Children’s and Mothers’ Contribution to Joint Reminiscing in Different Sociocultural Contexts: Who Speaks and What is Said

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The study compares mothers’ conversation with their 4-year-old children about two past events in two autonomy-oriented (35 German and 42 Swedish families), one relatedness-oriented (22 Cameroonian Nso families) and one autonomy-relatedness oriented (38 Estonian families) contexts. German mothers were rather similar to Swedish mothers in talking a lot, providing a lot of information and engaging children into conversation, but they differed from Swedish mothers by talking more about social content. Swedish children were more independent conversational partners to their mothers than other children, including German children. Estonian mothers’ contribution to conversation was similar to Cameroonian Nso mothers, except that they asked a lot of open-ended questions to engage children in conversations. Estonian children did not differ from Swedish and German children in their contribution to conversations. Compared to Swedish mothers, past event talk of Estonian mothers was characterized by a bigger proportion of talk devoted to social content, but also to the child, mental states and non-social content. It was characteristic of Cameroonian Nso mothers that they focused more on other people and actions, and their conversational dominance was larger. Differences in reminiscing were consistent with different cultural models of self and the type of autonomy – psychological or action – promoted. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: mother–child reminiscing; personal narratives; children’s contribution; cultural variations; cultural models of self; preschooler

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A great deal of theorizing and empirical research on the development of children’s skills of talking about past events has been done in the framework of sociocultural theory (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). These theoretical views state that through joint reminiscing with their parents, children internalize the culture-specific ways of sharing their past experience and how to understand the self and other people. Through shared reminiscing, children learn skills for creating coherent and detailed stories about themselves and gain knowledge about which personal experiences are appropriate to remember and to share with others (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Such conversations provide children with a way to share others’ perspectives on a past event and to get a better understanding of these events and of themselves, other people, social relations and the mind (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Fivush & Nelson, 2006). The present study explores how the cultural models (autonomous, related and autonomous related) are reflected in the amount and ways of mothers’ and children’s verbal participation in joint reminiscing and the content that is highlighted.

Cultural models of self

Cultural differences in mother–child past event talk have been linked to the conception of the self that is prevalent in a particular socio-cultural context, i.e. to cultural models of self (Fivush et al., 2006; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002). Autonomy and relatedness are inseparable fundamental dimensions of the self in all socio-cultural contexts, yet, the relative emphasis on either of these dimensions varies (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Kagıtçibaşı, 2005; Keller, 2007). In cultures that place great emphasis on the socialization of an autonomous self, socialization of children centres on the child being treated as a unique human being who is distinct from others. In cultures where the ideal is to socialize a related self, the values connected with interpersonal relations, self-other relatedness and a sense of social belonging are emphasized (see Greenfield et al., 2003). In cultures aimed at the socialization of an autonomous-related self, both dimensions of the self are emphasized (Kagıtçibaşı, 2005). In prior research, the USA has typically been classified as autonomy oriented, and Asian countries like China as relatedness-oriented cultures. Well-educated urban families of traditionally relatedness-oriented countries like Turkey and immigrant families living in autonomy-oriented countries like the USA have been classified as autonomous-related cultures (Greenfield et al., 2003; Kagıtçibaşı, 2013).

Recent theoretical perspectives suggest that in addition to the emphasis placed either on autonomy or relatedness, the type of autonomy fostered in a particular socio-cultural context could vary. Keller and Otto (2011) suggest that psychological autonomy is a desired developmental outcome in families from contexts that emphasize autonomy, as attention is paid to the wishes, intents and volitions of the child and other people. In relatedness-oriented cultures, parents foster the development of action autonomy – they develop children’s action competence and the ability to cooperate with other people from an early age. It would be important to consider both theoretical perspectives when making cultural comparisons about past event conversations.

Children’s and Mothers’ Contribution to Past Event Conversations

Prior studies demonstrate that although personal stories are told in all communities, cultures differ in the ways mothers engage children in conversations about shared past events (see Meltzi, 2010; Meltzi, Schick, & Kennedy, 2011; Wang, Leichtman, & Davies, 2000). Mothers in Western cultures reminisce in more
elaborate ways than mothers in non-Western countries and prefer to co-narrate (Wang, 2007). Mothers using a high elaborative style provide rich descriptive information about the actors, actions, intentions and affective experiences of those involved in the event and invite the child to ‘join in’ the conversations (see Nelson, 1993). They ask many open-ended questions that incorporate details of the event that took place (who, when, what and where) to encourage the child to participate and integrate children’s answers into a detailed and coherent joint story (Fivush et al., 2006; Reese, 2002). In return, the children of highly elaborative mothers provide richer memory recounts during the interaction (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Haden, Ornstein, Rudek, & Cameron, 2009). Children’s verbal contribution to the mother–child conversation is smaller in most East Asian cultures than in European American families (Wang, 2007; Wang et al., 2000).

Studies comparing European American and Latino mother–child past event conversations show that the co-construction of narratives is not as common in Latino immigrant middle-class families (considered to hold related or autonomous-related notions of self; Kagitçibaşı, 2005) as it is in autonomy-oriented Euro-American families (Cleveland & Reese, 2005; Leyva, Reese, Grolnick, & Price, 2008; Meltzi, 2010; Meltzi et al., 2011). Middle-class immigrant Latino mothers living in the USA allow children to introduce their own topics and do not structure their children’s narratives as strictly as European American mothers do, but serve as active listeners (Eisenberg, 1985; Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Meltzi, 2010; Meltzi et al., 2011). Thus, narrative participation seems to reflect the cultural models and values endorsed in the cultural context. The present study explores whether the cultural model of self and the type of autonomy fostered make a difference in terms of the amount and nature of mothers’ and children’s contribution to joint reminiscing: how much children talk in comparison to their mothers, and how much information they provide. We are investigating whether there are any cultural differences in the extent and ways mothers engage children in conversation (through open-ended questions, providing a lot of information or being talkative) and what encourages children from different cultural contexts to speak more and provide more information.

Cultural Differences in the Content of Conversations About Past Events

Researchers have observed consistent cultural differences in the number of references made to the child relative to other people in mother–child conversation when comparing Euro-American and Asian families (Fivush et al., 2006). Chinese mothers ask more factual questions and focus more on others relative to the child (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Wang, 2001, 2004; Wang & Conway, 2004; Wang & Ross, 2005). Euro-American mothers make more references to specific past events and to the child’s mental states and are more interested in the child’s point of view than Chinese mothers. European American children provide detailed memories, more mentions of themselves relative to others and describe themselves in terms of inner mental states such as intentions and feelings (Han et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2000). At the same time, previous cross-cultural studies have paid little attention to other conversational topics besides references to the child versus others. A prior study with European samples found that non-social aspects of the past event are as frequently referred to by mothers as the child or other people (Töugu, Tulviste, Schröder, Keller, & De Geer, 2012). The present study investigates whether different cultural models and types of autonomy manifest themselves in what content of reminiscing is highlighted (the child vs. other people vs. non-social content; mental states vs. physical activity).
The Present Study

Most researchers of mother–child reminiscing have contrasted cultures supporting the development of autonomous self to those supporting a related self by making comparative studies in Euro-American and East-Asian families such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean (e.g. Fivush & Haden, 2003; Meltzi et al., 2011; Wang, 2007). Less research on mother–child reminiscing has been conducted in other cultural contexts. The aim of the present study was to extend the literature about mother–child reminiscing, by including samples that have been rarely investigated. Four-year-old children were selected, because at this age, children from different cultures are able to engage in past event conversations (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Kelly & Bailey, 2013; Schröder et al., 2011).

Recent studies have observed a great variability in all societies with respect to the orientation towards autonomy versus relatedness. Moreover, some studies show an increase of relatedness in the individualistic West (see Kagitçibaşi, 2013) or of individualism in the collectivistic East (see below). Because of that, we follow Kagitçibaşi’s (2013) suggestions and consider both sociocultural development and culture when selecting the samples that would be representative of different cultural models. In our study, the autonomy-oriented cultural model is represented by Swedish and German middle-class urban families, the autonomy-relatedness model by Estonian middle class urban families and the relatedness-oriented model by rural Cameroonian Nso families.

Two cultural environments were chosen to represent the autonomy-oriented model, because few studies have compared children’s contribution to past event talk in cultures embodying the same cultural model. The comparison of Sweden and Germany provides a special opportunity to study similar contexts, as both countries are stereotypically individualistic (Budwig, 2000; Greenfield et al., 2003; Keller, 2007). At the same time, Budwig (2000) has shown that individualistic countries could differ in how they socialize children’s self. By analyzing the grammar forms used by 2- to 3-year-old children and their mothers in play situations, she found that American mothers were likely to enhance the agency of the child, but the German mothers focused on the joint experience. The Euro-American children tended to talk primarily about themselves, whereas German children were equally as likely to talk about themselves as about other people. It would be interesting to find out whether similar differences emerge when comparing past event conversations of German and Swedish mothers, and their 4-year-old children in respect of participation patterns and content highlighted. Moreover, the studies including the same three European samples as used in the current study give evidence that some differences might be expected between German and Swedish dyads in terms of children’s contribution to past event conversations and the content highlighted. Namely, German mothers valued autonomy over relatedness to a lesser extent than Swedish mothers (Tõugu, Tulviste, Schröder, Keller, & De Geer, 2011), and Swedish mothers and children talked less about other people than Germans (Schröder et al., 2011).

The rural Cameroonian Nso mothers from West Africa with a primary education were chosen as prototypical representatives of the relatedness-oriented cultural model. Previous anthropological research in Africa has shown that African societies are among the most collectivist ones in terms of the concept of self (Beattie, 1980). More recent studies indicate a wide variety in the African self-concepts. Although there is more collectivism than individualism, a surprisingly high proportion of students in big cities share the Western notion of individualistic self-concept (Eaton & Louw, 2000; Mpofu, 2001; Pirttilä-Backman, Kassea, & Ikonen, 2004). Despite changes in the direction of the independent orientation of...
self that have been observed in urban Cameroon, rural Cameroon has been seen as a socio-cultural context that emphasizes a related self – a self whose behaviour is meaningful around relationships with others (Keller, Demuth, & Yovsi, 2008). Moreover, the organization of rural Cameroonian Nso community and household, where children participate in chores, take care of themselves and younger siblings and run errands starting at an early age, fits well with the ideal of action autonomy (Keller, 2007; Keller & Otto, 2011; see also Keller et al., 2008).

Traditional African adult–child communication has been characterized as strictly hierarchical: adults give instructions not encouraging or expecting children to answer (Geiger & Alant, 2005). Children are expected to learn by observation and listening rather than by verbal participation. As a result, children have good listening and memory skills (Geiger & Alant, 2005; Rogoff, 2003; Sawadogo, 1995). The use of a hierarchical directive discourse structure has been found to be typical also of rural Cameroonian Nso mothers: in early mother–child interactions, mothers take the lead by using directives frequently, mainly for keeping children quiet (Demuth, 2008).

Estonian middle-class urban families were chosen to represent the context of the development of autonomous-related self (Tulviste, Mizera, & De Geer, 2012; Tulviste, Mizera, De Geer, & Tryggvason, 2007). This cultural model has been proposed to be characteristic of societies, where extensive changes have taken place (Greenfield et al., 2003; Kagitçibaşı, 2005). Estonia was formerly a part of the totalitarian Soviet Union with a collectivistic ideology. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, extensive economic, political and social changes have taken place. Mothers in Estonia emphasize relatedness values (see Tulviste et al., 2012), and relatedness is valued by Estonian mothers more than, for example, by Swedish mothers. At the same time, autonomy socialization has gained high importance because of the need to adapt to societal changes (Tulviste et al., 2012). Recent studies about socialization values show that Estonian parents are likely to manifest the pattern of autonomous relatedness (Kagitçibaşı, 2013; Tulviste & Kikas, 2010). Estonian children and mothers have been observed in naturally occurring conversations to be generally less talkative, with mothers expecting less verbalization from their children as compared to European American and Swedish families (Junefelt & Tulviste, 1997; Tulviste, Mizera, & De Geer, 2004). Estonian mothers reported less frequent talk about jointly experienced past events with their children and were less elaborative than German and Swedish mothers when reminiscing with their children (Tõugu et al., 2011). This makes us believe that there might be cultural differences in the amount and ways of children’s verbal participation in reminiscing.

**Hypotheses:**

Firstly, we expected that due to the stronger autonomy orientation of both German and Swedish mothers, they would talk more and help children to become more active participants in co-constructing the narratives through using more elaborative statements and asking more open-ended questions as compared to Estonian and Cameroonian Nso mothers. Children from autonomy-oriented contexts would talk more and provide more information, being thus more equal conversational partners to their mothers than Estonian and Cameroonian Nso children and mothers. We expected that the stronger relatedness orientation of Cameroonian Nso mothers, in contrast, would be reflected in their higher conversational dominance: children might participate rather through silent and careful listening while their mothers tell the entire narrative (i.e. they would be learning by observations, Rogoff, 2003).
Secondly, we expected that in relatedness and autonomous-related contexts, children’s contribution to joint past event conversations would be predicted rather by open-ended questions used by mothers than by the amount of maternal talk or elaborative statements. Thirdly, we expected that past event conversations in Cameroonian Nso would be characterized by larger proportions of talk devoted to other people (social content) and actions, a smaller proportion of talk about non-social content and a more prominent mothers’ conversational dominance, as it would reflect mothers’ stronger relatedness orientation and action autonomy fostered in this cultural context.

It was predicted that although German and Swedish mothers would convey values that endorse psychological autonomy by being more focused on the child, non-social content and mental states, German mothers would talk more about other people than Swedish mothers due to their stronger relatedness orientation. As for Estonian mothers with an autonomy relatedness orientation, we expected them to mention the child, non-social content and mental states as frequently and other people (social content) more frequently than in other European contexts.

METHOD

Participants

Mothers with their children at 48 months of age (between 48 and 49 months) participated in the study. The sample included 35 middle-class mother–child dyads from Berlin, Germany (19 of the children were boys, 16 girls); 42 middle-class mother–child dyads from Stockholm, Sweden (21 of the children were boys, 21 girls); 38 middle-class mother–child dyads from Tallinn, Estonia (24 of the children were boys, 14 girls); and 22 mother–child dyads from rural Cameroonian farming Nso families (10 boys and 12 girls). Estonian, German and Swedish mothers did not differ in regard to the number of years of formal education (Estonian: \(M=16.2, \ SD=2.41\); German: \(M=15.29, \ SD=3.57\); and Swedish: \(M=15.05, \ SD=2.37\)). The rural Cameroonian Nso mothers had a significantly lower educational level (\(M=7.78, \ SD=4.41\)) than mothers from the other three cultural contexts, \(F(3, 142)=95.44, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.67\). Mothers in the rural Cameroonian Nso sample were the youngest (\(M=24.82, \ SD=4.32\)), and mothers from Estonia were significantly younger (\(M=33.5, \ SD=5.32\)) than the mothers from the German and Swedish samples (German: \(M=37.3, \ SD=4.3\); Swedish: \(M=36.4, \ SD=3.71\)), \(F(3, 131)=48.31, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.53\). There were significantly more people living in the rural Cameroonian Nso household than in the other three socio-cultural contexts, \(F(3, 144)=15.89, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.25\). Rural parents with a low level of formal education, first birth at an early age and many offspring have been found to favour the relatedness-oriented cultural model. Urban middle-class families with a high degree of formal education, first birth at a late age and few offspring represent the autonomy-oriented model (Keller, 2007). Autonomous-relatedness model is prominent in changing societies (Kagitçibaşı, 2013). Thus, the sociodemographical characteristics of the samples corresponded to the three cultural models.

The cultural models for the selected samples have been verified in previous studies using the Autonomy-Relatedness Inventory (Keller et al., 2006). The German and Cameroonian Nso samples were participants in a longitudinal study where their cultural orientation was measured (Keller et al., 2006). A comparison
of three European samples with the same questionnaire indicated that the German mothers valued autonomy over relatedness to a lesser extent than Swedish mothers, and more than Estonian mothers (Tõugu et al., 2011).

**Procedure and Coding**

The mothers were asked to talk with their 4-year-old children about two jointly experienced events that had happened no longer than 4 weeks ago and spanned no longer than 1 day, consistent with Reese and Fivush (1993). The mothers were instructed to select specific events that did not happen routinely (e.g. going to bed) and not to retell stories from a play or a book. All participant mothers indicated in a sociodemographic questionnaire that such conversations about past events are common in their homes. The events discussed included visits to relatives and friends, outings (going to the fair, to a new play-ground, etc.), visits by relatives and friends and celebrations (e.g. Easter celebration, birthday parties, etc.). Mothers were encouraged to talk to their children as they normally would, and no time limit was set to the conversation. After switching on the audio recorder, the research assistant left the room until being called back.

The conversations from European capitals were transcribed in the original language and coded by trained native German-speaking, Swedish-speaking and Estonian-speaking research assistants. In Cameroon, a native speaker of Lamb Nso translated and transcribed audiorecordings in English and research assistants coded the English versions together with the native speaker. Applying coding in different languages was necessary, because it was not possible to train a native Lamb Nso speaker in the coding scheme (this language is not spoken by many people and some knowledge in research is essential in order to be trained in coding). First of all, the talk devoted to the jointly experienced event was distinguished from associated talk, off-topic talk and meta-talk (none of which were coded any further).

Two independent coding systems were used: one aimed at capturing the structure of the reminiscing conversations and the other the context. For structure coding, the coding system developed by Reese and Fivush (1993) and Reese, Haden, and Fivush (1993) was used. Independent clauses were the coding units with each unique verb in an independent clause forming a new propositional unit (Reese et al., 1993, pp. 409). Note that the coding unit could also include subordinate or embedded clauses and was still coded as one. For example, ‘I played,’ and ‘What were these things that you had to hold up?’ both account for one unit. The total number of independent clauses by a mother and a child served as a measure for general contribution of each. These measures were used to calculate mother conversational dominance – the number of the mother’s total number of independent clauses divided by the child’s total number of independent clauses.

Each mother’s and child’s independent clause that introduced an event or added new information concerning the event was coded as a statement elaboration (adopted from Reese & Fivush, 1993, also see Schröder et al., 2011; Tõugu et al., 2011, 2012 for more information on coding criteria for elaborations), e.g., ‘I was playing with Mia when grandma came’. On the mothers’ part, open-ended questions were also coded, for example: ‘What were we doing at the seaside?’ or ‘Who else came with us?’. The coding categories were mutually exclusive. Care was taken to ensure reliability of coding, therefore, 20% of the transcripts were translated into English and coded by two researchers independently in order to assess their reliability. Cohen’s kappa was .88 for elaboration statements and open-ended questions, and all discrepancies were resolved in discussion.
For coding content, the coding system developed at the University of Osnabruck (Schröder et al., 2011), partly based on Wang’s studies (Han et al., 1998; Wang & Fivush, 2005) was used. Every subject–verb combination (in independent and in embedded or subordinate clauses) by mothers and children and single-content word answers by children received a content code. Therefore, the above-mentioned statement elaboration ‘I was playing with Mia when grandma came’ received two content codes. The coding system was mutually exclusive and exhaustive and concentrated on the following five categories:

1. Child (mother’s and child’s subject–verb construction that referred to the child as the subject. This included instances where the child was the experiencer, e.g. ‘You got that nice gift.’ and cases with the child as the agent, e.g. ‘You were making snow-balls for me.’);
2. Co-agency (mother’s and child’s subject–verb construction referring to the child together with someone else as subjects, e.g. ‘We ate in the big room then’);
3. Mother (mother’s and child’s references to the mother as the subject, e.g. ‘And then mommy bought the batteries to go in there’);
4. Non-social content (subject–verb construction describing a situational context without mentioning any person, i.e. references to material objects and to general information, e.g. ‘It was a Spider-man cake’);
5. Social content (mother’s and child’s subject–verb construction referring to other people as subjects, e.g. ‘Who came to visit?’).

Finally, the above-mentioned content categories were further differentiated for referring to the following:

- Actions or external behaviour, e.g. ‘You ate a lot of candy.’;
- Mental states such as intentions, thoughts, feelings and preferences, e.g. ‘You didn’t want to go back to the play-ground.’;
- Physical or other characteristics, e.g. ‘What did you have on?’.

The reliability between coders was good with Cohen’s kappa .89 for content variables, and all discrepancies were resolved in discussion. The coding was done using the software Atlas.ti: the qualitative data analyses and research software. Atlas.ti is a set of tools suitable for analyses of written texts, audio clips, etc. that helps to manage, extract, compare and explore meaningful segments of information from large amounts of data (more information available at www.atlasti.com).

RESULTS

Two-way multivariate analyses were used to determine whether the dependent variables (contribution and content variables) are affected by gender and culture. As no main or interaction effect for gender in any of these analyses was observed, only the findings of univariate analyses of the effect of culture will be reported.

Children’s and Mothers’ Contribution to Past Event Conversations

Although the parents were asked to talk about two shared past events, only 69% of German, 81% of Swedish, 71% of Estonian and 51% of Cameroonian Nso mothers did so. All dyads talked about at least one shared event. In all samples, there were some dyads who talked about one, three or four shared events, therefore, the mean number of codes per shared past event for each mother and each child was calculated and used for analyses.
Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) showed significant cultural differences for contribution variables of mothers, Wilks’ \( \lambda = .66, F(9,318.97) = 6.62, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .16 \); and children, Wilks’ \( \lambda = .71, F(6,264) = 8.22, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .16 \). Descriptive data for mothers’ and children’s contribution to conversations per event, the univariate results (ANOVAs) for each contribution variable and effect sizes are presented in Table 1. To estimate cultural differences, post hoc comparisons with the Fisher LSD Test (planned comparison) were performed. As shown in Table 1, the first hypothesis was confirmed. German mothers used more independent causes than Estonian and Cameroonian Nso mothers, and Swedish mothers more than Cameroonian Nso mothers. German and Swedish mothers used more statement elaborations than Estonian and Nso mothers. Cameroonian Nso mothers asked significantly fewer open-ended questions and used significantly fewer statement elaborations than all other mothers.

Cameroonian Nso children provided significantly fewer independent clauses and statement elaborations than all other children. Cameroonian Nso mothers’ conversational dominance was significantly larger than in all other families. Contrary to expectation, Estonian children spoke as much as German and Swedish children. They used as many statement elaborations as German children, but fewer than Swedish children, and more than Cameroonian Nso children.

**Predictors of Children’s Contribution**

The variables of maternal contribution (total independent clauses, open-ended questions and statement elaborations per event) were entered into regression analyses to find out what predicts children’s contribution (total independent clauses and elaborative statements per event) to conversations in each cultural context. As seen in Table 2, children’s production of independent clauses was predicted by mothers’ total independent clauses except in the Cameroonian Nso sample, where maternal elaborative statements also emerged as a significant predictor (all significant at \( p < .001 \)). The second hypothesis found support in respect to children’s use of elaborative statements. Children elaborative statements were predicted by open-ended questions in Estonian (\( p < .05 \)) and Cameroonian Nso samples (\( p < .01 \)), by maternal elaborations and open-ended questions in the German sample (both significant at \( p < .001 \)), but by mothers’ total independent clauses in the Swedish sample (\( p < .001 \)).

**Cultural Differences in the Content of Conversations About Past Events**

Due to the large cultural differences in the number of total independent clauses, the content of mother–child past event talk was analyzed using the proportion of each content category. References to the mother occurred too infrequently to be included in subsequent analyses.

Multivariate analyses of variance showed significant cultural differences for the proportions of content categories (the child vs. co-agency vs. social vs. non-social) used by mothers, Wilks’ \( \lambda = .49, F(12, 344.24) = 8.81, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .24 \); and children, Wilks’s \( \lambda = .83, F(12, 338.95) = 2.03, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .07 \). MANOVAs revealed significant cultural differences in the proportion of talk devoted to actions vs. mental states vs. physical characteristics by mothers, Wilks’ \( \lambda = .60, F(6, 254) = 12.76, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .22 \); and by children, Wilks’ \( \lambda = .73, F(6, 254) = 7.11, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .14 \). Proportions of mothers’ and children’s conversational content variables by cultural context, univariate results (ANOVs) for each variable and effect sizes are presented in Table 3. Surprisingly, the child was proportionally most often talked about by the Nso mothers, who also focused on the social context and actions.
Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of maternal and child contributions to conversations by cultural context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Germany (N = 35)</th>
<th>Sweden (N = 42)</th>
<th>Estonia (N = 38)</th>
<th>Cameroonian Nso (N = 22)</th>
<th>F (3, 133)</th>
<th>η²</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mother</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total independent clauses</td>
<td>57.31 a 38.40</td>
<td>48.76ac 29.16</td>
<td>38.61bc 17.95</td>
<td>25.34b 21.75</td>
<td>6.60** .19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement elaborations</td>
<td>10.04 a 8.14</td>
<td>9.44a 6.88</td>
<td>4.24b 3.79</td>
<td>5.26b 4.88</td>
<td>7.63** .15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended question</td>
<td>8.12 a 4.15</td>
<td>7.14a 5.03</td>
<td>8.43a 3.54</td>
<td>2.22b 2.38</td>
<td>12.60** .22</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total independent clauses</td>
<td>35.14 a 29.48</td>
<td>31.93a 16.60</td>
<td>27.96a 11.85</td>
<td>12.80b 10.26</td>
<td>6.86** .13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement elaborations</td>
<td>10.57 ac 5.93</td>
<td>12.21a 6.80</td>
<td>9.69c 4.52</td>
<td>2.42b 2.41</td>
<td>16.22** .27</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother conversational dominance¹</td>
<td>1.75a 0.54</td>
<td>1.60a 0.50</td>
<td>1.44a 0.45</td>
<td>3.03b 3.97</td>
<td>5.02** .10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means and standard deviations are per event; ¹ the mean ratio of independent clauses by mother and child; different subscripts indicate significant differences between contexts with LSD adjustment.

* p < .05.
** p < .01.
*** p < .001.
**** p < .0001.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Germany Child’s independent clauses</th>
<th>Germany Child’s statement elaborations</th>
<th>Sweden Child’s independent clauses</th>
<th>Sweden Child’s statement elaborations</th>
<th>Estonia Child’s independent clauses</th>
<th>Estonia Child’s statement elaborations</th>
<th>Cameroonian Nso Child’s independent clauses</th>
<th>Cameroonian Nso Child’s statement elaborations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mother’s independent clauses</td>
<td>1.05***</td>
<td>.767***</td>
<td>.483***</td>
<td>.672***</td>
<td>.892***</td>
<td>- .356***</td>
<td>.683**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother’s statement elaborations</td>
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<td>Adjusted R²</td>
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<td>.41</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.43</td>
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*p < .05,
**p < .01,
***p < .001.
Table 3. Proportions of mothers’ and children’s conversational content variables by cultural context

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Germany (N=35)</th>
<th>Sweden (N=42)</th>
<th>Estonia (N=38)</th>
<th>Cameroonian Nso (N=22)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>0.25&lt;sub&gt;ab&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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<td>0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
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<td>0.39&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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</table>

Different subscripts indicate significant differences between contexts with LSD adjustment.
*<i>p</i> < .05.
**<i>p</i> < .01.
***<i>p</i> < .001.
****<i>p</i> < .0001.
more than other mothers. German, Swedish and also Estonian mothers focused on
the non-social content and mental states more than the Nso mothers. As predicted,
Estonian mothers talked more of social content than Swedish mothers, but not
more than German mothers who also differed from Swedish mothers in this
respect.

**Past Event Talk in Different Cultural Contexts**

A multinomial logistic regression analysis was used to check the third hypoth-
thesis about the characteristics of maternal past event talk in autonomous, related-
ness and autonomous-relatedness contexts. The proportion of talk devoted to the
child, social content, non-social content, mental states, actions and maternal con-
versational dominance were entered as predictor variables to examine the effect
the variables may have on predicting the particular socio-cultural context the dyad
belonged to (Germany, Estonia and Cameroonian Nso). One from the two
autonomous-oriented contexts – Sweden – was chosen as the reference context in
order to highlight the characteristics of reminiscing in all other contexts (related-
ness, autonomous-relatedness and another autonomy-oriented context –
Germany). As expected, a one unit increase in the talk about action (\(B = 21.27,\)
\(p = .01\)), social content (\(B = 15.88, p = .002\)) and in mothers’ conversational domi-
nance (\(B = 2.88, p = .01\)) increased the likelihood of rather belonging to the Camer-
ononian Nso sample than to the Swedish mothers’ sample. Contrary to expectation,
a one unit increase in the talk about the child also increased the likelihood of bel-
onging to the Cameroonian Nso than to the Swedish sample (\(B = 11.81, p < .05\)).
The comparison of Swedish and Estonian mothers indicated that a one unit in-
crease in the talk about mental states (\(B = 20.32, p = .001\)), non-social content
(\(B = 10.73, p < .01\)), the child (\(B = 8.03, p < .05\)) and about social content (\(B = 16,
\(p < .001\)) increased the likelihood of rather belonging to the Estonian than to the
Swedish sample of mothers. As hypothesized, Swedish and German mothers dif-
fered significantly (\(p < .05\)) only in the proportion of talk devoted to other people: a
one unit increase in the talk about social content increased the likelihood of
belonging to the German than to the Swedish group, \(B = 7.93, p = .01\).

**DISCUSSION**

The study compared mother–child past event conversations in different cultural
contexts – two autonomy-oriented (i.e. urban middle-class families in Berlin,
Germany, and Stockholm, Sweden), one relatedness-oriented (i.e. rural Nso fami-
lies in Cameroon) and one autonomy-relatedness oriented (i.e. urban middle-class
families in Tallinn, Estonia) context. The results showed that verbal contribution of
mothers and children to past event conversations, the extent and ways mothers en-
couraged children to engage in such conversations and the content of reminiscing
that was highlighted varies alongside the emphases placed on the autonomous
and related dimensions of self and the type of autonomy fostered in certain devel-
opmental contexts.

**Children’s and Mothers’ Contribution to Past Event Conversations**

In both contexts of socializing autonomous self (German and Swedish), mothers
and children spoke a lot, provided a large amount of new information, and
mothers asked many questions to engage children in conversations. Their
narrative participation pattern was similar to that described in studies with
Euro-American mothers and children (Meltzi, 2010; Meltzi et al., 2011; Wang, 2007). In the context supporting the development of related self (Cameroonian Nso), both mothers and children talked less and provided less new information than their counterparts in autonomous contexts. Cameroonian Nso mothers very seldom invited their children to get involved in the conversation via open-ended questions. Mothers with the orientation to autonomous relatedness (Estonian mothers) talked less than German mothers, provided less new information than German and Swedish mothers, but asked as many open-ended questions to engage children in conversations. In fact, they did not differ from Cameroonian Nso mothers in the amount of talk and new information provided. At the same time, Estonian children were similar to German and Swedish children in their contribution.

Mothers contributed to joint reminiscing more than their 4-year-old children across all samples. Previous within-culture research on narrative development has indicated the same: although children become more independent storytellers with age, 4-year-old children’s contribution to co-constructed narratives is still smaller than that of their mothers (Kelly & Bailey, 2013). At the same time, the present study found a great cultural difference in the relative contribution of mothers and children to reminiscing. Cameroonian Nso mothers’ conversational dominance was larger than in other cultural contexts, as they produced three times more talk than their children.

In all cultural contexts, children’s greater amount of talk was predicted by their mothers’ greater amount of talk, except for the rural Cameroonian Nso where children’s amount of talk was predicted both by the mothers’ amount of talk and by mothers’ smaller provision of new information. Previous studies about everyday mother–child conversations have also found the children of mothers who talk more tend to be more talkative (see Hoff, 2006). It is known from prior studies that more elaborative mothers have children who provide richer memory recounts (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Haden et al., 2009). The current study extends the prior knowledge about the issue by demonstrating cultural variability in what might encourage children to provide more information. The German children whose mothers used more elaborative statements and open-ended questions provided more information. In the Swedish dyads, more information was provided by the children whose mothers were more talkative. The latter finding seems to suggest that Swedish 4-year-old children are more independent and equal narrative participants than other children, including German children. In Estonia and Cameroonian Nso, as expected, children’s provision of new information was bigger when their mothers asked a lot of open-ended questions. It is likely that the fact that Estonian mothers asked as many open-ended questions as mothers from autonomy-oriented contexts explains the finding that Estonian children provided a similar amount of talk and new information as children from autonomous contexts.

Compared to other cultural contexts, Cameroonian Nso mothers’ stronger relatedness orientation seems to be expressed in less equal participation pattern. They acted as the sole narrators and possibly expected children to listen rather than to speak themselves, like Latino immigrant parents with low education in the USA (see Greenfield et al., 2000; Meltzi et al., 2011). Thus, the hypothesis that mothers and children representing the predominantly autonomy-oriented model would talk more and be more equal conversational participants than those mothers and children following the relatedness model found support.

In general, some cultural differences in past event conversations were similar to those found in comparative studies about general conversational style. For
instance, Afro-American families have been found to be less talkative (see Hoff, 2006), Swedish children more talkative and active conversational partners than Estonian children and Estonian mothers less talkative, but more active in eliciting children’s talk (Tulviste et al., 2004). Some studies investigating cultural variation in the construction of personal narratives have found similarities in mothers’ narrative elicitation styles in different interactional contexts, for instance, in family reminiscing and book reading (see Meltzi, 2010; Meltzi et al., 2011). Other researchers have suggested, on the contrary, that maternal reminiscing style is specific to the particular conversational context and is not just a reflection of talkativeness or general conversational style (Haden & Fivush, 1996). Future studies on mother–child conversations in multiple interaction contexts (including reminiscing) in multiple cultural contexts are needed to shed light on the relationships between reminiscing style and general conversational style across cultures.

Cultural Differences in the Content of Conversations About Past Events

Based on the results of prior studies where Western cultures, such as European American families in the USA, are contrasted to non-Western cultures, such as East Asia (Fivush et al., 2006; Han et al., 1998; Wang, 2001, 2004; Wang & Fivush, 2005), and the conception of different types of autonomy fostered (Keller & Otto, 2011), we expected more references to the child and mental states in German and Swedish dyads than in Estonian and Cameroonian Nso dyads, who were, in contrast, expected to refer more to other people and actions. Contrary to expectation, a bigger proportion of Cameroonian Nso mothers’ speech referred to the child than of Swedish and German mothers’, and Estonian mothers spoke about the child significantly more than German mothers. One reason for it might be that German and Swedish mothers, but not Cameroonian Nso mothers, tended to talk a lot about co-agency: about their child together with themselves or someone else. Methodological issues could account for the different results as well: most studies (e.g. Han et al., 1998; Wang, 2004) have used a self-other ratio measuring references to others relative to references to self. Our results indicate that when looking at the proportions of each type of content separately, the interpretations may not be as straightforward.

Less substantial cultural differences were detected in the content of children’s reminiscing, possibly due to the fact that 4-year-old children contributed relatively little to the shared past event talk. Differences that appeared were congruent with the cultural models of self: Swedish children spoke more than others about co-agency, and Cameroonian Nso children spoke more about actions and other people than Swedish children. It is likely that when children grow older and their capacity to participate in conversations with others about past events increases, more cultural differences would emerge in children’s talk about past events.

Little talk about mental states in all participating dyads might be related to the cognitive abilities of 4-year-olds. Preschool age children describe other people and themselves rather by physical than psychological characteristics. Although 2–3 year-olds sometimes mention mental states, metacognitive abilities continue to develop over many years, and the most extensive development takes place later during the school years (Karmiloff-Smith, 1994). It is also likely that children’s cognitive and language abilities shape maternal reminiscing style and content. When jointly reminiscing, the mother is likely to adapt her speech to the level of child’s cognitive and language abilities and to what she assumes is more appropriate for the child to talk about.

It is possible that the finding that Cameroonian Nsos focus more on concrete contextual features of social situation (actions) whereas Estonian, German and
Swedish participants focus more on more abstract characteristics of a person in a social situation (mental states or physical characteristics) also reflects differences in their cognitive style. The tendency to use more abstract descriptions is likely to be the context-free (analytic) style prominent in Western contexts, while the tendency to describe an external behaviour and actions is the context-dependent (holistic) style common in non-Western/rural contexts (Klein et al., 2010; Masuda & Nisbett, 2001).

Nevertheless, the findings are consistent with the recent ideas about action and psychological autonomy (Keller, 2007; Keller & Otto, 2011; Keller et al., 2008). At first glance, the high proportion of talk about other people by German and about the child by Cameroonian Nso mothers might seem unexpected. But when looking at what they spoke about when talking about the child and other people, one can discover that such a finding is, in fact, in line with the conception of psychological and action autonomy: German mothers paid a lot of attention to personal viewpoints, feelings, intents and thoughts. Thus, through frequent references to other people, German mothers still fostered their children’s psychological autonomy (see also, Tulviste, Tõugu, Keller, Schröder, & De Geer, 2013). Cameroonian Nso mothers, in turn, were likely to promote action autonomy by focusing on the child’s and other people’s external behaviour and actions. Thus, the study found that in joint reminiscing, different types of autonomy – action versus psychological – were emphasized in different sociocultural contexts. As the level of formal education of mothers is instrumental in defining different sociodemographic profiles and related cultural model, the different conceptions of autonomy should reflect these educational differences.

Past Event Talk in Different Cultural Contexts

In order to see the systematic differences in the past event talk of mothers’ belonging to different cultural models, a multinominal logistic regression was carried out. The analysis provides a complementary picture to the mean differences in the content of maternal talk and the relative contribution of mothers and children to joint reminiscing discussed above and serves as a summary of differences observed in the three different cultural models. As expected, Cameroonian Nso mothers’ past event talk was characterized by a bigger proportion of talk devoted to other people (social context) and actions and by a larger mothers’ conversational dominance in comparison with Swedish sample (see an example of Cameroonian Nso conversation in Appendix). Mothers from the two autonomy-oriented contexts were quite similar in the contents highlighted in reminiscing, but German mothers were distinguished from Swedish mothers by their higher proportion of references to other people. A big proportion of references not only to social content but also to the child, mental states and non-social content was more specific to past event talk of Estonian than Swedish mothers.

The findings align nicely with previous research and provide a more comprehensive picture of how the different cultural models and the type of autonomy promoted are reflected in maternal talk in reminiscing. This shows how the experience of children in different cultural contexts varies systematically and carries different socialization goals as both cultural models of self and the type of autonomy – psychological or action – promoted are reflected in the content of maternal past event talk and in the relative contribution of mothers and children to reminiscing.
Limitations and Directions for Future Research. The study was limited because only the families highly representative of the three different models were included in the study. Rural families with low educational level were not recruited from autonomy- and autonomous-relatedness oriented contexts as were not urban, highly educated families from the relatedness-oriented context. Small sample sizes are also a limitation of the study. Moreover, some of the cultural differences reported may result from the particularities of the study. First of all, the instructions to reminisce with a child about a shared event may have influenced the amount of child-centred talk – the talk about the child’s agency and co-agency. Furthermore, dyadic reminiscing about such everyday personal events as was done for the particular study may be a culture specific behaviour, which is simply not as common in the Cameroonian Nso community where children spend most of their time in the company of many other people. This may account for the brevity of these conversations and the lack of details. Another limitation of the study is that due to difficulties in training a native Lamb Nso speaker in the coding scheme (see above), the Cameroonian Nso data was translated by a native Lamb Nso person and coded in English. The data of other samples was coded in the original language.

The study made an important theoretical contribution to the understanding of a culture-specific meaning and function of joint reminiscing by showing that cultural differences in the ways and the amount of children’s verbal contribution to conversations about the past and the content highlighted in such conversations are attributable to cultural models of self. Findings have implications for teachers working in multicultural classrooms, by showing that when educating children, one should be aware of the cultural variability in engaging children in conversations and in content highlighted in personal narratives. Furthermore, the findings correspond to the recent theoretical arguments that the dimensions of autonomy and relatedness are multifaceted constructs (see Forman, 2007, for a review). The results demonstrate the coexistence of both dimensions in each mother regardless of her cultural background, although both dimensions are emphasized to a different degree (Collins, Gleason, & Sesma, 1997; Forman, 2007; Kagitçibaşı, 2005). The present study added to previous work by demonstrating that cultures also differ in which aspect of autonomy (psychological versus action) is highlighted more in joint reminiscing. It is likely that socialization in relatedness-oriented cultures stresses action autonomy, whereas in autonomy supportive developmental contexts, psychological autonomy is fostered when socializing children. It will be important to probe different aspects of autonomy (action and psychological) further to find out how they are integrated in socializing children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research for this article was supported by the Baltic Sea Foundation in Sweden (grant no. 300903), the German Research Council (KE 263/46-1 bis 46–4) and the Estonian Science Foundation grant 9033.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Example of Cameroonian Nso mother–child past event conversation

M: Do you still remember that day we went for Chong?
C: mmh+
M: You still remember?
C: mmh+
M: You still remember the person who gave you corn drink?
M: mmh+
M: who gave it?
C: it is one mama who gave.
M: Whose mother? Whose mother was that?
C: The one who gave me corn drink.
M: Was it not the mother of Theo who gave it?
C: mmh+
M: The mother of Theo gave you corn drink?
C: mmh+
M: mmmh, the mother of, mother of Leo did not say that you should be going outside?
C: mmh+
M: *The mother of Leo said that you should be going outside not so?*
C: mmh+
M: mmh?
C: mmh+