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Ming-yeh Lee

*San Francisco State University*

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### Recommended Citation

Lee, Ming-yeh (1999). "The Role of Cultural Values in the Interpretation of Significant Life Experiences," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1999/papers/24>

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# **The Role of Cultural Values in the Interpretation of Significant Life Experiences**

Ming-yeh Lee  
San Francisco State University

**Abstract: Researchers in adult education have investigated the phenomenon of meaning-making for decades. However, majority of studies mainly focus on the psychological process of meaning-making, rather than examining how contextual elements, especially cultural values, affect the process of interpretation. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of cultural values in the interpretation of significant life experiences as perceived by Taiwanese Chinese in the U. S.**

## **Introduction**

The essential feature of every significant life experience is that it has meaning. Meaning-making addresses the ultimate concerns about the purpose of life, strengthens our endurance during hardship, and provides opportunities for significant learning and development in adulthood (Courtenay & Truluck, 1995). Meaning-making is the center of human experiences and the most fundamental human activity. Several writers have explicitly made the linkage between meaning-making and learning, especially learning from experience in adulthood (Jarvis, 1992; Mezirow, 1991). They argue that learning occurs when an experience is attended to, reflected on, and made sense of. In other words, learning from life experience is a process of interpreting, or making meaning of one's experiences.

In the field of education in general as well as in adult education, writers have discussed and delineated the process of learning from life experiences for decades. Dewey(1938), Piaget(1966), and Kolb(1984) all have explored the role that life experiences play in formulating a learning process. In adult education, Bould et al.(1993), Boyd and Fales(1983), and Miller(1994) have also uncovered the detailed process of learning from life experiences in various contexts. Mezirow(1991), Kegan(1982), and Daloz(1986) have further made the connections between adult development, adult learning, and meaning-making. These theories together present a clearer portrait of the process of interpreting life experiences

Although many have explored the process of meaning-making, the attention of most of the writers is disproportionately paid to learners' internal change as opposed to the contextual influences in shaping the interpretation process (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Jarvis, 1992). The impact of context on the process of learning from life experiences has been mentioned by many but just how a process is affected by context has been investigated by only a few (Clark, 1991).

Cultural values, as an important part of context, has hardly been focused on in studies of adult learning. However, when closely examining the process of learning from life experiences, it is obvious that the whole interpretation process, including the experience that one has, the context in which the experience is constructed, and the interpretation the person makes out of the

experience are all culturally shaped. Yet, under the influence of enculturation since birth, most people merely act out the internalized cultural values, with little realization of the extent to which cultural values affect their everyday lives. Therefore, this very culturally embedded nature of meaning-making process is always taken for granted and rendered invisible.

A cultural value is an emotionally charged concept, a recognized standard, or a core belief, which serves as a general rule and forceful goal to direct people's thought, perception, and behavior (Quinn & Holland, 1992). As Goodenough explained it, individuals, since early childhood, have been taught "the standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it and standards for deciding how to go about doing it" (1971, p.19). In other words, cultural values, by framing our ways of perceiving, relating, reflecting and evaluating, can largely condition the meaning made out of our experiences.

While the assumption that learning as a culturally constructed process has been widely shared among adult education researchers, our understanding about how in fact cultural values affect the process of interpreting life experience is still limited to a few studies of classroom behaviors (Hvitfeldt, 1986; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Pratt, 1990). Most writers in adult education, while pointing out the significance of cultural values on learning, have at the same time focused on the psychological changes relative to the process of interpretation. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the role of cultural values in shaping the process of interpreting life experience as perceived by Taiwanese Chinese people in the U. S.

### **Methodology**

A phenomenological study design was considered the most suitable for this study because it not only allowed the researcher to explore and understand the meaning that people make out of their own experiences, but also served to keep the researcher from projecting one's own judgments toward the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of doing the phenomenological study is to understand and delineate the phenomenon as subjectively experienced by the participants.

A nonrandom, purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. The reasons of targeting the Taiwanese Chinese in the U. S. as research participants are two-folded: Firstly, the cultural background I shared with the participants provided me a common ground to empathetically understand their meaning-making process and, secondly, being exposed to the foreign culture, these participants appear to be more sensitive to their home cultural values.

Three criteria were determined for sample selections : 1) the participants needed to have been brought up and lived at least twenty-five years in Taiwan to ensure the impact of Chinese cultural values; 2) the participants needed to be able to articulate an experienced significant life event; and 3) the participants needed to represent a range of educational background, age, and significant life experiences to increase the diversity of the sample and to ensure a common process of interpretation would not be caused by the effect of one particular experience.

Eleven participants located through informal networks in the local community were interviewed in Chinese to ensure their capability to freely and fully express themselves. There were six women and five men, ranging in age from 26 to 44. Six of the participants reported on an education related experience, two spoke of relational events, and one each referred to a family crisis and a relocation experience.

Phenomenological analysis is used to analyze data obtained by in-depth interviews. Member-check, data-triangulation, peer-debriefing, including English-Chinese translation consultation, were employed to increase the trustworthiness of this inquiry (Merriam, 1988).

## Findings

Three major areas of findings emerged from the data analysis: (1) the specific cultural values which affect the process of interpretation; (2) the process of interpreting life experiences; and (3) the role of cultural value in shaping the process of interpretation.

Finding I: The four Chinese cultural values addressed by most participants were: *respecting authority, maintaining harmony, valuing education and degrees, and putting men above women.*

Respecting Authority perpetuates every social context in the Chinese society. Factors like age, gender, and seniority intertwine to define individual status and interpersonal relationship. Not only are the authority figures entitled to respect and submission from their subordinates, but also the former are responsible for the protection and well-being of the latter. Authority figures, especially parents, are usually strongly and actively involved in their subordinates' decision-making. Su-hui, the women returning to school for her doctoral degree, remembered her father's parenting style: "My father was indeed in charge of my elder brothers' lives. For example, they were asked to listen to my father completely; they would follow whatever his commands were. They were expected to obey his orders, his wishes." Even though parents' involvement and interference is viewed as dominant and decisive, it is also perceived to be based on the consideration of the best interests of their children. Steve, who was forced by his parents to break up with his girlfriend, commented on his parents' involvement: "As Chinese parents, I guessed their concerns were correct; they only wanted me to have a better life."

Maintaining Harmony is usually used to characterize the ideal interpersonal relation in Chinese culture. Individuals usually try hard to reserve selves, get along with others, and avoid any behaviors leading to face-loss, which would be collectively shared by the whole group to which the individual belongs. For instance, Alice, who contributed all her saving to a family emergency at the age 12, recalled, "I felt I was very significant, very useful, useful for my family. The sense of contribution felt really good." May, who struggled to pursue higher education, told her experience of working as a child laborer: "I worked in order to give my family a better living....I gave all my wages to my family." For some, the group they claim goes beyond the scope of nuclear family; Chi-wei, who shared his relocation experiences, felt losing his sense of belonging after being uprooted from his old community: "I felt I had nothing to depend on. I used to depend on my extended family and identify with the community."

Another dimension of maintaining harmony is "emphasizing face" because face is perceived as a collective issue. When Alice's sister-in-law insisted on moving out of their extended family, Alice understood perfectly how her mother felt: "This is a face-losing issue for my mom because our neighbors would say, someone's daughter-in-law took her son away not long after they got married." Ting-yi, who has been traumatized by his academic failure, said, "face is still such an important issue for people even in our generation. Chinese are deeply concerned about face. Perhaps it is a burden or constraints enforced by our tradition."

Valuing Education and Degrees has been a long standing tradition since ancient time while the significance of education nowadays is reinforced by the social mobility and financial security obtained as a result of degrees and academic achievement. Academic achievement is viewed by many as equivalent to future career success, the gaining of family face, and self-dignity. Ting-yi described how this value was instilled in his mind at a very early age by his father when he brought home a certificate of academic excellence. Not only hanging his certificate on the wall, his father wrote in calligraphy next to his certificate: "Study is the noblest of human pursuits." Therefore, it is no surprise that the experience of failing school is accompanied by a sense of shame, guilt, or loss of face. Chi-wei remembered his schooling experience: "They evaluate students based merely on academic achievement." Sharon also agreed, "since elementary school, students who have better grades have more privileges."

Putting men above women is a product of the patriarchal Chinese society in which women are usually viewed by their blood family as outsiders, who will eventually marry out to someone's family. Thus, most family resources are preserved for male descendants only. May recalled her ambition to pursue higher education was seriously questioned by her mother and joked about in the neighborhood, because the whole community felt that "after girls graduate from schools, they would be married to someone's family. So what's the use of spending money providing education for girls?" Anny, who observed the sexist attitude in a workshop in which she participated, remembered that her sister was taken out of school by her grandfather, who said, "why did she need to study? She needed to be married." Chen also remembered a similar incident of reserving resources for men in the family: "My mom would rather spend the tuition on boys....my elder brother went to a kindergarten but I never did." These cultural values usually intersect with each other to shape the meaning of the participants' life experiences.

Finding II: the process of interpretation. The meaning-making process, which contains three phases -- **the trigger event, the immediate reaction, and the negotiation**--intersected with both individual **biography** and **context**. **Context** in this study refers to the interpersonal and social setting where the life event occurred, was experienced, and interpreted. **Biography** generally refers to the accumulation of individual life experiences, especially the unforgettable experiences of socialization. Each participant, situated at multiple contexts, proceeded through the meaning-making process, not necessarily in a linear order, to make meaning as well as the decision and/or action.

This process of interpretation is always precipitated by a **trigger event**, which is followed by **immediate reaction**. Immediate reaction refers to an optional phase of the meaning-making process during which a trigger is given immediate meaning when an individual first encounters it. This immediate reaction may or may not be congruent with the prevailing cultural values and

the participants may change their initial meaning afterwards. For instance, Su-hui's first reaction after graduating from college was to "swear that [she] would never study again because the education system in Taiwan did not allow people to develop their chosen interests." However, her initial meaning shifted after serious reconsideration of returning to graduate school. Alice, when learning of her younger brother's plan to move out the extended family, immediately wondered: "Why did they want to move out for?" Based on her socialization in a authority- and harmony-oriented environment, she thought the young couple should have followed the virtue of filial piety in order to keep his parents company.

Some participants immediately made initial meaning of the trigger event as they first experienced it while others moved to the process of negotiation, constantly trying to make some sense out of their confusion. The lack of immediate reaction was shared by participants who felt overwhelmingly confused when first encountering the trigger event. For example, Frank, whose life event is a break-up of a relationship, experienced a period of struggling or confusion before he was able to clearly articulate the meaning of the event. The length of the confusion period varied, depending on how many people were involved, how different their perspectives were, and how much the event meant to those involved.

In the phase of **negotiation**, the participants, their parents, relatives, friends, and anyone else involved in the event were all engaged in the process of negotiating and constructing meaning. Negotiation also illustrates varying degrees of cultural impact: some were highly affected by cultural values; some demonstrated mixed influences from both individual inclinations and cultural orientations while others appeared to lack any cultural inspiration. Experiences shared by May revealed the strongest influence of cultural values, including both compliance and resistance. May's desire to pursue a higher degree was directly negotiated with her parents but indirectly with her community. While the orientation toward narrowly defined gender roles firmly influenced her mother's reaction; fortunately, her father, inspired by the cultural orientation toward valuing study, approved her motivation. In this case, the orientation toward narrowly defined gender roles was compromised in prioritizing the orientation toward degree and study. Chen, when considering to give up her Ph. D. degree, the prevailing cultural orientations toward harmony, authority, filial piety, valuing face and study overwhelmingly permeated the negotiation phase. After in-depth reflection with herself and her husband, she finally realized that "I used to ignore my own feeling but only to seek the approval and rewards from my family." Around the end of the negotiation, her personal voice started to emerge and the overwhelming power of internalized cultural values appeared to be less prominent and much more easily compromised. Bulldog, whose shared experience is on-line learning, has mainly interpreted his experiences by himself. It was not affected by anyone else, nor inspired by prevailing cultural values. The negotiation phase demonstrated the complexity of meaning making and reflected various degrees of cultural influences.

The result of the negotiation, the constructed meaning, was subject to change(s) depending on subsequently encountered event(s). The originally constructed meaning might remain fixed or evolve to allow other layers of meaning to emerge. Subsequent events often stimulated participants to visit and revisit their previous life experiences, which made the process of meaning-making an endless cycle. May, for example, after the negotiation phase with herself and others, took action as guided by her constructed meaning in response to the encountered event.

When looking back on this critical decision to pursue a higher degree, May said that her determination was justified by her frequent visits to old friends: "I felt that if I had not studied more, I would have lived exactly like them." Another layer of meaning, believing in fate, emerged from her originally constructed meaning years after the event.

Findings III: the role of cultural values in shaping the interpretation process Cultural values shaped the process of interpretation in various ways. First, each component of the process, ranging from the context, biography of the participants, the implications of the event, and people involved in the negotiation phase, were all culturally constructed. Second, the participants' entire journey through the process of interpretation, meaning negotiation and construction in particular, was affected by culture to varying degrees: (1) highly-affected, meaning which was either heavily congruent with or strongly resistant to the cultural orientations; (2) medium-affected, culturally constructed meaning mixed with individual inclinations; and (3) not affected, the construction of meaning with little relevant cultural input, which are independent of biography and context. The direct quotes by the participants in finding II illustrate various degrees of cultural influences in shaping the process. Thirdly, the degree of impact cultural values had on the process of meaning-making was mainly determined by the participants' biography and context. Therefore, even though these participants came from the same socio-cultural background, the meaning they made out of significant life experiences reflected varying degrees of impact from cultural values.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Two conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. The first conclusion is that the entire process of meaning-making, including one's biography and context, is culturally constructed. However, the degrees to which meaning-making is impacted by cultural values is mainly determined by biography and context. Biography and context explained how, when, and where cultural values and messages were taught to individuals. According to cognitive anthropologists, vague cultural messages, different organizations of similar culturally internalized perspectives, different conditions under which internalization has occurred, and different levels of internalization all can contribute to various perceptions, interpretation, and reactions to the same life events (Strauss, 1992). It is through a complex internalized mechanism that one's perspectives are constructed, experiences interpreted, and action taken. That is why internalized cultural values can shape or constrain behaviors, but they cannot directly generate actions. This is also why people sharing common cultural values may internalize and cognitively process these values differently, hence making different sense out of the same event.

A second conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that there is a commonly shared process individuals use to interpret their experiences. This process usually involves interrelated components: trigger events, immediate reactions, meaning-negotiation, and constructed meaning with decisions/or action, all of which intersect with the biography and context of each participant. Upon encountering subsequent events, individuals may be motivated to revisit previous experiences, reevaluate their meaning, or re-interpret it. In this sense, meaning-making is an endless cycle.

Overall, this study provides a broadened base for the development of meaning-making theory. It stresses the significance of culture in meaning-making and documents how cultural values function to affect the process of interpretation. Falling in the same line with the argument made by previous researchers, this study serves to challenge the prevailing psychological bias embedded in the theory of adult learning and development, highlighting the role of cultural values in structuring and shaping the entire interpretation process. This study strongly contends that the process of meaning-making, in addition to being socially constructed or contextually shaped, is also culturally constructed. If a picture of meaning-making is to be completely grasped, the influences of cultural values need to be taken into serious consideration.

**References were distributed at the Conference**