Development of "Agentic" Regulation in Cultural Context: The Role of Self and World Views

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ABSTRACT—***This article explores differences in the development of intentional self-regulation in children from European American and Asian communities and examines the ways in which the socialization and development of "agentic" regulation follow specific goals that are in line with the predominant cultural model of agency and related self and world views. In particular, it considers whether cultural differences in self-regulation in these populations are related to the target of agency (one's self or external world) and to the view of the self as malleable (to personal effort and social influence). An overview of some basic beliefs in different Asian communities is provided, followed by empirical studies on socialization and the development of self-regulation and emotion regulation. It is argued that a binary distinction between independence and interdependence is not sufficient and does not take into account intracultural differences in cultural models of agency in Asian communities. Empirical studies show that culture-specific views on the self and the world influence respective socialization conditions and the development of agentic regulation.***

KEYWORDS—*agency; culture; regulation; self; socialization; development*

In various cross-cultural studies, an inherent opposition is assumed to exist between individual needs and social rules (Triandis, 1995). This gives rise to the question whether conformity to cultural demands implies reduced agency (Miller, 2002). As this question may result from culturally biased conceptions of agency and regulation, the present article aims to discuss the development of "agentic" self-regulation in different cultures. It is assumed here that culturally shared meanings and practices as part of socialization conditions affect the development of culturally appropriate "agentic" regulation.

Agentic regulation is defined as agency in self-regulation. Accordingly, agentic regulation is conceptualized by referring to self-regulation research (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997). However, the focus here is on agency in cultural context. Therefore, agentic regulation is defined more precisely as an intentional act to achieve self-regulation. The term *agentic regulation* underlines its reflective nature and its function for active selection and pursuit of, or disengagement of, goals for self-regulation. Agentic regulation is assumed to develop by organizing inner mental processes and behavior in line with cultural values, social expectations, internalized standards, and one's self-construal.

In this article, I focus on socialization conditions for the development of agentic regulation in cultural context. Socialization goals regarding the development of agentic regulation are assumed to be less pronounced in cultures where the expression of individual needs (in a socially adequate way) is valued over self-restraint and where the prevailing view of the self is an "entity" view, which sees traits as fixed and uncontrollable, as opposed to a "malleable" view, which adopts a context-specific

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view of self. Further, avoiding the traditional binary distinction between independence and interdependence as a major cultural model, I examine different cultural demands in several Asian communities in relation to socialization conditions for the development of agentic regulation.

First, I briefly refer to some basic processes in the development of agentic regulation. Second, I describe selected culture-specific self and world views with regard to socialization conditions of self-regulation, especially emotion regulation in relation to self-expression versus self-restraint. Third, I discuss empirical studies referring to different cultural meanings and practices in the development of agentic regulation. Last, I offer suggestions for further research on the development of agentic regulation in changing contexts.

BASIC PROCESSES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGENTIC REGULATION

Self-regulation is a central construct in the study of successful developmental outcomes relevant for interpersonal behavior, school achievement, socioeconomic status, and adaptation to life events. It is crucial for emotional, cognitive, and social development from infancy to old age. Self-regulation involves the modulation, modification, or inhibition of specific actions and reactions to increase the likelihood of goal attainment. Components of self-regulation (e.g., regulation of emotions, cognitions, and behavior) include goal setting, attention focus, impulse control, behavior inhibition, activation of resources, and so forth. Self-regulation is defined as the motivational process and ability to successfully guide and monitor goal-directed behavior, including emotions and cognitions, over time and across different situations (Karoly, 1993). This definition describes agency in self-regulation.

The development of agentic regulation depends on basic skills such as automatic attention and inhibition, as well as on higher level processes such as effortful, reflective inhibitory control, that is, voluntarily inhibiting, activating, or changing attention and behavior (Eisenberg et al., 1997).

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN DEVELOPMENT OF AGENTIC REGULATION

Agentic regulation is a general skill of intentional regulation in the service of cultural values and basic needs. Therefore, children from different cultures will differ in the quality of regulation in different domains. Most studies on the development of self-regulation and emotion regulation focus on European American contexts (see overview by McClelland, Ponitz, Messersmith, & Tominey, 2010). This is surprising since "all selves are culture-specific selves that emerge as people actively adjust to their cultural environments, and all experience is at once both individual and cultural" (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997, p. 15). Culture can be defined as a shared system by which its members experience and interpret the events happening in that context.

This raises the question of which cultural meaning and practices (Bruner, 1990; Miller, 2002) are accorded to the development and function of agentic self-regulation outside the European American context. Instead of conceptualizing cultures along the binary distinction between individualism and collectivism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002), I search for specific psychological constructs to unpack cultural effects on the development of regulation. Agentic regulation is seen here as embedded in the cultural context and as influenced by socialization conditions that transmit cultural mandates and social norms. Compared to children in European American cultures, for example, children in Asian cultures are (after several years of indulgence) more expected to follow social norms and duties while refraining from fulfilling individual needs. This culture-specific phenomenon raises questions of whether different processes underlie the development of regulation in different cultures. To summarize, I define agentic regulation as an intentional, goal-oriented action in the service of regulating inner mental processes and modifying behavior in line with cultural mandates and basic individual needs.

Socialization of Agentic Regulation in Asia

Cultural values and practices influence socialization and, thereby, the development of agentic regulation partly through the role of the self in relation to the world. Therefore, "entity" and "malleable" subjective theories on self (Dweck, 1999) and the world (Rothbaum & Trommsdorff, 2007; Rothbaum & Wang, 2010) seem fruitful. Previous differentiations between individual-oriented and other-oriented goals and self-focused and other-focused self-construals (Greenfield, 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) are helpful in specifying the culture-specific psychological concepts relevant in self and world views (Trommsdorff, in press). For example, among most European American communities where the cultural model of "independence" and an entity view of self (as fixed) prevail, self-regulation is motivated by the individual-oriented goal of expressing one's unique self. Thus, even the expression of socially disengaging emotions (e.g., anger) seems to be less constrained. This hypothesis can be studied in comparison to Asian communities where the cultural model of "interdependence" prevails. Here, socialization goals and practices aim to help children maintain harmony with the group and with nature. Such other-oriented goals for self-regulation are based on a malleable view of self (malleable to personal effort and social influence) and motivate self-effacement and self-criticism.

Asian (as well as European American) communities share certain values but differ in others. Therefore, intracultural studies are needed. Below, I give a brief overview on culture-specific beliefs on the self and the world and related socialization conditions of selected East, South, and Southeastern Asian

communities (Hindu Indian, Javanese, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese).

SELF AND WORLD VIEWS RELEVANT FOR AGENTIC REGULATION

In most Asian cultures (with East Asia being mainly influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, and South or Southeast Asia more influenced by Hinduism), primacy is given to the principle of social harmony with the group and nature, which is related to self and world views different from those of Western cultures. For example, Asian children learn to accept their ascribed role in the world by fulfilling their duties. This implies that children develop an incremental (malleable) view on self. The related implication for agentic regulation is the idea of changing the self to fit the world in its various situations. Hindu and Javanese have to deal not only with the human world but also with the spiritual world of gods, spirits, and ancestors interacting with human beings. Neglect of one's duties (*dharma*—sacred duties toward oneself, the family, the community, and humanity) is seen as an indicator of immaturity. Hindu Indian socialization places high value on control of selfishness and the refinement of the self and agency (Miller & Bersoff, 1995). Hindu and Buddhist ethics value nonviolence, self-restraint, and fulfilling one's assigned duties, emphasizing harmony, trust, and integration into society (*rukun*; Mulder, 1975) and the spiritual world and nature ("man-in-nature"; Mishra, in press). These virtues are characterized by acceptance of external conditions, awareness of one's limitations, striving for simplicity, and ascetic self-discipline. Agentic regulation in these cultures presupposes a malleable self, "a civilized person who displays the emotion and virtue of respectful self-restraint and gracefully submits to the authority of others" (Shweder, 2008, p. 64). Hiding real intentions and emotions is regarded as successful self-regulation for Javanese (Mulder, 1992). Moreover, mature agentic regulation means actively renouncing one's personal interests to "accept everything . . . without protest or resistance" (Magnis-Suseno, 1997, p. 139ff). For Javanese, to give up one's individuality and live in accordance with the harmony of the world (*iklas*) and the cosmos allows for agency, seen as the autonomous and active surrender by disengagement from goals (Magnis-Suseno, 1997). The supreme ideal for the Hindu Indian is the terminal value of *moksha* (release from the cycle of birth and rebirth; Mishra, in press).

In these cultures, specific forms of self-regulation are promoted to maintain the cultural goal of harmony. The general self and world view is that any attempt to change the world is futile because the more important task is to discover one's own faults and transgressions in the present life or distant past. In line with viewing the self as malleable to personal effort, Hindus "believe there is always something they can do to empower themselves and improve their prospects in the future" (Shweder, 2008, p. 75). This culture-specific view on agentic regulation resembles conceptualizations of secondary control (Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008). To summarize, the Hindu and Javanese cultural model of interdependence may be unpacked by reference to duty and self-restraint as indicators for agentic regulation.

Confucian ethics, which are relevant among Korean, Chinese, and Japanese populations, are similar to some Hindu and Buddhist values with regard to a belief in a malleable self that leads to accommodation to social rules and expectations. The Confucian child is motivated to fulfill others' expectations, especially those of family, due to filial piety and the goal to maintain "face" (Ho, 1997). The Confucian model of interdependence gives priority to "face," which is conferred by others (Cohen & Hoshino-Browne, 2005; Hwang, 2006) and is a basis for maintaining group harmony (Zane & Yeh, 2002). Due to a malleable view on self, others' expectations become part of the child's self-construal and self-awareness (Hwang, 2006). For example, it is the child's relational obligation to pursue achievement goals with high effort due to filial piety. Obedience and an emphasis on effort and learning, which imply a continuous striving for self-perfection, are part of the child's obligations as aspects of the Confucian concept of *ren* (Li, 2003). These felt obligations guide the child's agentic regulation indicating agentic secondary control mainly in social interactions. The concept of interdependence is too abstract to transmit the culture-specific meaning of duty and filial piety—concepts that may specify cultural effects on agentic regulation in the Confucian socialization context.

In Japan as well, interdependence and maintaining social harmony are the important developmental goals. Additionally, a culture-specific form of self-regulation is indicated by *amae*, the socially adaptive means of dependence that underlies in-group relationships throughout the life course (cf. Doi, 1973). The difficulty in achieving this goal is in understanding which degree of dependence from other persons is appropriate in which situation, and how one should regulate one's behavior, respectively. Too much dependence indicates immature self-regulation, while independence, as indicated by self-assurance, would undermine social harmony. Therefore, agentic regulation is needed to act in accordance with the cultural value of *amae* in Japan. Agentic regulation may foster the pursuit of major goals such as achieving self-assurance (*Jiko-shucho*) and impulse control (*Jiko-yokusei*), including the regulation of emotions that may disrupt social harmony (M. Kobayashi, personal communication, December 21, 2010).

In line with the Confucian tradition, self-regulated Japanese reflect on their behavior, acknowledge their mistakes, and ask for forgiveness. Japanese teachers repeatedly tell their students to reflect on and evaluate their behavior (*hansei shite kudasai*). In achievement situations, Japanese students showed more effort (indicating agentic regulation) after failure but not after success than did their Euro-American counterparts (Heine et al., 2001). These results highlight cultural differences in views on self in different situations.

Self-reflection and self-criticism (*Jiko hansei*; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999) focus on whether one's behavior was correct, friendly, and conforming to social norms, thus guiding agentic regulation in interpersonal behavior. The ritualized emphasis on *kenson* (modesty) and *enryo* (restraint) in self-presentation strongly differs from Western self-presentation (Tafarodi, Shaughnessy, Yamaguchi, & Murakoshi, 2011). *Jiko hansei* as a means for self-regulation serves to maintain social harmony. A further means is empathy and understanding others' intentions and expectations in different situations. Reading the other person's mind gives the necessary guideline for one's agentic regulation as based on secondary control in everyday activities. Thus, in the Japanese culture, intentional agentic regulation is guided by duty and self-restraint in the service of social harmony. Beside duty and self-restraint, further concepts help to clarify cultural effects on agentic regulation—*amae* and empathy.

Several studies show that the meaning and the goals of agentic regulation differ according to cultural models. In Asian, as compared to Western, communities, agentic regulation is more highly valued in the domain of interpersonal behavior, with priority given to intentional self-restraint. Effort in achievement situations is motivated by a critical view on the self. Yet, in countries like the United States, intentional self-regulation is valued as a means for individual achievement and culturally appropriate social skills. Here, effort in achievement situations is motivated by a positive view on the unique self. Agentic regulation is guided by the goal of maintaining and improving one's individual self.

To summarize, different cultural demands foster different developmental pathways of regulation by promoting different self and world views and goals of agentic regulation in different domains (Trommsdorff, in press). Agentic regulation in Asian cultures is based on the goal to maintain harmony. Therefore, the development of a malleable self adjusting to social expectations and the given environment is promoted (Rothbaum & Wang, 2010; Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008).

EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIALIZATION OF AGENTIC REGULATION

Emotion Regulation

Successful emotion regulation is an important aspect of agentic regulation comprising various emotional, cognitive, and behavioral strategies, including reappraisal of the situation, strategic implementation of one's own resources, and changing one's expectations, evaluations, and attributions (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). Individuals' experience, regulation, and expression of emotions depend on the respective model of agency they hold and the related cultural shared meanings and practices. In line with the values described earlier, the Asian model is assumed to give priority to social harmony and self-restraint, whereas the Western model is assumed to encourage authentic expression of emotions in social relationships (Trommsdorff, 2006; Trommsdorff & Cole, 2011a).

Regulation of Negative Emotions

Individuals from Western communities who face obstacles, failure, or unfair treatment will experience and express negative emotions (e.g., frustration, anger). In Nepal, Tamang children do not endorse anger; Brahman children endorse but would not express anger as U.S. children do (Cole, Bruschi, & Tamang, 2002; Cole & Tamang, 1998). Socially disengaging emotions such as anger are discouraged in Asian cultures because they may disrupt social harmony (Kitayama, 2001).

Further, strategies of successful emotion regulation differ cross-culturally. At age 5, Japanese children continue to seek their mothers' support for regulating distress significantly more than do German children (Friedlmeier & Trommsdorff, 1999; Trommsdorff, 1995). Further, Japanese mothers show more overall and more situation specific sensitivity to their child's distress than do German mothers (Trommsdorff & Friedlmeier, 2010). This pattern reflects both the situation specificity of Japanese mothers' caregiving and their indulgence of their young children's dependency (*amae*; Doi, 1973; Lebra, 1994). Japanese preschoolers' displaying *amae* in their interactions with their mother highlights a culture-specific indicator of agentic regulation.

Emotion Regulation and Social Behavior

A function of emotion regulation is to enable socially approved behavior. Anger motivates antisocial behavior and predicts aggression (Kornadt & Tachibana, 1999). In comparison to German adolescents, Japanese adolescents are more likely to regulate their emotions in anger-inducing interpersonal situations. When they are a victim of another person's harmful behavior, for example, they may make positive attributions of the other person's intentions or engage in self-criticism ("She did not want to hurt me"; "Her behavior was accidental"; "I was wrong to give her the impression of my provocation"; Kornadt, 2011). These attributions indicate intentional emotion regulation fostered by a malleable view on self and based on the value of social harmony. By contrast, German adolescents prefer negative attributions, which activate goals for retaliation and foster maintenance of self-esteem. Respective results show higher aggression and lower aggression inhibition among German adolescents than among Japanese adolescents (Kornadt, Hayashi, Tachibana, Trommsdorff, & Yamauchi, 1992). Another instance of Asian youths' exercise of intentional emotional regulation involves Hindu Balinese adolescents, who sympathize with an aggressive child and try to improve his or her behavior (Kornadt, 2011). These examples highlight the fact that empathy-based agentic regulation of anger resulting in aggression inhibition is more common in Asian cultures than in those of the West.

To summarize, in the domain of emotion regulation, different cultural goals and related self and world views influence agentic

regulation. The cultural differences in the regulation of anger show that beyond the duty-based types of interpersonal behavior, another type, namely, empathy-based differences in agentic regulation, can occur (see Miller, 2002).

Socialization Conditions

The development of agentic regulation is embedded in socialization conditions such as caregivers' beliefs and socialization practices, which are assumed to be influenced by cultural models of agency. Socialization conditions may foster an entity or a malleable view of the self and the world that underlies differences in agentic regulation. Socialization experiences make children aware of what is culturally meaningful, helping them to internalize their respective cultural models as part of their self-construal and to develop culturally adaptive goals to intentionally regulate impulses and modify inner mental processes and related behavior.

In European American communities, the goal of the socialization of self-regulation is to help children achieve independence and self-enhancement, whereas in Asian communities, it is to help children achieve agentic regulation for maintaining harmony. For example, Confucian principles regarding the "training" of child obedience (see a review by Chao & Tseng, 2002) promote harmony in family relationships (Cheah & Rubin, 2003); parenting related to these principles can be described by the indigenous Chinese concept of *guan* ("to care for," etc.), which implies parents' concern for the child (Chao, 1994). These principles presuppose a belief in a malleable self emphasizing self-restraint and self-improvement. Socialization of Asian children, compared to that of European American children, focuses more on assigned roles and related expectations, prioritizing the context for agentic regulation and thus fostering a malleable self-construct.

From a theoretical attachment aspect, caretakers' sensitivity may be related to effective socialization strategies for fostering security and self-regulation. However, cross-cultural research shows that sensitivity can have different meanings. In these observational studies of Asian and German mothers reacting to their children's distress, Asian mothers were more inclined to show anticipatory, proactive sensitivity when their child experienced negative emotions. For example, German mothers who witnessed their child having a mishap tended to react only after their child had expressed distress, and they focused their attention on their child's emotions. In so doing, they increased the child's distress, as promoting the authenticity of a child's expression of negative emotions undermines the child's regulation of distress. By contrast, Japanese and Indian mothers exhibited proactive sensitivity, carrying on normally while ignoring their child's negative emotions (e.g., disappointment) and thereby diminishing the child's awareness of his or her distress. By attending to the mother's calm behavior (as a cultural model), the child learns to intentionally disengage from disappointment, also remaining calm (Trommsdorff, 2006; Trommsdorff & Friedlmeier, 1993, 2010).

German mothers believe that their child is a separate entity and should express and regulate emotions mainly independently. This is in contrast to Asian mothers' norm- and duty-based socialization of agentic emotion regulation. Asian mothers' strategies are based on the anticipation of their child's needs, their felt personal responsibility to fulfill these needs, and perceiving their child as a child (Kornadt, 2011; Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2003; Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008). These different socialization strategies of emotion regulation indicate a culturally different prevalence of individuality and social-oriented regulation.

Still, there are differences and similarities in Asian mothers' socialization that point to the culture-specific meaning of agentic regulation. For example, both Japanese and Indian mothers avoid focusing on their child's emotions; rather, they focus on objects and guide their child toward a norm- and duty-based regulation. However, in contrast to Indian mothers, who primarily emphasize duty-based regulation, Japanese mothers guide their child toward an empathy-based regulation based on a close emotional bonding and "oneness" (*ittaikan*) with their child (Azuma, 1986). In both cultures, mothers can be seen as models promoting their child's malleable view on self- and context-sensitive agentic regulation. This is in line with cultural values of disengagement and self-improvement by regulating negative emotions.

Thus, although systematic knowledge about successful parenting for emotion regulation in different cultures is lacking (Trommsdorff & Cole, 2011a), the studies reviewed above show that differences in agentic regulation can be traced back to early development in the cultural context. For example, German mothers promote their child's individuality in the expression of emotions, whereas Asian mothers promote self-restrained agentic regulation of emotions. However, Asian mothers' socialization differs with respect to relative priority of norms and duty (Indian) or empathy (Japanese). In general, mothers' values, naïve theories on child development, and actual behavior (e.g., proactive or reactive sensitivity) correspond to their respective cultural model of agency, thereby promoting cultural fit in their child's development of regulation (Trommsdorff & Cole, 2011b).

CONCLUSION

Research on agentic regulation in cultural context enables investigators to combine the lens of culture with the lens of development, thereby advancing knowledge of the cultural and individual differences in the quality (goals, means) and processes of agentic regulation. Future research should focus on the processes through which cultural models are socialized and influence the development of agentic regulation in different domains.

Regarding the question whether individuality- or duty-based regulation implies different agency, I agree with Miller (1984, 2002) and assume agentic regulation when individuals conform to cultural imperatives (e.g., religious beliefs) or follow personal decisions (Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990). Self-regulation is culture specific and agentic as people actively adjust to their

cultural environments (Markus et al., 1997). Agentic regulation serves cultural fit on the basis of one's self and world views.

Future research should clarify how the cultural meaning of interdependence and independence is related to different self and world views and fosters culturally appropriate ways of agentic regulation. For example, agentic regulation among Asian populations can be described by interdependence. However, here interdependence is related to a concern with social harmony and its various aspects such as empathy-, norm-, and duty-based regulation; filial piety; self-criticism; face; acceptance of prescribed roles; acceptance of loss; and disengagement. These aspects are interrelated as part of the person's development in the cultural context. They vary in their respective function depending on the cultural meaning of the situation and the domain for agentic regulation. For example, in Japan a strict differentiation between private and public situations (inside, outside; see *uchi*, *soto*; *honne*, *tatemae*) fosters the development of agentic regulation based on high context sensitivity and awareness of the "situated meaning" (Bachnik & Quinn, 1994). Empirical studies by Trommsdorff and Friedlmeier (2010) have shown situation-specific sensitivity to be more pronounced in Japanese mothers than in German mothers. Therefore, beyond domain-specificity, situationally specific development of agentic regulation should be studied. This research should further differentiate cultural beliefs about developmental processes, tasks, and outcomes.

One starting point of this article was that the different cultural conceptions of the self influence self-regulation. "Unlike in Western conceptions, which tend to portray individuals as naturally autonomous and duty as a restriction on this freedom, Hindu Indian conceptions tend to portray individuals as naturally social and duty as congruent with individual inclinations" (Miller, 1994, p. 16). A Western conception of the self, in contrast to an Asian conception, typically draws a sharp distinction between the self and the context, or between self and role. Accordingly, research on the development of agentic regulation has to take a culturally informed perspective by focusing on the functions of an entity (fixed) view (related to uniqueness) and a malleable view on self (related to self-criticism and self-detachment).

Acting according to the system of cultural mandates, values, and practices indicates adaptive agentic regulation. Because cultures are not homogenous entities, partly due to ongoing sociocultural and economic changes, there is a need for intercultural and intracultural comparisons such as Chen and Chen's (2010) longitudinal study of changes in Chinese children's development of social competence. A major question arises here regarding the processes in the change of agentic regulation and fit. Both can change during the lifespan, especially during critical life events. Therefore, I assume that agentic regulation affects not only individual development but also changes in social relations and conditions for sociocultural changes. Thus, research on the development of agentic regulation may clarify the dynamic mutual interactions between culture and individual agency.

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