CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The Art of Intercultural Harmony

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CONTENTS

13

THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN PARENT–CHILD CONFLICT NARRATIVES WRITTEN BY CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS[1]

Xuan Zheng and Yihong Gao

Introduction

Background

The parent–child relationship is one of the most difficult yet intriguing areas of study for researchers from different fields, including communication, sociolinguistics, psychology and sociology. One of the greatest difficulties for the parent–child relationship is managing the balance between the need for autonomy and the need for interdependence. University students, most of whom have just started to learn to live on their own for the first time, face major challenges in balancing autonomy and interdependence with their parents. Conflicts are unavoidable in families that have children at this stage of their life, and these conflicts actually play a central role in their socialization process as they move toward adulthood (Briggs, 1996; Erikson, 1959). Whether culture plays a role in how university students around the globe manage parent–child conflict still needs closer scrutiny. Due to the rapid development of globalization, young people nowadays experience conflicts in different cultures more often than ever before. It is therefore critical to further explore the nature of identity in both local and global contexts (Arnett, 2002). It is especially interesting to examine how young people deal with conflicts with their parents in China, where traditional values are changing at a fast pace. This chapter attempts to examine the discursive construction of identities and conflict management strategies in parent–child conflict narratives written by Chinese university students.

Students' written narratives are used as a data source in this study. As recountings of personal experiences, written narratives contribute to constructing and displaying our sense of who we are and our relationship to others (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Scholars have been debating the transformative function of

narratives for years. For example, Bruner (1987) argued that "in the end, we become the autographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (p. 15). Although narratives have been widely studied in the field of linguistics, few scholars have analyzed stories of parent–child conflict told by children during the period in which their personal and social identities are being formed. Moreover, studying the linguistic details of narratives written by university students may go beyond what mere content analyses can provide.

Literature review

There are many different definitions of the term "conflict." Most of them present conflict in terms of goals, interests or resources (e.g. Putnam, 2006), but these definitions do not fit well with the parent–child conflict situation. Parents and children may have the same goals or interests, but the incompatibilities between them lie in the way they choose to reach these goals or engage these interests—and this involves both communication styles and value systems. Therefore, an individual's gain may not mean another's loss in the parent–child relationship. In this chapter, we employ Folger, Poole and Stutman's (2013) definition that conflict is "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatibility and the possibility of interference from others as a result of this incompatibility" (p. 4).

Research on conflict management has explored a wide range of relationships (e.g. teacher–student, supervisor–employee and –co-worker) and has categorized conflict management strategies based on cultural context types (e.g. Chen, Ryan & Chen, 2000; Nguyen & Yang, 2012; Ting-Toomey, 2009). In a collectivistic culture, the needs of groups are given priority over those of individuals, and conflict tends to be viewed as destructive and harmful for relationships (Ting-Toomey & Takai, 2006). Jackson (2014) pointed out that "to preserve relational harmony and one's public face, pacifism is generally favored, that is individuals strive to avoid conflict situations" and "if conflicts arise, people tend to restrain their emotions and try to manage disputes indirectly" (p. 259). Besides, cross-cultural comparisons also found that Chinese prefer negotiated and mediated strategies while Americans prefer direct confrontation, although strategies also depend on other variables such as conflict situation type, power relations, gender and age (e.g. Chen et al., 2000; Dixon, Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Nguyen & Yang, 2012; Ting-Toomey, 2009). Some of the central cultural values of the Chinese are the Confucian values of family, filial piety, respect for one's elders, group over the individual, and gender-based divisions of family. These traditional values in China, however, have been found to be changing (Sandel, Lowe & Chao, 2012). Other researchers have recently identified generational differences in people's perceptions of conflict. For example, Zhang, Harwood and Hummert (2005) found that young people in modern China increasingly prefer the collaborative style to resolve disputes, whereas their elders still favor the avoidance style. The gap between traditional and contemporary value orientations in conflict management calls for further research.

Among the different taxonomies developed to categorize conflict management strategies, the dual concern theory has been widely used by intercultural communication scholars and has been proven to be useful (e.g. Yuan, 2010). Based on disputants' two basic concerns—namely, their own needs, goals and feelings, and other parties' needs, goals and feelings—five conflict management strategies were identified: dominating, integrating, compromising, obliging and avoiding (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). The *dominating* strategy is usually interpreted as a win-lose strategy, *integrating* a win-win strategy, *compromising* a no-win no-lose strategy, *obliging* a lose-win strategy, and *avoiding* a lose-lose strategy. Nevertheless, some researchers have pointed out that the interpretation of conflict management styles differs across cultures. For example, Yuan (2010) indicated that *avoiding* was functional and contributed to relationship maintenance, and that it was therefore a win-win strategy, in which participants showed a high concern for both self and other.

Although studies on conflict management have been fruitful, the level of analysis mostly remains at the content level of reported data. The research focus of conflict management has not yet been on the linguistic details of how participants manage conflicts and discursively construct themselves. However, some linguists and discourse analysts have explored conflict episodes in families. For instance, narrative analysis of stories told by a Jewish mother about her daughter's dating choices revealed that the metaphor used in the mother's story evaluation displayed her unsupportive attitude toward her daughter, which was in sharp contrast to her neutral and tolerant stance in the story world (Schiffrin, 1996). Through the linguistic strategy of indirectness, the mother in the study created a mother–daughter relationship that balanced "closeness with distance, autonomy with control" (p. 198). Similarly, the analysis of the language of stories written by university students may also reveal how they construct positions in their family and their identities as adults.

This chapter aims to investigate conflict management strategies and discursive identity construction in parent–child conflict narratives written by Chinese university students. Three research questions are proposed as follows:

RQ1: What conflict management strategies do the students use, as narrated in their writing?
RQ2: How are these narrated strategies characterized by their linguistic features?
RQ3: What value orientations or identities do these strategies suggest?

Methods

Participants and data collection

Participants were 41 undergraduates enrolled in a course entitled "Language, Culture and Communication" at a top-tier university in Beijing. The demographic

TABLE 13.1 Demographic information of participants

Variable	*Range*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Gender	Male	18	44%
	Female	23	56%
Year in college	Freshman	5	12%
	Sophomore	19	46%
	Junior	9	22%
	Senior	8	20%
Major	Humanities	5	12%
	Social sciences	21	51%
	Natural sciences	13	32%
	Interdisciplinary	2	5%

information of participants is shown in Table 13.1. The course is one of the content-based English classes offered by the university for interested undergraduates from all majors.

The instructor, one of the authors of this chapter, assigned a writing exercise to elicit students' past conflict stories. Participants were invited to write in English about a recent conflict they had with their parents. The writing assignment was stated as follows:

Tell us a recent conflict story between you and your parents.
– How did it happen and why?
– How did you deal with the conflict?
– Do you think there are better ways to deal with the conflict? How and why?

Students were given extra credits for writing this paper (0-5 points), which was evaluated based on a grading rubric developed by the instructor (i.e. details of the story, depth of reflection, and the appropriateness of language use). Before assigning the paper, the instructor briefly introduced the topic of intercultural conflict and taught them about cross-cultural comparisons in conflict management styles.

Data analysis

Categorization of conflict strategies. In the analysis of conflict strategies, the dual concern theory was used as the framework (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Ruble & Thomas, 1976). Five conflict management strategies proposed by the dual concern theory—namely, dominating, integrating, compromising, obliging and avoiding—were used as a starting point for categorization in this study (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). We each independently coded types of strategies in student

narratives, discussed coding difficulties together, and then moved to the next round of independent coding. Not until the inter-rater reliability reached 0.83 did we continue to code the rest of the papers separately. New categories of strategies that emerged from the analyses were reported.

In calculating the occurrences of the five strategies, we first listed all the types of strategies in order. Then the percentage of each strategy was calculated by the total occurrences of this strategy in all students' essays divided by the total number of strategies. Actual strategies and proposed strategies were also distinguished and separated out from the data.

Categorization of transitivity processes of the strategy-related verbs. Using the tool (i.e. transitivity system) provided by Systematic Functional Grammar (SFG) (Halliday, 1985), we analyzed the verb processes students used in managing conflicts. We only coded the verbs that described the students, instead of their parents, as agents of conflict management. When faced with complex verb phrases which may suggest different processes (e.g. "settled with my bad-temper"), we coded the main verb first (i.e. "settle" is a material process), instead of coding it by its meaning (i.e. "settled with my bad-temper" is a mental process). Then we noted and categorized what came after the material process (e.g. mental as in "settled with my bad-temper" or verbal as in "initiated a quarrel"). We each coded the verbs in the conflict management section in all essays and invited a third coder trained in SFG to help resolve the disputes we had. We strived for consistency in our coding and arrived at a consensus.

Results and discussion

A total of 41 papers were collected, 18 written by males and 23 written by females. Among these, five were about conflicts between mother and son, one was between father and son, 12 were between "parents" and son, 10 were between mother and daughter, three were between father and daughter, and 10 were between "parents" and daughter. Conflicts between the university students and their mothers seemed to be more salient.

Triggering events

There were 43 conflict narratives in total because one student wrote 3 different conflict episodes. In the student narratives, there were different triggering events that led to the conflict (see Table 13.2). Most of the triggering events had to do with making major life decisions, such as choosing a career path, a university, or a boyfriend. Another type of triggering event had to do with various aspects of the students' college life, ranging from making holiday plans to starting a business. Domestic issues such as cleaning rooms or eating habits were also major types of triggering events. These stories often involved a nagging parent whose control of daily family chores irritated the child. This corresponded to the previous finding that nagging was a main source of conflict in the family arena (Boxer, 2002).

TABLE 13.2 Triggering event of conflict

Theme	*Total occurrences*	*Percentage*	*Details*	
Making major life decisions	18	42%	Choosing major for college	8
			Choosing career after college	8
			Choosing boyfriend	2
College life	13	30%	Holiday plans	4
			Internship	3
			Studying abroad	2
			Time management	1
			Joining club	1
			Joining the Communist Party	1
			Starting a business	1
Domestic issues	12	28%	Nagging about . . . Cleaning room	3
			Eating habits	2
			Wearing skirt	1
			Homework	1
			Laundry	1
			Watching TV	1
			House renovation	1
			Parents' conflict	1
			Asking for a sibling	1

Conflict management strategies

In categorizing the conflict management strategies provided by students' essays, the five major conflict management strategies (i.e. dominating, integrating, compromising, obliging and avoiding) previously identified by scholars were all found in the data. In addition, we found a strategy that could not be categorized based on the dual concern theory. This strategy was labeled "articulating." The meaning of each strategy is illustrated below.

Dominating: This strategy in our study suggested verbal or non-verbal confrontation with expressed emotion. It usually involved forceful behaviors and ignoring the needs of others. Examples were:

1. Shouting back was what I did.
2. I appeared upset and not interested in anything for a whole day . . . I turned them down.
3. I left the dining room with half of the rice left in my bowl . . . locked myself in my room without talking to my dad the whole day through.

Integrating: This strategy showed a high concern for both self and others. The child collaborated with the parents to reach a mutually acceptable solution. In the actual strategies students employed, examples of *integrating* were:

1. Both of us can stand on each other's point, trying to be considerate to avoid conflicts hurting others.

2. So we finally agree on that; I promise I would take care of myself and never carry more loads beyond my reach.

In proposed strategy, examples were:

1. If I had told them earlier, maybe we could work out with a better plan suited to every side.

2. I should also try to figure out a plan together with my parents to find out a win-win approach for how I arrange my room.

Compromising: This was a give-and-take situation, in which both sides gave up something in order to reach a consensus:

1. I finally insisted on my choice and made a concession by signing a three-month contract, which ended at the beginning of summer when I can make choices again.

2. I compromised after a heated argument. I promised that if my father really wanted me to read Korean I would read for him but not speak Korean at all times.

3. My dad and I have come to a consensus not to talk about my eating habits anymore.

Obliging: In this strategy, the child attempted to satisfy the parents and reach an agreement. It usually indicated low concern for self and high concern for others.

1. I had no choice but to rush into my room; I stuffed clothes into a suitcase and then bundled clutter from my desk into the drawers.

2. However, when she is in a bad mood, I'd better do exactly what she tells me to do at once and avoid making things worse.

Interestingly, sometimes the obliging strategy was *obliging on the surface*, which meant that the child attempted to satisfy the parents and reach an agreement on the surface while choosing in private to remain uncooperative. This strategy suggested high concern for both self and others:

1. I tried to pretend to balance my life in the way they hoped while actually dealing with the course stress according to my own understanding.

2. . . . though I won't actually do it, I will reply with a good temper saying "OK, I'll do it right now."

Avoiding: In this strategy, there was a tendency for the child to withdraw from or otherwise avoid conflict:

1. I even missed their calls on purpose.

2. . . . didn't call them for several days.

3. And then they became angry too, and stopped talking to me. The silence lasted for two days before we both thought it was time to let it go. So we went back to normal, and no one ever brought it up again.

In limited cases, the child did not provide a strategy, but described difficulties in arriving at a solution instead. Such cases were named "no strategy." In our strategy distribution calculation, these cases were merged with *avoiding*.

Articulating: In addition to the major strategies, a new strategy, namely *articulating*, was found. In this strategy, the university students directly articulated their needs and wants or, in their words, "talked things out" with their parents face to face. In articulating, they often used several persuasion techniques, such as showing evidence or showing empathy. Sometimes they invited a third party, such as their parents' friends or other relatives, to back them up. Different from the dominating strategy, the child did not confront their parents with strong and often negative emotions, but showed both high concern for self and others in this strategy. It also differed from integrating in that the child was not immediately satisfied with collaborating with their parents. The child knew what worked in their situation; therefore, they tried to explain why that was the case to their parents. This statement showed the child's assumption, "I win and you will eventually win in the future too." Examples of actual strategies in this category were as follows:

1. I finally chose to work up enough patience to explain why I would ignore some of their suggestions and how my life was different from their thoughts.

2. Firstly, I clarified that Ph.D. and Master's degrees were two totally different things. One concentrated on academic research and the other focused more on practical use. After that I told them my current thoughts and self-exploration about what suited me more. . . . What's more, I have also shown them the outline of Princeton's program and told them that I was the only student from mainland China to be admitted this year.

Articulating was also the top proposed strategy. Examples were:

1. I should also communicate in a timely manner with my parents. Don't quarrel, just say what I think.

2. . . . the only thing I can do better is to stay calm and explain my excuses patiently.

3. I will try to deal with the problem in a new way by telling my father why I would like to watch the movie and ask him why he would love to watch the news.

Overall strategy distribution

As illustrated in Figure 13.1, among the actual strategies used, *dominating* ranked first and was followed by the new strategy: *articulating*, and then *avoiding*. The chi-square test result was $X^2=28.82$ (df=5), greater than the table value 11.11 at the $p < 0.05$ significance level. This showed a significant difference in the frequency distribution across strategy categories.

The strategies the students would like to use in future conflict situations (which we named "proposal strategies") also consisted of six different strategies, but the majority of them belonged to the *articulating* and *integrating* strategies (see Figure 13.2). For proposed strategies, $X^2=0.27$ (df=2), smaller than the table value 5.99 at the $p < 0.05$ significance level. This showed that there was no significant difference in the frequency distribution across the three major categories: *articulating*, *integrating*, and other strategies.

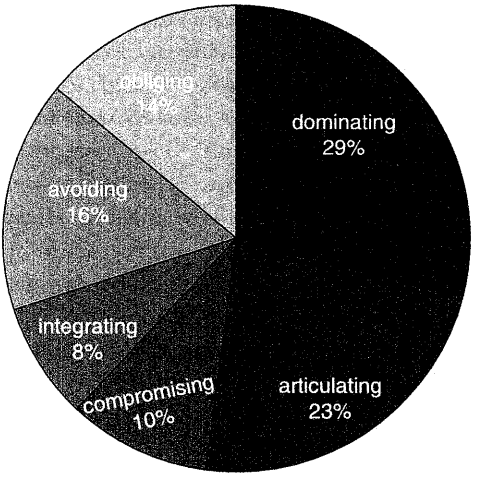

FIGURE 13.1 Distribution of actual strategies

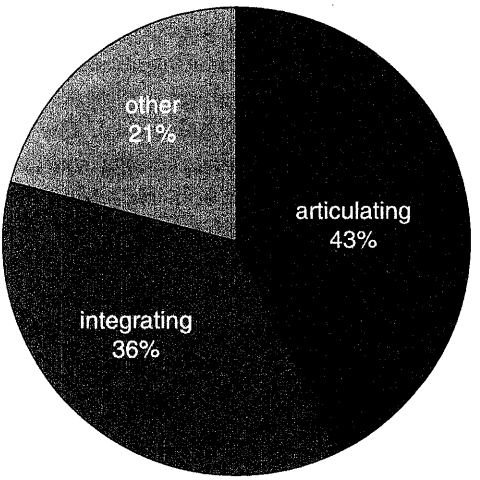

FIGURE 13.2 Distribution of proposed strategies

To sum up, similar to the findings of previous studies, *avoiding* was one of the major conflict management strategies and "conflict avoidance" was often a stated goal of the students. Also similar to what most scholars have found in Asian contexts (e.g. Yuan, 2010), *avoiding* was not necessarily a negative strategy. It may show a high concern for both the self and the other: as the students said in their papers, what they were doing was avoiding unpleasant words that would hurt their parents.

In contrast to most cross-cultural studies on conflict management, this study found that the top strategies students used were confrontational (*dominating*) and

direct (*articulating*). In the *articulating* strategy, students were capable of managing their emotions and were not afraid of saying out loud what they truly felt and thought. Although students in both *dominating* and *articulating* showed a high concern for their own needs, in the latter students were not making themselves "win" and the other party (i.e. their parents) "lose," but presenting their ideas in a clear and convincing manner so that the other party would understand and provide support. In this sense, it was a win-win situation. However, it also differed from *integrating* in that what got attended to was the desire of one party (i.e. the student), rather than those of both parties. The underlying assumption is perhaps that there is no ultimate conflict in the needs and interests of the child and the parents. Such an assumption is admittedly specific to parent–child communication and may not be applied indiscriminately to other conflict situations.

Linguistic features of narrated strategies: transitivity processes

Overall occurrences of transitivity processes

Linguistic features, including verbal transitivity processes, were scrutinized to further examine distinct features of the conflict strategies shown in the students' papers. In SFG, grammar is considered a resource for creating meaning in the form of wordings (Halliday, 1985, 1994, 2004). It regards language as presenting three meta-functions in social contexts: ideational, interpersonal and textual. The ideational meta-function is concerned with "ideation"—the grammatical resources for the function of representing, reflecting or construing the world (Halliday, 1985, 1994, 2004). This meta-function is realized largely through the transitivity system of language. The transitivity system views language in terms of processes (material, mental, verbal, behavioral, existential, relational) which are realized by verbal groups and that reflect doing, sensing, saying, behaving, the existence of things, and the relationship between par-ticipants. Table 13.3 shows several examples of these processes.

TABLE 13.3 Transitivity system

Processes	*Explanation*	*Examples*
Material process	A process of doing	build, break, create, make
Mental process	A process of sensing: perception; reaction; cognition	see, like, know, believe
Verbal process	A process of saying	say, tell, describe, ask
Behavioral process	A process of behaving	breathe, cough, laugh, cry
Existential process	A process of existing	be, exist, arise
Relational process	A process of being: attribute; identifying	be, become, add up to, mean, represent

Based on the transitivity system, we coded the verbs used in the strategies.[2] Table 13.4 and Table 13.5 show the occurrences of these processes:

TABLE 13.4 Occurrences of transitivity processes in actual strategies

	dominating	*articulating*	*integrating*	*compromising*	*obliging*	*avoiding*
material	34	26	11	17	20	13
mental	10	6	3	0	1	11
verbal	21	28	10	5	8	7
behavioral	1	0	2	1	1	2
existential	0	0	0	0	0	0
relational	6	14	0	0	1	0

TABLE 13.5 Occurrences of transitivity processes in proposed strategies

	articulating	*integrating*	*compromising*	*obliging*	*avoiding (including no strategy)*
material	23	30	4	10	3
mental	4	15	1	1	4
verbal	20	8	0	0	0
behavioral	1	1	0	0	1
existential	1	0	0	0	1
relational	4	8	1	2	0

We found that the transitivity system is a useful analytical tool, because there was a clear distinction in the verbs that students used in different types of conflict management strategies. While applying the transitivity system in coding the verbs, it became clearer that it was not only the types of verbs that varied in these strategies, but the combination of these verb processes varied as well. This linguistic evidence has further supported our categorization—especially among *dominating, articulating* and *integrating* strategies.

Transitivity processes in articulating, integrating and dominating

Table 13.6 shows the comparison in transitivity processes among *dominating, articulating* and *integrating* strategies.

Articulating

What stood out as significant was the combination of verbal and mental processes in the *articulating* strategy: the verb in the main sentence (used in the context of the student conflict management) was a verbal process, while the subordinate clause that came after the main verb entailed a mental process. In the following sentences used to exemplify this finding, the verbal verbs are in *italics*, while the mental verbs are underlined. This finding suggested that in *articulating* students were verbalizing

TABLE 13.6 Percentage of transitivity processes in *dominating*, *articulating* and *integrating*

		dominating	*articulating*	*integrating*
Actual	material	47%	35%	42%
	mental	14%	8%	12%
	verbal	29%	38%	38%
	behavioral	2%	0%	8%
	existential	0%	0%	0%
	relational	8%	19%	0%
Proposed	material	0%	43%	48%
	mental	0%	8%	24%
	verbal	0%	38%	13%
	behavioral	0%	2%	2%
	existential	0%	2%	0%
	relational	0%	7%	13%

their true thoughts, needs, wants, interests and preferences. In dealing with the conflict, they explained verbally what they preferred, what their thoughts were, and why they preferred their own way. This feature was not found in other strategies:

1. After that I *told* them my current thoughts and self-exploration about what suited me more.

2. My mother and I both *elaborated* on our thoughts and added some supportive evidence, like why she cared about the family background of my boyfriend and why I thought vagueness was terrible in dealing with such a relationship.

3. At first, I firmly held my decision and *told* them that I wanted to choose what I liked.

4. I finally chose to work up enough patience to *explain* why I would ignore some of their suggestions and how my life was different from their thoughts.

This was also the case in the proposed *articulating* strategy:

1. I will try to deal with the problem in a new way by *telling* my father why I would like to watch the movie and *ask* him why he would love to watch the news.

2. . . . need to *tell* them patiently and sincerely that I like computer science and have confidence in learning it well.

Before directly telling their parents what they preferred, some students were able to successfully handle their emotions, so that they could approach their parents in a calm manner. This was shown by material verbs (**in bold**) followed by a noun (in parenthesis) that indicated emotion:

1. I finally **chose** to **work up** enough (patience) to *explain* why I would ignore some of their suggestions and how my life was different from their thoughts.

Dominating

In examples of the *dominating* strategy, however, what came after the verbal process were often not the true thoughts and needs of the students, but direct

accusations that their parents did not understand them. This was often shown in the form of direct quotes, referring to their parents directly as "you."

1. I didn't know how I plucked up my courage and *said*, "You have no idea what true love is and you know nothing about me."

2. I once *said*, "If you really value the university so much, how about you give me the money that was meant for college and pretend you never had such a daughter?"

3. "I'll choose whatever I want! This is none of your business!" I *shouted* and shut the door of my bedroom.

In addition, the percentage of material processes (**in bold**) in *dominating* ranked at the top among verbs used in all strategies. A detailed analysis revealed that such material processes were often tantamount to the behavioral acting out of antagonistic feelings. For example:

1. I **left** the dining room with half of the rice left in my bowl . . . **locked** myself in my room without talking to my dad the whole day through.

2. I **stopped** talking to my father, **went** back to my room, and **started** the movie on my laptop as a protest.

Furthermore, the types of verbs in the *dominating* strategy also differed from those used in other strategies, where students simply and calmly "said" or "told." In *dominating*, the verbal verbs suggested the presence of an intense argument with explosive sound: "yell, shout, debate, quarrel, bicker," or sometimes came up in the form of a "cold war": "not (stop/without) talking." The material verbs were also full of destructive power: "shut (the door), break (into blame), subdue (my fury)." Sometimes they were failed attempts at managing negative emotions: "failed to subdue my fury," "(cannot) keep calm." Even a behavioral one, "burst out," entailed a strong and sudden negative energy. Lastly, the mental processes were mostly negative in that the mental verbs often came with negation:

1. I didn't <u>want</u> to hurt her feelings, but I can't <u>agree</u> with her.

2. I didn't <u>know</u> how I plucked up my courage and said, "You have no idea of what true love is, and you know nothing about me."

3. "I don't <u>miss</u> them," I answered coldly.

4. I act as still caring about this and didn't <u>want</u> to reach a compromise.

All of these statements suggest a denial of the mental processes (especially strong and negative emotions) that the students were actually experiencing. To sum up, in *dominating* students did not yet know how to properly manage their intense emotions when their needs were denied by their parents. They either let out their anger and frustration through bitter words, or suppressed/denied their emotions and acted out in protest.

Integrating

In *integrating*, the <u>mental</u>, *verbal*, **material** and [behavioral] verbs all suggested a willingness and a gesture from the children's side in listening, understanding, discussing and collaborating with their parents.

1. So we **sat** together and *talked* on it, **trying** to **smooth** it away . . . I understood her. She understood me too . . . so we finally *agreed* on that, I *promised* I would **take** care of myself, and never **carry** more loads beyond my reach.

2. I [listened] to my father's suggestions and *discussed* them with him. . . . Finally, I decided to **take** their advice and **stick** to my current major for a master's degree in the U.S.A.

In the proposed strategy, there were a large number of mental processes, more than those in the other proposed strategies. Unlike those in the *articulating* strategy, these mental processes did not come after verbal processes, but showed up alone. The examples were as follows with the mental verbs underlined:

1. While I do not want to bring financial burden to them, I want to take as much as I can to ease the financial burden I brought to them. I think both of us have good intentions at the beginning, but are too emotional and irrational when we express our opinions.

2. I would prefer to first think from others' perspectives and then have a mild touch rather than be irritated and ignored.

These examples suggest that in *integrating* the students had undergone a complex mental process in which they were considering both sides' concerns and feelings in their minds. This complex thinking process, however, had not yet been made verbally accessible to the parents, and this could be due to the fact that *integrating* showed up most often in the proposed strategies, which were hypothetical situations where students were contemplating the best strategies to use.

Lastly, in *integrating* the students were concerned about their parents' feelings. They apologized for their disrespect and thought that they should have listened to their parents with patience and even applied verbal strategies to safeguard their parents' emotions.

1. I *apologized* for my ignorance and disrespect of their opinions.

2. I should have *told* her more information and **used** more warm words to **make** her feel at ease and not **let** out my anger.

3. I should also have [listened] to her patiently and *told* her that I understood before *voicing* my own opinion.

To sum up, the different types and combination of verbs marked the distinction among *dominating, articulating* and *integrating* strategies.

Value orientations and identities

The student papers demonstrated value orientations that leaned toward low power distance, individualism and assertiveness based on the descriptions of the "cultural dimensions" identified by cultural theorists (e.g. Hofstede, 1984). These orientations were best exemplified in the *articulating* strategy, where students attached importance to their own needs and wants and directly communicated these to their parents by using different persuasion techniques. In this strategy, the students were constructing an "equal" self in relation to their parents, who

were capable of making important life decisions and taking on the responsibilities therewith.

In the *dominating* strategy, students constructed a paradoxically dependent and independent self. On the one hand, they strived to have their own thoughts, exercise control over their own futures, and be adults; on the other hand, they were still reliant on their parents like children. For instance, the reason that a student came into conflict with his parents was because he wanted to go back home during the holidays, but his parents did not allow him to. The linguistic features of the verbs used in this strategy, characterized by a verbal attack and physical (material) "acting out," also showed that the students often had strong negative emotions and did not know how to properly handle them. Although they were offended by their parents, who did not seem to grant them freedom to be grown adults, they did not yet know how to communicate their true thoughts to their parents and carry out their choices.

It is worth noting that the narratives also demonstrated a considerable amount of deep care, concern, love and understanding on the part of the children toward their parents. They understood perfectly well the other side of the conflict, even when it was different from their own (e.g. their parents' life experiences, values, what they considered was right, the way they showed their love). Students often regretted their immaturity in using the *dominating* style in dealing with conflict, because they knew their parents loved them.

Although these students' conflict management strategies may reflect value orientations and parent–child relations in contemporary Chinese families, it is important to keep in mind that these papers were collected from a specific English class, which emphasized effective communication skills. In this class, *articulating* strategies, which were often taught as a "Western" communication style, were valued and seen as positive, while *avoiding*, which was often categorized as a typical "Chinese" style, may have been regarded as negative, less competent or backward. It is likely that in this "extra credit" writing situation, students were actively constructing an identity as a competent, successful student who could confront a conflict situation effectively and manage their emotions properly.

Conclusion

In sum, in this study we identified six management strategies that students used in dealing with parent–child conflicts: dominating, articulating, integrating, compromising, obliging and avoiding. While *avoiding* was still one of the top strategies, the *dominating* and *articulating* strategies were favored more by these students. The *dominating* strategy revealed a paradoxically independent and dependent self, whereas in the *articulating* strategy students were constructed as equal and capable communicators in handling conflicts with their parents.

Linguistic analyses, specifically transitivity analysis carried out from the perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), provided strong supporting evidence for the categories generated in the content analyses presented in this

study. Analyses of the verbs used in the student narratives suggested that there was a clear distinction between *dominating*, *articulating* and *integrating* strategies. In *dominating*, verbal process often entailed a direct quote addressed to the parents that was loaded with negative emotions. The verbal verbs in *dominating* often suggested an intense argument with explosive sound. The mental processes in *dominating* often came with negations, thereby indicating a denial of the cognitive and emotional processes that the students were actually experiencing. In *integrating*, the verbs showed a strong willingness on the part of the students to listen, understand and collaborate with their parents. A great number of mental verbs suggested that students experienced an active thinking process in considering both sides' concerns. In *articulating*, the verbal process was often followed by a subordinate clause that contained a mental process, which suggested that the students were verbalizing their own needs, wants and preferences. Transitivity analysis only serves as one aspect of linguistic analysis, as the use of voice, pronouns and metaphors may also explain how students position and construct themselves in their narratives.

Compared to previous studies on cross-cultural comparisons in conflict and conflict management (e.g. Chen et al., 2000; Nguyen & Yang, 2012; Ting-Toomey, 2009), the narrated strategies in this study have suggested a reduced power distance, as well as individualistic and assertive value orientations, which seem to deviate from previous findings that collectivist cultures (including the Chinese culture) prefer to adopt an avoidance strategy in order to deal with conflict. This may indicate a change in value orientations in the young generation (i.e. those born after 1995) in contemporary China. In fact, this generational difference has been reported. For example, Zhang et al. (2005) found that young people in modern China differ from their older counterparts in their ways of resolving disputes. The younger generation prefers to resolve disputes collaboratively, while the older generations still prefer to avoid conflict situations. As the strategies examined here were narratives written by students, and as the narratives may be influenced by what the students were taught in the class, further investigation of real conflict situations is needed to substantiate this claim of generational change.

Despite the fact that this study has demonstrated that the students tended to directly articulate their needs and wants, there is still a need to explore parents' perspectives because the communication scenarios always involved both sides and identifies are co-constructed. Although verbalizing one's true needs, wants and feelings to their parents in conflict situations may be an ideal strategy for children, it may not work if the verbalization of their mental processes is repeatedly rejected by their parents. Future studies should approach parent–child conflict management from the perspectives of both sides.

Notes

1 We would like to thank our colleague Jianqiu Tian, an expert in Systemic Functional Grammar, for helping us with the coding of the transitivity processes of the verbs in

the data. We are also very grateful to Xiaodong Dai and Guo-Ming Chen for their helpful comments and careful editing of the manuscript.

2 For a very limited number of verbs that can be coded as different processes, we coded them based on what they meant in the context (e.g. "agree" was a mental process in "I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but I can't agree with her," but a verbal process in "we finally agreed on that").

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