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Abstract:

This study examined young adults' written accounts of intergenerational communication in conflict situations in the People's Republic of China. Using a content analysis approach, this study identified five major types of initiating factors that precipitated intergenerational conflict. Old-to-young criticism was most frequent, followed by illegitimate demand and rebuff. The least frequent initiating factors included young-to-old criticism and disagreement/generation gap. In addition, results indicated that more rebuffs were from nonfamily elders than from family elders, whereas disagreement with family elders was more frequent than with non-family elders. Proportionally speaking, no differences emerged between family and non-family elders for criticism (both old-to-young and young-to-old) and illegitimate demand. Results are discussed with respect to research in intergenerational communication, interpersonal conflict, and the Chinese socio-cultural norm of hierarchy and filial piety.

Keywords: Chinese intergenerational conflict, Initiating factors, Filial piety, Family and nonfamily elders

Text of paper:

Analyzing Chinese Young Adults' Perceptions of intergenerational conflict: Type of initiating factors, attributions and styles

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Running head: INTERGERNATIONAL CONFLICT INITIATING FACTORS

Introduction

Motivated by an interest in examining cultural similarities and differences on communication and aging, research has recently been extended to East Asian cultures (e.g., Japan, South Korea, and the People's Republic of China (PRC), where the explicit Confucian norm of filial piety is upheld and conditions normative intergenerational communication expectations (Cai, Giles, & Noels, 1998; Giles, Liang, Noels, & MaCann, 2001; Giles, Harwood, Pierson, Clément, & Fox; 1998; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). The Communication Predicament of Aging (CPA) model (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986) and communication accommodation theory (CAT) (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) have provided useful frameworks for much of the intergenerational communication research. Guided by these frameworks, research on intergenerational communication in both Western and Eastern contexts has revealed multiple young-to-old and old-to-young communicative behaviors associated with dissatisfying communication experiences (Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995; Giles & Williams, 1994; Ng, Liu, Weatherall, & Loong, 1997; Williams & Giles, 1996; Zhang & Hummert, 2001).

On one hand, research has found evidence to suggest that older adults experience dissatisfying, demeaning or patronizing communication from young people in a variety of social contexts (see Ryan et al., 1995; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). On the other hand, young people also indicate that they are sometimes "mistreated" or patronized by older adults and are especially unsatisfied with older adults' non-listening, complaining, disapproving, over-parental behaviors, intrusive love, and superior attitudes (e.g., direct, bossy, and reprimanding) (Giles & Williams, 1994; Williams & Giles, 1996; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). In essence, these unsatisfying young-to-old and old-to-young communication behaviors are potential factors that might precipitate intergenerational conflict, an area that has started to receive attention only recently (Berens, 2000; Bergstrom, 1997; Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996; Bergstrom & Williams, 1996; Sillars & Zietlow, 1993; Zhang, 2002). These studies have primarily focused on age differences in perceptions and choices of conflict management styles, and results in general indicate that age is a salient factor in conflict management.

During intergenerational interaction, conflict may arise due to the perceived incompatibility between young and older adults over a variety of issues (e.g., lifestyle choices, habits, personality, worldviews, political beliefs). However, these issues must be converted into overt conflict by some initiating factor (e.g., one party's interference with the goal-directed activity of the other), an area that has not received a great deal of attention (Peterson, 1983; Witteman, 1992). The current study adds to the growing body of research on intergenerational communication in Eastern cultures, focusing on young people's accounts of Chinese intergenerational conflict. Specifically, this study sought to identify the primary initiating factors of Chinese intergenerational conflict. Given family elders and nonfamily elders might be viewed quite differently (Chu & Ju, 1993; Ng et al., 1997; Yeh, Williams, & Maruyama, 1998), the current study also examined how the initiating factors might vary with type of intergenerational relationship (elderly family member versus non-family elders).

Initiating factors of interpersonal conflict and Chinese intergenerational issues

According to Hocker and Wilmot (1991), conflict is "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (p. 21). Conflict may arise due to the perceived incompatibility between the conflicting parties over a variety of issues and problems. For example, an interview study of heterosexual couples revealed 65 conflict issues (Gottman, 1979; Kelley, 1979). These issues included time and financial management, distribution of chores, habits, personality, worldviews, political beliefs, jealousy, and so on. However, these issues only represent the possible sources of disparity. Verbal or behavioral expressions of incompatible interests (i.e., initiating factors) must occur in order for these issues to be turned into open conflict.

Conflict is pervasive and it has been examined extensively in interpersonal relationships (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Sillars, 1980a, 1980b; Roloff, 1981; Witteman, 1988; Witteman, 1992). However, our knowledge about the early stages of conflict is very limited (Peterson, 1983; Witteman, 1992) because the majority of the research in interpersonal conflict has been focused on conflict management styles (e.g., competing, avoiding, accommodating, and problem solving) and their outcomes. In delineating the importance of studying initiating factors of interpersonal conflict, Witteman (1992) pointed out that "initiating factors have never really been studied, however, they may be important since they might guide subsequent sense making and behavioral activities" (p. 249).

Several studies have examined either the initiating factors of marital conflict or interpersonal conflict (Peterson, 1979, 1983; Witteman, 1992). Peterson (1979) asked husbands and wives to describe their significant interactions in their daily lives, of which a substantial proportion of the stories emerged as sources of marital conflict. They then analyzed the conflict scenarios (i.e., the written accounts) to identify factors that precipitated the conflict (Peterson,

1983). A total of four initiating factors of marital conflict were identified: criticism (one party is critical of the other), illegitimate demand (the person upon whom the demand is made perceives it as unfair), rebuff (one party fails to respond to the other as expected), and cumulative annoyance (the repetition of certain acts that exceeds some threshold).

Similarly, Witteman (1992) asked college students to think of an interpersonal relationship and to recall a conflict in that relationship. Participants were instructed to write down the details of the interpersonal conflict including how they became aware of the conflict and the communication exchange with the other party in the conflict. Content analysis of the interpersonal conflict scenarios revealed six types of initiating factors: 1) cumulative annoyance (33.5%), 2) mutually cumulative annoyance (23.4%), 3) rebuff (14.6%), 4) illegitimate demand (11.7%), 5) non-cumulative annoyance (8.8%), and 6) criticism (8.0%). Participants reported three major types of interpersonal relationships with the other in the conflict (e.g., romantic relationships, friendships, and acquaintances) and the average length of time that respondent had been involved with the other was 4.12 years ($SD = 6.04$). Participants also reported that the mean age of the other was 23.87 years ($SD = 8.22$) indicating that few intergenerational conflicts were represented in this sample.

Like interpersonal conflict studies, research on intergenerational conflict has been primarily focused on age differences in conflict management styles in the Western cultural context (Berens, 2000; Bergstrom, 1997; Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996; Bergstrom & Williams, 1996; Sillars & Zietlow, 1993). Chinese culture emphasizes hierarchical relations, including age-based hierarchy (Ting-Toomey, 1994; Westwood, Tang, & Kirkbride, 1992). Research has established that the Chinese cultural norm of filial piety legitimizes the power of older adults over young people, however, young people express a strong desire to maintain equal status in

intergenerational relations (Ng et al., 1997; Yue & Ng, 1999; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). One goal of the current research is to identify the initiating factors of intergenerational conflict in the Chinese cultural context, where the norm of filial piety specifies hierarchy with young people having a subordinate role in intergenerational relations (Ng et al., 1997; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). Examination of the conditions where intergenerational conflict begins and arises contributes to our understanding of the power dynamics of intergenerational interaction and the impact of the Chinese culture norms of hierarchy and filial piety on intergenerational communication. Understanding the initiating factors of intergenerational conflict might also enhance the prediction of conflict management responses.

RQ1: From the perspective of young adults, what are the primary initiating factors of Chinese intergenerational conflict?

Differentiating between family and nonfamily elders

Chinese culture is considered as collectivistic and oriented toward ingroups (e.g., family members) (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Triandis, Dunnette, & Hough, 1994). Family is considered as a basic unit in the macro social structure and the prototype of all interpersonal relations and is essential for maintaining social integration and stability in Chinese societies (Chu & Ju, 1993). Although there are competing sources (e.g., media), family has been one of the major channels of influence and support for young people (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). At the same time, there might be more problems when family live close together and are mutually dependent on each other. This study attempts to examine the effects of relationship type (family and nonfamily) on the frequency distribution of the type of intergenerational conflict initiating factors. Several studies examined intergenerational relations at both family and nonfamily levels. Results in general confirmed that family elders and nonfamily elders were perceived differently

in both the accommodative (e.g., being supportive) and nonaccommodative (e.g., being controlling) dimensions.

A study conducted with young New Zealanders on intergenerational communication indicated that young people tended to perceive their family elders more positively on the accommodation dimension (e.g., supportive and telling interesting stories) than nonfamily elders. However, the young participants perceived the two elderly groups as equally nonaccommodating (e.g., controlling and giving unwanted advice) and more non-accommodating than their peers (Ng et al., 1997). Using similar measurements, Giles, Noels, Williams, Lim, Ng, Ryan, and Somera (2003) examined young people's perceptions of intergenerational communication involving family versus nonfamily elders in several countries (i.e., USA, Canada, New Zealand, the Philippines, & Korea). Consistent with Ng et al.'s findings (1997), results indicated that interactions with nonfamily elders were evaluated more negatively than those with same age peers. In addition, family elders were perceived not only as more accommodating, but also less non-accommodating than nonfamily elders.

In an experimental study conducted by Yeh et al. (1998), Taiwanese and American young participants evaluate intergenerational conversations where the type of intergenerational relationship (family or nonfamily elder) and the older person's communication (disapproving versus approving) varied. Results indicated that the disapproving elderly family member was perceived as more nonaccommodative (i.e., being very direct) than the disapproving nonfamily elder person.

Although not conclusive, this literature suggests that people tend to evaluate nonfamily elders more negatively than family elders. This finding is important because it informs the current study by suggesting that a distinction must be made between family elders and nonfamily elders in research on intergenerational communication (see also Yeh et al., 1998), leading to the second research question

of this investigation.

RQ2: Do initiating factors vary with type of intergenerational relationship (family versus non-family)?

Methodology

Participants and procedures

Participants were 441 Chinese college students (M age = 19.61, Age Range: 18-25; 22.7% males and 77.3% females). They were volunteers from two universities in China (a medium sized medial university in Shandong province and a large university in Beijing). Five subjects were unable to recall an intergenerational conflict. Two participants described an intergenerational communication story that involved no conflict. These seven participants were removed from further analyses.

Participants were asked to think of an intergenerational relationship with an older person (60 years or older) that they presently have and an intergenerational conflict in that relationship (see also Witteman, 1992). In order to identify an initiating factor of intergenerational conflict in greater detail, respondents were asked to write down how they became aware of the conflict, how it developed, and what the outcome was. Participants were explicitly instructed to write down their communication exchange during the conflict with the other party (i.e., what they said and did). Participants' contributions varied from a few sentences to two pages with the majority being three quarters of a page (about 200 words). Participants were then asked to indicate their relationship with the older person, how long they had been in that relationship, and the older person's age.

Among the 434 intergenerational conflict scenarios, there were approximately equal numbers of reports on family ($n = 237$, 54.6%) and non-family ($n = 197$, 45.4%) intergenerational conflict, $\chi^2(1) = 3.04$, $N = 434$, $p > .05$. Family elders predominantly were grandparents, although there were a few cases

of parents and close family relatives like grandaunts and granduncles. The non-family elders included neighbors, teachers, acquaintances, customers, patients, and salespersons. The average length of time that the respondent had been involved with the other was 8.82 years ($SD = 8.31$). An independent t-test indicated that the length of intergenerational relationship with family elders ($M = 14.22$, $SD = 7.13$) was significantly longer than with nonfamily elders ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 3.73$, $t(430) = 21.00$, $p < .001$). The mean age of the other was 67.08 ($SD = 5.23$).

Last, participants rated the seriousness of the conflict situation on a 7-point scale (1 = not serious at all, and 7 = very serious). A one sample t-test indicated that the mean seriousness score for the conflict scenarios ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.86$) was not significantly different from the midpoint of the scale (i.e., 4), $t(416) = -.53$, $p > .05$. This finding indicates that the conflict situations were daily life scenarios, which were perceived as neither extremely serious, nor not serious at all. There was no difference in perceived seriousness between family ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.84$) and non-family ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.88$) intergenerational conflicts, $t(415) = 1.06$, $p > .05$.

Development of the coding scheme

The first step in the current analysis was to develop a coding system that is applicable to intergenerational conflict in the Chinese context. It is very possible that some of the initiating factors identified in interpersonal conflict research will also apply in the intergenerational context because intergenerational relationship could be considered as a particular subset of interpersonal relationship. Therefore, in developing the coding scheme, the author and two other bilingual Chinese nationals were familiarized with the definitions of a list of items (e.g., criticism, illegitimate demand, rebuff) derived from previous empirical work on initiating factors of interpersonal conflict (Peterson, 1983; Witteman, 1992).

Each conflict scenario was considered as a unit of analysis. The author and the two

bilingual Chinese nationals randomly selected intergenerational conflict scenarios ($n = 125$) to identify the initiating factor in each conflict until an exhaustive list had emerged (they were put back in the pool to be included in the later coding process). We examined the respondent's direct reference, concrete descriptions and/or clear verbal indications of how the conflict was precipitated in the early stage. An initiating factor of intergenerational conflict could simply be stated in a single sentence, or embedded in a series of statements. An initiating factor that appeared across a number of scenarios was considered as a category. A total of five initiating factors (i.e., old-to-young criticism, young-to-old criticism, illegitimate demand from the elder, rebuff from the elder, and disagreement/generation gap) were identified (see Table 1). We then developed operational definitions for each of the initiating factors based on previous research (Peterson, 1983; Witteman, 1992) and our discussion.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Coding

The two bilingual Chinese, who were involved in the first phase of this study, were coders in this study. They were instructed to identify the dominant initiating factor described in each conflict scenario. They were asked to make their decisions according to the operational definition, and to read the scenario as many times as needed. When a conflict scenario could not be coded into any of the available categories, it was placed in the "other" category. Only 9 scenarios were placed in the "other" category (e.g., invasion of privacy). The two coders coded the same 100 (i.e., 23%) intergenerational conflict scenarios. The inter-coder reliability was satisfactory (92%, Scott's $\pi = .89$). Disagreement was resolved through discussion. The remaining scenarios ($n = 334$) were split and coded by the two coders.

Results

Section 1: Quantitative results

Table 2 presents the frequencies of the five initiating factors identified in the respondents' written scenarios of intergenerational conflict. The nine scenarios (2.1%) in the "other" category were not analyzed further. As shown by Table 2, old-to-young criticism was the most frequent (50.9%; $n = 221$), followed by illegitimate demand (18.0%; $n = 78$) and rebuff (13.6%; $n = 59$). The least frequent initiating factors included young-to-old criticism (8.8%; $n = 38$) and disagreement/generation gap (6.7%; $n = 29$). Chi-Square tests indicated that there were about equal numbers of reports of illegitimate demand and rebuff, $\chi^2(1) = 2.64, N = 135, p > .05$. A similar pattern was found with young-to-old criticism and disagreement/generational gap, $\chi^2(1) = 1.21, N = 67, p > .05$.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Table 3 presents the initiating factors analyzed by the type of intergenerational relationship (family and non-family). A strong pattern emerged showing more rebuffs were from nonfamily elders ($n = 36$) than from family elders ($n = 23$), $\chi^2(1) = 5.66, N = 59, p < .05$, whereas disagreement with family elders ($n = 25$) was more frequent than with non-family elders ($n = 4$), $\chi^2(1) = 11.77, N = 29, p < .01$. Proportionally speaking, there were approximately equal numbers of reports of criticism (old-to-young criticism) from family and non-family elders. Similar patterns were found with young-to-old criticism and illegitimate demand.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Section 2: Qualitative results

One of the aims of this study was to provide baseline data for the construction of conflict situations and scenarios for experimental research on perceptions and/or choices of Chinese intergenerational conflict management styles. Hence, it is necessary to report representative examples of the content themes of the initiating factors. The following brief presentation focuses on the nature, content themes and characteristics of each initiating factor.

Old-to-young criticism (n = 221)

This initiating factor appeared most frequently in these scenarios (50.9%) of this sample. The essence of this category was that the older person was critical of the young respondent due to perceived problems related to the young respondent's behavior, opinion, and/or attitude. Older adults could find various faults with young people as described by the young respondents in these scenarios. For example, failing to fulfill responsibilities or duties, displaying inappropriate manners at home and in public, operating on irregular schedules, wearing non-traditional clothes and hairstyles, being careless, and violating social norms were frequently mentioned problems or wrongdoings that led to older adults' criticism. Both family elders and non-family elders were equally critical of young people. Frequently, older adults' criticism was manifested in the form of *Laodao* (i.e., endless repeating). In addition to *Laodao*, directness and being bossy and blunt also characterized older adults' criticism toward young people at home and in public. Another feature that characterized older adults' criticism was that older adults tended to direct criticism at young people as a social group. Young people could be criticized for various things. The following are illustrative examples of old-to-young criticism.

"I bought a new pair of platform shoes. (...) She (the young person's neighbor) said 'Aiya' (this expression is similar to 'Jeeze' in the Western context), you call those shoes? They look so weird and you look terrible with those things on you! She went on and on saying that young people are getting worse these days. I tried to ignore her at the beginning, but I told her to mind her own business eventually" (Scenario 1: Female Participant).

"He (referring to his grandfather) criticized me for going out with my friends too much. He repeated that all my friends were hooligans, I did not listen and went out with my friends anyway" (Scenario 129, Male Participant).

Illegitimate demand (n = 78)

This was the second largest category, occurring 18.0% of the conflict scenarios. The major premise of this category was that the older person placed or imposed his or her wants, needs, desires, or demands

onto the young respondent regardless of the young respondent's wants, needs, or desires. Young respondents reported that there was no way to even reason with older adults in these situations who believed that they had the right, power, or status to make such demands. Illegitimate demand was equally distributed between conflict scenarios involving family and nonfamily elders. The following examples illustrate some of the content themes of illegitimate demand.

"I wanted to apply for a college in Beijing, but my teacher, who is in her sixties insisted I apply for a college near home. She didn't believe I could take care of myself so far away from home, and also questioned my ability to get into the college I had in mind" (Scenario #49, male participant).

"Our family had a meal together at my grandma's house. Afterwards, she asked me to live with her at her house for a few days. 'You don't come very often, so stay here for a while.' I know that she loves me, but there were many things that needed to be done at home, so I refused" (Scenario #386, female participant).

Rebuff (n = 59)

Rebuff was also the third largest category in these scenarios. It was considered as a rebuff when the older person bluntly rejected the young respondent's request for support, approval, help or need for more attention, affection or understanding. In other words, the young respondent did not get the desired reaction or response from the older person. The young respondents reported more rebuffs from nonfamily elders than from family elders. The following examples reflect the essence of this theme.

"I wanted to go to college and I really needed his support (referring to his grandfather) financially. He rejected me" (Scenario # 2, male participant).

"I apologized to him, but he (referring to his coworker) did not accept it and walked out of the office with anger. That made me mad" (Scenario # 25, male participant).

Young-to-old criticism (n = 38)

Young-to-old criticism was one of the least frequent initiating factors, appearing in only 8.8% of the scenarios. The essence of this factor was that the young respondent criticized or found faults with the older person's behavior, opinion, and/or attitude. In most cases, the older person did not take the criticism well and responded with anger and /or sharp words leading to the escalation of the conflict. The following examples illustrate this category.

"Last summer at my grandma's house, she spoiled my little brother rotten, and all because he's a boy. (...) Nothing my brother did could be wrong. I criticized her for doing that, but she got mad at me and would not listen" (Scenario #330, female participant).

"My elderly neighbor was literally drunk. When he continued to chug down can after can, (and getting louder by the minute), I told him, 'Stop drinking! Look at yourself, and look at all the little children here! Set a good example for them, if you don't care about your health!' At that, he basically blew up (...) " (Scenario #47, male participant).

Disagreement/Generation gap (n = 29)

This was also the least frequent initiating factor of intergenerational conflict. The bottom line of this category was that the young respondent not only perceived a difference or clash in attitude, values, life style, and/or opinions between him or her and the older person, but also argued with the older person over this difference. Frequently, the young respondent attributed the cause of the argument to age difference or generation gap. The cumulative annoyance resulting from age differences precipitated the conflict. The following examples reflect this theme.

"Our family was watching TV together. My grandfather and I run into an argument over a TV show. There happened to be a music performance on. The young dancers all had bright costumes and

green, red, and blue hair. Seeing this, my grandfather sighed, 'The young generation is lost these days. All those people up there look like the roosters in our yard! In my days, you're lucky if you could keep warm.'" I just disagreed with him. We went back and forth a couple of times, he raised his voice" (Scenario #315, female participant).

"My grandma is an old fashioned person. We'd been experiencing drought for a while, and she said, 'Why doesn't *LaoTian* (heaven) give us more rain?' I told her that rain happens when the water droplets in clouds get too big and then fall to the ground, but she just wouldn't listen, we argued and argued" (Scenarios #116, female participant).

Discussion

The current study examined conflict initiating factors as emerged in Chinese young people's written scenarios of Chinese intergenerational conflict. Previous research has established that we tend to hold others to be more responsible than we hold ourselves, especially for negative results or outcomes (Ross, 1977). Not surprisingly, three of the five initiating factors were attributed to older adults whose criticism, illegitimate demand, or rebuff precipitated the conflict, whereas one factor was attributed to the young person (i.e., young-to-old criticism) and one factor was mutual (i.e., disagreement/generation gap). It is possible that the retrospective nature of this study (which might be subject to distortion) and attributions about negative communication situations (which might be erroneous) might have influenced the results. However, given that this study solicited a **most recent** intergenerational conflict event from a relatively large group of college students on a **voluntary** and **anonymous** basis, any possible effects of individual error or personal biases should be minimal (for similar arguments see Yue & Ng, 1999).

One intriguing finding is that the Chinese participants in this study reported approximate numbers of intergenerational conflicts with family elders and nonfamily elders. It is possible that the

Chinese participants might have intentionally avoided conflicts with family elders to report to hide dysfunctional family relations (for similar argument see Zhang & Hummert, 2001). However, it is unlikely the case given the *voluntary* and *anonymous* basis of this research. Although research has indicated that the frequency of intergenerational contact was small in the West (Williams & Giles, 1996), there is no clear evidence that intergenerational contact is more frequent with family elders than nonfamily elders. It might be assumed that most of the intergenerational contacts are with family elders, however, in some cases, research indicated the opposite (Lin, 2003). Specifically, Lin (2003) found that the number of Taiwanese young people who communicated with nonfamily elders a few times a week and daily was more than the number of young people who communicated with their grandparents at the same frequencies. A similar pattern was found with American young adults (Lin, 2003). Hence, a more favorite interpretation of this finding is that intergenerational contact frequency in China may be distributed approximately equally between family and nonfamily elders in China.

A strong theme that appeared in these initiating factors is older adults' various forms of nonaccommodation to young people in both family and nonfamily settings. It is especially encouraging to see that this theme is supported by findings associated with young people's dissatisfying intergenerational communication experiences and schemas (Giles & William, 1994; Harwood, McKee, & Lin, 2000; Lin, Zhang, & Harwood, 2003; Ng et al., 1997; Williams & Giles, 1996; Yeh et al., 1998; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). The discussion will first address older adults' nonaccommodative behaviors as initiating factors (i.e., criticism and illegitimate demand) of intergenerational conflict focusing on the underlying forces and how they precipitate intergenerational conflict. Second, the effects of the type of intergenerational relations on rebuff and disagreement will be addressed. Third, discussion will focus on the current findings with respect to the initiating factors in interpersonal conflict research. Finally, directions for future research will be addressed.

Older adults' nonaccommodative behaviors as Initiating factors in intergenerational conflict: Criticism and illegitimate demand

Using different research methodologies (e.g., content analysis, experiment, survey and interview), previous research in intergenerational communication has revealed that older adults' nonaccommodative behaviors (e.g., disapproving, intrusive, and controlling) are sources of communication dissatisfaction (Giles & William, 1994; Ng et al., 1997; Williams & Giles, 1996; Yeh et al., 1998; Zhang & Hummert, 2001) in both the Western and Eastern cultural contexts. Results in the current study not only confirm these previous findings, but also demonstrate that dissatisfying or nonaccommodative old-to-young communication could precipitate intergenerational conflict. One of the most severe forms of older adults' nonaccommodation revealed in this study is criticism.

Criticism was stunningly frequent (50.9%) in the conflict scenarios. Chinese older adults (regardless of family or nonfamily elders) were often seen as critically restrictive, interfering and meddling. As described by the young respondents, criticism was often carried out inappropriately in a *laodao* (repetitious), blunt, and/or demeaning manner, which echoes negative intergenerational communication behaviors of older adults outlined by Zhang and Hummert (2001). One female respondent reported that a nonfamily older person criticized her newly highlighted hair as "like hair from a cow" and another young person was criticized by her grandmother as being more disrespectful than the dog they had.

One factor that triggers criticism is age-based categorization. Some of the negative stereotypes that Chinese older adults hold about the young include naivety, hedonism, and recklessness (Zhang & Hummert, 2000). As revealed in this study, older adults tend to direct criticism at young people as a social group (Giles & Williams, 1994; Yeh et al., 1998). This type of stereotypical nonaccommodation (e.g., "young people are getting worse these days") eventually leads to open conflict as this study shows. In addition to age-based stereotypes, the Chinese cultural norms of hierarchy and filial piety also impact intergenerational communication in both positive and negative ways.

The traditional norm of filial piety promotes authoritarian moralism (Ho, 1996). In the context of intergenerational relations, the Chinese value of filial piety not only specifies obligations for young people to respect, care, and obey older adults, but also relegates responsibilities for older adults to excise "tough love" for young people (Yue & Ng, 1999; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). Criticism with sharp words is equated with bitter medicine and is believed to be beneficial for young people's good conduct. As a result, whether at home or in public, young people easily become the victims of older adults' criticism. For example, one respondent reported a public criticism from an older coworker because the young person did not give the older person a seat of honor at a formal dinner (see also Sung, 2001).

Another respondent complained about an older person who criticized him in front of others for not taking the trash out when he was on duty.

Unfortunately, along with the modernization and globalization movement, Chinese young adults are becoming increasingly more independent and less traditional (Ng et al., 1997; Yue & Ng, 1999; Zhang & Hummert, 2001; Zhang & Harwood, 2002). Older adults are stronger proponents of maintaining hierarchical intergenerational relations than young adults, who desire more equality with older adults in communication (Zhang & Hummert, 2001). In addition, Chinese young adults' endorsement of hierarchical relations is relatively weaker than interpersonal harmony (Zhang & Harwood, 2002; Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2003). In intergenerational context, young people tend to perceive that "we should respect our elders but should not necessarily obey them", whereas older adults may expect a higher degree of obedience from young people (Yue & Ng, 1999, p.222). These perceptual differences between Chinese older and younger adults in age hierarchy and obedience obligation seem to be the fundamental forces that turn criticism to open conflict. Although older adults' criticism might be offered with good intentions, it could easily lead to young people's negative responses and thus precipitates or escalates the conflict. For example, one respondent tried to ignore her neighbor's criticism over her hairstyle, but then the young person's frustration built up as the older person's *Laodao* continued. Finally this young person engaged in a competing style and said to the older person "mind your own business, stubborn old head", which induced more severe criticism from the older person. In other cases, the negative cycle escalated to the point that the older person slapped the young person for talking back disrespectfully.

Similarly to old-to-young criticism, illegitimate demand was equally distributed between conflict scenarios involving family and nonfamily elders. Older adults regardless of relationship

can be very demanding. Zhang and Hummert (2001) argued that older adults' superior status not only "creates the obligation to educate young people", but also gives them "the right to exercise power over young people in general" (p. 225). A demand (e.g., for immediate behavioral change, help or attention) may fit the older person's normative expectations (e.g., hierarchy and obedience), but it may exceed the boundaries of reasonable expectations of the young person (e.g., "I do not have to obey you, I am an adult already"). The intent of the older person making the demand and the true legitimacy of the demand become irrelevant as far as the precipitation of open conflict is concerned. The important point is that the young person perceives it as unfair and dissatisfying because the demand might have threatened the young person's freedom of action or negative face and/or the young person's positive image or face of being capable and independent (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Initiating factors of intergenerational conflict with family and nonfamily elders: Rebuff and disagreement/generation gap

Older adults' characteristics of being caring, helping, understanding and supportive are frequently associated with young people's positive intergenerational communication experiences, schemas and age stereotypes (Harwood et al., 2000; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Lin et al., 2003; Williams & Giles, 1996; Zhang & Hummert 2001; Zhang, Hummert, & Garstka, 2002). Research has also established that older adults' life experiences and knowledge are much valued in the East (Levy & Langer, 1994; Zhang & Hummert 2001). The Chinese cultural norm of filial piety also relegates an unconditional responsibility for older adults to be role models for young people and available to help young people when needed. It has become a normative expectation of Chinese young adults to seek and get advice, support or understanding from older adults, especially from family elders (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). When this expectation is unmet, young adults feel disappointed, frustrated and upset as illustrated in the conflict scenarios. The nature of rebuff is that older adults bluntly reject young adults' appeal for favor, support or

understanding. Nonfamily elders may feel less obligated to assist young people when support is expected. This interpretation is consistent with findings in the literature in that family elders were perceived as more accommodating (e.g., supportive) than nonfamily members in general (Ng et al., 1997; Giles et al., 2003; Yeh et al., 1998).

There were more numbers of reports of conflict initiated by disagreement/generation gap with family elders than with nonfamily elders. From the perspective of young people, conflict is precipitated by the cumulative annoyance resulting from generation gap (e.g., value, life style or attitude differences). For example, a young person reported that a perceptual difference between him and the older person over the appropriateness of the performing and dressing styles of some actors on TV. As reported by this young person, this kind of perceptual difference could easily be turned into an open argument. The reported open arguments, which were precipitated by age differences, were primarily on external issues, events, and problems. While young people might have different views with older adults regardless of relationship, it seems that young people tend to verbally disagree with family elders than with nonfamily elders. Young people may feel less constrained in expressing their opinions, feeling, and ideas with family elders due to a closer and to some extent an ingroup relationship with family elders (Chu & Ju, 1993).

Comparison with initiating factors in interpersonal conflict

Comparison of the initiating factors identified in this study with previous studies on interpersonal conflict (e.g., Witteman, 1992) reveals that some of the categories are shared (e.g., criticism, illegitimate demand, and rebuff) and some are different (i.e., young-to-old criticism and disagreement/generation gap). However, even the shared themes have appeared with different frequency distributions suggesting that the real differences between the interpersonal and intergenerational conflict initiating factors are not only in kind but also in *degree or frequency*. While the most frequent initiating factor in interpersonal conflict is annoyance (cumulative, noncumulative or mutual), the most frequent initiating factor in Chinese intergenerational context is criticism. In addition, participants especially attributed age differences as basis of young-to-old and disagreement indicating that intergenerational communication conflict has its unique characteristics and deserves attention in its own right. It needs to be noted that the above discussion is limited by comparing interpersonal findings in the U.S. to intergenerational findings in China. Although research conducted in China and the U.S. has indicated more similarities than differences in intergenerational communication and perceptions of aging (e.g., Giles, McCann, Ota, & Noels, 2002; Zhang & Hummert, 2001; Zhang et al., 2002), future research should also examine the initiating factors of intergenerational conflict in the U.S. to make the comparison more meaningful.

Directions for Future Research

This study identified five initiating factors in Chinese intergenerational conflict and provides concrete scenarios of the content themes and communication features of each factor. Building from the current research, one line of research in the future could focus on predominant responses or conflict management styles that Chinese young adults employ in dealing with older adults' criticism, illegitimate demand or rebuff within both family and nonfamily settings. Similar research can be conducted to examine older adults' reaction to young

adults' criticism. Other research could examine evaluative perceptions of young and older adults' conflict management styles. Research should also address the underlying forces of young versus older adults' accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviors.

In closing, findings in this study support the statement made by Yue and Ng (1999) that Chinese older adults "are caught by the rapid various social and economic changes" and are increasingly "bewildered and confused" as to how they should carry out their obligations and what expectations they should have from young people (p. 222). Conflict should be considered a natural process that occurs often, but for most, conflict has a negative connotation, invokes negative feelings and often leads to destruction (Lindelow & Scott, 1989). From this perspective, maintaining positive intergenerational relations is important from both young and older adults. However, it is especially critical for older adults as their communication satisfaction is more dependent on young people's accommodative behaviors than the vice versa (Lin & Harwood, 2003). Future research should investigate further effects of cultural change on social and psychological well being of both young and older adults.

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Table 1. Definitions of the identified initiating factors of intergenerational conflict

Old-to-young criticism: The elderly person criticizes or finds fault with the young respondent's

behavior, opinion, and/or attitude. Frequently, this type of criticism is manifested in the form of *Laodao* (i.e., endless repeating).

Young-to-old criticism: The young respondent criticizes or finds fault with the elderly person's

behavior, opinion, and/or attitude.

Illegitimate demand: The elderly person places or imposes his or her wants, needs, desires, or

demands on the young respondent regardless of the young respondent's wants, needs, or desires based on the belief that the older person has the right or status to do so. No explicit criticism was indicated as the initiating factor of the reported conflict.

Rebuff: The older person bluntly rejects the young respondent's request for support, approval,

help or need for more attention, affection or understanding. In other words, the young respondent does not get the desired reaction or response from the older person. No explicit criticism or demand is indicated.

Disagreement/ Generation gap: The young respondent not only perceives a difference or clash in

attitude, values, life style, and/or opinions between him or her and the older person, but also argues with the older person. Age difference is considered as the cause of this type of conflict. No explicit criticism or demand is indicated.

Table 2. Frequencies of the identified initiating factors of intergenerational conflict

Initiating Factors	Frequency	
		%
	(N = 434)	
Old-to-young criticism	221	50.9
Illegitimate demand	78	18.0
Rebuff	59	13.6
Young-to-old criticism	38	8.8
Disagreement/Generation Gap	29	6.7
Others	9	2.1

Table 3. Frequencies of initiating factors by the type of intergenerational relations: Family and non-Family

Initiating Factors	Family (<i>N</i> = 231)		Non-Family (<i>N</i> = 194)		χ^2 ^a (df = 1)
	<i>N</i>	% ^a	<i>N</i>	% ^a	
Old-to-young criticism	127	29.9	94	22.1	0.87
Illegitimate demand	35	8.2	43	10.1	2.83
Rebuff	23	5.4	36	8.5	5.66*
Young-to-old criticism	21	4.9	17	4.0	0.10
Disagreement/Generation Gap	25	5.9	4	0.9	11.77**

^a χ^2 values indicate differences in the frequencies of each initiating factor across intergenerational relationship types.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Overall Chi-Square χ^2 (4) = 21.18, $N = 425$, $p < .001$.