

Self-Esteem as Folk Theory: A Comparison of European American and Taiwanese Mothers' Beliefs

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SYNOPSIS

Objective. Self-esteem is seldom recognized to be a culture-specific, historically situated idea, and parents' folk theories of self-esteem are rarely investigated empirically. This paper remedies these omissions by comparing European American and Taiwanese mothers' beliefs about childrearing and self-esteem. The substantive goals are to understand the variety of meanings that these mothers associate with self-esteem and to delineate the local folk theories that contextualize this idea or offer alternatives. A related methodological goal is to develop an approach to interviewing that respects local communicative norms and thereby offers a sounder basis for comparison. *Design.* The study was situated in two large towns in rural areas, one in the Midwest and one in Taiwan. In each site, 16 mothers of 3-year-olds participated in in-depth, open-ended interviews concerning childrearing beliefs and practices. *Results.* Nearly all American mothers spontaneously invoked self-esteem early and often in response to a variety of childrearing questions and spoke at length about the importance of building children's self-esteem. In contrast, very few Taiwanese mothers talked about "self-respect-heart/mind" (a Chinese term that approximates self-esteem) and those who did articulated a view that contradicted the European American view. *Conclusions.* Self-esteem looms much larger in American mothers' folk theories of childrearing than it does in their Taiwanese counterparts'. In the American version, self-esteem is a central organizing concept, believed to be crucial to many aspects of healthy development. In the Taiwanese version, self-esteem is either not something that mothers worry very much about, or it is believed to create psychological vulnerabilities rather than strengths. Adaptation of the interview to local communicative practice enhanced the cultural validity of these findings.

INTRODUCTION

From earliest infancy, when babies learn who they are by seeing themselves reflected in their parents' faces, the self-esteem and self-respect that will maximize children's fulfillment of their potential, their resilience in adversity and their ability to esteem and respect other people depend on feeling

loved, respected, even celebrated, for who they are, now, not for what they do or might become in the future.

Penelope Leach, *Your Baby And Child* (1997)

There is growing awareness that a culture-inclusive understanding of child development cannot be achieved without taking into account parents' folk theories about the nature of children and childrearing (Bruner, 1990; DeLoache & Gottlieb, 2000; Harkness & Super, 1996; Lutz, 1983; Miller & Sperry, 1987). Folk theories or ethnotheories refer to local, informal belief systems that vary within and across cultures. Parental folk theories about children and childrearing are culturally organized, and they are systematically related to parenting practices, on the one hand, and to other local meaning systems, on the one hand.

Very little is known, however, about parental folk theories of self development, despite mounting evidence that construals of the self are culturally variable (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1990). From a developmental perspective, a fundamental question that arises from this new appreciation of the cultural plurality of selves has to do with the process by which different construals of self get created (Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998). How can we explain, for example, how children living in certain cultural communities (e.g., middle-class communities in the United States) develop selves that are clearly bounded and independent or why they grow up to have a need for positive self-regard? This article rests on the assumption that a better understanding of parental folk theories of self development (and the practices that they inform, motivate, and rationalize) will help to answer these questions.

Self-Esteem is "At Large" in American Culture

The opening quote, taken from one of the most popular childrearing manuals in the United States, expresses key features of a folk theory that is "at large" in American culture. According to this folk theory, children's self-esteem is extremely important because it promotes the development of a whole array of psychological strengths, including resilience, respect for others, and realization of one's own potential. Self-esteem is itself dependent on how other people relate to the child, from infancy onward. Self-esteem develops when children are loved and appreciated for who they are in the here-and-now, when their intrinsic worth is respected. In other words, this folk theory valorizes self-esteem as a childrearing goal. If parents love, respect, and affirm the child, healthy levels of self-esteem will develop, which, in turn, will lead to other psychological strengths.

This folk theory is not only available in many venues of popular culture—parenting workshops, women’s magazines, advice columns, TV talk shows. It is also enshrined in the scientific understandings of self-esteem that are taught in courses in developmental psychology and early childhood education. In recent years several prominent educators and psychologists have challenged the idea that self-esteem leads to the positive outcomes often attributed to it and have argued that practices intended to foster self-esteem may inadvertently promote under achievement, narcissism, and depression (Damon, 1995; Katz, 1993; Seligman, 1995). These misgivings are echoed in recent reports in the popular press (e.g., Begley, 1998).

Despite the critical scrutiny that self-esteem received in the 1990s, many American families continue to experience daily exposure to valorizing messages about self-esteem, whether through distant media or communications from authoritative sources closer at hand. For example, in a single month, we collected a wide assortment of textual references to self-esteem from the public media that regularly enter our homes. These included an article in a local newspaper about the rising rates of AIDS among teenagers and the need for more effective sex education, namely education that addresses self-esteem and communication skills; a complimentary copy of a new magazine called *Daughters*, which accompanied a mail-order purchase and contained an article about the ways in which girls’ participation in sports builds confidence and self-esteem; an article from the sports section of the *New York Times* concerning the New York Race for the Cure, which raises money for breast cancer research, in which one survivor talked about how her high self-esteem and strong religious faith enabled her to cope with the disease. In addition, one of us received a note sent home from his son’s kindergarten explaining the upcoming “ME” project, in which each child would create and present a self-expressive project (collage, story, song, dance, and so forth). The note strongly encouraged parents to get involved in these projects, concluding, “After all, the goal of this project is to enhance self-esteem while increasing parent involvement.” Another of us received a *New Parent Survival Guide* when her eighth-grade daughter entered a new school, urging parents to make sure that their teen understands that his or her worth is intrinsic, not dependent on high achievement. Note that this informal sampling of discourses of self-esteem is drawn entirely from the written media; the list would multiply were we to include the influx from television, radio, film, and the internet.

Study Rationale

We argue that the ubiquity of reference to self-esteem in both scientific arenas and popular culture naturalizes self-esteem, promoting a kind of in-

visibleness. This invisibleness is supported, as well, by two striking omissions from the discourse of self-esteem. Rarely is self-esteem and its associated folk theory recognized to be a culture-specific, historically situated discourse. And rarely is the debate about self-esteem informed by the voices of parents as they reflect on and work with these ideas in rearing their children. The study reported here addresses both of these omissions. Its purpose is to identify the meanings and practices associated with self-esteem and with the larger folk theory in which it is embedded. We hope to create a space within which the all-too-familiar notion of self-esteem can be seen for what it is — an element within a particular folk theory.

We approach this problem by listening to American and Taiwanese mothers talk about their childrearing goals and values. The study is intended to contribute to the emerging literature on cultural variation in parental folk theories (Bruner, 1990; DeLoache & Gottlieb, 2000; Harkness & Super, 1996). Our larger ambition is to work towards a developmental cultural psychology that is fully situated in local meaning systems and thereby incorporates knowledge of cultural variation in folk understandings of the self (Cole, 1996; Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus, & Miller, 1998; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1990).

Apart from its substantive aims, this paper offers some reflections on interviewing, a stock-in-trade tool of ethnographers. In our view, one of the biggest methodological challenges facing cultural psychology centers on the problem of cross-cultural comparison: How can we represent the intricate patterning of similarities and differences across cultures without subduing the complexity of particular meaning in each (Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997)? In the study reported here, we address this problem by adopting an approach to interviewing that is responsive to the norms of communication in Taiwan and the United States. This approach permits fuller access to the local meanings associated with childrearing in the two cultural cases.

The remainder of this introduction is structured to reflect the dual purpose of the paper. We first present studies pertaining to cultural variation in folk theories of childrearing and self-esteem and then outline the rationale for the methodological approach developed in the present study.

Self-Esteem in Folk Theory and Practice: Cross-Cultural Variation

A recent computer-generated search of the psychological literature revealed that English-language publications concerning self-esteem appeared at a rate of more than 250 per year from 1986 to 1998. The vast majority of these works either examine the antecedents, correlates, or con-

sequences of self-esteem or assess self-esteem as it contributes to other psychological processes (e.g., depression). Very few address the culturally saturated nature of self-esteem. In an important recent exception, Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999) point out that self-esteem research has been conducted primarily by North Americans (i.e., Canadians and Americans). They review social scientific analyses of Japanese culture and conclude that "the need for positive self-regard, as it is currently conceptualized, is not a universal, but rather is rooted in significant aspects of North American culture" (p. 766).

Mirroring this conclusion, several studies suggest that European American parents place greater value on children's self-esteem, compared with their counterparts from Japan and China (Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Stigler, Hsu, & Kitamura, 1990; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992) and from Puerto Rico (Harwood, J. Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). These cross-cultural differences co-exist with subtle but important intra-cultural differences in the meanings that parents attach to self-esteem (Taylor, 1995; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998). For example, Harwood et al. (1995) found that both middle-class and working-class European American mothers used a dimension of "self-maximization," which included self-confidence, to describe desirable qualities in their young children, but that working-class mothers did so less frequently and with an awareness that its attainment might be problematic for their children.

To our knowledge, the only research that addresses cultural variation in both parental folk theories of self-esteem and observed parental practices was conducted by Miller and Fung and their colleagues (Miller, 1996; Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997). Their work began with a study that was situated in "Longwood," a European American neighborhood in Chicago and in Taipei, Taiwan. The study focused on the modes of participation and interpretive strategies that middle-class families used in narrating young children's past experiences. Observations of ordinary family interaction revealed that Longwood families operated with a distinct self-favorability bias when narrating the experiences of 2-year-olds. These children were exposed repeatedly to stories that cast them in a positive light and that edited their past transgressions from the narrative record. The Longwood families thus routinely enacted a set of narrative practices that embodied a host of self-affirming messages.

These narrative practices were consistent with Longwood mothers' explicit childrearing goals. They said that promoting their young children's self-esteem was a matter of the first importance to them, articulating a folk theory that is strikingly similar to the version expressed by Leach in the opening quote (Mintz, 1999). They believed that parents should enhance children's self-esteem by providing abundant praise and encouragement,

engaging children in conversations about their feelings, showing physical affection, and providing opportunities for children to experience success. Interestingly, however, no one mentioned using stories to support children's self-esteem; that is, they did not talk about the self-favorability bias that we had documented (Miller, Sandel, Liang, & Fung, 2001). Apparently, these mothers were unaware that they repeatedly created positive self-portraits of their children in the stories that they told, even though this practice was consistent with their avowed childrearing goal. These findings suggest that parents who strongly endorse the goal of cultivating children's self-esteem may engage in a complex, converging mix of strategic and unconscious practices.

The Taiwanese families differed strikingly from the Longwood families in both their beliefs and practices. In contrast to the self-favorability bias, the Taipei families frequently narrated young children's past transgressions, often structuring such stories so as to establish the past misdeed as the point of the story. This narrative practice was compatible with the Taiwanese mothers' belief in "opportunity education," an indigenous notion that involves two interlinked ideas: It is more effective to instantiate moral lessons in the child's concrete experience than to lecture in the abstract and the parent should take every opportunity to do so (Fung, 1994, 1999). Thus, the Taiwanese folk theory and accompanying practices did not foreground self-esteem and self-affirming practices; instead, they were oriented around an explicitly self-critical stance that was part of a larger concern with children's moral education.

In sum, the available literature has very little to say about self-esteem as a cultural ideal or about how self-esteem fits into parental folk theories and practices. Comparative research provides an important vantage point by revealing that other cultures do not share Americans' preoccupation with self-esteem and by underscoring variation within the United States. With respect to the specific cultural comparison addressed in this article, existing work suggests that European American parents are much more likely than their Taiwanese counterparts to privilege self-esteem as a childrearing goal and to engage in self-affirming practices with their young children.

Interviews as Communicative Events

The goal of ethnographic research is to understand meanings from the standpoint of the people being studied, with the understanding that those meanings are more or less collectively shared (Corsaro & Miller, 1992; Erickson, 1986; Malinowski, 1922; Woolcott, 1995). In attempting to understand local meanings, ethnographers try not to mistake their own deeply

taken-for-granted, culturally saturated understandings for those of the study participants — a challenge that is never fully met. If the goal is to appreciate the interpretive frameworks of these particular American parents, for example, and the ethnographer is Taiwanese, then the process of bringing these parents' (American) frameworks into focus will also expose the ethnographer's own (Taiwanese) frameworks. Thus, even when ethnographers study a single cultural case, they aim for double vision (at least). In an increasingly globalized world, in which it is impossible to draw clear boundaries around cultures, many individuals, in fact, have first-hand experience of multiple cultures. In the study presented here, the research team includes individuals with widely varying life experiences in the two cultures: one of us (Wang) was born and reared in Taiwan and the others were born and reared in the United States; Sandel lived in Taiwan for eight years and has a Taiwanese wife. This cultural variability within the research team is a useful resource, allowing us to draw on multiple, insider/outsider perspectives in conducting the study and interpreting the findings.

If ethnographic work is intended to gain insight into local meanings, and incidentally to recoup understandings of one's own culture, how is this knowledge to be attained? Most ethnographic research involves some combination of fieldwork and interviewing. By fieldwork we mean participant-observation in the local, everyday scene. Many years ago, the linguistic anthropologist Edward Sapir (1949) described how difficult it is for a cultural outsider to discover the "cultural key" to an observed event. Clifford Geertz (1973) made a similar point in his famous interpretation of a twitch of the eye: Is it a wink or a blink or a parodied wink or a rehearsed wink or what? These discussions demonstrate the challenges that arise in interpreting other people's meanings, based on our observations of their actions.

If we turn to interviewing, the other standard tool in the ethnographer's repertoire, the situation is no less vexed. Dell Hymes (1975), another linguistic anthropologist, succinctly diagnosed this problem as follows: "Some social research seems incredibly to assume that what there is to find out can be found out by asking" (p. 18). This was Hymes's way of acknowledging how difficult it can be to communicate across cultural boundaries: The ethnographer may not stand in the kind of relationship vis-à-vis his informant that would allow him to ask, he may not know how to formulate his question in a way that is intelligible to his informant, the informant may innocently misunderstand the question and therefore provide a misleading response, or the informant may understand the question but not want to reveal the answer. What, then, is the ethnographer to do?

Fortunately, the situation is not as bleak as it seems because time and flexibility lie at the heart of the ethnographic approach. Ethnographers learn to flexibly deploy, again and again, the several modes of inquiry encompassed by fieldwork and interviewing: watching, listening, participating, and asking. Perplexed by a witnessed event, the ethnographer can go to a trusted informant to ask for clarification. Or she might choose to observe and listen to other related events to see whether they shed light on the puzzle. Or she might try to participate in the puzzling event the next time it happens to see how she will be corrected. In other words, in practice, watching, listening, participating, and asking are not separate activities but mutually informing ways of knowing that unfold in an ongoing process of discovery.

In this paper we examine interviewing from this perspective. That is, instead of thinking of interviewing as simply a matter of asking questions and listening to responses, we treat interviewing as an observable social practice in which ethnographer and informant participate and which may be more or less familiar to the participants, more or less in need of adaptation to local norms. This perspective owes a great deal to Charles Briggs's (1986) book, *Learning How to Ask*. Briggs urged researchers to recognize that interviews are communicative events, analyzable in terms of the metacommunicative features of the talk and nonverbal action that interviewer and interviewee together construct. When these features are addressed, along with other data from local communicative routines, it becomes possible to offer a more precise and well-grounded interpretation than is possible via the conventional approach to interviews, in which the content of the interviewee's talk is treated as a transparent expression of his or her beliefs. Like other ethnographers who have written about interviewing (Mishler, 1986; Woolcott, 1995), Briggs attends not only to what people say but to when and how they say it, what they convey nonverbally, how silence is patterned. As it applies to comparative research, this approach implies that it will often be necessary to devise different "interview" events, reflecting the different communicative norms of the communities being compared, in order to yield equivalently meaningful discourse. The study reported here builds on this insight.

In sum, this study was designed to address two related substantive questions: What are the meanings that European American and Taiwanese mothers associate with the idea of self-esteem? And what are the local folk theories that contextualize this idea or that offer alternative formulations of the goals and values of childrearing? A third question is methodological and follows directly from the methodological rationale outlined above: How is interviewing, as communicative practice, constituted in the two cultural cases?

METHODS

The study was situated in two large towns, one in the midwestern United States and one in central Taiwan, thereby extending our work beyond large urban areas. The study combined ethnographic fieldwork with audio-recorded interviews. At each site we interviewed the mothers and grandmothers of 16 young children. The present study is based only on interviews with mothers. Because beliefs and practices that support children's development shift with age, the study focused only on young children. The second and third authors collected data at both sites and depended on informal, personal networks to recruit participants. Before providing more information about the participants and how they were recruited, we briefly describe the two communities.

Chhan-chng

Chhan-chng Hiong is a small farming community of 33,000+ inhabitants covering an area of 16 square miles. Nearly all of its inhabitants are native Taiwanese. They are descendants of settlers who came to the island from China's Fujian Province during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries when Taiwan was under the control of the Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty. They speak Taiwanese as their mother tongue (also known as Hokklo or Minnanyu), the southern Chinese language spoken by the majority of the inhabitants of Taiwan (see Huang, 1995). Most residents also speak Mandarin Chinese, the official language taught in local schools since 1945.

Unlike Taiwan's crowded cities that are dominated by high rise residential complexes, Chhan-chng is a place where a more traditional way of life is still evident. The landscape is open, dominated by fields of rice paddies, sugar cane, and a variety of fruits and vegetables — onions, leeks, cabbages, melons, grapes, asparagus. Breaking up these fields are clusters of houses. Most people live in two- or three-story box-like cement buildings that have been built within the last 20 years. Scattered among these dwellings one can still find many traditional single-story, three-wing Taiwanese farmhouses, where the ancestral hall dominates the central wing, and the two protruding residential wings surround an open courtyard.

Nights and mornings in Chhan-chng are quiet, broken mainly by the sounds of grunting pigs and crowing roosters. And while most farmers today plow their fields with small tractors, one local farmer still uses a water buffalo. In the early mornings people gather around noisy and bustling open markets to buy their day's supply of fresh fish, poultry, vegetables and fruits. Men and women of the older generation, many of whom are

grandparents, ride their scooters and bicycles out to the fields to work before the sun gets too hot. The women dress so as to protect their skin from the sun's fierce rays: They wear broad-brimmed farmer's hats, long sleeve shirts and pants, and wrap colorful scarves around their faces. Later in the morning children, dressed smartly in their school uniforms, head off to Chhan-chng Primary School, some walking, others riding bicycles, and others riding on their parents' or grandparents' motor-scooters. Things quiet down in the afternoon as most people rest when the temperature and humidity levels rise. But later in the evening, as the sun goes down and the air might be cooled by a later afternoon thunderstorm, people move about on the streets. Many of the older grandfathers gather in shops open to the street and play lively game of Chinese chess and Mahjong. Women are busy preparing the evening meal. But after the meal is over and children have been given their baths, they go out and visit friends, or stay at home and watch popular Taiwanese dramas on television. Once a week vendors who operate nightmarkets come to Chhan-chng and set up their stalls, selling clothing, shoes, candy, assorted local snacks — roasted squid, pig's blood soup, oyster pancakes, stinky tofu — and games such as netting small fish and pinball.

People in Chhan-chng observe traditional Taiwanese religious practices. On the first and fifteenth of every month, according to the Chinese Lunar Calendar, local residents worship their ancestors before the family's ancestral tablets and go to local temples to ask for peace and prosperity. These include the temples of Ma-cho (Taiwan's most popular goddess), Guanyin (the goddess of mercy), Che-kong (another popular god from the Taoist pantheon), the Earth God, and Su-bu-keng (the four generals gods).

For children growing up in Chhan-chng today life is different from previous generations. Families have fewer children (Thornton & Lin, 1994), and because adult family members do not need to work such long hours in the fields, caregivers can spend more time supervising their children's (or grandchildren's) activities. A generation ago mothers and other family members lived together close to home and shared in the tasks of caregiving, household maintenance, and farming. But now as more young people have sought employment in nearby towns or moved to the cities for better jobs, some mothers resume work after observing a one month post-partum rest and entrust full-time or primary caregiving responsibilities to the child's grandmother, usually the paternal grandmother. In the past mothers were the primary caregivers while others merely helped as needed. Today's grandmothers sometimes complain that they are expected to care for their young grandchildren while their daughters-in-law work away from home although this does not prevent them from being proud of their close relationship with grandchildren.

But one feature of life that has not changed as much from one generation to the next is children's routine exposure to adult activities. Children live in a community where homes, farms, shops, and businesses are often joined. For example, two children lived with their grandmothers who operated small stores that were connected to the living quarters. These children were accustomed to seeing people come and go on a daily basis. In another case, the family's living quarters were located on the upper floors of a factory. The focal child would often play near the factory floor in close proximity to the employees and customers. Another child lived in a home where his mother and paternal grandfather and grandmother operated a family fish bait business. His home was physically joined to that of his relatives. Thus, he often played in a large courtyard in front of the house, and spent much time playing with siblings and cousins. Most of the children were quite accustomed to interacting with children, young people, and adults of all ages. Few spheres of adult life were unknown to them; this open lifestyle is one that people in Chhan-chng say is very similar to the lifestyle of the past generation.

While many in Chhan-chng claim that life today is much better than before, many qualify that claim. A common complaint centers on the deterioration of the environment. While in the past children could spend hours playing and swimming in nearby streams, catching an abundance of frogs, shrimp, and other natural creatures, today's children have no such opportunity. Streams and waterways are heavily polluted due to runoff from industrial waste and pig farms. Nor can today's children play with the kind of joyful abandonment that children in the past experienced, as traffic is a constant concern and danger for young toddlers. (See Sandel, 2000, for further description of Chhan-chng.)

Centerville

Centerville was developed almost entirely after the coming of the railroad in the mid-nineteenth century. The area had been a hunting ground of the Miami and Illini Indians, but the marshy land was not permanently settled by anyone until the early 1800s. The railroad platted out the town and its Boston financiers advertised for settlers, mostly from England and New England. The newcomers, of British and German origin, drained the land and began to farm.

Agriculture and agri-based packaging and shipping were the chief commercial activities through the 1920s and remain an important part of the county's economic base. The road to the nearest metropolitan area is a long one, featuring mile after mile of flat, treeless land sprouting soybeans and corn. Viewers of the local ten 'o clock news are well informed of the

strengths of competing brands of herbicide and genetically engineered soybean and corn seeds, and the public radio station monitors agricultural weather and agricultural markets.

Centerville is best known, however, as the home of a major, mid-western university, one which draws students primarily from the Chicago area, but also from across the United States and around the world. Out of Centerville's total population of 100,000 people, over 40,000 make up the "special population" of students and their dependents who reside in Centerville for a few years before moving on. The constant influx of people of diverse ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds brings to this community an atmosphere of vibrancy similar to that of many much larger urban communities of the United States.

Like many mid-western towns (Stack, 1974), Centerville is more or less racially divided. In the early years African Americans followed the railroad north to Centerville, and more recently some have followed it south from Chicago. African Americans comprise 13% of the population, and many live in a neighborhood located to the north of the railroad tracks.

Centerville supports a remarkable number of places of worship, including two synagogues, two Buddhist sanghas, a mosque, and more than 100 Christian churches. The Christian spectrum is extremely diverse, including Baptist, Mormon, Presbyterian, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and a host of independent fundamentalist congregations. The community has seven private Protestant and Catholic schools.

Because Centerville is much more diverse than Chhan-chng, it is not possible to describe family life in the same sweeping terms. Middle-class families might reside in a bungalow built in the 1920s or a restored Victorian located on a old, tree-lined street in the heart of the downtown or in a two-story or ranch-style house in a new subdivision on the outskirts. Although space varies, most children have their own bedroom or share a bedroom with a sibling, and toys and children's books are abundantly available. Some of the parents grew up in town or on the surrounding farms. Others came to Centerville for jobs. In still other cases, the parents had moved to town to earn degrees at the university and chose to stay to rear their family in a community with good public schools and a rich array of cultural and educational opportunities. These include art and historical museums, a center for the performing arts, independent book stores, bustling public libraries, and a park service and community college that offer year-round educational programming for children and adults.

In some families both parents work, and young children go to daycare or are cared for by paid caregivers in the home. In other families, mothers are fulltime housewives. Two of the families in our sample had chosen, for religious reasons, to home school their children; one of these families had

five children. The only times these preschoolers regularly left the house and interacted with other children was when their family attended church on Sunday mornings, and sometimes on Wednesday evenings when the church had special children's activities. Thus, the daily rhythms of life vary considerably for middle-class 3-year-olds in Centerville, ranging from days spent at home in the company of mother and siblings, to half-days at nursery school to full-days in daycare. Most young children have ready access to television and video, but many parents limit the amount of time that children are allowed to watch, and a few choose not to expose their children to these media.

Despite the differences across families, two-generation households are the norm. None of the families in our study resided with the grandparents and, in many cases, grandparents and other extended family members lived a considerable distance away. Contact with these relatives was limited to talking on the phone or visiting occasionally during the summer or on holidays. Maternal grandmothers might also help out when a new baby is born. In those families with grandparents living nearby, it is common for grandparents to visit on weekends or babysit in the evenings. In a few families the grandmother helped with childcare during the week.

For the mothers we interviewed in Centerville, change from one generation to the next was not a particularly salient issue. The few changes that catch people's attention are the rapid growth of a strip of chain stores (e.g., Walmart, Lowes, Sears, Best Buy) north of the interstate that borders the town, spreading subdivisions on what used to be farmland on the south side of the community, and children's growing access to computers and other high tech gadgets, items rarely seen just a decade ago. But the changes noticed by the residents of Centerville are not particularly foregrounded, especially when compared with the way change is foregrounded by residents of Chhan-chng. The homes, living arrangements, availability of cars and other vehicles, educational opportunities — these have changed at an evolutionary pace, not at the revolutionary pace of Taiwan.

Finally, we see a contrast between the nature of contact young children in Centerville have with relatives and other members of the community. In Chhan-chng young children participate in nearly all spheres of adult life, whereas in Centerville, young children share only in the domestic sphere. For example, none of Centerville's children lived in a family-run store or business; parents' work-related activities did not involve their young children. Similarly, although families might socialize with other families, parents also spent part of their leisure time away from their children. When parents "went out," they arranged for a babysitter to care for the children at home. And while virtually all young children in Chhan-chng routinely played with cousins and neighboring children, the peer experiences of

young children in Centerville varied: Some had extensive interactions with peers during daily childcare, others seldom spent time with children other than their own siblings.

Participants

At each site we interviewed the mothers of 16 young children, whose mean age was 3 years. The mothers in Centerville were older (mean age of 33 years) and better educated (most had a bachelor degree or higher) than the mothers in Chhan-chng (mean age of 25 years, mean educational level of 14 years). The average number of children per family was two for Chhan-chng and three for Centerville families.

Household organization and caregiving arrangements differed in the two sites. Thirteen of the Chhan-chng families followed the traditional pattern of living in the same household with the paternal grandparents. Nine of the mothers in Chhan-chng were the child's primary caregiver; the remaining seven children were cared for by their paternal grandmothers. In five of these cases the grandmother took care of the child during the day-time while the mother worked. In two cases the child lived with the grandmother while the mother worked at some distance from Chhan-chng, returning only on weekends and holidays. In Centerville each of the households was a nuclear family household.

Procedures

Recruitment. In Centerville we recruited participants through a variety of contacts. Wang recruited mothers through the participant pool at the university and through personal contacts. Sandel contacted mothers through ties to local Protestant and Catholic churches and through the classmates of his young children. The initial contact with participants was usually by phone. The researcher invited the mother to participate in an interview study about childrearing and explained that we also hoped to interview her mother or mother-in-law. Mothers were told that the interview would last for one to two hours. Self-esteem was not mentioned during this initial contact. Most mothers readily agreed to participate.

In Chhan-chng participants were recruited by Sandel's mother- and father-in-law; as life-long residents of this small and close-knit community, Mr. and Mrs. Dyoo are known to virtually everyone in the community. Mr. or Mrs. Dyoo then accompanied the researcher to the family's home, introducing the researcher and explaining again the purpose of the visit. In many cases they would remain with the researcher and chat with family members during the interview. Their assistance in recruiting participants,

making introductions, and explaining the purpose of the interview was critical to our ability to quickly gain participants' trust and engage in conversations which were framed within local cultural practices.

Conducting the interviews. Most of the participants were interviewed in their own homes. The interviews were open-ended, with questions adapted from the protocols developed by Mintz (1999) for interviewing mothers in Chicago and by Fung (1994) for interviewing mothers in Taipei. Content areas included childrearing goals and values, discipline, strategies for promoting development, sources of childrearing information, shame and pride, and self-esteem and related ideas. The interview protocol was intended to provide a rough guideline for conversation. We expected that the order of questions would need to be altered in order to follow the mother's lead. However, the interviewers were consistent in waiting until late in the interview to ask questions about self-esteem. Most interviews lasted 1–2 hrs. All interviews were audio-recorded, and researchers kept field notes about the physical space, participants, circumstances, and other relevant information.

Analysis and interpretation of data. The interviews were transcribed in the relevant language. Three interpretative analyses were undertaken. (See Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992, and Miller, Hengst, & Wang, in press, for a general description of ethnographic and interpretive methods as applied to the study of children.) The first analysis followed directly from the methodological approach outlined earlier: We described the nature of the interview as a communicative event in the two research sites, drawing on the fieldnotes, the audio tapes, and the transcripts. This description attends to the physical setting of the interview, the cast of participants, other activities that co-occurred with the interview, the flow of topics, and the researcher's adaptations, if any, to local communicative practice. The second analysis focused on the meaning of the term "self-esteem" and its closest approximations in Chinese and Taiwanese. Again, in keeping with the premise that interviews can be usefully analyzed as communicative events, we examined how mothers used these terms over the course of the interview. We paid particular attention to whether they invoked these terms before the researcher asked about them, whether researcher and mother were able to create common ground around the topic of self-esteem, and how much mothers elaborated on this topic. In the third analysis, we examined the mothers' talk in order to identify the major features of their folk theories of childrearing, as these pertained to self-esteem. In keeping with standard practice for deriving emic categories, our understanding of the patterns in the mothers' talk emerged through repeated

passes through the data (Bloom, 1978; Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992). We reviewed and re-reviewed the tapes and transcripts in order to discern the main ideas that the mothers expressed concerning self-esteem and to identify alternative ideas. For those mothers who talked about self-esteem, we paid particular attention to the links that they made between self-esteem and other ideas (e.g., achievement, competence, mental health, frustration, etc.). In presenting the three analyses, we quote at length from the interviews/conversations in order to show how the talk unfolded and to make the mothers' voices available to the reader.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two Different Communicative Events

Our first analysis revealed that the activity of talking with mothers about their childrearing beliefs and values took different forms in the two communities.

Interviewing in Centerville. Fourteen of the mothers were interviewed in their homes, two in their offices. The interviews that were conducted in homes took place in the living room or dining room. These participants seemed to share an interview script that included a particular kind of staging. The mother led the researcher to a table, where she and the researcher sat facing one another. Often juice or coffee was offered. Children were present in some interviews, but mothers would often ask them to play with toys or computer games and not interrupt the interview. Some mothers chose a time when children were not present (e.g., they were in bed or in the care of their fathers). In other words, although the researchers did not request that any special arrangements be made, the Centerville mothers established a self-contained time and space for the interview.

As indicated above, we intended that the interview protocol would provide a set of guidelines to be loosely followed and adapted to the interviewee's interests. However, both researchers found that little alteration was required. Again, the interview script — the researcher asks a question, the interviewee responds — seemed to be taken for granted by these participants.

The straightforward way in which these interviews unfolded can best be illustrated by reference to Wang's experience. The interviews were conducted in Wang's first year of studying abroad. Not a native English speaker, she worried that a language barrier would impede communication: Would the mothers comprehend her questions? Would they feel awk-

ward or uncomfortable with a linguistically incompetent interviewer? Would there be embarrassing silent moments when the researcher could not detect when the interviewee had finished her response?

Wang soon discovered, however, that the mothers could be counted on to carry the interview. Most of the time, they answered the questions without hesitation, as if they already had answers in mind and just needed Wang to play the asking part. The turn taking was so smooth that it seemed as though they had rehearsed with Wang and knew precisely where to start and end. For example, before a short pause to check on the children who played in another room, a mother said, "Let me just go look at the girls again. Ask me a question and I'll think about it on the way over." Wang obliged with, "Okay, um, how do you think self-esteem will affect behavior?" When the mother returned, she was ready to speak another paragraph.

In sum, the interview was a familiar and non-threatening event to the mothers in Centerville. Even when the interviewer was not entirely confident of her English proficiency, the interviews unfolded without a hitch, testimony that interviewing was a practice shared by both parties.

Conversing in Chhan-chng. In contrast to Centerville, very few Chhan-chng participants set up a self-contained time and space for the interviews. Indeed, most interviews took place in the presence of more than one family member. Sometimes even a bypassing neighbor would join the conversation. In further contrast, most interviews were conducted in domestic locations that allowed interviewees to get on with their work — harvesting green onions in the courtyard or cooking in the kitchen.

In most cases, the translated interview protocol had to be dramatically altered, as the local women were not in the habit of answering formal questions in the course of everyday life. Mothers often showed nervousness when researchers, with lists of questions in hand, asked one question after another. One mother said, with laughter and embarrassment, "I don't know what to say."

Instead of the steady back-and-forth turn taking characteristic of the Centerville interviews, these interviews assumed a more sprawling shape. Often there were multiple participants, who sometimes spoke simultaneously. Often interviewees did not wait for the researcher to introduce a topic. The following excerpt, again involving Wang as the interviewer, demonstrates how the topic shifted between childrearing and Wang's life in the United States. Although the intended interviewee was the mother, note that the grandmother, who occupies a position of authority in relation to her daughter-in-law, answers first.

Example 1: Wang's interview with Mrs. Liao, her husband, Mr. Liao, her mother-in-law, Grandma Liao, and Sandel's mother-in-law, Mrs. Dyoo

Mrs. Dyoo: [to Mrs. Liao] This is a Taipei lady. Studying in America. She wants to ask you how to raise children.

Mrs. Liao: [laughs].

Grandma Liao: [laughs] How to raise? Feed them and let them grow.

Mrs. Dyoo: Your experience. [laughs] Last night my husband called you about this.

Mrs. Liao: I didn't get the call.

Grandma Liao: [to Mrs. Liao] Don't worry. This is all right.

Wang: I am her [Mrs. Dyoo's] son-in-law's classmate in the U.S. We are studying the fact that American parents raise their children in a different way from ours.

Mrs. Dyoo: Wants to know our ways.

Mrs. Liao: [laughs] How to raise?

Mr. Liao: Prepare the milk! [everyone laughs]

Grandma Liao: Calm them down when they are crying.

Mrs. Liao: What to say? You can only understand from your own experience.

Mrs. Dyoo: Wants to chat with you and talk.

Wang: Yeah. I don't have kids.

Grandma Liao: You are studying in the U.S.?

Wang: Yeah, this is my first year.

Mrs. Dyoo: First-year Ph.D. student.

Mrs. Liao: Some kids are easy to raise; some are difficult.

Grandma Liao: Some grow up easily.

At the beginning of the interview, Mrs. Dyoo introduces Wang as "a Taipei lady," meaning that she is from Taipei, and as someone who is studying in America. Mrs. Liao expressed her wariness by clarifying that she did not get the call from Mr. Dyoo, but the grandmother reassures her. After Wang restated her identity in terms of the relationship with local people, and after Mrs. Dyoo and other family members provided further reassurance, the mother laughed with relief, but still did not understand the purpose of the interview. The father's amusing response also soothed the tenseness of the situation. The mother then started to respond but doubted that child-rearing ideas are communicable.

The focus again shifted to Wang's identity as someone who does not have children and is studying in the United States. Based on the relatively large number of international students in Centerville, her identity as a

graduate student was not remarkable in that university town. However, this identity was so salient to people in Chhan-chng that they were more interested in her "American experiences" than the questions per se. In some ways, Wang, born and reared in Taipei, the largest city in Taiwan, and a native speaker of Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese, was more of an outsider in rural Chhan-chng than was Sandel, an American who had kin ties in Chhan-chng. Later in the interview, while the other participants were engaged in discussing America, the mother started to focus on the topic of childrearing and began to answer Wang's questions.

In response to these kinds of interviewing experiences, the researchers changed their communicative approach. They abandoned the idea of beginning the interview with an abstract question about childrearing goals — which elicited very little talk from the Taiwanese families. It seemed obtrusive and rude to ask people questions that they felt unable to answer. The interviewers tried to find more suitable initial topics that would put people at their ease. After overhearing several conversations among local people, Wang realized that talking about a family member is easier than talking about an idea. Thus, she chose to begin by talking about the mother's relatives. Once the mother felt more comfortable, Wang retrieved other questions from memory and inserted them into the conversation in as natural a way as possible. Wang also discovered that talk flowed more freely when she participated in whatever domestic task was underway. Participants were surprised and pleased when the "Taipei lady" rolled up her sleeves and helped to harvest green onions. From tips about harvesting to complaints about children's naughtiness, participants were more comfortable about expressing their ideas in this ordinary working context. Like Wang, Sandel found it best to frame the interview as a conversation, as he told participants that he wanted to visit for a chat or "khai-kang chit e" (literally, a brief talk that is open and leisurely). And as mentioned earlier, Sandel could reduce some of the foreignness of the interview as a communicative event through his kinship ties. Sandel's wife, Donna "A-kui" Sandel often accompanied him. Because she was known to the participants as a member of the Dyoo family and a woman who grew up in Chhan-chng, she helped him establish rapport. Often she and the participant would reminisce, filling in the gaps across the intervening years.

In sum, the interview was not a familiar or comfortable speech event to the participants in Chhan-chng. In order to learn about mothers' childrearing beliefs, the interviewers had to adapt to local communicative norms, all but abandoning the interview format for a more conversational approach in which participants had significant control over the topics of talk, multiple speakers were accommodated, and everyone got on with the domestic work at hand.

Self-Esteem: Translating and Talking about Self-Esteem

In addition to the term "self-esteem" itself, there are several related terms — such as "self-confidence," "self-respect," "self-worth," "positive self-image" — in common usage in the United States. In the American interviews, the interviewers used the term "self-esteem" when directly probing about self-esteem. However, the mothers sometimes used other terms, especially "self-confidence," and when they did so, the interviewers adopted their usage.

There is no term in Mandarin Chinese or Taiwanese that translates directly as "self-esteem." Wang, who grew up in Taiwan speaking both languages, remembers that she first encountered the term "self-esteem" in a college course in social psychology. There are two terms which approximate some of the meanings associated with self-esteem. One is "zi zun xin" in Mandarin or "chu chun sim" in Taiwanese; the literal English translation is "self-respect-heart/mind." The second related term is "zi xin xin" in Mandarin or "chu sin sim" in Taiwanese; the literal English translation is "self-confidence-heart/mind." Note that both "self-respect-heart/mind" and "self-confidence-heart/mind" include the "xin" component that encompasses heart and mind, implying a quality that is metaphorically located in the mind and the body, simultaneously cognitive and affective. When asking questions about self-esteem in Chhan-chng, the interviewers used primarily "self-respect-heart/mind," but also "self-confidence-heart/mind," depending on the mother's preference.

Even more revealing than the issue of terminology per se were the ways in which the American and Taiwanese mothers used these terms over the course of the interview and the meanings that they explicitly attributed to them. The interviewers deliberately avoided introducing the topic of self-esteem or self-respect-heart/mind until late in the interview. This approach allowed us to determine whether or not the mothers spontaneously introduced these terms. We found that the majority (12) of American mothers invoked these terms in response to a whole range of questions. For instance, in response to the initial question, "What are your goals as a parent? What do you hope for your children?" Mrs. Ryan, mother of twins, said, "I want them to develop self-confidence." When asked what kind of person she wants her children to grow up to be, she said, "I want them to be comfortable with themselves." Later, when the interviewer asked her to describe her twins, she described her daughter as more self-confident than her brother. She repeated this comparison when discussing a dance teacher whose class was highly structured, noting that her daughter needed that structure less than her son because she was "so self-sufficient and confident." Like several of the other mothers, Mrs. Ryan created a subtext around the topic of self-es-

teem, inadvertently anticipating the topic of self-esteem, which the interviewer held in reserve for the latter part of the interview.

By contrast, only 5 of the Taiwanese mothers brought up the terms “self-respect-heart/mind” or “self-confidence-heart/mind” prior to specific questions from the interviewer, and no one invoked these terms repeatedly. For example, when the interviewer asked, “What are the consequences when Yuan-yuan breaks the rules? How do you usually discipline him?” YuanYuan’s mother, Mrs. Chiu said, “I’ll tell him. If it’s no use, I’ll beat him. To be honest, I am not very patient. [The oldest child, a sixth grader, brought the interviewer a cup of water.] When children grow up, like him [the oldest child], don’t beat them. I always tell my husband to remember it. Children have their own self-respect-heart/mind, so don’t beat them.” Like Mrs. Chiu, the other four Taiwanese mothers also mentioned self-respect-heart/mind when discussing discipline.

When asked directly about self-respect-heart/mind, the Taiwanese mothers varied in the degree to which they found the questions to be intelligible or meaningful. In 8 cases, the researcher and the mother were not able to create common ground, although they were able to do so around other topics. The following provides a good example:

Example 2: Sandel’s interview with Mrs. Iuⁿ

Sandel: Then I would like to ask you one, what do you feel, what does self-respect-heart/mind [zi zun xin] mean?

Mrs. Iuⁿ: Self-respect-heart/mind, self-respect-heart/mind. Hmm. [pause] Are you saying young children’s?

Sandel: Young children’s, or all others.

Mrs. Iuⁿ: Mm, still have a little bit. They [children] have self-respect-heart/mind.

Sandel: Then do you feel that self-respect-heart/mind for them, what does it mean?

Mrs. Iuⁿ: Mmm [pauses] How do you say it? Just is [pause].

Sandel: Does it have some, sometimes, will, see it, they, what behavior or else, because some people say, “Oh, that will hurt a child’s self-respect-heart/mind.” Do you have this, sense, don’t do this because that will hurt self-respect-heart/mind or something?

Mrs. Iuⁿ: Oh what you say I know. Mm [pause].

Sandel: Or else self-confidence-heart/mind [zi xin xin] there are people who say, perhaps say, children have self-respect-heart/mind or else self-confidence-heart/mind.

Mrs. Iuⁿ: Oh.

Sandel: Do you feel these two are the same, or else, are different, different?

Mrs. Iuⁿ: Self, self, self-respect-heart/mind just. Mm [pause], Respect him greatly, sometimes he will, say, own things, protect well.

Sandel: That is self-respect-heart/mind, Is it separated very clearly saying, this is self-confidence-heart/mind or else it is self-respect-heart/mind?

Mrs. Iuⁿ: Mm, different or else is a little bit, I feel that there is a little difference.

Sandel: Then do you yourself have any, you just said, not talking about children but about you, for you yourself, does this mean anything?

Mrs. Iuⁿ: Ah, what does it mean.

Sandel: Yeah.

Mrs. Iuⁿ: [pauses] All, all have [self-respect-heart/mind?]. Because we here are very simple.

Sandel: [laughs] [Begins to discuss a new topic]

In this excerpt, the interviewer tried a number of approaches, including leading questions, but the mother either did not understand what he was asking or had very little to say. Eventually, she explains, "we here are very simple."

A few of the Taiwanese mothers had ready answers to questions about self-esteem (which will be discussed in the following section). However, no one elaborated on her views about these matters in the detail that characterized many of the American responses, although they did elaborate on other childrearing issues. By contrast, it is clear, whether one attends to spontaneous comments or to responses to questions about self-esteem, that self-esteem was a highly familiar notion to the Centerville mothers, a topic that was easily and fluently discussed. Most saw abundant connections between self-esteem and their childrearing concerns and most found it easy to come up with real-life examples. One of the mothers found this topic to be so engaging that the interview lasted for 5 hours!

Folk Theories of Childrearing (and Self-Esteem)

Every Centerville mother said that self-esteem was important to children's development and that she actively tries to build, cultivate, or protect their children's self-esteem. In addition, most seemed to have in mind a fairly coherent theory of childrearing and self-esteem. According to this view, self-esteem is either in-born or emerges in the early years of life, and it provides an essential foundation for a wide array of psychological strengths. Children who have high self-esteem are able to learn and grow with ease; they are not afraid to achieve or compete; and they interact well

with others and form healthy relationships. When they encounter criticism or unkindness, they do not take these evaluations to heart but are able to bounce back. An especially strong theme in these interviews is that self-esteem leads to happiness, persistence in attaining one's goals, and willingness to try new things. These mothers also saw a powerful link between self-esteem and general mental health. One mother described self-esteem as the "periscope" through which we view everything. However, only a few of these mothers mentioned moral autonomy as an outcome of healthy self-esteem, a finding that differed from Mintz' (1999) findings in Longwood, an Irish-Catholic community in Chicago, where the mothers believed that a firm foundation of self-esteem allows one to stand up for one's principles.

The Centerville mothers said that self-esteem can be easily eroded, undermined, or crippled, and that parents play an important role in protecting and building children's self-esteem. In response to the question, "What role do parents play in helping children to develop self-esteem?" Mrs. Thomas concisely made several of the points that the other mothers made:

I think it goes back to the whole, praise and uh trying to be encouraging of those individual differences and preferences as much as possible and just making sure that they — again they always know that they are loved, that their actions might not always be the greatest but that they are always loved and that they can try to do anything they want to do, that that there are no limits.

Echoing the latter point, Mrs. Bucholtz said, "Remind them constantly...about how they can achieve anything that they want to," and Mrs. Ryan emphasized the importance of "giving them enough love and praise so that they feel good about themselves, and then they can go and master the world." Praising children, showing love and affection, distinguishing between being bad and doing bad things — all were endorsed by most of these mothers. On the other hand, they believed that a variety of practices — such as shaming children, disciplining too harshly, or making invidious comparisons — should be avoided because they damage self-esteem.

Thus, an important premise in the Centerville mothers' folk theory is that mothers and other family members play a key role in cultivating their children's self-esteem by actively shaping the feedback that children receive about themselves. That feedback should be positive, loving, and appreciative of who the child is. Such feedback supports self-esteem, which, in turn, leads to a host of positive outcomes. But their folk theory is considerably more complex than this.

In addition to the direct, hands-on way in which family members influence children's self-esteem, several of the mothers also talked of the importance of providing opportunities for children to explore their strengths and experience success. One mother said that if her child had low self-esteem, "I would want to concentrate on providing opportunities to the child that I know that they would be successful in, so kind of little baby steps to kind of build up the confidence in themselves." Another mother noted that self-esteem develops "naturally" as children try things, concentrate, and accomplish their goals. She seemed to be saying that children can see for themselves what they are capable of. These reflections not only imply that children make their own self-evaluations but that experiences of mastery or accomplishment build self-esteem. In other words, the direction of causality goes both ways: high self-esteem leads to success and success leads to high self-esteem.

Although these mothers believed that having high self-esteem is a great advantage to a child, almost everyone distinguished between high self-esteem and a variety of negative qualities that might be related to or confused with high self-esteem. They did not want to raise children who are conceited, self-centered, egotistical, or self-promoting.

In contrast to the American mothers, it is harder to characterize the Taiwanese mothers' folk theories as these pertained to self-respect-heart/mind or self-confidence-heart/mind. In fact, only four of the Chhan-Chng mothers talked at any length about these ideas. Moreover, the ideas that they articulated were strikingly different from the American mothers' ideas. For example, Mrs. Loa said that it is best for children to have "normal" self-respect-heart/mind, rather than strong self-respect-heart/mind. She explained, "If she (whose self-respect-heart/mind is too strong) fails, perhaps, a sense of frustration will be stronger, like that." In other words, this mother believes that children with strong self-respect-heart/mind will be more likely than children with more moderate levels to become frustrated by failure — an idea that contradicts the American mothers' belief that high self-esteem allows children to keep trying in the face of failure. Mrs. Dyoo, mother of 3-year-old Ahong, said that because her son has very strong self-respect-heart, his self-respect-heart/mind is hurt when one corrects him "a little bit loudly." He then becomes stubborn and won't listen. In short, these Taiwanese mothers believe that high self-respect-heart/mind creates psychological vulnerabilities — frustration, stubbornness, and unwillingness to listen and be corrected — whereas American mothers believe that self-esteem creates psychological strengths.

One of the notions that came up most frequently across Taiwanese mothers is the notion that children grow up naturally, with little parental intervention. We did not ask about this, but almost all mothers brought it

up spontaneously. The fact that growing up naturally was not mentioned by the Taipei mothers in Fung's (1999) study leads us to suspect that this idea has its roots in an agrarian way of life. This interpretation is supported by Chhan-chng grandparents' memories of how hard it was to earn a living in the preceding generation: adults were too busy working in the fields to spend time much time with their children (Sandel, 2000). Children were left in the company of their siblings and were not closely supervised by adults until they were old enough to help in the fields.

Taiwanese mothers also mentioned an important task that parents face: to correct children and oversee their moral education. However, because children grow up naturally, there is no one-size-fits-all way of disciplining them. Parents need to comprehend the child's nature and use a disciplinary strategy that fits the child's unique personality. It is by "watching" children that parents come to grasp the kind of personality that the child has. Half of the Taiwanese mothers spontaneously introduced this idea, explaining that by watching, parents come to understand the child and are thereby enabled to customize a caregiving method that is appropriate for that child. This notion came up in response to a variety of questions and appeared to be one of the key components of the mothers' folk theory of childrearing in Chhan-chng. For instance, when asked if she felt it important or fundamental to cultivate her child's self-respect-heart/mind, Mrs. Cho replied, "Yes, yes, but not so much." She then elaborated her idea, "Because, you must slowly, go and understand her personality. Only then can you grasp, are you able to grasp it right. Otherwise you can't." Mrs. Iuⁿ echoed this idea when asked about how she will change her way of disciplining her children as they get older. She said, "I want to understand their personality so that I can discipline [guan] them... [For some children] you are softer with them, and they'll still listen. For others, you have to be harder on them. They won't follow you because they aren't afraid of you. [You] must understand their personality in order to know how to discipline [guan]jiao] them."

In sum, we find among the Chhan-chng mothers a shared belief that children grow up naturally and yet that parents must take an active role in disciplining children. Linking these two seemingly contradictory ideas is the idea that each child has her own nature and that this nature must be discerned through parental "watching"; only then can parents devise an effective disciplinary strategy for this particular child.

CONCLUSIONS

This study addressed two related substantive questions: What are the meanings that European American and Taiwanese mothers associate with

self-esteem? And what are the local folk theories that contextualize this idea or that offer alternative formulations of the goals and values of childrearing? We will discuss the findings from the European American and Taiwanese communities, respectively, and then turn to the methodological question of how interviewing was constituted as communicative practice in the two communities.

Childrearing and Self-Esteem in Centerville

Self-esteem was a highly familiar idea to the Centerville mothers. Most could not talk about childrearing without talking about self-esteem. They spoke fluently, eagerly, and at length. Equally important, everyone regarded self-esteem as a positive quality that enhanced children's development and that should be cultivated by parents.

Self-esteem thus emerged as a central organizing concept in the folk theories of these European American mothers. Like Penelope Leach, whose childrearing manual is quoted at the beginning of this paper, these mothers from a small city in the rural Midwest believed that parents can foster children's self-esteem by providing love, affection, and praise and by appreciating the child's inherent worth. Like Leach, they believed that self-esteem leads to a variety of psychological strengths, including resilience, persistence in achieving one's goals, and the capacity to form fulfilling relationships. The Centerville mothers indicated that self-esteem is implicated in many important childrearing tasks — disciplining, managing relations between siblings, achievement — and it ramifies through children's emotional experience, affecting their happiness and willingness to try new things. In its main outlines, this folk theory is strikingly similar to that expressed by middle-class Irish-Catholic mothers in Chicago (Mintz, 1999) and middle-class Anglo mothers in New Haven, Connecticut (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). Taken together, these studies suggest that parental folk theories, and their associated practices, may be one important means by which the need for positive self-regard, so common among Americans (Heine et al., 1999), is reproduced.

Contrary to what might be supposed from some of the critiques of the American "cult of self-esteem," (Damon, 1995; Seligman, 1995), these mothers did not regard self-esteem only as an antecedent to other desirable psychological qualities. Although they said that children with high self-esteem are able to compete and to persist in the face of failure, they also said that self-esteem follows from children's successes. Thus, self-esteem is both an antecedent and consequence of children's accomplishments and experiences of mastery. According to this folk theory, a parent who wants to foster a child's self-esteem would be well advised to praise her when-

ever possible, to let her know that she is loved, and to devise opportunities that allow her to experience her own success. But success is not everything. Happiness is just as important to these mothers, if not more so.

Every folk theory comes up against its own limits when taken to an extreme, and the Centerville theory is no exception. It must be admitted that the strong focus on self-esteem carries with it the risk of creating a preoccupation with self-affirmation. Yet virtually every Centerville mother recognized a difference between high self-esteem and egotism or conceit. However, this distinction co-existed with the idea that there are no limits on children's capabilities or opportunities in the world, an idea that was expressed without caveat or qualification by some mothers ("They can try to do anything they want to do, that there are no limits."). This paradox deserves further exploration. Is it especially likely to arise when parents have a secure sense of their earning power and cultural capital? It would seem so in light of Harwood et al.'s (1995) finding that working-class mothers were keenly aware of the obstacles that their youngsters face in achieving their potential.

Moral Education and Growing Naturally in Chhan-chng

The Chhan-chng mothers' folk theory of childrearing was qualitatively different from the Centerville mothers' folk theory. Thus, this study can be added to the growing list of studies that demonstrate the cultural specificity of self-esteem as a childrearing goal and element within a particular (i.e., European American) folk theory (Harwood et al., 1995; Miller et al., 2001; Stevenson et al., 1990; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). The Taiwanese mothers' folk theory was just as coherent as the American mothers' folk theory. However, self-respect-heart/mind either played a minor role in their understandings of childrearing, with key premises that contradicted American views, or its role was eclipsed by other more important matters: allowing children to grow naturally, assiduously correcting their misdeeds, watching them to figure out what kind of personality they have. Although these mothers from a small town in rural Taiwan now have access to American programming through cable television, and some have read childrearing brochures provided by American infant formula companies, our data do not indicate that they have incorporated the notion of self-esteem into their childrearing theories — at least not yet.

The Taiwanese folk theory, in parallel with the Centerville version, was also characterized by paradox. Most studies of Chinese and Taiwanese childrearing have emphasized that parents serve as moral guardians and guides for their children. This is evident in such indigenous notions as "training" (Chao, 1994) and "opportunity education" (Fung, 1999) and in

parents' use of didactic narrative to socialize young children (Miller et al., 1996; Miller et al., 1997; Miller et al., 2001). In this study, although mothers sounded the same theme, acknowledging their responsibility to correct children's misdeeds, this idea co-existed with the seemingly contradictory idea that children should be allowed to grow naturally (see also Stafford, 1995). Sandel's (2000) analyses of the life stories of parents and grandparents from Chhan-chung suggest that the idea that children grow naturally may reflect, in part, a carryover from an earlier era in which parents had to work so hard in the fields to support their families that there was little time or energy leftover to supervise children.

In addition, although the Taiwanese mothers had little to say about self-respect-heart/mind, they said that it was necessary to take the child's personality into account in order to discipline effectively. Interestingly, both mothers and grandmothers emphasized this point, and some indicated explicitly that this was a "traditional" notion. Thus, it would be a distortion of this folk theory to say that the child's individuality was unrecognized. Compared with the Americans, however, these mothers did not seem to cultivate the child's individuality for its own sake: either they accepted individual differences as a matter of course, or they individualized moral guidance.

Customized Interviewing

We believe that the credibility of our comparative findings is enhanced by our approach to interviewing. Following Briggs (1986), we treated interviewing as an observable social practice co-constructed by ethnographer and informant. In Centerville, both parties shared an interview script, necessitating little change to the interview protocol, but in Chhan-chung, the interview format had to be radically altered in deference to local communicative norms. A more conversational approach was adopted in which the mother was granted more control over topics of talk, multiple speakers were accommodated, and everyone participated in the everyday tasks at hand. In other words, different communicative events had to be honored in the two research sites in order to allow the talk to unfold in ways that were equivalently meaningful. This study thus illustrates the fundamental methodological premise that flexibility and adaptation to local communicative practices are essential in comparative research; results are intelligible only when procedures have been customized to local conditions in each cultural case.

In addition to this methodological innovation, we paid careful attention to what people said and to when and how they expressed themselves. Whether self-esteem was introduced before the researcher mentioned it, how often the term was used and in which contexts, where there were points of confusion or unintelligibility — these and other meta-communi-

cative patterns helped us to determine the value and place of self-esteem in the two folk theories of childrearing.

A limitation of this study is that we focused on the converging patterns within each cultural case, giving less attention to individual variability. For example, our American sample includes some mothers whose childrearing goals center on their religious faith and whose beliefs about self-esteem are nuanced rather differently than their less religious peers. Future work will explore this variation. The results reported here also set the stage for a comparison of mothers' and grandmothers' beliefs, a comparison that will shed further light on intergenerational changes in parental folk theories. Although social change has been especially dramatic in Taiwan, some American mothers frame their beliefs about self-esteem in terms of a contrast with the way they were raised (Mintz, 1999). Finally, we recognize that any study that attends only to expressed folk theories tells only part of the story. How parents put their beliefs into practice amidst the hurly burly of everyday life is bound to be complex, messy, and surprising. In work currently underway we confront that complexity.

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