

Elderly Perceptions of Communication with Older and Younger Adults in China: Implications for Mental Health

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ABSTRACT *Research on intergenerational communication has shown that young people often report negative experiences when talking with elderly people who are not family members. Some of this research has recently begun to investigate the Asian Pacific Rim, an area of interest because of its tradition of filial piety. The present study complements this by looking at the other side of the generational coin by investigating elderly people's views of intergenerational and intra-generational communication in the People's Republic of China. These perceptions are related to informants' feelings of depression, self-esteem, and a sense of coherence in life. It was found that other older adults were perceived simultaneously as more nonaccommodative and more accommodative than young adults, and that some communication behaviors of young family members were perceived more positively than both those of elderly peer and young non-family adults. Results further suggest that some aspects of the intragenerational communication climate may have implications for older people's feelings of depression and self-esteem. The applied and theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.*

Considerable research suggests that aging, at least in the West, is viewed negatively in many ways (Kite & Johnson, 1988), and that intergenerational communication can be a difficult process (Williams & Giles, in press). Studies

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show that older people are often negatively stereotyped as feeble, egocentric, incompetent and abrasive, frail and vulnerable (Williams & Giles, 1991), perceived as less efficient and socially skillful (Nussbaum, Thompson, & Robinson, 1989), and viewed as overly self-disclosive and controlling (Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991). At the same time, other studies indicate that certain young people often talk with older people in a manner that is overly polite and warm, and grammatically simple relative to talk with same-age peers (Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995). Thus, by responding to stereotypes as opposed to the individual's personal characteristics *per se*, young people can "overaccommodate" to older people (Caporeal & Culbertson, 1986; Edwards & Noller, 1993; Kemper, 1994). Overaccommodation can result from the communicator's excessive concern for clarity, message simplification, volume, and/or repetition, and may be perceived as demeaning or patronizing by many older recipients (Giles & Coupland, 1991a). Moreover, overaccommodation is not unidirectional from young to old. In their investigation of younger adults' impressions of satisfying and dissatisfying intergenerational interactions, Giles and Williams (1994) reported that some young people felt that older people were sometimes condescending and that the former resented this kind of speech style.

Looking more closely at the characteristics of intergenerational communication, Williams and Giles (1996) asked young Americans to recall and describe recent conversations with older people who were not family members. The results of a content analysis of these accounts identified several themes underlying the participants' responses. In dissatisfying conversations, older people were underaccommodative. Underaccommodation occurs when the communicator uses an authoritarian or dismissive style which may be perceived by the recipient as being inattentive, closed-minded, or out-of-touch. Elderly adults were also perceived to force unwanted attention on the younger person and/or to negatively stereotype younger people. In these interactions, older people were often perceived to complain about their life conditions and physical health. In these situations, young people reported that they often felt defensive and compelled to be polite, having to "bite their tongue" in deference to the older person. Williams and Giles also asked participants to describe satisfying conversations. In these situations, older people were perceived as accommodative to the needs of the young person by showing support, listening attentively, providing compliments, and telling interesting stories. These conversations were also associated with satisfying and positive emotions, and age was often regarded as irrelevant to the interaction.

In contrast to the above, there are certain indications that intergenerational relations may be different in the East. Research by cross-cultural scholars suggests that Eastern nations, such as China, Japan, and Korea, may be described as collectivistic or ingroup-oriented, and Western nations, such as the U.S. and Canada, may be described as individualistic or individually-oriented (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). In many collectivistic cultures, the notion of filial piety governs relations between generations: One should respect and honor the elderly, who are viewed as wise, pious, and graceful (e.g., Park & Kim, 1992). As a result, age is an important consideration in interactions with others. The importance of filial piety has been noted, for example, in China, Japan, and Hong Kong (Ikels, 1975; Tobin, 1987; Turkowski, 1975). Thus, given this prevailing ethic in Eastern cultures (which does not seem as evident in Western cultures), it is reasonable to expect that intergenerational communication may be different, and possibly more

positive, in Eastern, collectivistic cultures than in Western, individualistic cultures.

There have been some attempts to test this hypothesis through cross-cultural studies, the results of which have suggested that intergenerational communication may, in fact, have more negative connotations in East Asia than in the West. For instance, a study by Giles, Harwood, Pierson, Clément, and Fox (in press) found that stereotypes toward the elderly were more positive in California than in Hong Kong (see also, Harwood et al., 1996). In related research, Harwood, Giles, Pierson, Clément, and Fox (1994) examined the vitality of younger, middle-aged, and older age groups, and found that elderly people were generally viewed as having less status and institutional support in Hong Kong than in California.

The results of another study, which addressed perceptions of communication behaviors directly, further attested to the cross-cultural trend described above (Williams et al., 1996). In their study, Williams and her colleagues developed items to reflect aspects of satisfying and dissatisfying intergenerational conversations based on the findings of Williams and Giles (1996). They asked young people in nine nations (sample means averaging 20 years), four of which could be considered Western cultures (Canada, U.S., New Zealand, and Australia), and five of which could be considered East Asian cultures (The Philippines, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, and the People's Republic of China), to assess the extent to which these items applied to their interactions with non-family elders (that is, aged 65–85 years). Through principal components analyses, the researchers found that young adults' perceptions of behaviors from non-family elders could be differentiated into two categories across all nine nations. These categories reflected behaviors that demonstrated *elder nonaccommodation* (e.g., complaining, out-of-touch, closed-minded, forcing unwanted attention on the younger person, and negatively stereotyping young people) and *elder accommodation* (e.g., supportive, attentive, complimentary, and interesting). They also found that young people's self-perceptions of communication behaviors towards the elderly could be described in similar terms across the nine nations. They distinguished between reactions that could be labeled as *young respect-obligation* (i.e., obliged to be polite, restrained from free expression in the sense of "biting one's tongue," and feeling defensive) and *age-irrelevant positivity* (i.e., feeling emotionally positive, interactionally satisfied, and that age did not matter in such conversations).

Although the findings of the Williams et al. (1996) study were quite complex and with a very large amount of variability emerging between the Eastern contexts, clear East-West differences did emerge on the second and fourth factors above. Put simply, Eastern nations were more likely to disagree that elder communicators were accommodative to younger adults than Western nations, with Hong Kong and China expressing this most strongly. In addition, Eastern nations were less likely to view their interactions with older people as generally positive and satisfying or to agree that age did not matter. It is interesting to note that on the remaining factors, Korea emerged as the nation who perceived elder communicators to be the most nonaccommodating (first factor) overall and who felt the most defensive, restrained, and obligated to be polite (third factor).

As Williams et al. (1996) summarized, "the data show that participants from Eastern cultures may have a less positive view of their interactions with generalized older people compared to participants from Western cultures overall" (p. 387). This, at some level, is a surprising finding, yet nonetheless, it comple-

ments other independent research which documents that attitudes toward the elderly in East Asia have become somewhat unfavorable (e.g., Tien-Hyatt, 1987). Such studies, and others, point to filial piety, despite its sustained public, legal and moral expressions (see, for example, Yuan, 1990), as slowly eroding in many parts of this region with increasing technological advances to which many older people have had difficulty adjusting as well as to concomitant changes in values towards individualism and liberalism.

A follow-up study in five of the cultures studied above (viz., Korea, The Philippines, U.S., Canada, and New Zealand) again required young people to evaluate "older people in general," but this time included a control target of "young people in general" to be evaluated alongside it (Noels et al., 1997). This procedure confirmed that, for young people, the climate of intergenerational communication was more negative than its intergenerational counterpart, and especially so in Korea. The Noels et al. study also introduced a third comparative target for evaluation, namely "elderly *family* members". Results showed that the previously-described tendency to downgrade communication with elderly people was actually directed more at older strangers and/or those not considered "family"; interactions with elderly family members were oftentimes rated as favorably as interactions with peer-young.

Thus, despite the ethic of filial piety evident in Eastern cultures, intergenerational relations outside the family do not appear to be less problematic there than in Western cultures. Although the previous studies have gone a long way toward looking at how young adults perceive the intergenerational climate, they have not, however, addressed the opposite side of the equation—how *older* adults perceive their interactions with younger people relative to older adults. One major objective of the current study, thus, was to examine the elderly's perspective. More specifically, we wished to determine whether their judgements would be a mirror image of their younger counterparts—that is, they too would downgrade interactions with "the outgroup" (young adults) or whether, in contrast, they would not differentiate intragenerational from intergenerational communication or, indeed, even view communication with younger people more positively. At the same time, based on the results of the Noels et al. (1997) study, it might also be expected that interactions with young adults who are family members may be perceived more positively than interactions with non-family young adults.

Inter- and Intragenerational Communication Climates and Psychological Well-Being

A second issue addressed here is the extent to which communication across different age groups is related to psychological well-being. Although it is possible to identify the characteristics of positive interactions, research suggests that intergenerational communication can be problematic. It is not unreasonable to think that repeated intergenerational communication along negative lines can have many negative consequences, including increased social distance between age groups (e.g., Ryan & Cole, 1990). It is also conceivable that repeated treatment in a manner that reflects agist stereotypes may serve to etch that stereotype into the self-concept (e.g., Giles & Coupland, 1991b; Ryan, Meredith, MacLean, & Orange, 1994; see also, Turner, 1987). The Communication Predicament of Aging (CPA) Model (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986; Harwood, Giles, Fox, Ryan, &

Williams, 1993; Ryan et al., 1995; and see Harwood, and Ryan et al., this Issue) sequentially develops the hypothesis that being the longstanding recipient of stereotyped (even agist) communication from young people can not only constrain intergenerational communication, and lead to a lowered self-worth, but also be a critical ingredient of the social construction of aging, life dissatisfaction, and physical demise. This might be particularly acute when the older person feels unable to successfully manage such distressing intergenerational interactions (Giles & Harwood, 1997). Another major objective of the present study then was to determine if such relationships predicted by the CPA model would be borne out in our data as they relate to depression, self-esteem, and a sense of social coherence.

While the CPA model focuses entirely upon the applied implications of intergenerational communication, the final aim of this study was to explore how patterns of *both* inter- and intra-generational communication might be implicated in health issues. In many respects, psychological health would seem to be related to patterns of social interaction, and, one might infer, communication with others. For instance, loneliness (in part, construed here as a lack of communication with others), a problem that often increases with age as friends and family die and children become more mobile (Monk, 1988), has been linked to psychological distress. Roth and Kay (1962) and Langer and Michael (1962, both cited in Monk, 1988) found that decreased social activity, including limited personal contacts, no close friends, and no organizational memberships, was related to higher levels of mental illness (see also Dean, Kolody, Wood, & Matt, 1992). Elsewhere, Ryff and Seltzer (1996; see also Ryff, 1989) suggest that one criterion that older individuals use to define a sense of well-being is the ability to have warm, positive relations with others. In an extensive body of research, interactions with friends and family have been shown to buffer the effects of stress on mental health because of the variety of social support that these people provide (e.g., Auslander & Litwin, 1991; Felton & Berry, 1992; Krause, Liang, & Keith, 1990; Krause, Liang, & Yatomi, 1989; Murrell, Norris, & Chipley, 1992; Russell & Cutrona, 1991; Ulbrich & Warheit, 1989). Thus, although these studies do not necessarily address communication characteristics per se, they do consistently show that more positive relations with others are associated with better psychological well-being.

One limitation of these studies is that very little effort has been made to determine the relative impact of different kinds of relationships on well-being. For instance, some research suggests that the relative contribution that friends and family members provide to different types of social support depends upon the age of the individual (Levitt, Weber, & Guacci, 1993), as well as a variety of other factors (cf. Auslander & Litwin, 1991; Felton & Berry, 1992; Ulbrich & Warheit, 1989). This research points to the question of whether peer-elderly (or same-age) relations have as important an association with mental health indices as the CPA model predicts intergenerational relations has with such indices. Furthermore, with reference to intergenerational communication, does communication with younger family members—who we noted above provide a source of social satisfaction—have different implications for mental health than relations with younger non-family adults?

While our ultimate aim is to explore the empirical questions posed above cross-culturally, a foray within a single culture seemed an important first step. We had the opportunity to explore our questions in the People's Republic of China. This is a particularly interesting context for a couple of reasons. First, as discussed

above, China has a tradition of filial piety, a tradition which might still be alive in the less Westernized (non-coastal) areas to which we gained access. Second, China is a relatively collectivistic society, hence we might expect that problems with social relations might have a direct impact on variables such as subjective well-being. In summary, the purposes of the present study were to assess older Chinese adults' perceptions of communication with other older adults, family and non-family youth, and to assess whether these communication climates can be related to psychological well-being in this particular cultural context. In the current study, we also introduced an extensive array of terms tapping informants' positive and negative affect—variables previously found to be clearly associated at least with young people's views about intergenerational communication (Williams & Giles, 1996). More specifically,

RQ1: Do older adults view interactions with young people in general the same as, more negatively, or more positively than their interactions with other older people in general?

H1: Older people will evaluate their communication with young family adults more positively than young people in general.

H2: The more negatively older people construe their communications with young people in general, the more depression, and a lowered self-esteem and sense of coherence they will report.

RQ2: To what extent are the affective valences associated with communicating with other elderly and family young adults associated with self-reported depression, self-esteem, and social coherence?

Method

Subjects and Procedure

One hundred and ninety-seven Han Chinese adults from a large urban provincial capital in the southeastern region of the People's Republic of China participated in the study. This provincial capital remains, for the most part, non-Western and has only limited contact with Western visitors. Participants ranged in age from 48 to 86 years ($M = 64.06$ years). Females comprised 44.7% of the sample. The lower age boundary of 48 years was chosen given local informants' construals of the onset of elderliness (a cross-cultural issue we are also exploring elsewhere). Participants were recruited by ten Chinese nationals who assisted with the study by circulating written questions within apartment complexes of elderly Chinese employees and retirees with whom they had both professional and personal contacts. While all participants were literate, the socioeconomic level of the participants varied widely from basic education among laborers up to college educated professionals. The questionnaire took approximately 25 minutes to complete.

Materials

Accommodative Actions: Other. For each of three categories of conversational partners (young non-family adults [aged 20–30], young family adults [aged 20–30], elderly peers [aged 65–85]), the participant was asked to describe, on a 7-point scale (strongly agree—strongly disagree), how nonaccommodative (14 items) and accommodative (10 items) the partner was. The Appendix provides a list of the

survey questions included in this study. Fifteen items (those italicized) were taken from Williams et al. (1996) and were reframed for this age group.¹ An array of other items (unitalicized) were added which were theoretically considered to be appropriate to tapping the elderly's judgments of communication with young people.

Accommodation Actions: Self. The participant marked, on a 7-point scale (strongly agree-strongly disagree), the extent to which he/she used 13 accommodation tactics when interacting with the three categories of partners.

Emotional Reaction to Interaction with Others. For each of the three categories of partners, the participant indicated, on a 7-point scale (strongly agree-strongly disagree), the degree to which 10 negative and 16 positive feelings were associated with interacting with the partners. These included items used in previous research (e.g., Russell (1980) and Williams and Giles (1996), as well as items chosen on the basis of their theoretical relevance to extant work in intergenerational communication.

Depression. Depressive affect was assessed with 15 items from the Geriatric Depression Scale (Brink et al., 1982), including 5 positively worded items and 10 negatively worded items. Participants indicated whether the listed symptom reflected their feelings (1 = "yes" or 0 = "no"). After reversing the positively worded items, the items were summed together, such that the theoretical range varied from 0 to 15. A high score indicated high levels of depression ($\alpha = .84$).

Self-Esteem. Global self-esteem was assessed using 4 items from Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale. Participants indicated on a 7-point scale the extent to which they agreed with each statement (e.g., "I take a positive attitude toward myself"), such that a high score indicated high self-esteem. This scale evidenced good reliability ($\alpha = .89$), consistent with previous studies (for a review, see Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991).

Coherence. The short version of the Sense of Coherence scale, which uses 13 items (Anotnovsky, 1987), indexed the participants' sense that their life was meaningful, manageable, and comprehensible. Participants indicated the extent to which the proposed item was indicative of their life (e.g., "How often do you have the feeling that there's little meaning in the things you do in your daily life?"—"very often" to "very seldom or never") on a 7-point scale. Negative items were reversed so that a high score indicated a high sense of coherence ($\alpha = .74$).

The mental health scales (i.e., depression, self-esteem, and sense of coherence) have each been previously used and tested for validity. While developed in the United States, these scales were evaluated by both young and elderly Chinese nationals within the People's Republic of China who assisted in the translation and back-translation of all of the scales into Chinese, giving attention to both linguistic and cultural equivalence of the scales (Cai, in press).

Results

Careful preliminary analyses of the data according to gender did not suggest that this variable was important in mediating the ratings of target others nor in its

predictive value for outcomes of psychological well-being. As a consequence, the data were collapsed across gender lines in all analyses that follow.

Factor Analyses: Communication Perceptions

To determine the factor structure of the three sets of items (perceptions of others' communication behavior, self-perceptions of communication behavior, and self-perceptions of feelings during interactions), the following strategy was adopted.² For each set of items, the data for older adults was first factor analyzed using principal axis factor extraction technique followed by oblique rotation. Preliminary factor analyses examined different factor solutions in terms of the variance accounted for and the interpretability of the factor structure. It was decided that, despite the small amount of variance that it accounted for, the two-factor solution yielded the most interpretable factors, with the fewest cross-loadings and the fewest number of items that did not load on any other factor. Next, using the factor solution so derived as a model, confirmatory factor analyses determined the validity of the structure of the items pertaining to perceptions of young family members and those pertaining to perceptions of young non-family members.³

Perceptions of Others' Communicative Behavior. An exploratory factor analysis yielded a two-factor solution that was the most satisfactory model to describe the data; the factors were uncorrelated ($r = .03$). The first factor received substantial loadings (i.e., $\geq .30$) from negatively-worded items such as "closed minded," "out-of-touch," and "forced attention on me" (see Appendix A for detailed items; Eigenvalue = 5.49; variance accounted for = 22.9%). These items all suggest negative interactions in which the interlocutor was more self-focused than attentive to the needs and concerns of other person. This factor was termed *Nonaccommodation* ($\alpha = .88$), similar to earlier studies by Williams and her colleagues (1996).

The second factor was defined by positively worded items such as "told interesting stories," "were supportive," and "gave useful advice" (see Appendix for detailed items; Eigenvalue = 2.47; variance accounted for = 10.3%). These positive items suggest that the communication behavior indicated a positive attitude toward the participant, and was labeled *Accommodation* ($\alpha = .75$; see again, Williams, et al., 1996). Confirmatory factor analyses, conducted separately for each young target group, supported this two-factor solution of *Nonaccommodation* and *Accommodation*.

Self-Perceptions of Communicative Behavior. A similar strategy to that described above was used to determine the factor structure for self-perceptions of communication behavior. Exploratory factor analysis indicated that a two-factor solution best described the data. Examination of the factor pattern matrix indicated that there were no cross-loadings and the factor correlation matrix indicated that the factors were only slightly correlated ($r = .20$). The first factor was defined by items such as "felt obliged to be polite", "made allowances for their age", and "avoided certain words (e.g., slang)" (see Appendix; Eigenvalue = 2.86; variance accounted for = 22.0%). This factor suggests an obligation to accommodate to the other person, apparently to the extent that the speaker felt inauthentic. This factor was labeled *Respect/Obligation* ($\alpha = .78$; again, see Williams, et al., 1996).

The second factor was defined by items such as "had to 'bite my tongue'", "avoided certain topics," and "did not know what to say" (see Appendix; Eigenvalue = 1.66; variance accounted for = 12.8%). Given the emphasis on avoiding communication, this factor was described as *Avoidant Communication* ($\alpha = .71$). Confirmatory factor analyses, conducted separately for each young target group, supported the distinction between *Respect/Obligation* and *Avoidant Communication*.

Feelings Associated with Interactions. Exploratory factor analyses of feelings associated with interactions with older family adults suggested that a two-factor solution best described the data. The two-factors were virtually uncorrelated ($r = .11$). The first factor was described by eleven items such as "defensive", "anxious", and "anxious to leave" (see Appendix; Eigenvalue = 5.55; variance accounted for: 19.8%). This factor was termed *Negative Emotions* ($\alpha = .86$).

The second factor was defined by twelve items such as "emotionally positive", "happy", and "relaxed" (see Appendix; Eigenvalue = 3.77; variance accounted for: 13.5%). This factor was labeled *Positive Emotions* ($\alpha = .88$). Confirmatory factor analyses, conducted separately for each young target group, supported this two-factor structure.

To calculate scores to describe *Nonaccommodation*, *Accommodation*, *Respect/Obligation*, *Avoidant Communication*, *Negative Emotions*, and *Positive Emotions*, the mean was calculated for those items which defined the factor in the originally hypothesized model, reversing items when necessary, and pro-rating for missing data. The Cronbach alphas were acceptable for all of the subscales (see Table 1 for alphas for each scale across the three age groups).

Analyses of Variance: Communication Perceptions Across Target Groups

Perceptions of Others as Nonaccommodative. A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine whether there were any differences in perceptions of nonaccommodation as a function of target age group (i.e., perceptions of young non-family adults vs. young family adults vs. older adults).⁴ A significant effect for target age [$F(2,380) = 11.86, p < .001; \eta^2 = .059$] showed that older people were viewed as more nonaccommodative (reverse-scored) than both young non-family and young family members (see Table 1 for all means reported in this section). There were no differences between the two young groups. Post hoc Tukey tests (using Gardner & MacIntyre's [1993] POSTHOC program) confirmed these differences.

Perceptions of Others as Accommodative. A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine variations in perceptions of accommodation as a function of target group. A significant effect for target group [$F(2,382) = 19.72, p < .001; \eta^2 = .094$] showed that young non-family members were viewed as less accommodative than young family and older adults. There were no differences between the two latter groups.

Self-Perceptions of Respect/Obligation. A repeated measures ANOVA examined variations in self-perceptions of respect/obligation as a function of target group. A significant effect for target group [$F(2,378) = 15.21, p < .001; \eta^2 = .074$]

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach Alpha Indices for the Subscales for Interactions with Older Non-Family, Young Family, and Young Non-Family Adults

Communication Perceptions	Mean ^a	Standard Deviation	Cronbach Alpha
<i>Others</i>			
Nonaccommodation			
Young non-family adults	3.46	0.89	.86
Young family adults	3.42	0.88	.89
Older non-family adults	3.72	0.86	.88
Accommodation			
Young non-family adults	4.60	1.01	.85
Young family adults	4.90	0.91	.85
Older non-family adults	5.02	0.72	.75
<i>Self</i>			
Respect/obligation			
Young non-family adults	4.51	0.92	.75
Young family adults	4.44	0.87	.70
Older non-family adults	4.77	0.87	.78
Avoidance			
Young non-family adults	3.79	1.19	.73
Young family adults	3.46	1.14	.74
Older non-family adults	3.87	1.11	.71
<i>Emotions</i>			
Negative			
Young non-family adults	3.48	0.98	.85
Young family adults	3.39	1.08	.89
Older non-family adults	3.62	1.00	.86
Positive			
Young non-family adults	5.03	0.96	.93
Young family adults	5.11	0.93	.93
Older non-family adults	5.02	0.72	.87

^aN = 188 to 192.

suggests that participants felt more respect/obligation with older adults than young family and non-family adults. There were no differences between the two young groups.

Self-Perceptions of Avoidant Communication. A repeated measures ANOVA examined variations in self-perceptions of avoidant communication as a function of target group. There was a significant effect [$F(2,374) = 12.54, p < .001; \eta^2 = .063$]. Respondents felt less avoidant with young family members than with young non-family adults and older adults. There were no differences between the two latter groups.

Negative Emotions in Interactions. A repeated measures ANOVA examined variations in negative feelings in social interactions as a function of the target group. There was a significant effect [$F(2,382) = 5.64, p < .004; \eta^2 = .29$], such that older adults elicited stronger negative emotions than young family adults, but no more negative emotions than with non-family young adults. There were no differences between the two young groups.

Positive Emotions in Interactions. A repeated measures ANOVA examined variations in positive feelings in social interactions as a function of the age of the interlocutor. There were no significant effects [$F(2,382) = 1.78, p = .17$].

Summary. Older adults were perceived to be more nonaccommodative (i.e., complaining, stereotyping, etc.) and participants, who themselves were elderly, felt more obliged to be polite with other older adults than with younger adults, whether family or non-family members. Participants felt less avoidant of interactions with young family members than with non-family members, whether young or old. They also reported feeling more negative emotions with old and young non-family members than with young family members, although the difference between young family and non-family groups was not significant. Young non-family members were viewed as least accommodating of the three groups, with no distinction made between older adults and young family members. There were no differences in the level of positive emotions across the three groups.

Regression Analyses: Predicting Psychological Adjustment

To assess the relative contribution of the target person (young family vs. young non-family vs. elderly) to the mental health of the subject, a series of multiple regressions were conducted. For each factor outlined above (*Nonaccommodation*, *Accommodation*, *Respect/Obligation*, *Avoidance*, *Negative Emotions*, and *Positive Emotions*), the indices pertaining to older people, young non-family adults, and young family adults served as independent variables predicting either depression, self-esteem, or a sense of coherence. Thus, 18 regression analyses were computed. A summary of these results appears in Table 2.⁵

TABLE 2
Summary of Regression Analyses: Predicting Psychological Adjustment
from Communication Variables

	R ²	F	Beta		
			Young Family	Young Non-family	Older Non-family
<i>Depression</i>					
Nonaccommodation	.08	5.00**	.23*	ns	ns
Accommodation	.01	0.43	ns	ns	ns
Respect/obligation	.03	1.71	ns	ns	ns
Avoidance	.05	3.02*	ns	ns	ns
Negative Emotions	.08	5.13**	ns	ns	.24*
Positive Emotions	.02	1.23	ns	ns	ns
<i>Self-Esteem</i>					
Nonaccommodation	.02	1.41	ns	ns	(.17*)
Accommodation	.15	19.34***	ns	ns	.43*
Respect/obligation	.23	18.89***	ns	ns	.41*
Avoidance	.06	3.67**	ns	ns	.28*
Negative Emotions	.03	2.02	ns	ns	(.22*)
Positive Emotions	.30	27.39***	.24*	ns	.32*
<i>Coherence</i>					
Nonaccommodation	.01	0.59	ns	ns	ns
Accommodation	.04	2.68*	ns	ns	ns
Respect/obligation	.00	0.24	ns	ns	ns
Avoidance	.02	1.05	ns	ns	ns
Negative Emotions	.01	0.38	ns	ns	ns
Positive Emotions	.03	1.96	ns	ns	ns

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. The betas in parentheses were significant coefficients in a non-significant equation.

Depression. The indices for perceptions of nonaccommodation by older adults and young non-family and young family adults were entered as a block to predict depression. *Nonaccommodation* perceived from young family members significantly predicted scores on depression such that more nonaccommodation was associated with greater depression.

Negative Emotions. Emotions with older people and the two groups of younger people were entered as a block to predict depression. Negative emotions with older people significantly predicted scores on depression, such that stronger negative emotions were associated with greater depression.

None of the regression analyses involving perceptions of *Accommodation* from others, self-perceptions of *Respect/Obligation*, nor *Positive Emotions* yielded a significant equation. Although the equation for self-perceptions of *Avoidance* was significant, inspection of the coefficients indicated that no single target group significantly predicted scores on depression.

Self-Esteem.⁶ A similar set of analyses examined how perceptions of interactions with older adults and young family and young non-family adults predicted esteem. Analyses conducted separately for *Accommodation*, *Respect/Obligation*, *Avoidance*, and *Positive Emotions* yielded significant equations, and examination of the coefficients indicate that greater accommodation, more positive emotions, increased respect/obligation, and greater avoidance in interactions with older people were associated with greater esteem. In contrast, interactions with younger people did not relate to self-esteem, with the exception that more positive emotions experienced with young family members were associated with higher levels of esteem.

The indices for perceptions of nonaccommodation by older people and young family and young non-family adults were entered as a block to predict self-esteem. The equation was not significant, although inspection of the coefficients indicated that nonaccommodation with older people marginally significantly predicted scores on self-esteem, such that greater nonaccommodation was associated with greater esteem. In a similar manner, negative emotions experienced with older people and the two groups of young adults were entered as a block to predict self-esteem. The equation was not significant, but inspection of the coefficients indicated that negative emotions with older adults predicted scores on self-esteem, such that stronger negative emotions were associated with greater esteem.

Sense of Coherence. None of the communication nor the emotion indices predicted subjects' sense of coherence in life. Although the equation for the analyses regarding accommodation was significant, inspection of the coefficients showed that none of the target groups predicted a sense of coherence.

Summary. The results of the regression analyses suggest that communication with older adults is a more important predictor of self-esteem than communication with younger adults. The exception to this is that more positive feelings associated with communication with young family members were associated with greater self-esteem and more nonaccommodation from young family members predicted increased depressive symptoms. The more negative emotions experienced while interacting with older adults, the more participants were depressed. As well, the

more accommodating older adults were perceived to be and the more positive feelings associated with these interactions, the greater the self-esteem. Interestingly, higher self-esteem was also predicted by feelings of greater obligation to be accommodative to other older adults (i.e., being polite, speaking slowly, and so on) and a desire to avoid interacting with them. Marginal relationships also suggested that greater esteem was linked to perceptions of older people as nonaccommodative and experiencing negative emotions when interacting with them.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine older Chinese people's perceptions of intergenerational communication relative to communication with older adults, with particular attention given to the distinction between family and non-family young adults. A second purpose was to explore possible links between communication and psychological health variables.

The results of the factor analyses extend the findings of earlier studies that have examined intergenerational communication around the Pacific Rim (e.g., Williams et al., 1996; Noels et al., 1997). A more extensive set of items was used to assess perceptions of others' communicative behavior, self-perceptions of behavior, and feelings associated with interpersonal interactions. The results of factor analyses of the scales confirmed many of the structures reported earlier, particularly in the distinction between perceptions of others' accommodative and nonaccommodative behavior. Participants also distinguished between positive and negative emotions associated with the interaction, and between behaviors that were accommodative, albeit with an undertone of obligation to the other person, and behaviors that were restrained or avoidant with regards to interacting with the other person. In general, these factor structures were consistent and the subscales were reliable across the target age groups. Overall, the results point the direction to developing a more comprehensive, valid, and reliable instrument for use in future studies.

Earlier research indicated that young people, particularly in East Asian countries, view intergenerational communication with older, non-family members rather negatively. Turning to RQ1, such a mirror image pattern whereby older people reciprocally view interactions with younger, non-family members negatively was apparent, but was not as clear-cut a pattern for these older Chinese adults. Rather, their perceptions of their interactions were more complex (as actually were the Chinese young, see Williams, et al., 1996). Non-family young adults were perceived as less accommodating (i.e., supportive, attentive, respectful, polite, etc.) than older adults (or, indeed, young family members), a finding that is somewhat inconsistent with the idea that older people would be relatively well-regarded—and perceived to be accommodated to—in a culture where age is supposed to be an important delineator of status. It is, however, consistent with expectations based on previous research and certain theoretical models that guide intergroup approaches to intergenerational communication (e.g., Communication Accommodation Theory, or CAT) in that the ingroup (i.e., older adults) are viewed more positively relative to the outgroup (i.e., young non-family adults). Young family members may be perceived as members of a familial ingroup, and thus differentiated from the age-outgroup. Consequently, these interactions may be perceived more positively than those with other young adults.

In parallel, however, other older adults were perceived as being more *nonaccommodating* (i.e., closed-minded, complaining, controlling, etc.) than the two younger groups. In addition, subjects felt more obliged to be polite and respectful, to speak slower and louder, and to adapt topics and vocabulary to the older adults than they did with younger people. They also indicated that they tend to experience more negative emotions with this group than with the other groups, especially young family members.

This unique pattern, whereby older adults are seen as simultaneously more accommodating *and* nonaccommodating relative to non-family young adults may be due to conflicting perceptions of older people. Consistent with the Chinese cultural value of elders, and with the phenomenon of ingroup favoritism, older people may have a positive view of their age group as a kind, wise, and noble group. At the same time, negative stereotypes of older people as mentally or physically impaired may be so pervasive that these images are difficult to dismiss even for older adults. The participants may then respond in a manner that reflects these mixed conceptions (see also, Yuan, 1990).

Note also that in the Williams et al. (1996) study discussed above, Chinese young adults did not see accommodation and nonaccommodation as necessarily related constructs. In other words, and pertinent to the development of CAT, just because an individual is seen as accommodating on some levels, does not mean that he or she is not perceived as just as unaccommodating on others, and vice-versa. It is also possible that participants differentiate more easily between accommodative and nonaccommodative members of the ingroup (i.e., older adults) than between members of the outgroup (i.e., young non-family members). As a result, they may more readily think of examples of accommodation and nonaccommodation with their peers. In some cases, participants may have thought of people who are literally older than they are, in which case there may be a hierarchy based on age which defines the nature of communication between older adults (see Endnote 5 again). If there is high power-distance between people in their later years, interactions with some older people may indeed be difficult, even for people who are in the same age range. More research is necessary to understand the dynamics of these patterns, perhaps by comparing younger and older people's perceptions of different target age groups, including more varied age ranges of older adults. In addition, we could differentiate the outgroup targets rated (in this instance, young non-family adults) so as to differentiate between those who are more or less chance encounters and those who provide valued service support.

Turning now to H1, support for this prediction was found to the extent that participants were relatively more comfortable with young family members than with young people in general; they did not have to grasp for topics or be conscious of how they should express themselves. Moreover, the participants felt that young family members were more accommodating than young non-family and they experienced fewer negative emotions with the former than with same age peers, and marginally than with non-family youth. In these informal situations, it is perhaps not surprising that they also felt less guarded, anxious, emotionally negative, and so on. These results are somewhat consistent with the findings reported in the Noels et al. (1997) study with regards to younger adults, who also indicated that interactions with family members were positively regarded. The

results emphasize that family members must be distinguished from others in discussions of intergenerational relations.

The results of this study support the notion that communication with certain age groups may have implications for psychological health (see also, Bettencourt & Dorr, 1997). The results of the regression analyses suggested that aspects of *intragenerational* communication were, generally, more important predictors of psychological health than aspects of intergenerational communication. In other words, H2 was not confirmed in that a negative communication climate associated with interacting with young people in general did not predict indices of psychological well-being (at least in this cultural context with these particular measures). These findings suggest that for older Chinese adults (and initial, comparable data we have gathered recently from California support this), relations with older adults may provide benefits as well as disadvantages that interactions with younger non-family adults do not provide. This general pattern is qualified by the fact that positive feelings associated with interactions with young family members related to greater self-esteem, and nonaccommodation from young family members related to greater depression.

In this vein, it is important to point out that nursing home care is only a recent phenomenon in China, since care for the elderly is generally assumed by the family. Thus, if there are poor family relationships between young and old, then the latter stand to suffer. Furthermore, in this "shame" culture, having young family members who do not care for the elderly emotionally as well as physically would perhaps be an embarrassment to elderly in front of their elderly peers. Hence, the benefits for older mental health of frequently monitoring and encouraging young family members to be competent communicators with their grandparents (and others) as they age cannot be understated. Across all of the relations examined, however, interactions with young non-family people do not seem to contribute to psychological distress. Hence, although young non-family adults may be perceived more negatively with regards to accommodation, it does not seem that these negative interactions have many detrimental effects with regards to psychological well-being.

Curiously, high self-esteem was also associated with greater avoidance of older people. Perhaps because of negative stereotypes associated with old age, older individuals with high self-esteem may distance themselves from other older adults and disidentify with that age group. They may find interactions with other older people somewhat distressing because they know that they also belong to a stigmatized group. In some respects, this explanation corresponds with the work of Krause and Alexander (1990) who suggest that individuals in later life with high esteem as well as low esteem are more likely to experience psychological distress than persons with a moderate sense of self-worth. According to these researchers, people with extremely high self-esteem tend to be isolated from their social network members, arguably because interactions with others may challenge their aggrandized sense of self-esteem.

An alternative interpretation returns to the idea described above, that these subjects make finer distinctions in terms of "older" adults than we anticipated. If power-distance relations in the People's Republic of China are tied to very slight differences in age, and these respondents interpreted "older" adults to mean people older than they are, there may be some ambivalence about interacting with older adults because it may or may not be an equal interaction. Some slightly older

peers may insist on maintaining a higher status, while others may consider all people within a certain range to belong to the same age (and hence, status) group. Thus, some interactions may be positive and affirming to the participant's sense of self while others may be negative and undermine feelings of self-worth.

The research reported here is important for a number of reasons. First, it has helped to extend understanding of intergenerational communication from a youth-oriented perspective to one that encompasses more age groups. In addition, by comparing intergenerational communication with intragenerational communication, it has helped to better clarify what aspects of communication may be more or less positive within a clearer frame of reference. Specifically, it has indicated that intergenerational communication, in some respects, may indeed be more enjoyable with family members than with non-family members, and hence greater attention should be directed to this distinction in future research.

Clearly, more research is necessary on a whole range of issues, including how much contact different older people have with what kinds of elderly and younger adults, where such interactions take place, and for what purposes; such data are critical to enriching our interpretive frame. We need to look at other nations around the Pacific Rim to determine if older people (and different subcategories of them in terms of age and personality) in other cultures show the same patterns of evaluations of different age groups. In addition, it should be determined if, among other Pacific Rim nations, there is the same, apparent ambivalence in older people about interactions with older adults. It will also be important to directly compare older people's perceptions of intergenerational conversations with those of younger people across these nations—as well as examine actual interactions rather than global retrospective assessments of them. Given that interactions with other older adults are important for mental health, it will be important to explore this issue further by examining a wider variety of mental and physical health measures (subjective and objective) in an attempt to understand the dynamics and processes by which communication relates to well-being. In particular, it will be important to replicate the, admittedly marginal, finding that even negative aspects of same-age interactions seem to contribute to greater self-esteem, and to establish why this might be so. In this regard, Rook (1984, 1995) has found that elderly people's ability to manage difficult and aggravating individuals and situations could bolster one's sense of communicative competence and subjective well-being. But certainly, why there is a link between communication and esteem, less so for depression, but none with a sense of coherence warrants further investigation.

As the population ages in a world that is becoming smaller, there will be more opportunities for interaction across generations and across cultures. This kind of research attention to cultural and generational issues in communication may help to make these encounters as beneficial as they can possibly be. Clearly, one of the most influential models in the domain of intergenerational communication—the Communication Predicament of Aging Model—will likely require considerable revisions. Currently, the model is not specific about particular health outcomes, does not distinguish between family and non-family members, and does not acknowledge the health implications of *intragenerational* communication for elderly people. Indeed, it is possible, based on our data, that the CPA model could, at best, be limited in its theoretical and applied significance to only a small subset of the elderly. Such a subset may be only those who are (for whatever reason) the

frequent targets of patronizing talk from a wide variety of young people—a reciprocity experience they feel particularly demeaning and/or difficult to manage (see Giles & Harwood, 1997). Before we establish intervention communication programs which attempt to close the intergenerational gap—and rather than assuming it has profound applied implications—we need to further research (and with cross-cultural finesse) the kinds of variables we have just highlighted above. Certainly, the field of intergenerational communication has not hitherto alerted young family members to their communicative responsibilities with their elders, let alone the potential ramifications for not so doing. Moreover, this research domain has yet to appreciate the communicative support that older (not family) peers need to provide each other in order to maintain self-esteem, avoid depression, and add to quality of life. Put another way, present work on the relationships between communication and aging are, arguably, biased in favor of studying intergenerational processes; our data suggest that intragenerational relational processes are worthy of concurrent attention, empirically and theoretically.

Endnotes

1. Only one item, "call me pet names, like 'dear'", was dropped from the Williams et al. (1996) inventory of dependent variables due to translation difficulties. In addition, their generic item "complained about health and life" was separated here into two scales. It should also be noted that four of the remaining items in the Williams et al. study were incorporated into the *Positive Emotions* ("emotionally positive", "satisfied", and "age did not matter") subset of dependent variables and "defensive" into the *Negative Emotions* category; previously, the former clustered into the *Positive Elder Individuation* factor and the latter item into *Respect/Obligation*.

2. Prior to the factor analyses, cases with missing values and with outlying values on any items were screened and eliminated from the analyses.

3. For more complete details of these factor analyses, as well as an array of other regression analyses, write the third author at the Psychology Department, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada S7N 5A5. email: noels@duke.usask.ca.

4. Because 60.9% of the sample fell below the age of 65, a series of analyses of variance were conducted in which the age of the participant (younger or older than 65 years) was included as a between-subjects factor in addition to the repeated measures factor of target age group. The results of these analyses of variance showed no interaction effects between the age of the subject and the target group. There was a significant main effect for the age group with regards to perceptions of others as nonaccommodative—people over 65 years generally viewed others as more nonaccommodative than people under 65 years ($M = 3.67$ and $M = 3.46$, respectively; $F_{1,189} = 4.13$, $p = .044$). Additionally, people over 65 generally had higher levels of obligated accommodation relative to people under 65 years ($M = 4.73$ and $M = 4.48$, respectively; $F_{1,188} = 5.66$, $p = .018$). Because the failure to find any interaction between the age of the participant and the evaluation of the target age group, both age groups were combined for subsequent analyses.

5. Regression analyses were also conducted separately for those under 65 and those over 65 years. For participants over 65 years, a stronger perception of people over 65 as accommodative, an increased sense of obligation and respect towards people from this age group, and more positive emotions when interacting with people over 65 years were associated with increased self-esteem. More positive emotions experienced while interacting with young non-family adults were associated with a greater sense of coherence in life. None of the communication variables predicted variation in levels of depression.

For participants under 65 years, a more complicated picture emerged. The more the participant experienced negative emotions and avoided interactions with people over 65 years, the more depression he/she experienced. The more one experienced positive emotions and the less they experienced negative emotions with young family members, the greater was self-esteem. The more one felt that people over 65 years were accommodative and felt positive emotions with these people, the greater was the sense of self-esteem. At the same time, the more one felt that people over 65 years were

nonaccommodative, felt a greater obligation to be respectful towards and more avoidant of interactions with people over 65 years, and experienced negative feelings with people over 65 years, the greater was self-esteem. None of the communication variables predicted sense of coherence in life. Thus, it would appear that positive communication with same-age peers is important for feelings of well-being in people over 65 years. Communication with this age group is important for people 48 to 65 years as well. However, this pattern of findings suggests that people under 65 years are ambivalent about these interactions, perhaps because of the negative stereotypes associated with this group combined with the fact that they will be soon entering this age bracket.

6. In a follow-up analysis, all of the indicators pertaining to older people were entered as a block to predict self-esteem. The resulting equation was significant ($R^2 = .36$; $F(6,181) = 16.93$). The most important predictors of self-esteem were *Accommodation* ($Beta = .21$, $t = 2.73$, $p < .05$) and *Positive Emotions* ($Beta = .36$, $t = 4.22$, $p < .05$). The remaining variables (*Nonaccommodation*, *Respect/Obligation*, *Avoidance*, and *Negative Emotions*) were not significant predictors of self-esteem.

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APPENDIX

Scalar items italicized below were those used in Williams et al. (1996). Below are the original "Accommodative actions: Other" measures that were subsequently factor analyzed into two dimensions.

Factor 1: **Nonaccommodation**

were closed minded; were out of touch; forced their attention on me; made angry complaints; complained about their health; complained about their life circumstances; negatively stereotyped elderly people; complimented me (negatively loaded); talked down to me; treated me like a child; gave unwanted advice; were overly caring; were controlling; and were patronizing

Factor 2: **Accommodation**

old interesting stories; were supportive; gave useful advice; did not act superior; did not pry; were attentive; talked about the past; gave welcome advice; gave respect; and were polite

The following are the "Accommodative Actions: Self" measures that were subsequently factor analyzed into two dimensions.

Factor 1: **Respect/Obligation**

felt obliged to be polite; made allowances for their age; spoken slower; spoken louder; avoided certain words (e.g. slang); showed respect for their age; did not 'act like myself'; and used simplified vocabulary

Factor 2: **Avoidant Communication**

had to 'bite my tongue'; avoided certain topics; did not know what to say; and look for ways to end the conversation

The following are the Emotional Reaction measures that were subsequently factor analyzed into two dimensions

Factor 1. **Negative Emotions**

felt defensive; anxious; emotionally negative; frustrated; angry; bored; powerless; sad; anxious to leave; and guarded

Factor 2. **Positive Emotions**

emotionally positive; satisfied; happy; relaxed; interested; helpful; supportive; kind; generous; good about myself; sympathetic; a sense of camaraderie; mutual understanding; age did not matter; secure; and loved

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