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THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SELFHOOD IN CHINESE AND EURO-AMERICAN MOTHER-INFANT INTERACTIONS¹

Heidi Keller & Carolin Demuth

INTRODUCTION

Children's socialization environments reflect cultural models of caregiving that shape the infant's developmental pathways (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Keller, 2003). Cultural models are not static entities separate from psychological phenomena but are standing in dynamic and dialogical relationship to the persons living in a specific cultural context (Valsiner, 1991). Cultural psychologists have emphasized that the mind is a constitutive part of culture and that it therefore cannot be extricated from the culturally diverse intentional worlds of the surrounding (e.g. Shweder, 1990). Rather, culture needs to be seen as "birthing site for psychological processes" (Gergen, 1997, p. 31). Likewise, Bruner (1990) states:

"Scientific psychology [...] will achieve a more effective stance toward the culture at large when it comes to recognize that the folk psychology of ordinary people is not just a set of self-assuaging illusions, but the culture's beliefs and working hypotheses about what makes it possible and fulfilling for people to live together [...] It is where psychology starts and wherein it is inseparable from anthropology" (p.32).

THE INTERPLAY OF CULTURE AND THE CONSTRUAL OF THE SELF

Markus and Kitayama (1991) have demonstrated the interplay between culture and construals of the self and suggest two prototypical models with regard to Western (Euro-American) and East-Asian cultures: the model of a construal of the independent self prevailing in Western cultural contexts, and a construal of the interdependent self prevailing in East-Asian societies. The model of independence prioritizes the perception of the individual as bounded and self-contained, focuses on mental states and personal

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qualities in order to support self enhancement, self expression and self maximization. The model of interdependence prioritizes the perception of the fluidly defined individual as interrelated with others, for example, as expressed in Hsu's (1971) concept of *yen*. Interpersonal transactions are the core of the meaning of *yen*, representing an alternative to the Western conception of personality. With this concept the nature of the individual's behavior is not seen as an expression of individual traits and mental states but rather as a reflection of how the behavior fits the interpersonal standard (Keller, Abels, et al, 2004). Personal transactions are embedded in social hierarchies in order to contribute to the harmonic functioning of the social unit, in particular the family (Bond, 1991; Chao, 1995). Markus & Kitayama (1991) postulate that

“the most significant differences between these two construals is in the role that is assigned to the other in self-definition. Others and the surrounding social context are important in both construals, but for the interdependent self, others are included within the boundaries of the self because relations with others in specific contexts are the defining features of the self. [...] The sense of individuality that accompanies an interdependent self includes an attentiveness and responsiveness to others that one either explicitly or implicitly assumes will be reciprocated by these others, as well as the willful management of one's other-focused feelings and desires so as to maintain and further the reciprocal interpersonal relationship” (p. 245/246).

For the independent self, on the other hand, they state that

“... others are less centrally implicated in one's current self-definition or identity. Certainly, others are important for social comparison, for reflected appraisal, and in their role as the targets of one's actions, yet at any given moment, the self is assumed to be a complete, whole, autonomous entity, without the others” (p. 247).

SELF-CONSTRUALS REFLECTED IN PARENTAL IDEAS ON CHILD REARING

These strikingly different construals of the self, of others, and of the interrelation of the two are reflected in the social beliefs and parental behavior of caregivers toward their child. This has prototypically been shown for the East-Asian, especially the Chinese culture on the one hand, and the Euro-American culture on the other hand: Euro-Americans parenting strategies have been described as emphasizing the child's individuality and building self esteem in a child-centered environment (Chao, 1995; Chao & Tseng, 2002) whereas East-Asian parenting strategies have been described as emphasizing obedience, respect and filial piety (Kao & Sinha, 2000) in an adult-centered hierarchical environment. Similarly, Chinese mothers have been found to be oriented more towards family allocentrism than Euro-American mothers (Keller, Abels, et al., 2004).

The Euro-American approach to childrearing is assumed to be rooted in individualism, the love of enterprise, and the pride in personal freedom (Bryce, 1888/2004). As described by R. W. B. Lewis (1955), the quintessential American is “... an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritance of family and race; an individual standing alone and

self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (cited in Monge, 1991). Euro-Americans parents accordingly rely on the free will of the child as early as infancy (Ainsworth, 1973) which is expressed, e.g., in choices of behavioral options (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). Euro-American mothers let the baby take the lead when they are more influenced by infants’ states and more primed by three-week-old infants’ behavior than Chinese-American mothers (Kuchner & Freedman, 1981).

The Chinese approach to childrearing is assumed to be rooted in Confucian ethics, that place a high value on social hierarchy and moral rectitude and is regarded as still valid today (Bond, 1991, 1998; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989; Wu, 1985). Nevertheless increasing education and changing economy had an impact on childrearing although less than in Western cultures (Xiao, 2000). Chinese parents therefore rely on training, which expresses the parental responsibility to carry out moral education for the child (Wu, 1985).

Euro-American parents intend to foster self esteem whereas Chinese parents intend to foster a very close relationship with the child throughout the whole life (Chao, 1995).

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

Over the past years, there has been an increased focus on the role of *language* in the construction of the self (e.g., Budwig, 1996; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). There is large consensus among social constructivists that language is not a tool for representing an already given world, but an action that is central to understanding identity (Budwig, 1996).

Two approaches can be differentiated: language as grammar (e.g., Mülhäusler & Harré, 1990; Shotter, 1989) and language as discursive action (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Harré (1992) argues that concepts such as the self, attitude, motives, gender and emotions are created discursively and are to be understood as attributes of conversations rather than as mental entities (p. 526). Referring to the threefold analytic scheme of *langage*, *langue*, and *parole* introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure (cited in Joerchel and Valsiner, 2003) demonstrates the relationship between the macrogenetic level of cultural beliefs (*langage*) and the individual or microgenetic level (unity of *langue* and *parole*). They suggest that “... signs are collective models taken over from *langage* by persons and stored in memory, and which become the basis for construction of thought through verbal means” (p. 31).

While most socioconstructive theorizing emphasizes *that* language can play a role in self-construction, little is said about the specific nature of *how* specific language use impacts the child’s constructions of the self.

In developmental psychology, language has traditionally been used as a method that helps the researcher to uncover children’s emerging conceptions of self and other through development. It has been argued, however, that language itself plays a fundamental role in the child’s coming to construct notions of self and other. Budwig (1996) for instance, studied children’s and their caregivers’ indexing of self and other in a sample of children ranging from 20-30 months of age and found significant culture-related differences between Euro-American and German children. In contrast to the American children, when the German children began to combine words, they were equally likely to refer to themselves and others. Also, whereas American children reserved the use of one form (*my*) for talk about self as intentional agent, no such usage

was found in German children's talk. Similarly, German children indexed self in terms of impersonal agency in a way not noted for the American children.

Another approach to language as a tool for the child to gain access to culturally appropriate notions of self has been the study of maternal conversational styles. It has been demonstrated that the style with which caregivers talk to children is reflective of the cultural models of the self and the relation of self and others (Keller, Abels, et al., 2004; Ochs, 1988; Wang, 2004). Studies on cultural conversational styles with preschool children revealed the following cultural differences between Euro-American and East-Asian mothers (Wang & Brockmeier, 2002): the conversational style of the Euro-American mothers was voluminous, elaborated and self-focused. Mothers typically referred to specific episodes. East-Asian mothers, in contrast, demonstrated a brief, skeletal, relation-centered conversational style, typically referring to general routines as well as social roles and interpersonal relations. Similarly, Keller, Abels, et al. (2004) found that Euro-American mothers talk more about agency, make more self-referential statements than Chinese mothers. Chinese mothers, in contrast, use more repetitions, talk more descriptively, use more conditional clauses, and mention more social concerns.

In keeping with the cultural emphasis on individuality and autonomy, Euro-American parents often focus on the child's personal attributes, preferences and judgments. In contrast, East-Asian parents often take a leading role during the conversation, refer to moral rules and behavioral expectations (Wang, Leichtman, & Davies, 2000).

There are also vast differences between East-Asian and Euro-American mother-child conversations with respect to the role and content of emotions. For independently oriented selves, emotions are often regarded as a direct expression of the self and an affirmation of the importance of the individual, whereas for interdependently oriented selves, emotions tend to be viewed as disruptive and need to be strictly controlled (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). During conversations about shared emotional experiences, American mothers predominantly discuss events in which non-social objects or events in the environment triggered children's emotional expressions, whereas Chinese mothers predominantly talk about events in which other people caused children's emotions or shared the emotions with the child (Wang, 2001).

Euro-American mothers' conversational style during everyday conversations is rich, embellished and elaborated. Chinese mothers tend to pose and repeat questions without providing embellishment (Wang et al., 2000).

A STUDY ON THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF

In this paper, we want to draw the reader's attention to the question how caregivers' discursive construction of the child's self may play a functional role in the child's own construction of self and in the transmission of cultural values from one generation to the next. We draw on the findings of a study focusing on caregivers' verbal dialogs with their 3 months old babies in spontaneous interactions. We address the socialization agendas with respect to three-month-old infants. The age of three months was selected because a first developmental transition becomes observable with respect to the formation of primary relationships (Keller, 2002). The three-month age period can be regarded as a focal time, which allows the prediction of later developmental achievements (Keller & Gauda, 1987; Keller, Yovsi, et al., 2004). The

three-month time span is regarded as a developmental transition in various parts of the world, like the end of early mother-child separation periods, naming ceremonies, and introducing the baby to the cultural community. The demonstration of cultural styles already with three-month-old infants would support the view on development as a culturally informed pathway through universal developmental tasks (Greenfield et al., 2003; Keller & Greenfield, 2000).

Procedure

The data considered here were part of an ongoing longitudinal study comprising samples from Germany, USA, China, India and Cameron. In this paper, we refer to selected case studies of the Chinese (Beijing and Taiyuan) and Euro-American (Los Angeles, California) urban middle-class sub-sample of this study (cf. Keller, Abels, et al., 2004). Part of the research project consists of 10-minute video recordings of spontaneous mother-infant interactions. We randomly selected 5 mother-infant pairs each from the Beijing and the L.A. samples respectively. The verbal/vocal interaction between mother and baby during the videotaped sequence was transcribed and, for the Chinese sample, translated into English by a Chinese native speaker.

For analysis of the material we followed a discourse analysis approach (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), supported by the software program Atlas.ti. This qualitative research methodology is not to be understood as a strict set of analytical procedures but rather as a "... broad theoretical framework, which focuses attention on the constructive and functional dimensions of discourse, coupled with the reader's skill in identifying significant patterns of consistency and variation" (p. 169). It can be described as an inductive and recursive procedure of coding and interpreting data. Coding has a pragmatic rather than analytic goal of collecting together instances for examination and therefore is as inclusive as possible. The process of analysis in our study basically comprised two steps. In the first, we identified patterns in the 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 consists of forming hypotheses about the functions and effects of the verbal accounts and searching for linguistic evidence in the data (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Results

What we found on the *structural* level was a consistency in that all mothers in their discourse used specific means to construct and convey a certain self-concept of the child: In both samples, the mothers (1) mirrored the behavior and assumed inner states of the child and (2) switched perspective when talking to the child.

The following examples serve as illustrations. Here is an excerpt from a Euro-American mother:

"Should we go on your changing table, because then you're thinking your changing and you're so much happier on your changing table. Huh? 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)

In this excerpt, the mother apparently tried to find out what's wrong with her child. She first assumed that the child was unhappy and suggested something that the child might like. Note that she started out from a *me-you perspective*. Then, she *mirrored* the behavior of the child (rubbing the eyes) which she interpreted as a sign of being tired. Nevertheless, she continued with her strategy to go to the changing table, mirroring the child's assumed preference that he liked to do that. Note that now, (apparently this is the moment where the mother for herself realized that this interpretation was wrong and looking for a suitable explanation, finally decided that the correct interpretation of the child's behavior was tiredness) the mother switched perspectives and continued to talk from the *perspective of the child*.

Similarly, the Chinese mothers used these two linguistic features:

"Niu Niu is extremely tired, right? Niu Niu is so small. Let mommy see your hand if there is anything there. 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. Niu Niu is right, Niu Niu is sleeping, your tired, Niu Niu. (babytalk) I am a beautiful little treasure, I am a beautiful little treasure, I have grown to be beautiful. I go outside and am also very beautiful. I am a good (gui) little treasure, I am an obedient little treasure. You're tired? I will place [you in] your room so you can sleep." (CH_01:25-28)

What we see here is that the mother first spoke of the child and of herself from the perspective of the 3rd person ("Niu Niu", which is the name of the child, and "mommy" which refers to the mother's social role). She also mirrored the child's assumed inner state (tiredness) and the child's physical features as conceived by the mother (smallness). She then introduced a new topic: being good. Here is where she changed perspective and continued to talk from the child's perspective. One gets the impression that she does this because she wanted the child to take over the following statements as her own perspective and identify with it: The first statement referred to the child's identity ("I am called Niu Niu"), the second to praise ("I am beautiful"), followed by statements on obedience as a future development goal ("will be a super little treasure", "I am a good little treasure, I am an obedient little treasure"). Then the mother switched back to addressing the child directly: "I will place [you in] your room so you can sleep".

On the *content* level, our findings revealed striking differences between the two cultural samples that we will discuss in the following.

THE CHINESE CASE: CREATING A MUTUAL SOCIAL WORLD

The Chinese mothers actively and deliberately drew the child's attention to the social world. Moreover, the mother directed the focus away from the world of objects to the social environment. Similarly, the child's activities were interlinked with the

surrounding social context. In an example where two cousins of the baby came to visit, the mother commented:

“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)

Several aspects in this extract seemed typical to us for the Chinese mother-infant context. Not only was the visual attention of the child directed to the surrounding social world but also the child’s activities: The child was expected to perform something for others (the cousins). The others in turn were also expected to perform something for the child. This *other-serving purpose* of activities arose as a pattern in several of the interactions. In another example, the child was praised for managing to grasp something, but at the same time it was made clear that the praise does not serve a self-sufficient purpose, but an other-focused purpose: *“Very good, very good, grasp so your father can see”* (CH_01:04). In another example, the mother comments: *“See the hands moving yea? ... do it for mommy”* (CH_01:25). Another aspect that seemed typical to us in the Chinese sample is the *reciprocity of exchanging favors* or doing something for somebody else: Not only was the child asked to perform a dance for her cousins, but also she should ask the cousins to perform for her in turn. The utterance *“Talk to mommy, I will talk to you, lets talk, talk, now lets talk”* at the beginning of this excerpt is another example of how a mutual social world has been created in the discourse. Likewise, the mothers often referred to themselves as helping the child: *“Mommy will help you move ...”* (CH_02:09), *“Let mommy get your rattle, let mommy find your rattle”* (CH_02:06). The child was encouraged to engage in mutual activities rather than playing by him- or herself: *“I by myself don’t know what to do. There are so many things. [...] Give mommy this one, mommy will put it on your feet to play”* (CH_02:21). The attentiveness and responsiveness to others was also expressed in the constant use of terms of reassurance: *“Niu Niu, play with the ball, okay?”* (CH_01:34), *“Lets do something okay?”* (CH_02:06), *“Mommy will place it in his hand okay?”* (CH_02:17).

Yet another aspect was expressed in the above excerpt: that of conveying moral values to the child. *“You should perform”* implies a duty that requires obedience. Overall, the Chinese mothers used imperative formulations more often than the Euro-American ones, e.g. *“You see the toy and you do not cry.”* (CH_03:24); *“Why are you not happy? [...] Mommy sees that little treasure is happy, happy right? Your mood is not bad. Your mood today is quite good. Quickly take it off.”* (CH_02:24). In the context of obedience, often the term „good girl/boy“ was used (see also the example mentioned in the previous paragraph). Also, both the child and the mother were often addressed in the 3rd person: *“Little treasure will grab it like this.”* (CH_02:13); *“Mommy will place it in his hand okay?”* (CH_02:17) which may be considered as a role-referral.

The smallness of the child was also often referred to on the physical level of the child: *“Niu Niu is so small ...”* (CH_01:25), *“Exercise, exercise small baby. One, two,*

three, four...exercise exercise small baby, mommy will exercise for small baby" (CH_01:34-35), "*Shake the small legs, the small legs. The small legs.*" (CH_03:13), "*Small thing, crawl by yourself.*" (CH_05:29), "*Your little hand, little hand. Little treasure, grab it. Come. Good. Look look, let mommy see you. This is a little thing, little thing, little thing, little thing. Little treasure crawled quite well right?*" (CH_05:34-35). Another striking finding was that the Chinese mothers repetitively referred to their child as "little treasure".

The overall impression one gets from the verbal accounts is a picture of a small, valuable and fragile "treasure" that needs to be treated carefully.

THE EURO-AMERICAN CASE: ENTERTAINING A PROSPECTIVE MUTUAL PARTNER

L.A. mothers drew a completely different picture in their discursive constructions, as illustrated by the following example:

"What do you think about this? Hmm? You like that book? Hehehe... Okay, should I read another little book to you, in Greek? Because we have to practice everyday so when your grandfather comes to you, he will speak to you in Greek and the next year we will go to Greece and have your Baptism and you will be able to understand, this is... want to feel the 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, Deca!... 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... let's 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? What's this? What's that?!" (LA_02:6-11)

What we see here is, that the mother drew the child's attention to the world of objects. This is a pattern we found in other observed interactions: "*Will you kiss Sammie? Can you watch Sammie? He is like on your belly. Where's Sammie? Are you going to look at Sammie honey? Kenneth, what are you looking at? What are you looking at darling? Do you need this instead? Will this get your attention?*" (LA_03:03); "*What you're looking at? What you're looking at huh? Whatcha doing? You're checking things out? O, you want to see behind you, you want to see then? Okay, look at you're whales up there. You see your whale up there? No, you see the giraffe, you see the giraffe. You see the chair then?*" (LA_14:20-21). Also, what we can see from the above excerpt is that a lot more attention is given to the child as the center of the situation. This is similar to other mother-infant interactions in the L.A. sample: "*You want to see yourself now? Here we go, you're going to be in the mirror. Can you see yourself? Can the baby see yourself? Look, look, don't look at me, you want to stare at mommy?*" (LA_14:09). Mothers generally also referred more often to self-serving purposes when talking about the child's activities. In the above sample, the child was supposed to learn Greek not for the sake of the grandfather but for *the child* to be able to understand what he is saying.

The mothers grant a great deal of autonomy to the child in their discourses: in the above excerpt the mother asks the child about his opinion and refers to his own property (toys). Other examples reflect the same notion: *“Want to look at mommy for a second or are you busy? Busy huh? Yes.”* (LA_03:05). *“What are you looking at, darling? Do you need this instead?”* (LA_03:03). The child’s autonomy and self-sufficiency is encouraged as the following examples illustrate: *“I am going to leave you alone so you can play all by yourself.”* (LA_04:18); *“You’re busy aren’t you? Am I bothering you? Am I bothering you? You keep yourself pretty busy by yourself huh?”* (LA_03:10), *“Shake it, can you shake it? O I’m sorry, you were playing on your own huh?”* (LA_04:11). The child was treated as potentially autonomous partner whose personal opinions were considered to be important and whose independence is to be respected. Mothers for example often asked the child whether it wanted help and encouraged the child to do it her/himself: *“Would you like some help?”* (LA_03:12); *“Can you make it go again? Broom Broom. Get it, you can get it. You can get it, I know you can”* (LA_10:03).

Yet another aspect that we can see from the above excerpt is that L.A. mothers often talk about the child’s cognitions (*“What do you think about this? Hmm? You like that book? You will be able to understand?”*). Other examples point in the same direction: *“Do you remember the circular? [...] What’s this honey? Do you remember this? Those your keys?”* (LA_03:07).

Another difference consisted in the way mothers addressed their child. In contrast to the Chinese mothers, L.A. mothers more often addressed their children directly by their name (*“Kenneth... here you go”*; LA_03:10). The L.A. mothers also referred to terms such as „good girl/boy“, however, not in the context of obedience but in the context achievement: *“Couple months, you should be able to touch it. O, you want to reach for it now. There you go. [...] Are you trying? yea, that’s a good boy, that’s a good boy making those noises. huuh? That’s a good boy, you’re kicking hard now huh?”* (LA_14:14-15).

And finally, L.A. mothers typically refer to the child as big: *“I’m so big. I’m so big.”*(LA_04:05); *“Okay, you’re the tallest boy in the world huh? Look how tall you are. Look at those strong legs. [...] look how big that big boy is? [...] Super baby, super baby. Look at that, look at that big boy, look at that big boy!”*(LA_14:23-24). They also referred more often to the child’s self maximation by praising the child.

The general impression one gets is that of entertaining a potentially equal partner by offering him or her toys, possibilities to learn, and the choice to decide for oneself what is of interest.

The findings from this study are succinctly summarized in the following table:

Table 1
Chinese and Euro-American Narration Styles

Chinese mothers...	LA mothers...
typically referred to the child as small	typically referred to the child as big
more often referred to other-centeredness	more often referred to self-serving purposes
often included the social environment and drew the child’s attention to the social environment	typically referred to the child as autonomous entity
often referred to themselves as helping the child	typically drew the child’s attention to the world of objects
referred to “good girl/boy” in the context of obedience	asked the child whether it wanted help and encouraged the child to do it her/himself:
typically used terms of reassurance	referred to “good girl/boy” in the context of achievement
more often addressed the child in the 3rd person	LA mother often talked about the child’s cognitions
used imperative formulations more often	more often addressed the child directly
	treated the child as autonomous partner

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the existing different construals of the self, of others, and of the interrelation of the two as outlined in the model of independence and interdependence are reflected in the social beliefs and parental behavior of caregivers toward their child. We have further argued that concepts such as the self are created actively in social discourse and that culturally appropriate notions of the self become evident in maternal conversational styles. We provided evidence that cultural conversational styles vary greatly between the East-Asian and Euro-American contexts already in interactions with three-month-old babies. While mothers use similar specific means in their discourse to construct and convey a certain self-concept of the child, such as mirroring and change of perspective, they use strikingly different content to do so. Cultural beliefs on the macrogenetic level and the construction of self through verbal means on the individual or microgenetic level are thus dynamically interrelated. Discourse styles are powerful cultural mediums of conveying cultural values and beliefs from one generation to the next.

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