Aging in Culture

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This article reviews the empirical studies that test socioemotional aging across cultures. The review focuses on comparisons between Western (mostly North Americans and Germans) and Eastern cultures (mostly Chinese) in areas including age-related personality, social relationships, and cognition. Based on the review, I argue that aging is a meaning-making process. Individuals from each cultural context internalize cultural values with age. These internalized cultural values become goals that guide adult development. When individuals from different cultures each pursue their own goals with age, cultural differences in socioemotional aging occur.

Key Words: Socioemotional selectivity theory, Personality, Social relationship, Attention, Memory

It has become common knowledge that the world’s population is aging. However, few realize that many societies in East and Southeast Asia are among the most rapidly aging societies in the world (Cheng, Chan, & Phillips, 2009), surpassing many European and American societies. For example, the number of older persons in Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Mainland China will increase by 243% from 2005 to 2050 compared with the world’s average of 113% (Cheng et al., 2009). In Mainland China alone, the number of persons aged 65 years or older is expected to reach 334 million (United Nations Population Division, n.d.), more than the total number of all persons aged 65 years or older in the entire Europe.

However, theoretical development about aging largely focuses on North American and Western European cultures. In this theoretical article, I attempt to extend socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006), a theory developed in the United States about age differences in goals, to account for the influence of cultural contexts on aging. In particular, I argue that (a) individuals make sense of life (i.e., figuring out what is important to them) through internalizing the values of their cultures, these internalized cultural values become personal goals that guide adult development and (b) when individuals from different cultures each pursue their own internalized cultural values with age, cultural differences in aging occur. I acknowledge that most of the empirical findings reviewed subsequently are cross-sectional findings, from a number of cultures only. From the life...
course perspective (see Alwin, 2012 for a review), both place (in this case, culture) and time (in this case, age and cohort) contribute to human development. The cross-sectional findings should be interpreted with caution as age differences can reflect cohort effects and/or developmental changes. Nevertheless, because cohort effects tend to vary with culture, reviewing whether the patterns of age differences are the same or different across cultures can help to partially isolate developmental changes from culture-related cohort effects.

Individuals Make Sense of Life Through Internalizing the Values of Their Cultures

The need to make and maintain meaning is one of the basic human needs (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Stevens, Martina, & Westerhof, 2006). From birth, individuals try to figure out what is important in life through sociocultural artifacts such as schooling, work, sex roles, and social relationships (Kegan, 1994). Gradually, individuals learn to resolve conflicts between societal demands and personal desires (Erikson, 1982), by means that include, but not limited to, internalizing societal demands and turning them into personal goals. This process is known as “cultural learning” (Vygotsky, 1934/1962) in the human development literature and “acculturation” in the immigration literature (Berry, 1997).

For example, individuals in independent cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) learn to value personal autonomy and uniqueness from birth, through interactions with their parents (Keller, 2003; Keller et al., 2004). Their parents maintain a certain level of personal distance from them (in terms of face-to-face contact, object stimulation, and mutual eye contact) and encourage them to express the self as a separate physical entity in actions, words, ideas, and feelings (Keller et al., 2004). In contrast, individuals in interdependent cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) learn to see the self as embedded within social units through proximal parenting (Keller, 2003), that is, their parents provide them with much body contact and stimulation. They also learn to prioritize the needs of the group over their own by being encouraged to follow the customs and norms that are embraced and prescribed by their parents and the society (Keller et al., 2004). Later, as the individuals enter schools, those in independent cultures are encouraged to learn through exploration (Chao, 1995). But those in interdependent cultures are given more dogmatic education and training (Chao, 1995), as well as direct moral education and formal training on how to relate to others (Wu, 1996). These processes are so successful in both types of cultures that by adolescence, individuals have generally shared similar cultural values; see Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, and Maynard (2003) for a comprehensive review.

There are reasons to believe that these processes intensify with age. For example, Neugarten (1977) argues that older adults perceive themselves as less able to effect change in the world. They thus place greater emphasis on meeting sociocultural demands by changing themselves. Elaborating on this theme, Heckhausen and Schulz’s (1995) life-span theory of control postulates that with age, people are less likely to exercise primary control (i.e., seeking to bring the world in line with personal goals) but are more likely to exercise secondary control (i.e., changing oneself to adjust to the world). Similarly, Brandstätter and colleagues (Brandstätter & Rothermund, 2002) propose a dual-process framework, which argues that age-related declines and the resulting losses in resources lead older people to favor accommodative processes (i.e., adjusting personal goals to make them consistent with situational constraints) over assimilative processes (i.e., modifying the actual situation in accordance with personal goals). In addition, the model of selective optimization with compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) also describes how personal goals are flexibly adjusted in reaction to age-related losses in the second half of life.

Although not focusing on age-related losses and declines, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006) argues that with age, people perceive future time left in life as increasingly limited. This sense of limited future time motivates older people to prioritize goals that aim at deriving emotional meaning from life. Meanwhile, in the social psychological literature, terror management theory argues that an awareness of one’s eventual death creates existential terror; one way to manage this terror is by affirming cultural worldviews (McCoy, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2000). Doing so gives the individual a sense of symbolic immortality: A part of the individual, the part that is consistent with the cultural worldview, will continue to live in the culture after the individual has passed away. Integrating these two theories, I argue that in older age when future time is perceived as more limited, and/or when mortality is made salient, one can derive emotional meaning...
from life through affirming and internalizing the values of one’s culture.

To test whether older adults were indeed more likely to endorse and internalize cultural values than did younger adults, Ho, Fung, and Tam (2007) examined personal and cultural values among younger and older Chinese adults. Values were measured by the Schwartz Value Questionnaire (Schwartz, 1992), which consisted of 56 values grouped under 10 value types: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security. To measure personal values, participants rated the importance of each value to their own self. To measure cultural values, the intersubjective importance approach (Wan et al., 2007) was adopted and participants rated the importance of each value in reference to their culture (i.e., the Chinese culture). Ho and colleagues (2007) first examined age differences in cultural values, in terms of the 10 value types. Except power and tradition, older participants reported higher levels of all types of cultural values than did younger participants, suggesting that people might be more likely to endorse cultural values with age.

Next, Ho and colleagues (2007) examined whether older people internalized cultural values to a greater extent than did younger adults. They calculated the correlation coefficient between the ratings of personal and cultural values for each participant, across all 56 values. They found age differences in the correlation coefficients, such that older participants showed a higher correlation between personal and cultural values than did younger participants. They also computed mean differences between personal and cultural values for each participant and then compared them across age. Smaller discrepancies between personal and cultural values were found among older participants than among younger participants.

To further investigate what drove this higher congruence of personal and cultural values among older participants relative to younger participants, Ho and colleagues (2007) examined age differences in personal values. Older participants reported higher endorsement of all personal value types that were more communal in nature (i.e., universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, security) than did younger participants. They also reported lower endorsement of four out of five personal value types that were more agentic in nature (i.e., achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction) than did younger participants. These findings, though cross-sectional, suggest that with age, Chinese move away from more agentic values to more communal values, giving rise to a closer association between personal and cultural values. In other words, we have preliminary support for the theoretical postulate that people increasingly internalize cultural values with age.

When Individuals From Different Cultures Each Pursue Their Own Internalized Cultural Values with Age, Cultural Differences in Aging Occur

The fact that personal goals guide human development has been widely documented (see Brandstätter, 1999 for a review). Meanwhile, although cultural identification is universal, cultural contexts differ in the specific values and norms that they socialize (Ingersoll-Dayton, Saengtienchai, Kespichayawattana, & Aungsuroch, 2004; Wan et al., 2007). To the extent that everyone develops across adulthood in ways that are consistent with internalized cultural values, cultures with different values should show different patterns of adult development. Subsequently, I review empirical work in the areas of personality, social relationships, and cognition to illustrate this process.

Age Differences in Personality.—For a number of years, personality development has been assumed to manifest in exactly the same way across cultures. Indeed, cross-sectional patterns of age differences in personality were found to be largely the same across cultures, ranging from Germany, Italy, Portugal, Croatia, South Korea (McCrae et al., 1999), the United Kingdom, Spain, the Czech Republic, Turkey (McCrae et al., 2000), Russia, Estonia, Japan (Costa et al., 2000) to the People’s Republic of China (Yang, McCrae, & Costa, 1998). These findings have often been taken as evidence that personality development is universal. Yet, these cross-cultural findings were almost always obtained within the scope of the five-factor model—neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness (commonly known as the Big Five). It remains possible that age differences in other aspects of personality may differ across cultures.

Recent literature in cultural psychology (Cheung et al., 2001) has reliably documented that when personality was measured not just by measures imported from the West but also by indigenous measures developed in China, six factors—interpersonal relatedness in addition to the Big Five—were
found among several Chinese samples. When the expanded measures were then imported back to the West, the interpersonal relatedness factor was again found among several American samples (Cheung et al., 2001).

Conceptually, what distinguishes interpersonal relatedness from the Big Five is that although there is no theoretical reason to suspect that the Big Five may differ in importance across cultures, there is reliable cross-cultural evidence to suggest that interpersonal relatedness is more important among Chinese than among North Americans. For example, Chinese are found to be more interdependent than are North Americans (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002 for a meta-analytical review). Relationship harmony is more important than self-esteem to the psychological well being of Chinese, whereas the reverse is true for North Americans (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). Moreover, the lexical approach of personality argues that as people in a community talk to one another, they use vocabulary to describe different personality attributes. The personality attributes that “people in the language community have found particularly important and useful in their daily interactions” (John, 1990, p. 67) are represented by more synonyms in the language and are eventually picked up as a factor when the language is factor analyzed. The fact that the interpersonal relatedness factor was first identified in the Chinese language suggests that it is more “important and useful” in the culture.

To test whether age differences in personality existed for interpersonal relatedness, Fung and Ng (2006) examined age differences in the Big Five and interpersonal relatedness among younger and older Canadians and Chinese. Findings revealed that age differences in the Big Five did not differ across cultures. Yet, age differences in some aspects of interpersonal relatedness (i.e., social reciprocity and adherence to norms and traditions) were found only among Chinese but not Canadians. I interpret these findings by suggesting that personality may change with age according to cultural values. For Chinese, their culture emphasizes social reciprocity and adherence to norms and traditions, so they may learn to exhibit these characteristics to a greater extent with age. Canadians, in contrast, do not live in a culture that emphasizes these personality characteristics; they, thus do not exhibit these characteristics to a greater extent as they grow older.

To directly test the moderating role of cultural values, Fung, Ho, Tam, Tsai, and Zhang (2011) examined age differences in social reciprocity among European Americans and Chinese Americans, aged 20–90 years. Conceptually, replicating the findings of Fung and Ng (2006), age was positively associated with social reciprocity among Chinese Americans but not among European Americans. Moreover, individual differences in values moderated these cultural differences. The association between age and social reciprocity was nonsignificant among European Americans as a group, but it became positive among European Americans who valued tradition (seeking group acceptance) more. Conversely, the association was weaker among Chinese Americans who valued hedonism (seeking individual pleasure) more. These findings suggest that people from each culture develop their social reciprocity, or more generally, their personality, with age according to what they value.

Further cross-sectional findings for the role of cultural values in personality development were obtained in a study on age differences in dispositional optimism among Americans and Chinese (You, Fung, & Isaacowitz, 2009). Prior cross-cultural research has suggested that optimism is closely associated with self-enhancing tendencies that are considered to be more desirable among European Americans than among East Asians (Chang, Sanna, & Yang, 2003). Examining optimism across age, You and colleagues (2009) found that although Americans as a group were more optimistic than Chinese, this cultural difference was greater with age. Older Americans were more optimistic than were younger Americans, yet older Chinese were less optimistic than were younger Chinese. These findings, though cross-sectional, once again suggest that the direction of personality development may be determined by what is desirable and appropriate in each culture. Americans, living in a culture that regards optimism as desirable, become more optimistic with age. Conversely, Chinese, who live in a culture that values optimism less, become less optimistic with age.

Age Differences in Social Relationships.—Other than personality, social aging also seems to be under the influence of cultural values. A particular pattern of age differences in social network characteristics (SNC) has been reliably reported in the literature (Fung, Carstensen, & Lang, 2001; Lang & Carstensen, 2002). Increasing age was
associated with fewer peripheral social partners, yet the number of emotionally close social partners remained relatively stable across age. It should be noted that most of the studies on age-related SNC cited earlier were conducted in the United States and Germany. Yeung, Fung, and Lang (2008) predicted that East Asians with a higher level of interdependence (Oyserman et al., 2002) might be more likely to maintain interactions with social partners of greater diversity even when they grew older. In particular, East Asians might be more likely to maintain or even increase the number of close social partners, and be less likely to reduce the number of peripheral social partners, with age.

To test these hypotheses, Yeung and colleagues (2008) examined age differences in SNC among Chinese, aged 18–91 years. More importantly, they tested whether individual differences in interdependence moderated these age differences. The stability of the number of emotionally close social partners across age, typically found in Western studies (Fung et al., 2001) was replicated only among Chinese with a low level of interdependence. In contrast, those with medium or high levels of interdependence exhibited a positive association between age and the number of emotionally close social partners.

Similarly, although a negative association between age and the number of peripheral social partners was observed for the entire sample, the association was significant only among those with low or medium levels of interdependence. The association was much weaker, and in fact, no longer significant, among those with a high level of interdependence. These findings revealed that age differences in the number of close and peripheral social partners depended on values such as interdependence.

Longitudinal findings provide further evidence for the moderating role of values. Zhang, Yeung, Fung, and Lang (2011) examined the relationships between age, changes in the number of peripheral partners, and changes in loneliness for 2 years, among Chinese aged 18–91 years. They also tested the moderating role of individual differences in interdependence. Results showed that the well-documented negative association between age and number of peripheral partners over time was only significant for individuals with low or medium levels of interdependence, but not for those with high levels of interdependence. Moreover, having more peripheral social partners was associated with decreased loneliness in the 2-year interval, only among older and middle-aged adults high in interdependence.

Country-level individualism also moderated age differences in trust. Li and Fung (2012) examined age differences in generalized trust, and trust toward family members, friends, neighbors, and strangers, using data from the World Value Survey. They found that age was positively related to all the five types of trust across the 38 countries. However, countries with lower levels of individualism, as indexed by Hofstede (2001), showed weaker associations between age and trust toward friends and strangers. I interpret these findings by suggesting that people in less individualistic countries are less selective about these peripheral partners with age.

Age-Related Cognition.—Even age differences in basic cognitive processes, such as attention and memory, show differences across cultures that seem to be consistent with cultural values. In recent years, an age-related phenomenon called the “positivity effect” (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005) has been identified. This effect involves preferential cognitive processing of positively valenced, relative to negatively valenced or neutral stimuli, with age.

Isaacowitz and colleagues, for example, found the positivity effect using eyetracking techniques (Isaacowitz, Wadlinger, Goren & Wilson, 2006a, 2006b). They presented younger and older American adults with pairs of synthetic faces. Each pair included the same face in a nonemotional expression and in one of four emotional expressions (happiness, sadness, anger, or fear). They found that older adults displayed attentional preferences toward happy faces and away from angry faces (Isaacowitz et al., 2006a), as well as sad faces (Isaacowitz et al., 2006b). Young adults only showed an attentional preference toward fearful faces.

Similarly, in memory, the positivity effect has been found among American samples. Empirical studies on age differences in memory generally revealed negativity dominance (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001) among younger adults, but found either a lower level of such negativity dominance, that is, a negativity reduction effect (Charles, Mather, & Carstensen, 2003; Experiment 2), or superior processing of positively valenced stimuli, that is, a positivity enhancement effect, among older adults (Charles et al., 2003; Experiment 1; Mather & Knight, 2005). Although a few other studies did not find any age differences in memory (Grühn, Smith, &
might either do not show the positivity effect or information as useful as positive information, they that people in East Asian cultures found negative associations with increases in emotional closeness for a 2-year period. Cheng, Fung, and Chan (2009) found that older Chinese, aged 18–91 years, that more negative exchanges were positively associated with lower levels of interdependence. As a result, the positivity effect might not be generalizable to East Asian cultures. Cross-cultural studies have repeatedly found that the North American culture, being more independent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), that is, valuing personal autonomy and uniqueness, may be particularly attuned to positive information (Frey & Stahlberg, 1986), in order to maintain and enhance optimism and self-esteem (Herzog, Franks, Markus, & Holmberg, 1998). However, information from the external environment, whether positive or negative, may carry important social cues. In particular, negatively valenced information, such as angry facial expressions, may be at least as useful as, if not more useful than, positively valenced information, such as happy facial expressions, in maintaining social harmony (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1995). As a result, the East Asian culture, valuing interpersonal relationships and interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) may not show a bias for positive information. For example, in describing the construct “happiness,” Americans only describe the positive features, whereas Japanese describe both positive and negative (e.g., social disruption) features (Uchida, 2007). In another study, Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, and Kitayama (2006) found that although American athletes explained Olympic performance primarily in terms of positive attributes, Japanese athletes did so in terms of both positive and negative (e.g., their family have made a lot of sacrifice) attributes.

In addition, although optimism or even positive illusion were found to be beneficial to well being in the mainstream (i.e., Western) psychological literature (see Carver & Scheier, 2002 for a review), Cheng, Fung, and Chan (2009) found that older Chinese who foresaw a more negative future had higher well being 12 months later. Likewise, despite the well-established finding in the mainstream literature that negative social exchanges had adverse effects (Rook, 1984), Fung, Yeung, Li, and Lang (2009) found among Chinese, aged 18–91 years, that more negative exchanges were positively associated with increases in emotional closeness for a 2-year period.

Given the above, we predicted that to the extent that people in East Asian cultures found negative information as useful as positive information, they might either do not show the positivity effect or show it to a lesser extent with age. To test this prediction, Fung and colleagues (2008) compared attention among younger and older Chinese, using eyetracking techniques in exactly the same way, with the exact same stimuli, as Isaacowitz and colleagues (2006a, 2006b). In contrast to the aforementioned positivity effect reliably found among Americans, older Chinese actually looked away from positive stimuli (in this case, happy faces).

Similar cross-cultural differences were also noted in memory. In a study that compared memory for positive, negative, and neutral stimuli among younger and older Chinese (Fung & Tang, 2005), a negativity bias was found among older adults. In the study, the background music of a government TV announcement on health promotion was varied such that it conveyed positive, negative, or neutral affect. The only difference in recognition memory was found between the negative and neutral versions, with older adults showing better recognition memory for information presented in the negative version of the announcement than from the neutral version. Younger adults did not show such differences.

However, the methodology of Fung and Tang (2005) was different from that used in prior Western studies (Charles et al., 2003; Mather & Knight, 2005), rendering results from the studies not comparable. To further test whether the positivity effect existed in memory among older Chinese, Fung, Isaacowitz, Lu, and Li (2010) examined age differences in free recall for positive, negative, and neutral images, with the exact same stimuli and methodology as those employed in a previous study that has found the strongest positivity effect among Americans (Charles et al., 2003; Experiment 1). Their findings revealed that older Chinese showed better memory for positive than for neutral images (i.e., the positivity enhancement effect), but they showed the same level of memory for negative images as they did for neutral images (i.e., an absence of the negativity reduction effect).

Fung and colleagues (2010) tested whether individual differences in interdependence moderated these age differences in memory. Older Chinese with lower levels of interdependence showed both the positivity enhancement effect and the negativity reduction effect, like what their American counterparts did in prior studies (Charles et al., 2003). Yet, older Chinese with higher levels of interdependence only showed the positivity enhancement effect but not the negativity reduction effect. Younger Chinese showed a memory bias for negative images over positive and
neutral images throughout the study, regardless of levels of interdependence.

Individual differences in interdependence also moderated the age-related positivity effect in attention among younger, middle-aged, and older Chinese. Fung and colleagues (2010) presented participants with a real-life video clip that showed positive images on one side of the screen and negative images on the other side of the screen. They found that among Chinese who were lower in interdependence, older Chinese looked at the negative images, relative to the positive images, significantly less than did their middle-aged and younger counterparts. However, no such age differences were found among Chinese who were higher in interdependence.

Taken together, the earlier findings suggest that the age-related positivity effect is not universal. Chinese, being more interdependent as a group, are more likely to value negative stimuli as much as positive stimuli in their social environment. They are thus less likely to show preferential processing of positive stimuli over negative stimuli with age.

Summary, Caveats, and Conclusion

In summary, the empirical findings reviewed earlier suggest that socioemotional aging, at least in the areas of personality, social relationships, and cognition, may not manifest in exactly the same way across cultures. Moreover, when cultural differences in aging occur, they are usually consistent with known cultural differences in values. These findings inspire me to argue that socioemotional development across adulthood may be part of a life-long process: Individuals in each culture learn to be more culturally appropriate as they grow older. Cultural differences in aging (i.e., age by culture interactions) occur when people from different cultural contexts learn different ways to become culturally appropriate. By proposing this argument, I agree with the basic premise of life-span developmental theories (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandstätter & Rothermund, 2002; Carstensen et al., 1999; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995) that as people age, they shape their world in ways that maximize their well being, but I add that people do so within the confines and definitions of their respective cultures.

I acknowledge that due to the limited number of studies on the intersection between aging and culture, much empirical evidence I have cited is based on cross-sectional studies, conducted in only a couple of cultures. Longitudinal studies on a wider range of cultures are needed to test the postulates of the theory. However, despite the preliminary nature of the findings reviewed previously, they have practical implications for policies and intervention. On the one hand, these findings suggest that the patterns of aging differ across cultures, particularly in the areas of personality, social relationships, and cognition. Governments and professional bodies should not develop their policies and intervention programs only by adopting “good practices” from the mainstream literature. On the other hand, these findings suggest that cultural differences in aging are not random. We do not have to examine aging in every single culture before policies and intervention programs can be developed. It may be fruitful to look for cultural differences in aging (i.e., culture by age interactions) in areas where known cultural differences in values (i.e., culture main effects) exist.

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References


