

Running head: CONSTRUAL OF SELF AND EMOTION SOCIALIZATION

Mothers' construal of self and emotion socialization goals

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### **Mothers' construal of self and socialization goals**

Emotion socialization is an important domain in early parenting. Through teaching the child norms and regulations concerning feeling rules and display rules of emotion, the society conveys to the child a morality of self-control (Gordon, 1981) and through socializing the child to experience and display the appropriate emotions in appropriate contexts, societal values are maintained and disruptions to society are minimized (Markus & Kitayama, 2001). Emotion socialization, thus, helps to enculturate the child to become an effective and valued member of the society through fostering in them the culturally valued emotional competence. As Ogbu (1981) suggested in his cultural-ecological model, "competence" must be considered within the cultural context in the sense that they become cultural goals that are adaptive to the socioecological demands, and that culturally standardized techniques which help parents achieve these cultural goals would evolve gradually within the cultural context. In other words, cultural-specific values would become culturally endorsed parental goals which affect parental practices. Markus and Kitayama (1991) elaborated that cultural influence is exerted through the construal of self asserted that the model of self is related to different spheres of life including emotions. The implication is that parents' model of self would affect their emotion-related socialization goals. Based on Markus and Kitayama's cultural model of self, the main aim of the present study was to examine how mothers' construal of self is related to their emotion socialization goals.

### ***Cultural model of self***

Collectivistic and individualistic cultures have been associated with higher levels of interdependence and independence respectively (Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; 2003). Markus and Kitayama (1991) introduced the cultural model of self, coining the influences of differences in cultural values

embodied in individualism and collectivism on how individuals view themselves.

Although attempts to categorize cultures as either collectivistic or individualistic have been regarded as simplistic (Singelis, 1994), there is currently no better construct to acknowledge differences between cultures in the relative importance of the group and the individual.

In the Western world where independence is valued, an individual's behavior is seen as regulated by his/her thoughts, motives, needs and feelings. The self represents an autonomous and independent entity with personal needs and attributes. Markus and Kitayama (1991) label this as an independent construal of self. An independent construal of self orients towards satisfaction of personal needs and actualization of personal potentials and attributes. Group and social relationships serve to promote the strength of the self in an individualistic society. In a society where interdependency is valued, "self" is not equal to "individual" in the Western sense. Instead of viewing the self as an individual with psychological needs and attributes, self is viewed as a person enmeshed in a network of relationships. Self is a constellation of ascribed or assigned social roles. Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994) label this kind of self as an interdependent construal of self. The individual's behaviors are contingent on what they perceive to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in any relationship. The interdependent self serves to promote the smooth running of the group.

The concept of interdependent construal of self is similar to the concept of 仁, (*jen*) in Chinese culture (Hsu, 1971). Hsu argued that Chinese stress interpersonal relationships in formulating the concept of *jen* (man) while western people stress more on inner psychic substances in the concept of "man". Then, according to the

cultural model of self, people from Chinese culture should have a dominant interdependent construal of self.

As mentioned above, cultures cannot be categorized exclusively as either individualistic or collectivistic. The two dimensions, independence and interdependence, co-exist in individuals (Cheng & Lam, 2007; Singelis, 1994). Cross and Markus (1991) found that while the two dimensions of self or dual self co-exist in East Asian students as well as American students, East Asian students had better developed interdependent self-construal than their American counterparts and the Americans had a better developed independent self-construal. Related to the work of Markus and Kitayama's (1991), Kagitcibasi (1996, 2005) argued that an individual can be autonomous and at the same time related closely to other people and she introduced a third model of self: an autonomous relational self. An autonomous relational self "combines interpersonal relatedness with autonomous functioning" (Keller et al., 2006, p. 156). An autonomous relational self is the dominant model of self of people in societies which emphasize the cultural value of interdependence but has undergone the processes of urbanization and industrialization and become wealthier (Kagitcibasi, 2005). In these societies, the intergenerational material dependence becomes low, people enjoy prolonged period of education and people start to value autonomy.

### ***Construal of Self and Emotion***

Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994) elaborated that differences in emotion experiences and emotion regulation can be expected between societies putting different emphases on the two different kinds of construal of self. In a society in which interdependent construal of self is nurtured, emotional interdependency is an important tool for survival. People with strong interdependent construal of self would

tend to take others' feelings into consideration before expressing their own emotions. Interpersonal harmony is important in Chinese culture (Bond, 1991). Emotion is manipulated to harmonize interpersonal relationships. Chinese parents are eager to socialize their children to "read face color" of other people and act accordingly (Q. Wang, 2006). Children who are good at doing that are praised as "smart". Other than emotional interdependence, Chinese philosophy encourages emotion regulation in general. Confucianism which exerts strong influences on Chinese culture encourages control of emotion (Xu et al., 2005) and Xu et al. found that mainland Chinese mothers' rating of collectivism was positively related to the value they placed on emotional self-control. Highly emotionally expressive individuals are regarded as poorly regulated and socially immature (Ho, 1986).

On the contrary, in a society where independent construal of self is relatively strong, emotion is regarded as an individual attribute and the expression of emotion as an articulation of individual needs or desires. Understanding of emotion is part of the process of self-understanding and expression of emotion is an acknowledgment of the importance of the self and helps individuals to get their needs and desires met. Therefore both emotion understanding and emotion expression are endorsed in Western socialization. Parents are eager to help children understand and articulate their emotions so that their needs or desires can be satisfied (Chao, 1995).

Other than the dimension of emotion interdependency and independency, Markus and Kitayama (1991) considered two different kinds of emotions: ego-focused emotions and other-focused emotions. They argued that emotions such as anger, frustration and pride have the individual's internal attributes as the primary referent. They labeled this kind of emotion as ego-focused because it results from the blocking, satisfaction or confirmation of one's individual goals, needs or abilities. In

contrast, emotions such as sympathy and shame which have another person as the primary referent are other-focused emotions. Other-focused emotions “are relational in their meaning and in their source, and often in their experience and expression as well” (Kitayama, Markus, & Matsumoto, 1995, p. 439). Experience or manipulation of these emotions highlights one's interdependence and facilitates the reciprocal exchanges of cooperative social behaviours as they depend on other people's views on the self.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) assert that people with a dominant independent construal of self would be relatively more competent in the understanding and expressing ego-focused emotions while people with strong interdependent construal of self would be relatively more competent at understanding and expressing other-focused emotions.

It can, then, be predicted that since Chinese society nurtures a strong interdependent construal of self, emotion socialization practices of Chinese parents would stress the constraint of ego-focused emotions and encourage the expression of other-focused emotions. In Chinese society, interdependent construal of self appears to be related to filial piety. Respect has to be paid and criticism withheld in relation to elders. Therefore the display of ego-focused emotion towards parents or other adults is seen as highly unacceptable or possibly immoral. In fact, children are taught to keep silent when they find their parents or other elder family members have done something wrong.

To summarize, the emotional competence valued by those with a strong independent construal of self includes emotion understanding, the natural expression of emotions, especially ego-focused emotions and emotion independence or *individualistic emotional competence*. In contrast, interdependent construal of self

emphasizes the regulation of emotions especially self-focused emotions, encourages the expression of other-focused emotions and nurtures emotional interdependence or *relational emotional competence*.

### ***Hong Kong Context***

Kagitcibasi (2005) asserted that the developmental path leading to construal of self is related to both the socio-cultural context and socialization processes. Keller and colleagues elaborated that, according to Kagitcibasi's cultural model of parenting, parental goals reflect the global cultural goals related to the dominant cultural model of self (Lamm, Keller, Chaudhary, & Yovsi, 2008). In other words, parents' emotion socialization goals would be related to their model of self. Since people with an autonomous-related self value both autonomy and relatedness, it follows that they would value both individualistic and relational emotional competence.

Wang and Hsueh (2000) suggest that the changes in socio-economic environment which lead to a shift of dominance of an interdependent construal of self to the dominance of an autonomous relational self have happened in Mainland China. A similar change might be argued to have happened in Hong Kong as well. The socio-cultural context of Hong Kong should be one that nurtures an autonomous-related self. Having been a British colony for 155 years, Hong Kong is labeled as the melting pot of Western and Eastern cultures (Luk-Fong, 2006). Hong Kong has a strong Chinese cultural heritage which stresses interpersonal relationship and filial piety (Ho, 1986; Pearson & Rao, 2003). At the same time, Hong Kong implements a western education system and education philosophy. English is a core subject in all primary and secondary schools and was the teaching medium of most secondary schools before 1997. English remains the teaching medium of the top secondary schools after 1997. Through education, Western values of independency

and equality are transmitted. Given the unique cultural and historical context of Hong Kong, it was predicted that Chinese parents in Hong Kong who are likely to have an autonomous relational self, would value both relational and individualistic emotional competence goals, with a greater emphasis on the former than the latter.

Since Markus and Kitayama (1991) introduced the cultural model of self, research has confirmed the influences of culture on emotion experiences (e.g., Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, & Jing, 2003; Kitayama, Markus & Kurokawa, 2000; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006). Only a few studies have been conducted to apply the proposed link between construal of self and emotional competence to the process of emotion socialization (e.g., Q. Wang, 2001, 2003; Q. Wang & Fivush, 2005). Kagitcibasi (2005) has related the concept of construal of self to parenting. She maintained that parents' construal of self is related to their parental goals and practices. However, although the cultural model of parenting has been researched but in these studies, parents' construal of self were either assumed or measured only indirectly (e.g., Keller, Borke, & Yovsi, 2005; Keller et al., 2006; Lamm, Keller, Chaudhary, & Yovsi, 2008). The present study addressed these research gaps measuring mothers' construal of self and examining its relationship with their emotion socialization goals.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were Chinese mothers of 91 girls and 98 boys studying in primary one and primary two classes (Grade 1 and 2) in 16 Hong Kong primary schools. The ages of the children ranged from six to eight years and the mean age was 7.3 years ( $SD = .72$ ). The sample was a convenient sample. The author contacted all the primary school headmasters she knew and 16 of them agreed to recruit parents for the study. A



majority of the mothers (81.5%) completed secondary school education. Of the rest, 19 (10.1%) had primary school education level or below, and 16 (8.5%) had post secondary education level. All of the mothers were of Chinese origin and had Chinese as their native language with Cantonese as their dialect.

### ***Data collection***

The data were collected through face-to-face meetings conducted by the author with groups of mothers at the schools through which they were recruited. The group size varied from four to 16, depending on the number of mothers returning consent forms. Detailed verbal instructions were provided to the mothers to assist in questionnaire completion and the individual questionnaire items were read aloud by the first author to the group. The participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before and during administration of the questionnaires. Each mother recorded her responses to her own questionnaire.

### ***Instruments***

#### ***Mothers' construal of self***

Singelis's (1994) Scale of Independent and Interdependent Construal of Self was adapted for measuring mothers' construal of self. Since Singelis's scale was developed on undergraduate students and the situations in some items were not applicable to adults, the wording of the some items was amended so that they could be used with mothers. "Speaking up *in a class* is not a problem for me" was changed to "Speaking up *in a group* is not a problem for me" (independent construal of self) and "I am the same person at home as I am *at school*" was changed to "I am the same person at home as I am *in my office or with my friends*" (independent construal of self), and "I should take into consideration my parents' advice *when making education/career plans*" was amended as "I should take into consideration my

parents' advice *when I decide where I live after I get married*" (interdependent construal of self). The modified Singelis scale was translated into Chinese by two Chinese psychology professors who teach in both Chinese and English. Internal reliability of the modified Chinese scale was found to be comparable to that reported by Singelis (1994). Two factors explained 25% of the total variance and the Cronbach alpha was .65 for the Interdependent construal of self subscale and .65 for the Independent construal of self subscale.

*Mothers' emotion socialization goals.*

Based on the differences in emotional competence between people with a dominant independent construal of self and people with a dominant interdependent construal of self as suggested by Markus and Kitayama (1991), a Parental Emotional Competence Goals Scale was developed to measure mothers' socialization goals in relation to their child's emotional competence. There were 20 items making up two subscales: individualistic emotional competence (IEC) and relational emotional competence (REC). The items were developed and presented in Chinese. Mothers were asked to rate to what extent they regarded each statement as important from 1 (*very unimportant*) to 6 (*very important*). The mean scores of the two subscales were used as a measure for the value placed on relational and individualistic emotional competence. Sample items were "My child can show negative feelings in relation to the senior members of the family" and "My child can control his/her emotions so as to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationship" for REC and "My child can express his/her own emotion naturally" and "My child can express his/her emotions and the reasons behind in front of elders or authority figures" for IEC.

The Cronbach alpha was 0.73 for the IEC subscale, 0.78 for the REC subscale and 0.80 for the whole scale. To further confirm the structural validity of the two

subscales, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with LISREL.8. In order to meet the sample size-to-item ratio, the 10 items in each scale were paired up at random to create five (Chang, Lei, Li, & Liu, 2005; MacCallum, Widaman, Zhang, & Hong, 1999). The goodness of fit indexes showed that the structure of the scale was at good fit level (K.T. Wang, Staney, & Rice, 2007): individualistic emotional competence, CFI= 0.96, IFI=0.96, NNFI = 0.91, AGFI=0.92, RMSEA= 0.093; relational emotional competence, CFI= 1:00, IFI= 1.01, NNFI=1.02, AGFI= 0.99, RMSEA = 0.00. The Cronbach alphas and CFA results supported the reliability and structural validity of the scale.

### **Results**

The means and standard deviations of independent and interdependent construal of self were 3.86 (0.55) and 4.55 (0.43) respectively. The former was near the mid point of the 6-point Likert scale. T-test results show that there was a significant difference between independent construal of self and interdependent construal of self,  $t(188) = 14.72, p < .001$ . The Chinese mothers in the present study had a dominant interdependent construal of self.

The means and standard deviations of individualistic and relational emotional competence were 4.25 (0.53) and 4.83 (0.49) respectively. The means of both subscales were above the mid-point of the 6-point Likert scale. A significant difference was found between relational emotional competence and individualistic emotional competence,  $t(188) = 13.63, p < .001$ . This shows that Hong Kong-Chinese mothers would like their children to learn to express other-focused emotion, control their negative emotions, especially when interacting with senior members of the family, and consider other's emotion before expressing their emotions.

***Mothers' Construal of Self and Goals for Children's Emotional Competence.***

Structural equation modeling was conducted with LISREL 8.0 to examine the relationships between mothers' construal of self and parental goals for children's emotional competence. The indices of fit are:  $X^2 = 148.992$ ,  $df = 100$ , CFI = .92, TLI (NNFI) = .90, IFI = .92, RMSEA = .051 (see Figure 1). The indices support a good model (K.T. Wang, Staney, & Rice, 2007). Mothers' independent construal of self predicted the adoption of individualistic emotional competence goals ( $\beta = .48$ ) but not the adoption of relational emotional competence goals ( $\beta = -.09$ ). Mothers' interdependent construal of self predicted the adoption of both individualistic and relational emotional competence goals but the predictive power was over relational emotional competence goals ( $\beta = .74$ ) is stronger than that over individualistic emotional competence goals ( $\beta = .48$ ).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

**Discussion**

The present study offers some support to the link between construal of self and emotion socialization proposed in the cultural model of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and the cultural model of parenting (Kagitcibasi, 2005). Although it has been shown that the cultural model of self is related to parental behaviors (e.g., Q. Wang, 2001, 2003; Q. Wang & Fivush, 2005), parental behaviours would only be meaningful if we understand the meaning parents assign to these behaviours (Tamis-LeMonda, Wang, Koutsouvanou, & Albright, 2002). The Parental Emotional Competence Goals Scale developed in the present study operationalizes the cultural influences of construal of self on parental emotion socialization goals. The scale is proved to have strong structural validity and internal consistency in the present study. It can serve as a starting point for cross-cultural and within cultural studies on emotion socialization.

***Construal of self of Chinese mothers in Hong Kong***

The present findings suggest that the Chinese mothers in Hong Kong tended to have a bicultural self system with their interdependent construal of self stronger than their independent construal of self, consistent with Markus and Kitayama's (1991) assertion that people in group-oriented cultures have an interdependent self as their dominant construal of self. This implies that they valued relatedness as well as independence.

The results also give some support to Kagitcibasi's (2005) conception of autonomous-related self. Kagitcibasi (2005) has proposed that intergenerational dependency is institutionalized as cultural values in agricultural societies to secure the survival of both generations. When these societies have undergone the processes of modernization and industrialization and advanced from an underdeveloped to a developing or developed society, people would start to value autonomy increasingly. Similar to the societies described by Kagitcibasi, the economic system Hong Kong has changed from being mainly agricultural to tertiary in nature. As a result, flexibility, creativity and specialization in the workplace are required. At the same time, the Hong Kong government has enforced nine year free and compulsory education which is Western in nature. Consequently autonomy is gradually regarded as a kind of personal asset and is more and more valued in Hong Kong. The cultural value of interpersonal relatedness is still embraced but intergenerational dependency becomes psychological instead of material in nature. The self model nurtured is that of an autonomous-related self as in the case of the Chinese mothers in the present study.

***Parental goals of children's emotional competence***

The Chinese mothers in the present study valued both individualistic emotional competence which regards emotion as a personal asset and relational emotional competence which views emotional expression as a vehicle for promoting harmonious

interpersonal relationships. However, comparatively speaking, the mothers regarded relational competence goals as more important than individual emotional competence. In other words, they aspired to bring up children who are good at expressing other-focused emotions and control ego-focused emotions in order to build harmonious relationship with people.

Parenting is a cultural activity which transmits cultural values to the next generation (Lamm, Keller, Chaudhary, & Yovsi, 2008). However, the influence of construal of self on emotion socialization proposed by Markus and Kitayama (1991) has been examined in only a limit number of studies. The present study contributes to the literature by revealing that mothers' goals for their children's emotional competence were related to their construal of self. As hypothesized, mothers' construal of self was related to their goals for children's emotional competence. Independent construal of self predicted the endorsement of individualistic emotional competence goals. Mothers with a strong independent construal of self endorsed Western values such as independence, assertiveness, openness and rights to express one's feelings and opinions. Results show that they aspired to bring up children who understand their own emotions, are true to their own emotions and are emotionally independent.

Analysis results also revealed that mothers with a dominant interdependent construal of self regarded both relational and individualistic emotional competence as important to be inculcated in their children. These results offer some evidence for the cultural model of parenting suggested by Kagitcibasi (2005). According to Kagitcibasi, parents with an autonomous-related self aim to bring up children who are autonomous whilst relating well with people.

Previous findings showed that Chinese parents valued both relatedness and autonomy (Jose, Huntsinger, Huntsinger, & Liaw, 2000). Kagitcibasi (2005) explained that the study results of Jose et al. show that the parents had an autonomous relational self as their dominant model of self. The same argument can be used to explain the present findings. According to Kagitcibasi, people with an autonomous relational self continue to endorse the collective values of relatedness which are their traditional cultural values. Collectivism is rooted in traditional Chinese values (Kim, 1994). Therefore, Chinese mothers would endorse abilities to control emotions in front of senior family members to show one's respect and the abilities to express and control emotions for interpersonal harmony which are included in relational emotional competence. At the same time, parents in this kind of societies would value autonomy. That explains why the Chinese mothers also rated expressing one's emotion naturally and emotional independence as important socialization goals.

To date, most studies on emotion socialization have been conducted in Western societies (e.g., Valiente et al., 2006; Wong, McElwain, & Halberstadt, 2009; Oppenheim, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 1999). The present study which was conducted with mothers from a group-oriented culture reveals the influences of relatedness and autonomy on mothers' emotion socialization goals. The results imply that attempts to change parents' behaviors in handling children's emotion may be in vain if they do not understand their emotion socialization goals. Parental responses endorsed by a mother who value individualistic emotional competence may not be acceptable to a mother who has a dominant interdependent construal of self. Service providers should be aware of the values and socialization goals endorsed by parents when they design activities to teach parents how to handle their children's emotions.

***Parental Goals for Children's Emotional Competence Scale***

The Parental Goals for Children's Emotional Competence Scale provides a tool for measuring parents' emotion socialization goals with respect to the values they place on the two kinds of emotional competence. The scale has a wide range of applications including use in cross-cultural studies investigating influences on emotion socialization and within-culture studies investigating child outcomes or changes in parenting practices. The scale may also play an important role in documenting changes in goals of Chinese parents. As Tam (2003) has noted, many Chinese societies are currently undergoing substantial and rapid change which impacts on parental socialization goals. Investigation of such change may have an important role in advancing understanding of the relationship between social change and parental goals for emotional competence.

***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

Previous studies have researched how construal of self is related to emotional experiences and parental behaviors. By developing a scale for measuring the relative importance of individualistic and relational emotional competence to parents and examining the influence of construal of self cultural influences on parental emotion socialization goals, the present study starts a new direction of research in the field. Despite the contributions, there are some weaknesses which need to be acknowledged.

A major limitation of the present study is the self-report nature of the data collected. In order to examine the influences of construal of self on emotion socialization, data collected through observation would help to validate the self-reported data on parental goals and the influences on emotion-related parental practices.

Although Chinese mothers play a major role in bringing up their children (Chan, Bowes, & Wyver, 2009; Chao, 1994), fathers start to take up more child care



responsibilities because most mothers in Hong Kong are working mothers. It is therefore essential to include fathers in studies on emotion socialization. In these studies, the interaction effects of gender of parents and children can also be examined.

The Parental Goals for Children's Individualistic and Relational Emotional Competence Scale has shown to have strong construct validity and reliability in the present study but it has not been tested with non-Chinese parents. Future studies with parents from individual-oriented societies would help to improve the validity and reliability of this subscale.

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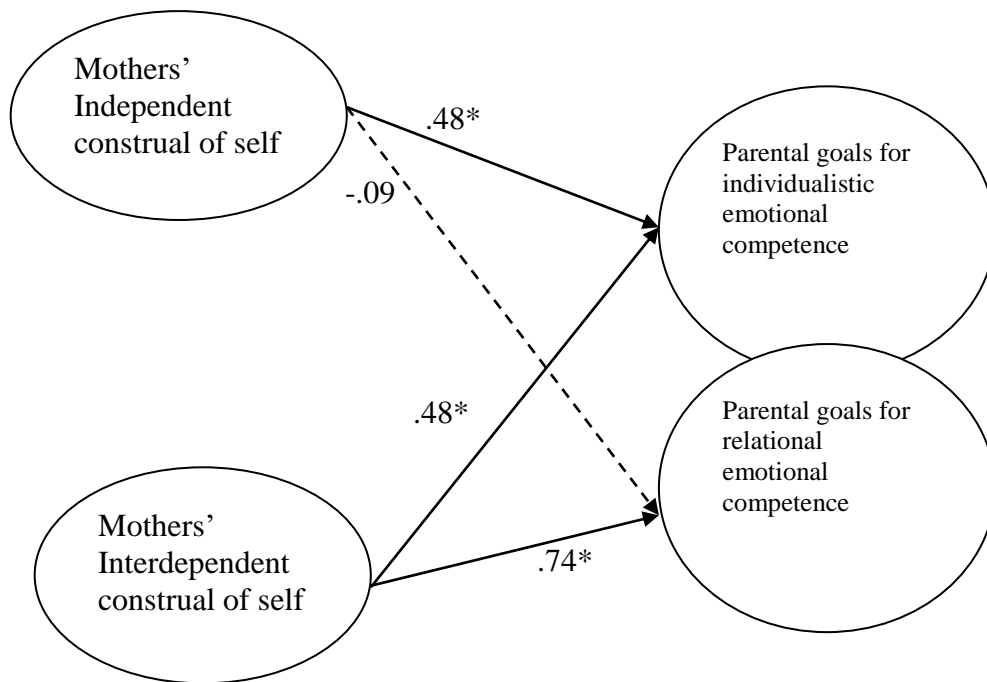


Figure 1. Structural equation model of mothers' construal of self predicting their emotional competence goals.  $X^2 = 148.99$ ,  $df = 100$ ,  $CFI = .92$ ,  $TLI (NNFI) = .90$ ,  $IFI = .92$ ,  $RMSEA = .05$ . The dotted line represents a non-significant path.