

## Abstract

Cultural models of the self-concept have been claimed to reveal themselves in the discourse styles of the caregiver. A qualitative discourse analysis approach is used to examine the dynamic interrelation between cultural beliefs and the construction of self in a prototypical sample of East-Asian and Euro-American mothers. The results suggest that maternal discourse styles serve to transmit a culture's prevailing conceptions of selfhood from one generation to the next.

## Introduction

Children's socialization environments reflect cultural models of caregiving that shape the infant's developmental pathways<sup>1,3</sup>. The interplay between cultural belief systems and construals of the self has been described in terms of two prototypical models: an independent self-construal prevailing in Western cultural contexts describing the self as bounded and self-contained, focusing on autonomy, interpersonal independence, self enhancement, self expression and self maxi-mization, and an interdependent self-construal prevailing in Non-Western rural contexts describing the self as fluid across contexts and interrelated with others, focusing on heteronomy, interpersonal relatedness, social hierarchies in order to contribute to the harmonic functioning of the social unit, in particular the family<sup>1,2,3,5</sup>. One approach to study infants' access to culturally appropriate notions of self has been the study of maternal narrative styles. In the present study, we follow a discursive psychology approach to analyze how caregivers' discursive construction of the child's self may play a functional role in the transmission of cultural values.

## Procedure

We analyzed 10 minute video recordings of 5 Chinese (Beijing and Taiyuan) and 5 Euro-American (Los Angeles, California) urban middle-class mothers in spontaneous interactions with their 3 months old babies. The corpus consisted of the transcripts of these verbal interactions (the Chinese interactions were translated into English). The data was analyzed using discourse analysis<sup>4,6</sup>. In the first step, we identified patterns in form of both variability (differences in either the content or form of the accounts) and consistency (features shared by the accounts). In a second step, the analysis consisted of forming hypotheses about the functions and effects of the verbal accounts and searching for the linguistic evidence in the data.



Chinese mother



Euro-american mother

Example: „Talk to mommy, I will talk to you, lets talk, talk, now lets talk... your tired, your sleeping, Is it difficult to fall asleep? What are you seeing? What are you looking at? Niu Niu (babytalk). Don't speak, tired, tired, don't want to talk to mommy? Follow mommy and dance. Follow mommy and dance (babytalk) (two cousins are coming). You should perform for them a summer sault. For Niu Niu to see, you see. You will perform for them a summer sault. Is that okay? Niu Niu, what are you looking at? Don't look at that. Don't look at that. Talk to them. You're talking to them? O, you're talking to them? You're talking to it? O... 'ber ber' you should ask them to perform. 'Cousins, can you perform for me? Just perform for me once, is that okay? Ber Ber and Ge Ge please perform for me.'“ (CH\_01:07-10)

Example: “What do you think about this? Hmm? You like that book? Hehehe... Okay, should I read another little book to you, in Greek? [...] is... want to feel tue bunny ears? Can feel them? This is a book called (Greek title) about a little bunny named Ruby. This will teach you to count in Greek. (Greek reading in the book.) Are you tired of this reading? Then we will just look at the pictures really quick, this is Emma, Zeo, Glia, Thera, Bende, Xzi, Fta, Octo, Enya, Decal... Count to ten in greek, Okay? Lets go play with you and your toys. Are you getting a little sleepy? Hmmm?... A little sleepy? And... lets see, wanna play with some of these ... toys...ooo... lots for you to do here, yes, hmm? Yea... See? And here is a mirror, Look Atenlia, look over here! You can see yourself. Hmm? Whats this? Whats that?” (LA\_02:6-11)

## Results

**Consistency** was found on a **structural level**: (1) **mirroring** the child's behavior and assumed inner states. (2) Switching from a me-you perspective to the **perspective of the child**

Chinese mother:

“Niu Niu is extremely tired, right? [...] Niu Niu is sleeping, Niu Niu is tired. Niu Niu is good (girl/boy), Niu Niu is good (girl/boy). Niu Niu is tired. Niu Niu is good (girl/boy). I am called Niu Niu, I have grown to be very beautiful. Will be a super little treasure. I am a good little treasure. [...] I am a good little treasure, I am an obedient little treasure.” (CH\_01:25-28)

US mother:

“You're rubbing your eyes and you're tired, okay let's go over here. Let's go over here and play. You like to go on your changing table, the best place, the funniest place is at the changing table. Yea, but I just got my diaper changed. But I just got my diaper changed. I am cranky 'cause I'm tired.” (LA\_04:13)

**Variability** was found on a **content level**:

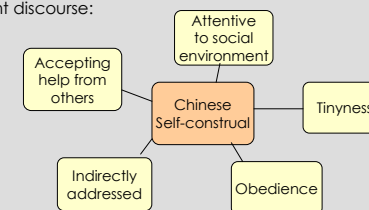
**The Chinese Case:**  
“Creating a Mutual Social World”

- refer to the child as **small**
- refer to **other-centeredness**
- include the **social environment**
- draw the child's attention to the **social environment**
- refer to themselves as **helping the child**
- refer to „good girl/boy” in the context of **obedience**
- use terms of **reassurance** (“is that o.k.?”)
- address the child in the **3rd person**
- use **imperative** formulations

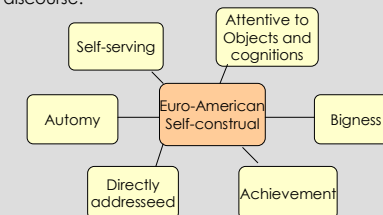
**The Euro-American Case:**  
“Entertaining a Prospective Equal Partner”

- refer to the child as **big**
- refer to **self-serving** purposes
- refer to the child as **autonomous** entity
- draw the child's attention to the **world of objects**
- ask the child whether it wants help and encourage the child to **do it her/himself**
- refer to „good girl/boy” in the context of **achievement**
- talk about the child's **cognitions**
- address the child **directly**
- treat the child as **autonomous** partner

Interdependent discourse:



Independent discourse:



## Conclusion

While mothers use similar specific structural means in their verbal interaction with the child, such as mirroring and change of perspective, they use strikingly different contents. The function of switching perspective might be interpreted as trying to make the baby identify with the mother's statement. Mother's verbal accounts towards their infants can be regarded as reflecting culturally informed assumptions of what is appropriate within a specific cultural context. The discourse used by the Chinese mothers seems to serve the function to convey cultural values such as obedience, attentiveness to and inclusion of the social environment, mutual support and putting oneself second in social context, and may thus be described as „interdependent discourse”. The discourse used by the Euro-American mothers seems to serve the function to convey cultural values such as autonomy, achievement, attentiveness to own interests and choice, striving for self-serving purposes, self-enhancement, and may thus be described as „independent discourse”. The differences in discourse reflect cultural assumptions on the self as expressed in the model of independence and interdependence. Discourse styles on a microgenetic level can be conceived of as dynamically interrelated with cultural beliefs on a macrogenetic level and as powerful media to convey cultural values in the interaction with three months old babies. The present study has some limitations in generalizing the results due to the rather small sample size as well as in the culturally informed interpretation of the results of the Chinese transcripts due to the linguistic features that might get lost in the English translation. Further studies from an indigenous perspective are needed to understand in more depth the discursive construction of selfhood in culture-specific contexts.

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