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Autobiographical Memory and Culture

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Autobiographical Memory and Culture

Abstract

Autobiographical memory encompasses memory for significant personal experiences and knowledge of the self and, consequently, is critical for personal identity and psychological wellbeing (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Pillemer, 1998). Although autobiographical memory, like many other cognitive faculties, has been traditionally viewed as an individual matter and a product of the mind or brain, research in the past two decades has revealed the central role of culture in human cognition and remembering. Recent theories of autobiographical memory have increasingly emphasized the constructive nature of memory in the cultural context, and empirical findings have further accentuated the influence of culture on autobiographical remembering (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002; Wang & Ross, 2007).

Against this backdrop, my collaborators and I have conducted extensive studies to examine the effect of culture on autobiographical remembering through affecting information processing at the level of the individual and by shaping social practices of remembering between individuals. This suite of research further integrates developmental, cognitive, and sociocultural perspectives to examine the mechanisms responsible for the development of autobiographical memory. We have obtained critical evidence that two intrapersonal variables – self-construal and emotion knowledge – and one interpersonal variable – parent-child reminiscing – play important roles in driving the cultural differences in the content, structure, emergency, and general accessibility of autobiographical memory. In addition, we have conducted studies to investigate how these intrapersonal and interpersonal variables themselves are influenced by culture through early socialization practices and parental beliefs and goals. Together, these studies illustrate that autobiographical memory emerges and develops as both an individual expression and a cultural product (see diagram below for illustration).

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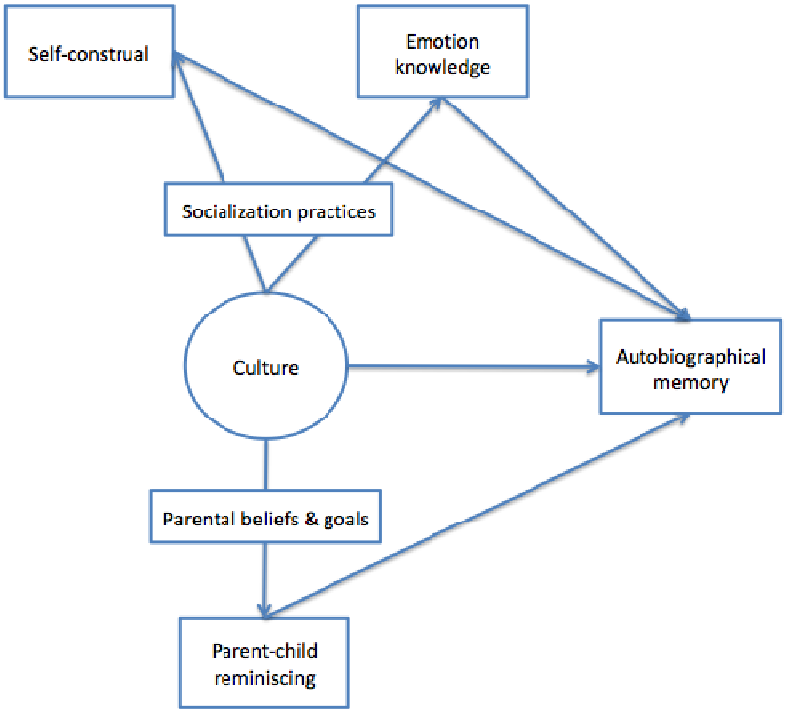
Self-Construal

Individuals' self-construal often integrates and reflects the prevailing cultural views of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder et al., 1998). In Western, particularly North American, cultures that subscribe to an autonomous self and the inherent separateness of distinct persons, individuals often view themselves in terms of their unique personal attributes and qualities. In contrast, in East Asian cultures such as China and Japan that give prominence to interpersonal harmony and collectivity and view the self as realized through one's social stratification, individuals tend to perceive themselves in terms of their social roles and relationships.

Given the executive role of the self in modulating the constructive process via which event information is encoded, retained, and retrieved (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), cultural self-construal may have profound effects on the accessibility, style, and content of autobiographical memory. Conceivably, an autonomous self-construal may drive cognitive resources into elaborate encoding of personal experiences, especially discrete, one-moment-in-time episodes that are unique to the individual and focus on the individual's own roles and perspectives (e.g., "the time I won the spelling bee competition"). Such memories are likely to become richly represented and highly accessible during recall. They help individuals distinguish themselves from others and reaffirm their unique identity. A relational self-construal may, instead, prioritize the retention of social knowledge – not necessarily in the form of event memory – that is critical for social harmony and group solidarity. Detailed remembering of one's own experiences may not be accentuated in this context. When remembering the past, individuals may focus on information about group activities and social interactions, which helps them relate to significant others and the community. Individuals may also attend to generic routine events (e.g., "going to parties"), which, in contrast to specific episodes, are often skeletal with few sensory-emotional details and generally serve to direct one's behavior in particular, oftentimes social, situations (Neisser, 1988; Nelson, 1996).

In line with these analyses, we have found that compared with Asians, European and Euro-American adults are able to access more distant and more detailed very-long-term memories such as early childhood experiences, retrieve more frequently unique, one-time episodes (as opposed to generic events), and focus more on their own roles and predilections (e.g., Wang, 2001a, 2006a; Wang & Conway, 2004). We have found the same pattern of cultural differences in children as young as age 3 or 4 (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Peterson, Wang, & Hou, 2009; Wang, 2004). For instance, in Han et al. (1998), Euro-American, Chinese, and Korean preschoolers and kindergartners were asked to recount personal events such as a recent time when they did something special and fun. Across both age groups, Euro-American children provided more elaborate, more detailed accounts and recalled more specific episodes than Chinese and Korean children. They also more frequently referred to their preferences, feelings, and opinions (e.g., "I liked the birthday present," and "My mom didn't let me go out but I did anyway") than Chinese and Korean children, who more often spoke of other people relative to themselves.



Importantly, if cultural variations in autobiographical memory are indeed due to differing self-construals, then people who view themselves primarily in terms of personal traits should exhibit a more Western style of autobiographical memory regardless of their cultural background: their autobiographical memories should be detailed, specific, and self-focused. Research with individual difference analysis has obtained these very results. In the Euro-American and Chinese samples examined, children and adults who dwelled more on personal attributes and predilections when describing themselves were also more likely to provide detailed, specific, and self-focused memories, compared with those who dwelled more on social roles and group memberships when describing themselves (Wang, 2001a, 2004; Wang, Leichtman, & White, 1998). In a recent study (Wang, 2006b), we found that a focus on personal aspects of the self in 3-year-olds uniquely predicted the amount of event details children recalled, independent of culture, gender, and language skills; and the children's self-construal served as a potent mediator that gave rise to cultural differences in memory.

Experimental research has provided further evidence for the causal effect of cultural self-construal on remembering. When being primed to focus temporarily on their unique personal self, both European and Asian American adults recalled memories that focused more on the rememberer and less on social interactions, compared with when being

primed to focus on their relational self (Wang & Ross, 2005). The personal prime also helped Asians access more distant childhood memories such that they reported as early first memories as did Euro-Americans. Similarly, Asian Americans whose American self (i.e., the autonomous aspect of the self) was activated recalled more self-focused and less socially oriented memories than those whose Asian self (i.e., the relational aspect of the self) was made salient (Wang, 2008a). In a recent study with English-Chinese bilingual children in Hong Kong (Wang, Shao, & Li, 2010), we found that speaking English led to a focus on one's autonomy and agency in the children's self-construal, which further resulted in the retrieval of detailed and self-focused autobiographical memories. In contrast, speaking Chinese led to a focus on one's relationship networks and social roles in the children's self-construal, which, in turn, resulted in the recall of autobiographical memories of social interactions.

In sum, cultural self-construal affects the processes of remembering and determine the perceived importance of autobiographical memory in constructing one's self and identity. This, in turn, affects how, what, and whether personal experiences are remembered.

Emotion Knowledge

Emotion knowledge refers to the schematic knowledge of situational antecedents of emotions (e.g., holidays and birthday parties are happy and joyful situations, whereas separation and the loss of a loved one are situations of sadness and grief). It may affect autobiographical remembering through multiple processes. It may first enable the individual to interpret and understand the emotional meaning of the event situation and thus to perceive its personal relevance or importance and why the event is memorable. Not only does emotion knowledge operate on situation appraisal or meaning analysis, it may also manifest in the anticipation and actual experience of emotions within the situation (Frijda, 1986; Stein & Liwag, 1997), which may further trigger special mechanisms to facilitate the encoding and consolidation of the event information in the memory system (Christianson & Safer, 1996; McGaugh, 2003). Furthermore, emotion knowledge may provide an organizational structure that serves to process and represent significant personal event information, allowing it to be well integrated into an existing autobiographical knowledge base and be effectively stored and retrieved (Conway & Bekerian, 1987). As a result, an autobiographical memory with elaborate details may be formed. During development, the acquisition of emotion knowledge helps children experience appropriate emotions during specific events, understand the personal meaning of the events, and organize the event information in a structured fashion, thereby facilitating retention of and access to the memories over the long term.

Importantly, emotion knowledge is culturally construed and children form their theory of emotions through participating in everyday sociocultural practices. In Euro-American culture that emphasizes individuality and autonomy, emotion is regarded as a direct expression of the self and an affirmation of the uniqueness of the individual. Middle-class parents are often eager to help children understand and express emotions and feelings so

as to raise an “emotionally intelligent” child (Chao, 1995; Fivush & Wang, 2005; Gottman, 1998; Wang & Fivush, 2005). In contrast, in many East Asian cultures such as Korea, China, and Japan that put a premium on social harmony and group interests, emotion is often viewed as destructive or even dangerous to ongoing relationships and therefore needs to be strictly controlled. Asian parents are not preoccupied with facilitating emotional understanding in their children but emphasizing psychological discipline and behavioral standards (Chen et al., 1998; Wang, 2001b; Wang & Fivush, 2005). Accordingly, when conversing with their 3-year-olds about shared emotional experiences, Euro-American mothers often use an emotion-explaining style, frequently discussing the causes or consequences of children's feeling states and providing elaborate explanations as to why and how children experienced the emotions. In contrast, Chinese mothers often use an emotion-criticizing style, commenting on the incorrectness of children's (negative) emotional experience or behavior (Wang, 2001b; Wang & Fivush, 2005).

The great emphasis on the personal importance of emotion and emotional understanding and the associated family practices in Euro-American culture directly facilitate children’s developing emotion knowledge (Doan & Wang, 2010). Consequently, when asked to judge the emotional nature of story situations or to describe situations likely to provoke various emotions, Euro-American preschoolers outperform their Chinese peers regardless of age (Wang, 2003; Wang, Hutt, Kulkofsky, McDermott, & Wei, 2006). For example, in one study with Euro-American and Chinese 3- to 6-year-olds (Wang, 2003), children were presented with 20 short stories with a protagonist of their age, gender, and ethnicity, and were asked to identify the feeling states of the protagonist by choosing among faces showing happy, sad, scared, or angry emotions. Children's mothers and a second group of adults read the same stories and judged the protagonist's emotions in the same fashion. Based on the concordant judgments between children and adults in each culture, findings showed that American children had a better grasp of emotion knowledge and made more rapid progress in such knowledge than their Chinese peers.

Conceivably, the greater emotion knowledge in Euro-American children helps them better remember autobiographical events for long-term retention. As our research has shown, compared with their Chinese counterparts, Euro-American adults are able to access earlier and more childhood memories (Wang, 2001a, 2006a; Wang, Conway, & Hou, 2004) and Euro-American children tend to give more elaborate and detailed memory accounts (Han et al., 1998; Peterson et al., 2009; Wang, 2004). The hypothesis was further confirmed in a recent longitudinal investigation with European American, Chinese American, and Chinese preschoolers (Wang, 2008b). Across the preschool years, Euro-American children showed overall greater understanding of emotion situations and recalled more detailed autobiographical memories than Chinese and Chinese American children. Regardless of culture, children who showed greater understanding of emotion early on recalled memories with more specific details both concurrently and longitudinally than children who had less emotion knowledge. Furthermore, emotion knowledge functioned as a potent mediator that accounted for cultural differences in memory recall.

Parent-Child Reminiscing

Sociointeractionist approaches to memory development view the emergence of autobiographical memory as a direct result of children's developing narrative skills that take place in collaboration with significant adults (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Pillemer & White, 1989). Specifically, parent-child reminiscing teaches children how to represent and reinstate event information in linguistic forms and provides children with the necessary organizational framework around which to structure their personal memories. Furthermore, located in the cultural context, parent-child reminiscing conveys to children cultural norms and beliefs regarding the purpose and importance of remembering the past and models to children culturally promoted ways of remembering (Wang & Brockmeier, 2002; Wang & Ross, 2007).

Our research has revealed stylistic and thematic differences in parent-child reminiscing across cultures. When Euro-American and Chinese mothers talk with their preschool children at home about shared past experiences (e.g., Wang & Fivush, 2005; Wang, 2001b, 2007; Wang, Leichtman, & Davies, 2000), American mothers often use an elaborative conversational style in which they dwell on specific episodes, supplement children's responses with rich and embellished information, and provide immediate feedback to scaffold children's participation. Such conversations create ample opportunities for children to learn to construct elaborate stories about themselves. In contrast, Chinese mothers often employ a pragmatic conversational style wherein they direct the conversations by frequently posing and repeating factual questions, provide little detail or embellishment to assist the child's participation, and often try to elicit correct answers in a way that emulate a memory test. Such conversations seem not to focus on personal storytelling but more on reinforcing the position of the mother as an authority figure. The use of an elaborative reminiscing style, as opposed to a pragmatic style, has been found to be positively associated with mothers' endorsement of an autonomous self-view, and negatively related to their endorsement of a relational self-view (Wang, 2007). Furthermore, the thematic content of memory talk exhibits marked cultural differences. Memory talk between Euro-American mothers and children often take a child-centered approach, where the child remain the focal point of the conversation and the mother frequently refer to the child's interests, preferences, opinions, and personal attributes. In contrast, memory talk in Chinese families often take a mother-centered, hierarchically organized approach in which mothers set the direction of the conversation, emphasize social interactions, and frequently refer to moral rules and behavioral expectations with their children.

Intriguingly, children as young as age 3 appeared to have already adopted their mothers' style of conversation when talking about the shared past (Fivush & Wang, 2005; Wang, 2001b; Wang et al., 2000; Wang & Fivush, 2005). Compared with their Chinese peers, European American children use a more elaborative conversational style where they frequently volunteer new and descriptive information about the events under discussion, assuming a cooperative partnership with their mothers during the conversation. In contrast, Chinese children often reply to their mothers' inquiries,

especially repeated prompts, with either short answers or no new information. They also tend to play a passive role when responding to their mothers' inquires. In addition, Euro-American children frequently refer to their own roles, feelings, and thoughts in the past event, whereas Chinese children often comment on social rules and the roles of others. Furthermore, when children independently recount their experiences with an interviewer, the volume, style, and content of their memory narratives echo the cultural variations in parent-child reminiscing. Euro-American children tend to provide lengthy, elaborative, self-focused memory narratives and to place a great emphasis on personal predilection and autonomy. In comparison, Korean and Chinese children's narratives are often brief, skeletal, relation-oriented and exhibit a great concern with authority and moral rectitude (Han et al., 1998; Peterson et al., 2009; Wang, 2004; Wang & Leichtman, 2000).

Our research has further provided direct evidence for the effect of the differing parent-child reminiscing on children's memory, whereby Euro-American mothers' use of an elaborative reminiscing style early on, compared with Chinese mothers' pragmatic style, directly facilitate their children's memory recall concurrently and over the long term (Wang, 2006b, 2007). Maternal reminiscing style further serves as a potent mediator in explaining cultural differences in children's autobiographical memory (Wang, 2006b). Importantly, because of the pragmatic and less elaborative reminiscing early in development within Asian compared with Euro-American families, Asian children may not develop elaborated narrative schemas for representing and recalling the past, thus leading to less detailed and sparser autobiographical memories in adulthood (Wang, 2006a; Wang & Conway, 2004; Wang et al., 2004; Wang & Ross, 2005). Similarly, the socially oriented reminiscing in Asian families may facilitate the remembering of event information related to important others and the community over the long term, and the child-centered reminiscing in Euro-American families may encourage the remembering of self-focused information that highlights one's individuality and uniqueness (Wang & Ross, 2007).

Conclusion

A cultural perspective on autobiographical memory suggests that the memory is more than just a neurocognitive (brain/mind) entity that transcends social context and culture. As Bartlett (1932) argued forcefully in his seminal treatise on the social construction of memory, "Social organization gives a persistent framework into which all detailed recall must fit, and it very powerfully influences both the manner and the matter of recall" (p. 296). The current suite of cross-cultural research on autobiographical memory highlights the importance of embedding context and social rules into the models of memory and its development, and of identifying specific cultural frameworks and variables that influence how and what individuals remember.

Western children and adults often recall more detailed, more specific, and more self-focused memories than their Asian counterparts. Culture, through intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, plays a critical role in shaping autobiographical remembering. By internalizing prevailing cultural views of the self into one's own self-construal, and by acquiring culturally appropriate knowledge of emotion situations, individuals are afforded

or constrained in the endeavor of remembering autobiographical events and their details. Early family reminiscing, where parents model to children what to remember, how to remember, and why to remember it, convey to children cultural beliefs and parents' implicit or explicit socialization goals and further reinforce the intrapersonal processes of autobiographical memory, ensuring the continuity of cultural ways of remembering across generations.

Future research will continue to identify additional cultural variables responsible for the cultural differences in autobiographical memory. Research effort should also be devoted to delineate cultural effects on various stages of remembering, which is related to the question in general memory research of whether memory is shaped by factors acting at encoding, post-encoding remembering, or retrieval (see Wang, 2009, for an example). Studies should further investigate the relations between different types of memories, such as how individuals' prior knowledge of a particular cultural script (semantic memory) influences they remember distinct events (episodic memory). Furthermore, given the close relevance of autobiographical memory to daily life, the practical implications of cultural differences in memory recall should be considered in various domains such as psychotherapy, eyewitness identification, business negotiation, and everyday social interaction. Such research will help enhance efficiency in real life situations and facilitate the understanding of cultural diversity in human cognition and behavior.

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Additional Reading

Qi Wang published a book at Oxford University Press in 2013 with the title "The Autobiographical Self in Time and Culture" (see additional material)

Discussion Questions

1. How do the three cultural factors discussed in this article interrelated and how that, in turn, influences autobiographical memory?
2. At that stage of remembering – encoding, retention, or retrieval – do cultural differences in autobiographical memory emerge? Design a study to test your hypothesis.
3. Within a society, what cultural factors may affect the way people remember their experiences?
4. Do cultural differences in autobiographical memory extend to episodic future thinking? Do a literature search for recent findings on this topic.
5. In connection with your personal experiences, think about the implications of cultural differences in autobiographical memory in everyday life.

About the author

Qi Wang holds a BSc in Psychology from Peking University, China, and a PhD in Psychology from Harvard University. She is currently Professor and Director of Social Cognition Development Laboratory at Cornell University. Wang has received many honors and awards and is regarded as the preeminent psychologist in the study of memory and culture. Her work exemplifies a creative merger of rigorous empiricism, compelling theoretical insights, and real life significance for education and parenting.