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CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN RETRIEVAL OF SELF-DEFINING MEMORIES

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Australians and Asians were asked to provide autobiographical memories of events they believe shaped who they are as individuals (self-defining memories). The authors found the anticipated cultural differences for the memories' themes. Contrary to previous suggestions, however, elaboration of personal memories occurred equally for both groups and was dependent on the content of the memory. Australians provided more elaborate autonomous memories and Asians more elaborate relatedness memories. The findings indicate that elaborating personal memories may function to enhance the dominant self-focus.

Keywords: autobiographical memory; cultural orientation; memory elaboration; self

Recent evidence (Wang, 2001; Wang & Conway, 2004) consistently shows that the cultural distinction between individual versus relatedness orientation (Kitayama, Markus, & Norasakkunkit 1997; Triandis, 1995) is reflected in the content of autobiographical remembering. This cultural difference is in keeping with a theoretical approach (Conway, 2005), which emphasizes the role of a "conceptual self" in personal remembering, such that "memories retain knowledge related to the focus" of the self-system, that is, independent or interdependent (Conway, Wang, Hanyu, & Haque, 2005, p. 746). The nature and determinants of cultural differences in the quality of autobiographical memory, particularly in the degree of elaboration, however, are less clear. Some researchers (Conway et al., 2005; Wang, 2001) suggest that people from independently oriented cultures are more likely to provide lengthy and highly elaborated autobiographical narratives than people from interdependent cultures whose autobiographical memories are depicted as brief, routine, and less elaborate. There is some evidence to support these suggestions when people are asked to recall memories about individual experiences, personal roles, and emotions generally, or from a particular time in their past (Conway et al., 2005; Wang, 2001; Wang & Conway, 2004).

The suggestions do not accord with the model's functional perspective on autographical remembering, which proposes that the quality of memories helps regulate affect by ensuring a correspondence between acts of remembering and the dominant conceptual self-knowledge (Conway, 2005). For individually oriented cultures this should be achieved by elaborating mainly autonomous aspects of personal memory, whereas for interdependent cultures congruence should be maintained by elaborating relatedness aspects. There is some indirect evidence to support this view. Western mothers emphasize the unique individual when reminiscing with their children, focusing on the child's actions and opinions.

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Asian mothers downplay the autonomous self *in favor of* a discussion about social interactions, activities, and social norms (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Wang, Leichtman, & Davies, 2000). There are also consistent findings (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Wang, 2001; Wang & Fivush, 2005) that, regardless of culture, people provide both autonomous and relatedness autobiographical memories. These considerations suggest that any cultural difference in the degree of elaboration of autobiographical memory may depend on the type of information that is retrieved.

We examine cultural differences in memories that are regarded as self-defining. A self-defining memory is a memory of an event that an individual believes shapes “who I am” and is essential in giving meaning to the “self” (Singer & Salovey, 1993). Because they function to distinguish the person as a unique individual, demonstrating a dependency of the quality of self-defining memories on an autonomous or relatedness cultural focus would provide powerful support for the inference from earlier work that a cultural conceptual self is critical to regulating autobiographical remembering (Conway et al., 2005).

This study asks whether cultural differences in the quality of the self-defining autobiographical memories will depend on the theme of the memory. In particular, we test the hypotheses that autonomously themed memories will be more elaborate for Australian participants and relatedness themed memories more elaborate for Asian participants. In addition, the study evaluates whether observed cultural differences in the theme of autobiographical remembering will be replicated using an instruction to retrieve key, self-focused memories (self-defining memories).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 50 volunteers (24 Asians; 18 male) recruited from undergraduate courses at the Australian National University, Canberra. They ranged in age from 17 to 42 years ($M = 22.46$, $SD = 6.40$). All Australian participants reported that their country of birth was Australia. Asian participants were ethnic Chinese ($n = 16$), Japanese ($n = 2$), Taiwanese ($n = 2$), Korean, ($n = 2$), Indian ($n = 1$), and Bhutanese ($n = 1$). The two groups did not differ in terms of age, $t(48) = 1.40$, $p > .05$, or in their gender distribution, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = .71$, $p > .05$. Australian students had lived in Australia ($M = 21.60$ years, $SD = 6.39$), significantly longer than Asian students ($M = 2.20$ years, $SD = 2.12$), $t(48) = 14.16$, $p < .01$.

PROCEDURE

Self-defining memories. We used Singer and Salovey’s (1993) method to elicit self-defining memories. Participants were given 8 minutes to write five self-defining memories. Participants were informed that

a self-defining memory is a memory from your life that you remember very clearly, is important to you, and leads to strong positive or negative feelings. It is the kind of memory that helps you to understand who you are and conveys powerfully how you have come to be the person you currently are.

They were also asked to rate “how hard they found the study” on a 10-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*).

SCORING

The written memories were coded according to the instructions developed by Wang and Conway (2004) for theme, autonomous orientation, and social interactions, and using Reviere and Bakeman's (2001) rules for coding memory elaboration.

Theme. Personal experiences (autonomy theme) were associated with objects or events not particularly related to other people, for example, academic achievement or sporting endeavors. Social events (relatedness theme) were about collective activities of the family, workplace, community, or other social groups. An autonomous ratio was formed by dividing the number of autonomous-themed self-defining memories by the number of memories reported. A relatedness ratio was formed by dividing the number of relatedness-themed self-defining memories by the number of memories reported.

Autonomous orientation. The autonomous orientation for each memory was the sum of references to (a) personal needs, desires, or preferences; (b) personal dislikes or avoidance; (c) personal evaluations, judgments, or opinions regarding other people, objects, or events; (d) retaining control over one's own actions and resisting group or social pressure; (e) personal achievement or competency; and (f) instances that involved just the individual (Wang & Conway, 2004). The autonomous orientation scores for each memory retrieved were totaled and divided by the total number of memories retrieved to provide an autonomous orientation score.

Social interactions. The number of references that involved social interactions or group activities were counted and totaled for each memory. A social interaction score was obtained by tallying the total number of interaction scenarios provided across all the memories and dividing by the number of memories retrieved (Wang & Conway, 2004).

Elaboration. Elaboration was scored as the number of unique, nonredundant units of information referencing person, place, feeling, descriptor, personal evaluation, dialogue, and so on. We calculated, for each participant, the average number of units of elaboration for autonomous-themed memories and the average number of units of elaboration for relatedness-themed memories (Reviere & Bakeman, 2001).

Word number. The number of words per memory was counted. This was tallied for each participant and then divided by the number of memories retrieved.

Reliability. One rater coded all the memories, and a second independent rater from a Chinese cultural background coded 20% of responses. Raters were blind to the study hypotheses and the cultural group of participants. Discrepancies between raters were resolved through discussion. Interrater reliability was calculated using intraclass kappa and percentage agreement for the categorical code (theme) and Pearson coefficients for the continuous measures. Reliability was good for theme ($\kappa = .83$; 80% agreement), autonomous orientation ($r = .84$), and elaboration ($r = .96$), and adequate for social interactions ($r = .79$).

RESULTS

Australians and Asians provided an equivalent number of self-defining memories ($M = 4.77$, $SD = .51$; $M = 4.92$, $SD = .28$, respectively), $t(48) = 1.24$, $p > .05$, and their

self-defining memories were equivalent in length (mean number of words; $M = 18.05, SD = 7.77$; $M = 17.23, SD = 7.18$, respectively), $t(48) = .39, p > .05$. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between the groups in self-reported study difficulty, $t(48) = .58, p > .05$.

Theme. Australians provided a significantly higher proportion of autonomous-themed self-defining memories ($M = 0.61, SD = 0.24$) than Asians ($M = 0.46, SD = 0.26$), $t(48) = 2.16, p < .05$, and Asians provided a significantly higher proportion of relatedness-themed memories ($M = 0.53, SD = 0.23$) than did Australians ($M = 0.37, SD = 0.23$), $t(48) = 2.40, p < .05$.

Autonomous orientation. Australians had significantly greater autonomous orientation in their self-defining memories ($M = 3.99, SD = 1.88$) than Asians ($M = 1.52, SD = 0.59$), $t(48) = 6.17, p < .01$.

Social interactions. Asians ($M = 1.01, SD = 0.67$) had significantly more social interactions in their self-defining memories than Australians ($M = 0.45, SD = 0.24$), $t(48) = 4.04, p < .01$.

Elaboration. We undertook a 2×2 way ANOVA with culture (Australian vs. Asian) as a between-subjects factor and theme (autonomous vs. relatedness) as a within-subjects factor, with mean number of elaboration units as the dependent measure. There was no difference in the elaboration of autonomous versus relatedness-themed memories overall, $F(1, 48) = .09, p > .05$. The difference between Australians and Asians in elaboration of their self-defining memories overall was not significant, $F(1, 48) = .18, p > .05$. However, there was a significant interaction between culture and theme for elaboration, $F(1, 48) = 12.57, p < .01$. Australians provided significantly more elaboration than Asians for autonomous-themed memories ($M = 4.96, SD = 1.98$; $M = 3.31, SD = 2.07$, respectively), $t(48) = 2.88, p < .01$, but the stronger elaboration by Asians compared to Australians for relatedness-themed memories ($M = 4.85, SD = 2.40$; $M = 3.66, SD = 2.90$, respectively) failed to reach significance, $t(48) = 1.58, p = .06$. Australians elaborated their autonomous-themed memories significantly more than their relatedness-themed memories, $t(25) = 2.31, p < .05$, and Asians elaborated their relatedness-themed memories more than their autonomous-themed memories, $t(23) = 2.71, p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that cultural differences in the quality of autobiographical memories depend on the theme of the memory. Specifically, the results show that elaboration of personal memories may occur equally for people from relatedness cultures as for people from an autonomous culture and that elaborating personal memories is dependent on memory content. These results are consistent with Conway's (2005) model's functional perspective on autographical remembering. They also question suggestions that those from interdependent-focused cultures may have "less need for elaborated, detailed autobiographical memories" (Wang, 2001, p. 221) and that their autobiographical histories can be depicted as "brief, skeletal" (Conway et al., 2005, p. 740). The findings indicate instead that elaborating personal memories may function to enhance the dominant self-focus by enriching the network and presentation of the relatedness-self for Asians and the autonomous-self for Australians. In addition, the study replicated observed cultural differences in the theme of autobiographical remembering using an instruction to retrieve key,

self-focused memories (self-defining memories) providing additional support for a culturally dependent difference in autobiographical remembering. Here, the cultural effect is evident for memories that are regarded as important for distinguishing oneself as an individual.

The limitations of this study are acknowledged. In particular, it is not clear what impact the fact that the Asians were undertaking a task in an intercultural context while for the Australians the task was intracultural, may have had on the findings. It seems unlikely, in our view, that this difference would affect memory theme or the interaction between culture and theme for memory elaboration. Given the pattern and size of our results with a smallish sample, we have some confidence that they are robust. Nevertheless, we recognize the importance of examining contextual effects on personal remembering that may interact with cultural-dependent differences. The culturally heterogeneous Asian group was considered in this study as a single, relatedness-orientated population. Although there is support for this approach from previous literature (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004; Wang & Ross, 2005), the inclusion of a measure of interdependent and/or independent orientation would have provided better support for our conclusions. In this regard, it is important to note that the analyses using the more homogeneous group of ethnic Chinese produced equivalent findings. These limitations are being addressed in an ongoing study using a larger sample of members from the general population, incorporating an individual-difference measure of independence-interdependence. Notwithstanding these limitations, the results of the study document the salience of memory content in moderating cultural differences in autobiographical memory quality and raises interesting questions about other memory content effects. We are currently investigating whether the emotional impact of the memory is also important in moderating cultural differences in the nature of personal remembering.

NOTE

1. Because there may have been cultural differences in norms and values within the culturally heterogeneous Asian group, the analyses were also conducted comparing Australian and ethnic Chinese participants only. Equivalent findings emerged for the predicted Theme \times Culture interaction for elaboration, $F(1, 40) = 9.05, p < .01$, and the cultural main effect for theme (relatedness, $t(40) = 2.20, p < .05$; autonomy, $t(40) = 2.06, p < .05$).

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