot of the child, to select events to be discussed. She asked the mother to nominate as many as possible specific, one-time events that were emotionally very positive or very negative for the child and in which both mother and child participated. To facilitate the mothers’ response, the researcher used a standard prompt, ‘What other events can you think of?’ until the mother indicated that she was done. The researcher took notes of each memory the mother nominated.

Following the event nomination, the researcher asked the mother to select from the nominated memories an extremely positive event, one of the best things that had ever happened to her child, and an extremely stressful event, one of the worst things that had ever happened to her child. Mother and child then discussed the two selected events alone in a quiet place in the home without the presence of the researcher, with a tape-recorder recording their conversation. It was emphasized to the mother that she should talk with her child about the events in as natural a way as possible. No time restriction was placed on the length of their conversation. The sequence of discussing positive and negative events was counterbalanced across mother–child pairs within each culture group. The mother informed the researcher when they finished the conversation. The researcher thanked the mother and child and gave the child a gift to keep.

Coding

Mother–child conversations lasted approximately 30 minutes (ranging from 20 to 45 minutes). They were transcribed verbatim on to paper. The events mothers selected were mostly from the recent past and all occurred within the previous year. The majority of positive events (U.S., 81%; China, 83%) were about family activities, parties, vacations, and holiday events. The most frequent negative events selected by U.S. mothers concerned child injuries/illnesses (26%) and scary things such as thunderstorms and monsters (26%), and the most frequent negative events selected by Chinese mothers concerned conflicts involving parents/caregivers (48%). Other types of negative events included death, doctor/medical procedures, losing a special object, separation from caregivers, and conflicts with peers or siblings. Coding was performed in the original languages. For most of the codes, we used propositions, defined as subject–verb constructions, as the coding unit (Fivush et al., 1995). Each unique or implied verb in an independent clause forms a new propositional unit. For example, ‘we ran and ran’ was one proposition, whereas ‘we ran and stopped’ was two. Frequencies for mothers’ and children’s conversational codes were tabulated separately for each of the two emotional events discussed.1 Coding categories reflect how self-defining, social, and emotion-regulation functions are displayed in reminiscing.
Narrative Style. As in previous research, style is conceptualized as the way in which information is elicited and provided during the memory conversations. It illustrates the type of personal story being constructed (e.g., how elaborate and detailed it was) and the pattern of discursive interactions between mother and child (e.g., being interactive or directive). We first calculated the number of conversational turns and total number of propositions for mothers and children independently as measures of length of conversation; we then coded each proposition into one of the following mutually exclusive reminiscing style categories:

Elaborations. The mother introduced a topic for discussion, moved the conversation to a new aspect of the event, or added information regarding a particular aspect; the child requested new information, moved the conversation to a new aspect, or provided new information regarding the past event being discussed (e.g., M: Do you remember some of the places that we went swimming this summer?; C: Uhhhh... Cast Park.). To examine the specific types of questions and responses made by mothers and children, elaborations were further coded into three mutually exclusive subcategories adapted from previous studies (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Haden, 1998).

Mother elaborations
a. Memory questions: Any questions that asked the child to provide information regarding the event under discussion, including who, what, where, and when questions (e.g. What did we do after you got a shot?) and ‘Do you remember X?’ questions (e.g. Do you remember going to Myer’s Park?).
b. Yes–no questions: Questions that only required the child to confirm or deny the information provided by the mother (e.g. Did you swim in the lake?).
c. Memory statements: The mother’s utterances that provided new information regarding the memory event without calling for a response (e.g., Uncle Tang brought you a nice present.).

Child elaborations
a. Memory questions: The child’s questions about the memory event, including both open-ended and yes–no questions (e.g., When was that, mama?). Because the frequency of this code was generally low, we combined the types of questions.
b. Yes–no responses: The child responded ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the mother’ questions (e.g., M: Did you and Daddy go to the festival together with Grammy? C: Yes.).
c. Memory responses: The child responded with at least one new piece of information regarding the memory event (e.g. M: What did you see at the zoo? C: Monkeys.).

Repetitions. The mother repeated the exact content or the gist of her own previous utterance or tried to elicit memory information from the child but provided no new information; the child repeated his or her own or the mother’s previous utterance or took a legitimate turn without providing any information (e.g., M: Do you remember anything about going horseback riding? What do you remember?; C: I don’t know.).
Evaluations. The mother provided feedback to the child by confirming, negating, or questioning the child’s previous statement; the child provided feedback to the mother by confirming, negating, or questioning the mother’s previous statement. Head nods or shakes by the child that could be inferred from the mother’s subsequent comment were also coded (e.g., M: You’re right, there’s a lot of sand there; C: Um-hum.).

Narrative Content. The specific content of information provided by mothers and children was coded into the following categories:

Self and relationships. The following categories capture the self and social aspects of a conversation in which the mother and child referred to the role of the child or of other people:

a. Focal theme: The focal incident that caused the child’s emotion within the event was categorized into one of two mutually exclusive types: social theme focused on interpersonal situations as the antecedent of children’s emotions (e.g., being visited by a friend or being scolded by an adult); personal theme focused on situations where children’s emotions were caused by objects or events in the environment (e.g., receiving a present or having surgery).

b. Autonomous talk: The mother referred to the child’s personal preferences or judgments regarding an object, person, or the event itself; the child expressed personal preferences, judgments, or opinions (e.g., M: How was it this weekend?; C: Good.).

c. Interaction scenario: The mother and child discussed instances that involved social interactions or group activities (e.g., M: What did Daddy yell at you about? C: We were making a big truck road.).

d. Other/self ratio: The number of times the mother and child mentioned the child (self) and other people (other) in their conversations was counted respectively. An ‘other/self ratio’ was then calculated for mother and child respectively. A count of ‘1’ for the denominator was used when there was no direct mention of the child.

Emotion regulation. The following mutually exclusive categories tabulate the ways that the mother and child discussed the emotional aspects of the past event. They reflect the degrees to which references to feeling states, causal explanations, and didactic instructions were used during reminiscing to facilitate the child’s emotional understanding and regulation.

a. Attributions: Mother ascribed emotional states or reactions to the child; child ascribed emotional states or reactions to him or herself (e.g., M: You were very happy, weren’t you? C: And I got scared.).

b. Explanations: Mother discussed the causes of the child’s emotions; child talked about the causes of his or her own emotions (e.g., M: How did you feel when you couldn’t get your head out of the water?; or Why were you crying? C: I cried because my eyes got wet.).

c. Didactic talk: Mother and child talked about moral standards, social norms, and behavioral expectations and disciplines (e.g., M: Little children should listen to their teachers; C: I’ll be a good child.).

d. Emotional resolutions: This variable refers to the closure that the mother put to a negative emotional event to help to resolve issues or situations that had elicited negative feelings in the child. The type of resolution may reflect the mother’s implicit or explicit goals in the emotional conversation. Resolutions were coded...
into four mutually exclusive schemes: (1) *reassurance*: resolutions to reassure or comfort the child that everything was all right (e.g., M: *Did Daddy give you a hug? And he said not to be scared? Yeah, yeah. Then it kind of got fun, didn’t it?*); (2) *re-establishment of relationship*: resolutions to re-establish harmonious relations with the person who caused a negative emotion (e.g., M: *Dad didn’t let you play with that bottle because it’s dangerous to little children. He loves you.*); (3) *moral lesson*: resolutions to teach children the appropriateness of their emotional experience or behavior (e.g., M: *Isn’t it wrong for you to get mad at Papa?*); and (4) *no resolution*: The mother did not provide any resolution for the negative emotion (e.g., M: *You were sad. Hmm.*).

One American and one Chinese research assistants coded the respective data. They were blind to the hypotheses of the study. Joint coding sessions were held to ensure that the same definitions were applied to the two datasets. Two other independent coders, one American and one Chinese, coded 20% of the respective data for inter-coder reliability estimates. For mother memory codes, percent agreement ranged from 80% to 100%, with a mean of 95%. For child memory codes, percent agreement ranged from 79% to 100%, with a mean of 93%.

**Results**

Results are presented in three major sections. The first section focuses on narrative style and the second on narrative content, as described in the coding section. The final section focuses on individual differences and examines consistency between mothers and children as well as consistency across the positive and negative event. The means and standard deviations of all continuous variables are displayed in Table 1. All analyses were conducted on frequency rather than proportions because previous research has shown frequency of specific utterance types to be most predictive of child outcome (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Hoff-Ginsburg, 1991).

Two 2 (Culture) × 2 (Gender) × 2 (Event: Positive vs. Negative) multivariate analyses of variance were first performed on mother memory codes and child memory codes respectively. For maternal codes, there were significant main effects of culture, $F(10, 48) = 18.07, p < .0001$, and event, $F(10,48) = 13.70, p < .0001$, and a Culture × Event interaction, $F(10,48) = 7.05, p < .0001$. For child codes, there were significant main effects of culture, $F(10,48) = 11.28, p < .0001$, and event, $F(10,48) = 5.71, p < .0001$, and a Culture × Gender interaction, $F(10,48) = 3.36, p = .002$. All continuous variables were thus analyzed in a 2 (Culture) × 2 (Gender) × 2 (Event: Positive vs. Negative) repeated-measures ANOVA on maternal and child codes separately, and all significant effects were followed up with analysis of simple main affects as appropriate.

**Narrative Style**

**Conversational Length.** Analyses on the number of conversational turns and total number of propositions showed that overall, U.S. mothers took a greater number of turns than did Chinese mothers, $F(1,57) = 4.11, p = .05$. There was no cultural difference in the total number of propositions mothers made. When discussing positive events, mothers in both cultures took a greater number of turns, $F(1,57) = 29.48, p < .0001$, and had a greater number of propositions across conversational turns than...
when discussing negative events, $F(1,57) = 27.61, p < .0001$. Similarly, U.S. children tended to take a greater number of turns than did Chinese children overall, $F(1,57) = 3.84, p = .06$, and there was no cultural difference in their number of propositions. Children in both cultures took a greater number of conversational turns, $F(1,57) = 27.56, p < .0001$, and used more propositions, $F(1,57) = 23.91, p < .0001$, when discussing the positive than the negative event.

**Reminiscing Style.** Analyses on the total number of maternal elaborations showed no cultural difference. When discussing the positive event, both U.S. and Chinese mothers used more elaborations, $F(1,57) = 31.01, p < .0001$, than when discussing the negative event. Analyses on children’s contributions revealed that U.S. children used more
elaborations than did Chinese children, $F(1,57) = 4.65, p = .04$. Children in both cultures used more elaborations when discussing the positive than the negative event, $F(1,57) = 37.70, p < .0001$.

Figure 1 illustrates the means of different types of elaborations made by mothers and children. U.S. mothers asked more memory questions than did Chinese mothers, although the difference did not reach significance ($p = .13$). U.S. mothers also asked more yes–no questions than did Chinese mothers in the positive event, $F(1,57) = 7.77, p = .007$. Mothers in both cultures used more memory questions and memory statements when discussing the positive than the negative event, $F(1,57) = 37.28, p < .0001$, and $F(1,57) = 8.83, p = .004$, respectively. U.S. but not Chinese mothers also asked more yes–no questions in the positive than in the negative event, $F(1,30) = 24.72, p < .0001$. Compared with Chinese children, U.S. children asked slightly more memory questions, $F(1,57) = 3.26, p = .08$, and gave more yes–no responses, $F(1,57) = 9.27, p = .004$. U.S. children also provided more memory responses than did Chinese children, although the difference did not reach significance ($p = .14$). Children in both cultures made more memory questions, more yes–no responses, and more memory responses when discussing the positive than the negative event, $F(1,57) = 9.39, p = .003$; $F(1,57) = 18.77, p < .0001$; and $F(1,57) = 33.13, p < .0001$, respectively. Thus, the pattern of results was generally consistent across different types of elaborations for both maternal and child codes.

Analyses on maternal repetitions and evaluations revealed that Chinese mothers used more repetitions than did U.S. mothers, $F(1,57) = 4.00, p = .05$, and U.S. mothers used more evaluations than did Chinese mothers, $F(1,57) = 28.90, p < .0001$. When discussing the positive event, both U.S. and Chinese mothers used more evaluations, $F(1,57) = 29.26, p < .0001$, than when discussing the negative event, and the difference was especially substantial for U.S. mothers, $F(1,30) = 21.24, p < .0001$. Analyses on children’s contributions revealed that when discussing positive events, children in both cultures used more repetitions, $F(1,57) = 8.79, p = .004$, and more evaluations, $F(1,57) = 3.95, p = .05$, than when discussing the negative event.

**Narrative Content**

**Self and Relationships.** A majority of both U.S. (70.97%) and Chinese mothers (75.86%) focused on a social theme as the antecedent of children’s emotions in the positive event, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = .15, p = .69$. However, Chinese mothers (86.21%) were significantly more likely than U.S. mothers (25.81%) to focus on a social theme that elicited negative emotions in children, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 18.05, p < .0001$. Indeed, almost 75% of the U.S. mothers focused on a personal theme in the negative event.

Analyses on amount of autonomous talk, interaction scenario, and other/self ratio revealed that overall, U.S. mothers talked more frequently regarding their children’s autonomous preferences and opinions than did Chinese mothers, $F(1,57) = 8.59, p = .005$, whereas Chinese mothers discussed more social interactions than did U.S. mothers, but only for the negative event, $F(1,59) = 6.18, p = .02$. When discussing positive events, mothers in both cultures made more of these autonomous references, $F(1,57) = 9.19, p = .004$, and mentioned others more frequently in ratio to the child, $F(1,57) = 4.95, p = .03$, than when discussing negative events. U.S. mothers also made more frequent references to interaction scenarios when discussing the positive compared with the negative event, $F(1,30) = 29.08, p < .0001$, and there was no difference for Chinese mothers.
Figure 1. Types of elaborations made by mothers and children.
U.S. children used more autonomous talk than did Chinese children in conversations of both positive and negative events, although the difference did not reach significance ($p = .12$). Chinese children talked about a greater number of interaction scenarios than did their U.S. peers, although, again, the difference did not reach significance ($p = .11$). Children in both cultures made more autonomous references, $F(1,57) = 4.17, p = .05$, and references to interaction scenarios, $F(1,57) = 7.65, p = .008$, when discussing the positive than the negative event. There was a two-way interaction between event type and gender for other/self ratio, $F(1,57) = 8.22, p = .006$, whereby girls ($M = 1.63, SD = 2.44$) made more mention of others relative to themselves than did boys ($M = .68, SD = .79$) in the negative event, $F(1,59) = 4.21, p = .04$, and there was no gender difference for the positive event.

**Emotional Regulation.** Analyses of emotional attributions, explanations, and didactic talk showed that Chinese mothers made more emotional attributions to their children than did U.S. mothers, $F(1,57) = 21.32, p < .0001$. U.S. mothers provided more causal explanations for their children's emotions, $F(1,57) = 5.97, p = .02$, than did Chinese mothers, and this was particularly the case in conversations of the negative event, $F(1,59) = 8.01, p = .006$. In addition, Chinese mothers made more didactic talk than did U.S. mothers, but only for the negative event, $F(1,59) = 14.07, p = .0004$.

Mothers in both cultures were more likely to attribute emotion to their child when discussing negative than positive events, $F(1,57) = 12.36, p = .0009$, and this especially held for Chinese mothers, $F(1,29) = 12.73, p = .001$. Further, a three-way interaction among culture, gender, and event type, $F(1,57) = 5.61, p = .02$, indicated that Chinese mothers attributed more emotion to their daughters when discussing negative events ($M = 5.60, SD = 4.27$) than positive events ($M = 2.06, SD = 2.69$), $F(1,15) = 22.39, p = .0003$. No such difference was found in maternal speech for Chinese boys or for U.S. boys and girls. Mothers in both cultures also made more causal explanations when discussing the negative than the positive event, $F(1,57) = 22.01, p < .0001$, with U.S. mothers showing a greater difference, $F(1,30) = 20.08, p = .0001$, than Chinese mothers, $F(1,29) = 3.73, p = .06$. Additionally, Chinese mothers gave more didactic talk in their conversations of the negative than the positive event, $F(1,29) = 15.07, p = .0006$, whereas there was no difference for U.S. mothers.

Finally, turning to the resolutions for children's negative emotions, mothers in the two cultures differed in the types of emotional resolution they provided, $\chi^2(3, N = 60) = 32.19, p < .0001$. Among the U.S. mothers, 19.35% reassured the child that everything was all right. The rest did not provide any resolution. Among Chinese mothers, 13.79% intended to re-establish relations between the child and the person who caused the negative emotion(s), 37.93% used the ‘moral lesson’ resolution to teach children regarding the appropriateness of their emotional experience or behavior, and 48.28% did not provide any resolution.

For children, Chinese children attributed more emotions to themselves than did U.S. children, $F(1,57) = 8.93, p = .004$, and U.S. children gave more causal explanations of their emotions than did Chinese children, $F(1,57) = 5.95, p = .02$. A three-way interaction among culture, gender, and type of event emerged for attributions, $F(1,57) = 3.94, p = .05$, whereby Chinese girls made more emotion attributions when discussing the negative ($M = 2.67, SD = 2.60$) than the positive event ($M = 1.44, SD = 1.93$), $F(1,15) = 9.40, p = .008$, and U.S. boys also made more emotion attributions when discussing the negative ($M = 1.12, SD = 1.11$) than the positive event ($M = .35, SD = 1.44$).
.61), $F(1,16) = 10.56$, $p = .005$. Although, overall, children made more explanations when discussing the negative than the positive event, $F(1,57) = 6.90$, $p = .01$, this difference only held for the U.S. children, $F(1,30) = 8.06$, $p = .008$. Finally, for didactic talk, Chinese children talked more about this when discussing the negative than the positive event, $F(1,29) = 4.69$, $p = .04$, whereas there was no such difference for U.S. children.

**Individual Difference Analyses**

We first conducted correlational analyses to examine the consistency in reminiscing style and content between individual mothers and children (Table 2). The mother–child consistency was high in both culture groups and across the events; the average correlation was .72 between U.S. mothers and children, and .76 between Chinese mothers

| Table 2. Correlations between Mothers’ and Children’s Conversation Codes |
|----------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Code                | Event    | U.S.     | China    | Total     |
|                     |          | (n = 31) | (n = 30) | (n = 61)  |
| **Narrative Style** |          |          |          |           |
| Turns               | P        | .99****  | .99****  | .99****   |
|                     | N        | .99****  | .99****  | .99****   |
| Propositions       | P        | .93****  | .95****  | .94****   |
|                     | N        | .89****  | .88****  | .87****   |
| Elaborations        | P        | .87****  | .92****  | .90****   |
|                     | N        | .83****  | .87****  | .82****   |
| Repetitions         | P        | .36*     | .90****  | .61****   |
|                     | N        | .38*     | .64****  | .46**     |
| Evaluations         | P        | .77****  | .56***   | .48****   |
|                     | N        | .55***   | .63***   | .29*      |
| **Self/Social Content** |          |          |          |           |
| Autonomy            | P        | .90****  | .91****  | .89****   |
|                     | N        | .82****  | .83****  | .81****   |
| Interaction         | P        | .51**    | .82****  | .65****   |
|                     | N        | .39*     | .55**    | .47***    |
| Other/self ratio    | P        | .72****  | .28      | .41****   |
|                     | N        | .40*     | .61***   | .47***    |
| **Emotional Content** |          |          |          |           |
| Attributions        | P        | .64****  | .89****  | .86****   |
|                     | N        | .66****  | .75****  | .71****   |
| Explanations        | P        | .59***   | .97****  | .73****   |
|                     | N        | .61***   | .61***   | .65****   |
| Didactic            | P        | .98****  | .83****  | .94****   |
|                     | N        | .96****  | .32      | .55****   |

P, positive event; N, negative event.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, **** $p < .0001$. 

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and children. The only substantial differences between the two groups were in the cases of other/self ratio for positive events and didactic talk for negative events, where the correlations were significant between U.S. mother–child pairs but not between Chinese mother–child pairs.3

To examine how consistent individual mothers and children were in discussing the positive and negative event, we further performed partial correlational analyses between conversation codes of the positive and the negative event with culture effect controlled for. As Table 3 shows, when discussing the positive and negative events, there were significant correlations for both mothers and children in the length of their conversations, the number of elaborations and evaluations they provided, the number of interaction scenarios they discussed, and the types of emotional regulations they used.

**Discussion**

In this study, we examined the style and content of conversations of highly salient emotionally positive and negative events between Euro-American and Chinese mothers and their young children. Following a functional perspective on early parent–child emotional reminiscing, we were particularly interested in examining the ways in which conceptions of self and relationships and emotional regulation would be reflected in these conversations. As illustrated in the following two conversational excerpts, Euro-American and Chinese mother–child emotional reminiscing showed important structural and functional variations.
American mother–child dyad:

M: . . . Do you remember doing some crying?
C: Why did I cry?
M: I’m not quite sure why you cried. But do you remember where you were?
C: I cried because I had any, no any balloon.
M: They had no balloon. But then, you were also crying because, did you not want to go home?
C: Yeah.
M: Where were you?
C: At Stewart Park!
M: (Laughs). You did cry a lot at Stewart Park, but, um, this was in Joe’s parking lot. Do you remember Joe’s Restaurant parking lot? Do you remember standing by the door and crying?
C: Yeah.
M: You do?
C: Yeah.
M: What were you crying about?
C: ‘Cause I didn’t wanted to leave yet; it was because I wanted to eat.
M: Oh you wanted to eat some more (laughs); is that why?
C: Yeah.
M: Hmmm. I remember Mommy tried to pick you up and you put up a little bit of a fight. You were crying real hard. Maybe it was ‘cause the balloon and maybe it was ‘cause you were hungry. But we knew that you could get another balloon, right?
C:Yep.

Chinese mother–child dyad:

M: . . . Do you remember why Dad spanked you last time?
C: Chess!
M: Why chess? What did you do with chess?
C: Not obedient!
M: How were you not being obedient?
C: (I) threw the pieces on the floor.
M: All over the floor, right? And did you do it on purpose?
C: Umm. I’ll be careful next time!
M: Right! That’s why Dad spanked your bottom, right?. . . Did you cry then?
C: (I) cried.
M: Did it hurt?
C: It hurt.
M: It hurt? It doesn’t hurt anymore, right?
C: Right. I’ll be careful next time.
M: Umm, be careful.

In terms of self and relationships, U.S. mothers were more interactive by taking more conversational turns with their children than did Chinese mothers, although the volume of overall talk (i.e., the number of propositions) was similar between the two groups. In addition, U.S. mothers asked more elaborative questions, were more evaluative, and focused more on personal themes and autonomy than did Chinese mothers, whereas Chinese mothers were more repetitive and focused more on social themes and interaction scenarios than did U.S. mothers. These findings confirm previous
research indicating that Euro-American mothers use the reminiscing context as a way
to socialize their children into a more elaborated and autonomous sense of self than
do Chinese mothers (Miller et al., 1996, 1997; Mullen & Yi, 1995; Wang, 2001a; Wang
et al., 2000). More specifically, by engaging in more interactive and elaborative con-
versations and by evaluating their children’s responses, Euro-American mothers are
inviting their children to actively participate in the construction of their personal
stories. Moreover, by focusing on discussions of the child’s preferences and predilec-
tions, Euro-American mothers are socializing their children into a sense of self as an
autonomous being with distinctive and unique characteristics, and modeling to chil-
dren the culturally desirable form and content of autobiographical memory in build-
ing one’s unique individual identity. In contrast, by taking a leading role in posing and
repeating questions and by placing past events in a more social-relational context,
Chinese mothers are engaging their children in ongoing relationships and modeling
to children the construction of personal stories that give prominence to social
interactions and collectivity. In this way, Chinese mothers focus on socializing
their children to be in harmony with others and to view the self as part of a social
community.

Similar to their mothers, U.S. children had more interactive and more elaborated
conversations than did Chinese children. In addition, U.S. children focused on
autonomous talk, whereas Chinese children focused on social interactions. These cul-
tural differences suggest that children are already responding to and adopting their
mothers’ style of reminiscing early in the preschool years. The influence is most likely
to be bidirectional (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington & Bornstein, 2000;
Schaffer, 2000) such that mothers are also responding to their children’s contributions,
although previous longitudinal research indicates that maternal style is stable across
the preschool years and that children adopt their mother’s style more than mothers
adapt to their children’s contributions over time (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Peterson &
McCabe, 1994; Reese et al., 1993). Thus, we assume that the cultural differences seen
here reflect enduring cultural values that have been adopted by mothers and are now
in the process of being socialized in their children, who, in turn, actively contribute
to this process. Indeed, such socialization and internalization can be readily observed
at the individual level as well, as reflected in the high consistency in style and content
between individual mothers and children in both cultures.

In terms of emotional regulation, U.S. mothers talked more about causes of their
children’s emotions and tended to resolve negative emotions by reassuring children
that everything was all right. In contrast, Chinese mothers attributed more emotions
to their children, talked more about behavioral norms and disciplines, and emphasized
conflict resolution and moral lessons in resolving negative feelings. In turn, U.S. chil-
dren also talked more about causes of their emotional experience than did Chinese
children, whereas Chinese children attributed more emotions to themselves than did
U.S. children. That Chinese mother–child pairs made more emotion attributions was
contrary to our predictions. We speculate that this may reflect changes in Chinese
child-rearing practices following Western influences and industrialization in recent
Chinese society as well as the implementation of the one-child policy (Wang, Leicht-
man & White, 1998). Chinese parents are possibly now more open than before with
respect to discussing feelings with their children. In addition, there is evidence that
Chinese infants are less reactive to stimuli than are Caucasian infants (Kagan, Arcus,
Snidman, Feng, Wang, Hendler & Greene, 1994). The early biases in temperamental
characteristics in children may in turn influence how Chinese and Euro-American
mothers interact with their young children (Collins et al., 2000; Schaffer, 2000). Obviously, this issue requires further investigation. Nonetheless, although Chinese mothers attributed more emotions to their children, they tended not to provide further explanations of the emotion. Instead, they often used didactic instructions as a means of emotional regulation. Emotion, particularly negative affect, was often depicted as a result of the child’s past wrongdoing such that in order to avoid negative emotion, the child should behave properly in the future.

It appears that to help the child cope with negative experience and achieve emotional regulation, Euro-American mothers employed a ‘cognitive approach’ in which they elaborated on the cause of children’s feelings states so as to facilitate their emotional understanding and thus regulation (see also Fivush et al., 2003). In contrast, Chinese mothers used a ‘behavioral approach’ where they evaluated children’s past behaviors in order to promote proper conduct in the child. Chinese mothers were more likely than Euro-American mothers to provide resolution for their child’s emotional state that focused on learning a moral lesson from the negative event and thus for the child to avoid expressing and/or experiencing negative emotions in the future. Euro-American mothers, in contrast, were more likely to explain the causes of their children’s negative emotions and reassure children that everything was all right, thus implicitly accepting these emotions as appropriate to the situation.

The way in which emotional regulation was expressed also highlights the influence of the valence of the event on the style and content of mother–child reminiscing. Intriguingly, U.S. and Chinese mothers differentiated reminiscing about positive and negative experiences in similar ways. Both U.S. and Chinese mothers talked more about positive than negative experiences and elaborated on and evaluated positive experiences to a greater extent than negative experiences. Mothers from both cultures focused more on autonomous talk and more on others relative to the child when discussing positive than negative experiences. U.S. mothers also talked more about interaction scenarios for positive than negative events. In contrast, mothers from both cultures attributed more emotion to their children and discussed the causes of emotional experience more when reminiscing about negative compared with positive events. Similarly, children from both cultures talked more about positive than negative experiences, and elaborated, evaluated, and repeated more about positive than negative experiences. Children had more autonomous talk and referred to more interaction scenarios for positive than negative experiences but talked less about the causes of positive compared with negative experiences. In addition, Chinese mothers and children gave more didactic talk when discussing negative than positive events.

This pattern suggests that the functions of reminiscing about positive and negative experiences may be quite different and that these different functions may be independent. More specifically, through longer, more elaborated conversations focused on both the child’s own preferences and actions and the roles of others, reminiscing of positive events may serve a more self-defining and social function; mothers may want their children to focus on positive events as a way of defining who they are in the world and in relation to other people. However, reminiscing of negative experiences seems to serve a more emotional regulatory function; by focusing on emotional attributions and causal explanations of negative experiences, and on didactic teaching particularly in the Chinese case, mothers may be trying to teach their children how to regulate and cope with aversive affect. Notably, independent of culture, mothers and children who had longer conversations, were more elaborative and eval-
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Uative, discussed more social interactions, and talked more regarding emotions when
discussing the positive event were also more likely to do so when discussing the nega-
tive event, suggesting a consistency in individuals’ reminiscing style across different
kinds of events.

Our results confirm previous research that has found a greater focus on discussion
of emotion and its causes when reminiscing regarding negative compared with posi-
tive events; yet previous research also found that mother–child conversations regard-
ing negative events were longer than those regarding positive events (Ackil et al.,
2003; Sales et al., 2003). In contrast, we found that conversations regarding positive
events were longer than conversations regarding negative events in both cultures. One
methodological difference is that the previous studies were explicitly focused on mem-
ories of stressful events, namely a tornado and a visit to the emergency room, and
parents were aware that this was the focus of the study. In our study, mothers were
told that we were interested in emotionally salient events, and both positive and nega-
tive experiences were equally highlighted. Perhaps because parents in the previous
studies knew that those studies were focused on specific negative events their children
had experienced, they responded to the implicit demands of the situation to concen-
trate on this event. Further research manipulating the kinds of instructions given to
parents to determine how this might affect length of conversation would be useful.
However, importantly, regardless of length, all studies that have compared parental
reminiscing about positive and negative events have found similar differences in
content, suggesting that this is a robust difference reflecting real functional variations
in these conversations.

Finally, although much previous research has found gender differences in parent–
child reminiscing, especially in the emotional content (Fivush, 1994; Fivush et al.,
2003), we found few gender differences in this study. Chinese mothers attributed
more emotions to their daughters when reminiscing about the negative event, and
Chinese girls similarly attributed more emotions to themselves in these conversations.
Yet U.S. mothers displayed no differences in reminiscing with daughters versus sons,
and U.S. boys attributed more emotions to themselves when reminiscing about the
negative compared with the positive event. Critically, previous research finding gender
differences in the emotional content of reminiscing examined various negative
emotions, including anger, sadness, and fear, independently. Whereas there are very
few reported gender differences in conversations regarding fear (e.g., Wang, 2001a),
and mixed findings for conversations regarding anger, virtually all the research has
found that parents talk more about sadness and the causes of sadness with daughters
than with sons (for a review, see Fivush & Buckner, 2000). In the present study,
mothers were simply asked to discuss a highly negative event, and the events selected
expressed various negative emotions. Gender differences in emotion are quite likely
specific to particular emotions (Fischer, 2000) and thus any possible differences
would wash out when comparing across emotions. This is an important theoretical
and methodological point when considering data on gender differences in emotion
socialization.

Although this study yielded compelling evidence for the differing nature of early
emotional reminiscing across cultures, we must acknowledge several limitations. Most
obvious is that we focused on middle-class families in the U.S.A. and China with the
majority of mothers having a college education or beyond. Although this might help
to avoid confounding effects of unexpected factors, it limits the generalizability of
our findings. In particular, Chinese parents with a higher education may hold more
'Westernized' values in child rearing, and this might have attenuated the cultural differences. Also, the small samples in our study have limited representativeness. Future studies should include bigger samples of mothers and children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Studies should also examine within-cultural variations (e.g., socioeconomic status, rural vs. urban) in the way that parents converse with their children about highly emotional experiences. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are required to examine the long-term effects of early parent–child reminiscing in different cultures on the socio-emotional outcomes in children. Finally, our findings should be corroborated by studies with direct assessments (e.g., parental report) of the functions of emotional reminiscing as well as natural observations of family emotional discourse in everyday life.

In summary, the present results indicate that emotional reminiscing in the family serves multiple functions consonant with the myriad expectations of the cultural context in which such conversations take place. Euro-American mother–child conversations are well suited to the goal of helping children develop an autonomous sense of self and regulate their emotions through emotional understanding. Chinese mother–child conversations serve the purpose of helping children build affiliation with significant others and regulate their emotions through adapting to social norms and behavioral expectations. Growing up in such different narrative environments, Euro-American and Chinese children as young as age 3 appear to be already internalizing different values and styles from their parents in talking about emotional experiences. The structural and functional variations in Euro-American and Chinese mother–child conversations of emotionally salient experiences may have long-term effects on the development of an autobiographical self and emotion-coping strategies.

References


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**Notes**

1. A few mother–child pairs discussed more than one memory pertinent to the positive or negative event. We coded the memory that had the longest conversation. One Chinese mother–child pair did not discuss a positive event and one did not discuss a negative event. The missing data were substituted by group means pertinent to the gender and culture of the child. One U.S. mother–child pair’s conversation was not recorded because of equipment failure. They were not included in the current sample.

2. The types of emotions mother and child discussed were similar between the two culture groups. A majority of U.S. (65%) and Chinese (67%) mother–child pairs mentioned the child being happy and having fun in the positive event. The negative event often involved more than one type of emotion, with a majority of U.S. (68%) and Chinese (73%) mother–child pairs mentioning the child being sad, feeling bad, and crying. In addition, 19% and 17% of mother–child pairs in respective cultures mentioned anger, and 13% and 7% mentioned fear. Other negative emotions mentioned included upset, worry, dislike, and unhappy. We also coded mother’s and child’s comments on other people’s emotions, and the frequencies were too low to warrant analysis.

3. We explored in the Chinese dyads individual differences in reminiscing style that are typically found for Western samples. Chinese mothers were median-split into two groups on the basis of a ratio of each mother’s number of elaborations over her number of repetitions across the two events (Reese et al., 1993). Mothers in the high-elaborative group used at least four times as many elaborations as repetitions (mean ratio = 6.05, range = 4.15–11.88), whereas mothers in the low-elaborative group used about twice as many elaborations as repetitions (mean ratio = 2.85, range = .93–3.88). (Notably, with the same criteria 87% of U.S. mothers would fall into a high-elaborative group.) There was evidence that compared with low-elaborative Chinese mothers, high-elaborative mothers took a greater number of turns, generated more propositions, and used more elaborations and evaluations across both positive and negative events. High-elaborative Chinese mothers also discussed more interaction scenarios in the positive event and used more autonomous talk and didactic talk in the negative event than did low-elaborative mothers. However, because of the small sample size, these differences were mostly not significant. The same pattern of differences was observed between children of high-elaborative mothers and children of low-elaborative mothers, consistent with our correlational analyses of mother–child consistency (see Table 2). The individual variations among Chinese dyads are consistent with the style-difference literature with Western mothers and children, suggesting that culture is not the only variable determining how mothers structure reminiscing with their young children.