

Lin, M.-C., & Zhang, Y. B. (2008). Taiwanese older adults' perceptions of aging and communication with peers and young adults. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 18, 135-156. Publisher's official version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/japc.18.2.02lin>, Open Access version: <http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/>.

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**Paper citation:**

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**Abstract:**

This study examined interview accounts from thirty-one Taiwanese older adults' about their inter- and intra-generational communication experiences, and perceptions of today's young and older people.

Thematic analysis showed that Taiwanese older adults tended to initiate conversation topics accommodative to young people's lives such as their job and marriage, whereas conversation topics with their old-age peers centered on adjustment into senior years (e.g., health, exercise) and their children's achievement. Analysis also revealed some of the Taiwanese older adults' major perceptions of young people (e.g., less respectful towards elders) and their peers (e.g., losing status in the family). The discursive strategies used in constructing such perceptions (e.g., discourse on self exception, denial of self inclusion) demonstrated the ways in which they negotiated and managed their age identity in inter- and intra-generational communication. Results are discussed in light of Social Identity Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory, age identity, filial piety, and culture change.

**Key words:** Intergenerational communication, age identity, Taiwan, filial piety

**Text of paper:**

Taiwanese older adults' perceptions of aging and communication with peers and young adults

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The authors would like to acknowledge our interviewer, Liao, Man-Chao for her assistance in the data collection process.

In recent years, communication and aging research has been extended to East Asian cultures such as China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Motivated by understanding the potential positive influence of the explicitly age-based Chinese cultural value, filial piety, on successful aging, researchers have explored a variety of subjects such as age stereotypes and attitudes, intergenerational communication schemas, and intergenerational conflict management (e.g., Giles, Harwood, Pierson, Clément, & Fox, 1998; Lin, Zhang, & Harwood, 2004; Ota, Giles, & Gallois, 2002; Williams et al., 1997; Zhang, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). While the bulk of these studies aimed for cross-cultural comparisons or targeted young people's perceptions, a few studies (e.g., Zhang et al., 2005; Zhang & Hummert, 2001) have attempted to reveal older adults' conceptualizations of intergenerational communication in general or in a specific context (e.g., conflict). These findings contributed to our understanding of the ways in which the concept of aging is discursively structured and manifested in intergenerational communication from an in-group's point of view. Using Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Communication Accommodation Theory (Coupland,

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Coupland, & Giles, 1991) as our analytical frames, this study examined Taiwanese older adults' accounts of perceptions of inter- and intra-generational communication in terms of conversation topics, young versus older people, and the discursive strategies used to construct their conversation topics and perceptions of old peers and the younger generation. Through this analysis, we hoped to shed some lights on older adults' discourse of filial piety in Taiwan, one of the traditional Confucian and modern East Asian societies.

### *Age as a social identity in an intergenerational context*

Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT; 1979) provides an appropriate theorizing basis to investigate age talk used to achieve positive age identity at individual and/or group levels. Strategies of age talk and age representation reveal the ways in which individuals manage their sense of self based on personal and societal/cultural views on aging (e.g., Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 1995; Lin, Hummert, & Harwood, 2004). For example, Lin et al. (2004) studied older people's discourse about aging in an online setting (i.e., SeniorNet) and found that older adults negotiated their age identities by changing existing stereotypes (actively engaging in social events), reemphasizing their positive assets to society (offering wisdom and experience), or resisting to aging (re-defining one's chronological age to a younger one). Research has also indicated that an individual's health identity becomes an important source of an older person's age identity, and habitually occurs together in older people's daily conversations (Coupland & Coupland, 1995; Lin et al., 2004). The recurrence of age talk, therefore, gives us a glance of the collective force on aging in a society and individual interpretations of such a force.

Other discursive strategies, along with the tenets of the Social Identity Theory, were also identified (see Williams & Nussbaum, 2001 for a review). For instance, a "denial of personal disadvantage" strategy is used when an older speaker rejects the idea that he/she has been personally subjected to discrimination due to his/her age. The older speaker acknowledges the possibility that his/her in-group members may have encountered such unfair treatment. Discrimination, however, only occurs at a group level (to other older people), not a personal level (not to him/herself). Another strategy is "discourse of self-exception." This method is employed when an older person attempts to psychologically or physically distance him/herself from other in-group members. The older speaker points out that negative age stereotypes (e.g., making angry complaints) only associate with other older people. Remarks like this re-affirm the existing age stereotypes. Both of these strategies are utilized to protect personal age identity at the expense of collective age identity.

Social Identity Theory in aging research places an emphasis on older adults' speech intention (e.g., Coupland et al., 1991) and communicative strategies (e.g., Williams & Giles, 1998) to achieve

that intention. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987), grounded in Social Identity Theory has been used to examine older and younger adults' perceptions of their own and/or others' accommodative behaviors in relation to quality of intergenerational communication. CAT describes ways in which individuals adopt strategic behavior to negotiate desired social distance with their interaction partners (Shepard, Giles, & Le Poire, 2001). CAT suggests that people attune their communication styles or conversation topics to be similar to or different from their partners in order to achieve various relational goals such as group identification or interpersonal solidarity. Strategies such as over-accommodation (i.e., patronizing speech; Caporael, Lukaszewski, & Culbertson, 1983), under-accommodation (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, Henwood, & Wiemann, 1988; Williams et al., 1997) from old to young or young to old resulted in dissatisfying interactions in many cases.

For example, Cai, Giles and Noels (1998) surveyed Chinese older adults' perceptions of self and other communicative behaviors when interacting with elderly non-family peers, young non-family and young family adults. One of the findings indicated that older adults viewed young family members as more accommodative to them in interaction than non-family young people, and elderly non-family peers were more non-accommodative to them. This result mirrored the strategies of SIT, such as "discourse of self-exception," where the boundary of in-group and out-group shifts to satisfy speakers' needs of positive self image.

#### *Filial piety and communication accommodation theory in the East*

Filial piety (*Xiao*), a core element of Confucianism has long been identified as the philosophical ideology and behavioral guidance of familial relationships in East Asia (Gao, 1996; Noels, Giles, Gallois, & Ng, 2001). Within the principles of filial piety, parent-child relationships are the most discussed. Obligations and respect to parents, and devotion to familial responsibilities are classic forms of filial piety (Ng, Phillips, & Lee, 2002; Sung, 2001). The virtues of respecting parents also extend to other intergenerational interactions in both family and non-family contexts. These cultural values have helped establish a stable social structure and orderly interpersonal/intergenerational relations in Chinese societies and its neighboring countries (Chang, 1997).

One approach to studying intergenerational communication in the East is from a Communication Accommodation Theory perspective (CAT). Using CAT as the major theoretical framework, recent studies have examined young people in the East and their attitudes towards aging and intergenerational relationships. While filial piety in general is still upheld by both generations, older adults are stronger proponents of the age-based value than young adults (see Pecchioni, Ota, & Sparks, 2004 for a review; Yang, 1996; Zhang & Hummert, 2001; Zhang, Hummert,

& Savundranayagam, 2004; Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005). On the other hand, many older adults also expressed an ambivalent view about aging (e.g., Ryan, Jin, Anas, & Luh, 2004). Older people recognize their marginalized roles and status in an industrialized society, and they struggle to redefine their values and identity (Chow, 1999; Coupland, 2004; Yue & Ng, 1999). Older people in this era witnessed the ongoing transition from tradition to modernity at a drastic pace. The transition is particularly tough for those in collectivistic cultures such as Asia where seniority had been highly regarded and built into the backbone of the society for centuries. Interviews and focus groups of elderly residents in Hong Kong (Ng et al., 2002) Thailand, and Taiwan, (Ingersoll-Dayton, Saengtienchai, Kespichayawattana, & Aunguroch, 2001) revealed increasingly disparate aging experiences when compared with previous generations and with the same-aged peers. In Ingersoll-Dayton and Saengtienchai (1999)'s focus group study in Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand, older participants reported that younger generations may respect the elderly but not obey their wishes. Older adults in these studies expressed desires to remain connected with their adult children but also were aware of the needs to be independent so that they did not become a burden to their children. Findings in general validate that the influence of traditional values stands strong albeit with alterations in actual practice. New meanings are added to those traditional values. As Sung (2001) put it, the meaning of elderly respect is changed from "obedience and subservience to courtesy and kindness" (p. 21).

Yeh, Williams, and Maruyama (1998) compared Taiwanese young people's evaluations of intergenerational relationships and found that Taiwanese respondents evaluated young targets as less willing to communicate and viewed old targets as less accommodative than did their American counterparts. Giles, Liang, Noels, and McCann (2001) compared Taiwanese, Chinese-American, and Euro-American young adults' perceptions of peers and non-family older people. The Taiwanese were more negative about older people, felt more deferential and obligated in interactions, and tended to avoid interactions with older adults. These findings shared similar patterns with other studies done in the Pacific Rim area (e.g., Cai et al., 1998; Williams et al., 1997). Yeh et al's and Giles et al's studies offered preliminary results of intergenerational relationships and aging in Taiwan, but they were results from young people's perceptions. How older people view their age group and their interaction with young people in this changing society has not been addressed yet.

In East Asia, the status of aging and the nature of intergenerational relationships seem to have undergone changes from supreme conformity to reciprocal exchange of advice, assistance and emotional support. These shifts in values and practices may be best captured by the Social Identity Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory. The current study, therefore, investigated older adults' perceptions of aging and intergenerational communication. Older adults' accounts on aging and perceptions of intergenerational communication in Taiwan may reveal how Taiwanese older people perceive their social status, the ways they respond to cultural changes, and the ways they manage intergenerational communication. To achieve this goal, four research questions were proposed.

RQ1: From the Taiwanese older adults' perspectives, what are the major intergenerational

conversation topics?

RQ2: From the Taiwanese older adults' perspectives, what are the major intra-generational conversation topics?

RQ3: How do Taiwanese older adults perceive young people and what are the discursive strategies used to construct their perceptions?

RQ4: How do Taiwanese older adults perceive older peers and what are the discursive strategies used to construct their perceptions?

## Method

### *Participants and procedures*

Thirty-one Taiwanese older adults (female = 16; male = 15;  $M$  age = 67.45,  $SD$  = 5.15; range = 60 - 82) from two large cities (*Taipei*, *Tainan*) agreed to participate in the interview. *Taipei* and *Tainan* are two major cities in Taiwan (*Taipei* in the North; *Tainan* in the South). *Taipei* is an urban city while *Tainan* is relatively traditionally preserved in terms of family structures and cultural values. The majority of the participants were recruited through a snowball sampling technique. This sample included older people with various level of education (i.e., elementary to four-year college), different living arrangements (e.g., living with children, living with spouse), different living environments (e.g., urban and country), and ethnicities (i.e., Taiwanese, Chinese mainland, and Hokka).

The interview protocol followed Harwood, McKee and Lin's (2000) study of intergenerational communication with American participants and Lin et al.'s (2004) study with Taiwanese young participants. Older interviewees were asked to describe a conversation with a young person and with an old-age peer. An older female adult (60-years-old) conducted one-on-one interviews in either Mandarin or Taiwanese depending upon interviewees' language preferences and proficiency. This older interviewer received training from the first author to familiarize her with interview protocol and interviewing skills. An older interviewer was appropriate for she was likely to establish a good rapport

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with interviewees as being considered "one of them." Interviewees may feel freer to express their thoughts about today's young people.

Permissions for audio recording the interview were first obtained from the interviewees. After explaining the purpose of this study, participants were instructed to describe a "typical" conversation with a younger person (30 or below), including such details as conversation topics and their feelings in the conversation. Prompts were provided (e.g., "What would be the topics discussed in this conversation?" "How would you feel in this conversation?"). Then, participants were asked to describe one to three additional conversations with a younger person. These additional descriptions were solicited using prompts from categories such as Family/non-family, hostile/kind, strangers in the subway, and ideal/worst conversations. These categories were adopted from Cantor, Mischel, and Schwartz (1982) and Harwood et al. (2000) studies. The interviewer decided which type of older adults and/or situation to introduce after listening to participants' descriptions of the previous conversation. Our intention to offer different types of older adults and situations was to explore a wide variety of intergenerational communication scenarios. Following similar interview protocols, interviewees were last asked to describe typical conversations with peers and their perceptions of older adults in Taiwan. The interview process lasted approximately from twenty minutes to an hour for each participant.

Interview accounts were first transcribed into written texts in Mandarin. The thirty-one interviews generated a total of 80 Intergenerational Conversation Descriptions (ICD; 2-5 ICDs on average per person), and a total of 26 usable Peer Conversation Descriptions (PCD). These ICDs are a mixture of personal interaction experiences with specific persons (e.g., examples and stories) and general descriptions of intergenerational communication.

### *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Lindlof, 1995) was used to identify the major themes from these ICDs and PCDs. Boyatzis (1998) defines a thematic analysis as a process of encoding qualitative information, involving the identification and interpretation of themes systematically. Themes are units derived from “conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 131). For Research Questions 1 and 2, the theme identification process followed the inductive procedures outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987). These ICDs and PCDs were independently read by the authors. Explicit descriptions of conversation topics and the ways in which they were discursively constructed were recorded on spreadsheets. We were specifically interested in the ways in which inferences (e.g., “because when we were young ...”) were made to formulate such topics. The authors then discussed their notes and interpretations to uncover themes (i.e., main ideas that appeared repeatedly across different older interviewees’ accounts) (see also William & Giles, 1996). We also consulted a native Taiwanese graduate student for issues related to expressions, interpretation, and semantics. One tenet of the Communication Accommodation Theory is “topic management” through which intention to accommodate or non-accommodate the conversation partner is accomplished. Therefore, we noted the kinds of topics and analyzed the ways in which these topics were framed from the topic management perspective as delineated in the Communication Accommodation Theory (Shepard et al., 2001).

The same procedure was adopted to address Research Questions 3 and 4. In particular, age identity strategies outlined in the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and other sociolinguistic studies on intergenerational communication (e.g., Coupland et al., 1991; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001) were used as analytic guidelines. Since RQ3 and RQ4 tapped into older adults’ perceptions of themselves (in-group) and young people (out-group), a social identity analytical frame was deemed appropriate.

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Prominent perceptions of today's young/old people were revealed after several readings across ICDs, and across PCDs. Second, we examined the discursive strategies used to convey such perceptions. All the excerpts presented in this study were translated from the Chinese transcripts to English.

## Results

### *RQ1: Conversational Topics with Young People*

In communication accommodation terms, older participants expressed an immense amount of interest and willingness to attune to young people's conversational needs (e.g., Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995). The topics brought up in the conversations were largely geared towards young people such as school, job, future career plan, marriage, or life in general. Older people seldom disclosed their own personal issues or painful experience (e.g., health, travel, retirement plan, etc.). That said, older participants felt free to discuss almost anything with their children. Statements such as, "We can talk about everything," or, "It is very relaxing, nothing needs to be avoided," were frequently used when the target was a family member (i.e., in-group).

A major difference between family and non-family members is the depth of the conversations. When the target young person was a family member, topics were discussed more thoroughly than with a non-family young person. The depth of the conversation with a non-family young person was determined by his/her responses to the first few conversation exchanges. If the non-family young interlocutor seemed to be impatient or disinterested, the older person would shift the topic or stop the conversation. Older people, thus, conducted their conversation with a non-family young person vigilantly and would adjust their conversation content and strategies accordingly.

While the conversation topics themselves were evidently accommodative to young people's interests, the ways in which these topics were discussed could be interpreted as over-accommodative

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(Giles & Williams, 1994; Lin et al., 2004). Older adults seemed to conduct conversations with a “helping schema” in that they were always ready to offer their lifetime experiences in these conversational topics (Lin et al., 2004). By inquiring into a young person’s life, an opportunity opens for older adults to insert their pieces of advice in the given area. Two excerpts are provided here for illustration:

“I will ask, ‘Do you have a good job?’ If you have a good job, that’s good. But, we as a social being, the most important thing is to fulfill our duties. First, you should fulfill your own duties, and second, you should be filial to your parents. I tell you, if you don’t work hard to make money when you are young, your life is going to be miserable when you get old later.’ I would tell him these principles in the conversation.” (interviewee 6).

“I will ask him, ‘Young man, do you have a girlfriend?’ If you do, you should be nice to her. When it is the age to get married, get married. After getting married, treat her well. Women like that. They like their husbands to care for them, to understand them. Marriage is not the tomb of romance, so you should still try to be romantic even after you walked that red carpet at your wedding. Be nice to your wife.’ I like to give these kinds of encouragement” (interviewee 17).

These two excerpts shared a similar discursive structure. A question regarding the young interlocutor’s life (e.g., job, dating) was posed, and immediately followed by the older speaker’s advice giving. When the topic is about family (e.g., “How many siblings do you have?” “Where are they working?” “How old are your parents?”), older people advise young people not to forget about filial piety. When the topic is about young people’s life style (e.g., hobbies, leisure), older people advise young people not to be wasteful. Accommodation in conversation topics may become a strategy for older adults to serve their additional purpose – to find ways to help and teach young people the “correct” ways to conduct their behaviors and personal relationships or to express their intrusive love, which can be perceived as over-accommodative and very dissatisfying by young adults (Zhang & Hummert, 2001).

*RQ2: Conversational Topics with Peers*

Three topics emerged from the analysis: Trips/leisure/hobbies, exercise/health, and children. The accounts here demonstrate “in-group” membership identification and a mutual accommodative topic management. The topics centered on activities and/or issues shared by older people. These three topics were discussed in various ways but with one common thread: responsibilities to the family and uncertainty that today's young generation will fulfill filial obligations as their previous generations always did.

*Trips/leisure/hobbies.* This topic was discussed under the assumption that older adults were already retired from their jobs, or their children were already financially self sufficient. Older adults now are interested in how others re-arrange their daily routines such as learning piano, joining a choir; re-uniting with their friends or making new friends. They like to discuss topics such as taking trips together or volunteering in social services after years of child-rearing. When we further examined the context where this topic took place, we found that many respondents expressed a “free from family responsibilities” attitude. Older adults believe that their duties to their children are now completed and it is time to pursue their own interests and likes. As the following excerpt illustrates:

“When chatting with older people, we all think that we are free now. If we want to go out, we just go out. When we come home, we just cook some simple food for ourselves. Besides, we don't need to worry about if we have money or not” (interviewee 18).

*Exercise/Health.* It is not surprising that health and exercise together emerged as a frequent conversation topic with older peers. Using health as a way to open conversation is particularly common among older adults. Frequently asked questions are like, “How is your health? We should take good care of ourselves, and take medicine on time” (interviewee 8) and, “How does he exercise? What kinds of food will be good to our health? What types of fruits? We shouldn't eat too much meat now” (interviewee 16). This topic usually leads to information exchange about the types of food that older adults have daily and the particular type of exercise that older adults do.

In addition to engaging in health-related conversations, a number of accounts revealed another side of the story: that older adults should maintain their health was a result of uncertainty about whether their children would follow the norm of filial piety and take care of them in their late lives. For instance,

“We usually talk about how to take care of ourselves including maintaining our healthy body, a good temperament, and securing financial plans for the future. Older people should not depend on their children. If your children are filial children, they will take care of you. If your children are not filial children, and you are not financially independent, you are not getting any help and you will resent your own children” (interviewee 12).

“But, we are old people now, and we should have some self awareness. You cannot expect to depend on your son...so I think older people, when they are old, they have to take care of their health. If they can take care of themselves, they take care of themselves. If you really are sick and you need to see a doctor, but your son is busy, you should say, ‘Son, I can take care of this. I will take a cab.’ That’s enough. You should not demand that your son go with you. Everyone is busy. If you can be self-sufficient, your family will be in harmony. If our family is harmonious, our society will be harmonious” (interviewee 29).

These excerpts showed that older people advise each other not to expect their offspring to adhere to the norm of filial piety. Since the enforcement of the norm of filial piety is weakened, it is critical to obtain information about healthy food and helpful exercises so their “deposit” (meaning remaining healthy) (interviewee 17) will last long.

*Children’s achievements.* Children’s accomplishments are one of parents’ favorite subjects of conversations. However, it is also a topic that needs to be avoided when conversing with their peers. On the one hand, it is proper to inquire after older people’s children; on the other hand, it is not appropriate to ask detailed questions whether their children are taking care of them physically, visiting them regularly, supporting them financially, or respecting them properly. These questions tend to place their children under scrutiny of meeting filial responsibilities. When the conversation did involve such an issue, older interviewees would smooth it out. The following two examples illustrate different ways older adults conversed on this topic.

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"If [this older person's] children are not as good [filial] as what we expect them to be, we will comfort this person saying, 'You should keep this out of your mind! This is life. Our children have their own fate and luck. You should think of it this way more often: As long as children have their own jobs; at least we do not have to worry about whether they can support themselves. It is sad that they don't give us money. But, at least, they don't come and ask for money, right?' (interviewee 2).

"When it comes to children, you should always take a positive outlook...I tell them [older people], 'If your children do not come back to visit you, don't take it as a sign of not being filial. You just think that maybe it is because they are busy.' Take a positive outlook, right? Everything has a positive and a negative side" (interviewee 21).

Both excerpts showed that older participants are trying to comfort their old peers whose children are not filial by asking them to take a different but positive perspective. The first excerpt achieves this purpose by introducing the worst scenario case through the "downward comparison" (Heidrich & Ryff, 1993) – ("at least they do not come and ask for money, right?"). The older interviewee in the second excerpt advises older adults to adopt positive perspectives to interpret their children's behaviors.

### *RQ3: Perceptions of Today's Young People*

Older participants' accounts suggest that among Taiwanese young people, there is an increased interest in "self." This self orientation is spoken of negatively because it conflicts with the collectivistic values such as filial piety, respect for the elderly, or saving money/working hard for the future. These perceptions are framed in two forms, striving for a comfortable life, and less respectful for older adults.

*Striving for a comfortable life.* Young people were perceived to be more materialistic and less likely to endure hardship in life or at work. Examples are "young people care about their own satisfaction, their own needs, not others. They call their friends and talk about which restaurant or which club to go to afterwards" (interviewee 1), "Today's young people cannot endure hardship, they cannot. They are not able to stick to one job for too long. Unlike us, we endured so much and tried to

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live through those tough times. Now, [Young people have] their fathers give them money to spend. Whatever they want, they can get it (interviewee 21)."

*Less respectful for older adults.* Another form of self orientation is expressed through young people's attitudes towards older adults. An interviewee expressed his view, "[young people] today are not that easy to communicate with, they are more interested in themselves, and more disrespectful of the elderly. Unlike us, we respected our seniors very much; our generation is very respectful for the previous generation. Young people today, they've changed. They don't have respect for the old (interviewee 28)." The phrase, "unlike us" is commonly used to mark group differences and stress positive characteristics of in-group members. Two excerpts demonstrate this cross-generation comparison technique.

"I often hear them saying things like, 'As long as I have money to cover my expenses today, [I don't care about anything else]' or 'parents can take care of themselves; that's their own business. The money we make is our money. We don't need to be responsible for them. They have money for themselves.' I really don't feel I can accept this kind of thinking because when we were young, we took care of our elderly family members, and also took care of our own children without complaint. Now the society is changing. I don't really like to hear that" (interviewee 1).

"Times have changed. The whole world is changing. Young people today don't like to listen to older people. When older people say something, they don't want to listen. If I said something to them, they dared not interrupt me or talk back. They only nodded and said, 'Okay, okay' but were they really listening? I don't know!" (interviewee 22).

Comparison is made between two generations or sometimes even three (young people, old people, and the previous generation when old people were young). Older interviewees cited evidence to support their views, for example, that classical filial duties were not practiced and hierarchical relationships were challenged.

*RQ4: Perceptions of Today's Older People*

When asked about their perceptions of today's older people, these older participants offered lengthy accounts. An "in-group oriented" topic seemed to lend itself to much elaboration. Notably, however, sub-categorizations were made clearly in these accounts. Older interviewees strategically presented themselves positively by either dissociating themselves from other less fortunate elderly or associating themselves with other peers when comparisons were made with the young adult group. Three discursive strategies were identified in these accounts: Discourse of self-exception, Denial of personal disadvantage, and Discourse of self-inclusion.

*Discourse of self-exception.* Older adults distance themselves from negative images of old age, and to a certain degree, completely "tune out" of the group. Many interview accounts could be read as if they were from a young or middle-aged person. Two examples below illustrate this strategy.

"Today's older people, some of them have bad temper...they don't have money so they ask their sons for it. If their sons do not give them the money, they become upset. That is not right...many old people are like that now. If their sons refuse to give them money, they yell at them. The whole family is not at peace. I don't like this kind of old people. In today's society, you cannot have the mindset of, "I am the father, so I am the biggest person in the family" (Interviewee 29).

"Sometimes you see older people sitting in the park alone. It is such a pity. You go there and ask, 'Do you come down here everyday?' I will ask questions like this. You can tell that they are bored and very lonely... You go outside and you will see many old people like that...I wonder is it because their children are not nice them or because they don't have money or because they are in poverty?" (Interviewee 9).

The first interviewee challenged absolute authority and criticized many older people for being overly demanding ("This is not right!"), which may disrupt family harmony. In the second example, the interviewee felt sympathetic for older adults ("lonely and bored") and attributed older adults' situations to their children's lack of attention or money, which should have been one of the children's filial duties.

*Denial of personal disadvantage.* This strategy refers to older people disclaiming being the victim of negative age stereotypes personally, but having witnessed other older adults subjected to such mistreatment. Two examples are provided here.

"[I feel that] Today's older people are more pitiful [than the previous generation]. Those whose sons are not filial are very pitiful. I am not worried about myself having such things happen to me, but when I saw other older people who were treated that way, I felt really sorry for them, [sorry for] the kind of life they have..." (interviewee 26).

"Today, young people have their own feelings and thoughts; we older people have our own feelings and thoughts. We now should be more submissive to young people. We shouldn't have the idea that we are 'old people.' Like me, I won't say that young people should treat us this way or that way. I don't talk about them that way anymore. I won't. Young people have their own minds and we have ours. It is okay for us. I won't say what young people should be doing [for us]" (interviewee 14).

The difference between a "denial of personal disadvantage" strategy and the "discourse of self exception" is that the former has a clearer in-group age group indication that shows the narrator is also one of the aging persons whereas the latter suggested a complete disassociation from the age group. The first excerpt is a perfect example of the employment of a denial of personal disadvantage. In this excerpt, the speaker conveyed an impression that her children were, unlike others, very filial and this established a positive credential for this interviewee as a successful parent. The participant in the second excerpt acknowledged the different perceptions of the two generations, but chose to accommodate to younger people's ways of thinking. By expressing having a different mentality (e.g., "we should not have the idea that we are old people."), this older participant moved him/herself out of this age classification, and its old-fashioned and unrealistic expectations of the young generation. As a result, he/she is no longer under the scrutiny of disrespectful treatments like others.

*Discourse of self-inclusion.* A number of accounts showed that older participants discursively aligned themselves with other older members. A cohort effect was verbalized to establish "in-group" perspectives. An "out-group" (i.e., young people) may or may not be directly present in these accounts, but it is a precondition where this self inclusion strategy achieves its purpose. Two examples are included below:

"When it is older people to older people, we have many more things to talk about. Now that we are retired, we talk about politics, social issues, everything. From outer space to geography, everything

can be discussed. Talking to old people is like this; sit down, make some tea, and we talk”

(interviewee 31).

“If I run into the colleagues I worked with before, those who are older than I am, we would have a great time together. We reminisced about the old time, very happy. Sometimes we just couldn't stop talking about it! We talked about how hard working we were. The young people today [are not the same]. In our days, when we saw our boss, we were intimidated and respectful. People today, even when they see the president of their company, they don't give a damn! People today, it is a change, a big change. They don't give a damn whether you are the boss or not” (interviewee 28).

The first excerpt is a typical example of in-group conversations with words such as “older people to older people” and “we” appear interchangeably. The second excerpt is an example that younger people were included for comparison purpose (i.e., work ethics) to reinforce the in-group commonality (a positive one). A “compare and contrast” way of conversing is a common method in reminiscence talk. Through introducing the out-group into this “life review,” older interlocutors collectively created a positive sense of self.

## Discussion

Several themes emerged from Taiwanese older people's accounts of their aging experiences and communication with peers and young adults. First, the findings of this study show that Taiwanese older adults tend to initiate conversation topics accommodative to young people's lives, whereas conversation topics between old-age peers center on their adjustment into senior years and recounting children's achievements to their peers. Second, age relevant discursive strategies suggest that Taiwanese older adults are intra-personally renegotiating their age identity which is manifested in their interview accounts. The increasing discrepancy between the actual and expected respect for the elderly in modern Taiwanese society threatens older adults' traditional positive age identity. Hence, positive group distinctiveness and self-esteem are discursively renegotiated. Third, consistent with previous studies in other East Asian regions, older adults in Taiwan have ambivalent feelings about aging in that they desire to be respected but acknowledge that their age-based status is less endorsed (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2001; Ng et al., 2002; Ryan et al., 2004). Their communication with young people highlights such feelings.

*Dialectical interplay between under-accommodation and accommodation*

Our respondents chose the kinds of conversation topics that would allow them to simultaneously maintain their advisory status while being accommodative to young adults (i.e., in terms of conversation topic selection). Whether or not this is a skillful communication strategy depends on young interlocutors' perceptions and older speakers' effort to satisfy their desires to "help" and to let young people disclose. This finding posts an interesting question about the nature of communication accommodative strategies. That is, it may be pre-mature to determine if a topic is accommodative or not based merely on the topic per se. Harwood and Lin's (2000) study on grandparent and grandchildren communication suggested that grandchildren may not want to discuss their school life (e.g., grade performance, weekend activities) with their grandparents to avoid disapproval. Also, Lin, Harwood and Shaner's (2000) work on grandparent-grandchild conversation topics failed to find any significant correlation between the types of the conversation topics and any of the relational measurements (e.g., liking, closeness). Thus, a qualitative approach may provide a clearer picture as to how the accommodative strategies are employed in conversations which may in turn influence interlocutors' interpretations and feelings about the conversations and their conversation partners.

To place this point into the current context, young people in general understand older adults' good intentions behind intrusive advices (Lin et al., 2004; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). When the conversation is managed well, a mutual satisfaction can be achieved (Williams et al., 1997). Our results in this study offer a possible reason as to why such a mechanism might exist. Young people may already know what is behind the topical accommodation – usually followed by unsolicited advice; thus, they might resist participating in such a scripted conversation sequence and consider older adults as imposing and intrusive.

Nevertheless, it would be a misunderstanding to conclude that older people do not want to listen to young people's feelings and thoughts, and that they only want to force their values onto young people. On the contrary, a number of accounts in this study showed that older people had an interest in learning young people's viewpoints or enjoyed telling each other funny stories without a purpose of "teaching them something." Again, this mutual interest is usually between family members. In addition to topical accommodation, some older people are sensitive to young people's reactions to their advice-giving and determine whether they should continue to pour our advice to their young counterparts. As two respondents stated, "If the young person does not seem to agree with what we say to him, then, we should not try to force it," (interviewee 31) and, "If the young person doesn't want to talk about this topic, we can tell it from their facial expression. Then, we should change to a different topic or change the way we discuss this topic" (interviewee 10).

From older adults' perceptions, they may assume that their experiences and advice are valuable to younger people so they should meet the role expectation (Zhang & Hummert, 2001). A substantial number of accounts had an advice-giving intention embedded in intergenerational conversations. Advice-giving is a common trait of intergenerational conversations, especially in East Asia. It is interesting that both young and older adults in Taiwan have a strong "helping" schema for

intergenerational communication (Lin et al., 2004). For young adults, it is "sympathy for the old" that motivates their helping schema while for older people it is "role expectation." Whether or not these two helping schemas are one source of dissatisfying communication dividing the two generations or one source of connection bridging the two generations deserves scholarly attention in the future.

Our interview accounts also demonstrated the dynamic nature of communication accommodation when different group memberships are crossed: the accommodative pattern between older adults' conversations. Older interviewees in this study strategically managed their age and family identities: they demonstrated a "dance on the edge" maneuver when they conversed with their peers. On the one hand, older adults selected mutual conversation topics to allow them to brag about their own children (e.g., achievement and temperaments), feeling positively about their shared age identity (i.e., being old and proud of their children). On the other hand, conversations about their children essentially permeate their family identity. Given that there is not a family bond between the two older interlocutors. They have to delicately manage their conversation topic, not to touch on a sensitive issue that might be unpleasant for their older peers or considered as criticizing their children. Even so, some interview accounts also showed that older adults may have to play the role of counselor to comfort their peers whose children may not be meeting the filial expectations. In such a case, older adults discursively re-assume an in-group role to help smooth out an inter-generational conflict (old peers and their children). Nevertheless, our findings are adequate to suggest that multiple group memberships may interact in older-peers communication. Older adults have to be sensitive enough to accommodate to each other's "face" needs mandated by both their age and family identities.

#### *Promoting positive identity through age relevant strategies*

Our findings revealed that these Taiwanese older adults' positive identity is promoted through various age relevant strategies. Along with the family factor, some patterns emerged. The first pattern is accomplished by reference to one's children. In some cases, their filial children were directly mentioned (e.g., "it wouldn't happen to me. My children are very filial") and in some other cases, their children were implied. In this way, older participants achieved positive faces for themselves and their family. Another reference point is their effortful adjustments to the new interaction expectation either by directly expressing that they have changed or by blaming other older people for not doing so. Through strategies such as self-exception or denial of personal disadvantages, older people's individual age identity is strengthened at the expense of the collective one. These patterns show that the nature of one's age identity is fluid and always under negotiation.

Previous studies (e.g., Lin et al., 2004; Paoletti, 1998) have employed the SIT approach to uncover older adults' age identity negotiation in conversations with older peers in Western societies. Our analyses suggest that a SIT framework is also applicable in a non-US/non-Western context. Moreover, there have been numerous discussions on the concept of filial piety and the challenges its stakeholders' face in East Asia. For example, Zhang et al.'s (2001) study suggests the negotiation of the communicative norms of filial piety in intergenerational communication. The current study

shows how older adults may present themselves and their age group in inter- or intra-generational conversations. Their own face is protected when they talk about their children's filial accommodation and their own flexibility to adjust. The "face of their age group," however, suffers in some cases. Some interviewees even condemned their peers for unreasonably demanding young generations to follow traditional filial piety norms. Future studies may examine whether those who are willing to adjust their expectations of filial piety have more successful aging and better well-being than those who cling to traditional norms.

#### *Uncertainty about aging and adaptation into new expectations*

Retirement can be a welcome point of a person's life to have a second chance to live life as he/she pleases, and yet it can be an uncertain time not knowing what he/she can do, especially for those who base their own value on their relationships with children. In a collectivistic culture, there is a strong need to relate to others, particularly to one's family members. In this study, older interviewees have put aside their personal interests for their children and family. With the new freedom acquired after retirement, older adults plan to pursue their dreams or at least do not have to perform family tasks (e.g., cooking for the children) as before. It seems to be universal that older people's "free from family responsibilities" concept underlies their active engagement in various activities. A similar attitude was also found in Lin et al.'s (2004) study on online message boards posted by US seniors. Traditional core status given to old age and its responsibility to maintain a well functioning family is replaced with freedom to pursue one's own interests and spend time with peers. Interdependence used to be the prevalent value processing mechanism; however, Taiwanese older adults now have to seek a new balance between interdependence and independence such as actively pursuing of social engagements while helping their adult children with child-rearing.

Communicatively, balance was sought when these older interviewees conversed with peers about their children, which is a very sensitive issue. Thus, they approached it with caution by adjusting their discourse according to their peers' responses. Instead of blaming the young generation for violating the cultural norm, these older respondents seemed to console each other by either attributing the unfortunate to uncontrollable fate, or finding ways to excuse their children's behaviors. These two discursive forms suggest a discrepancy between Taiwanese older people's filial expectations and young people's actual behavior. As a result, older people begin to cope with this disappointment and accommodate to the changing trend. Accommodation and coping are shown through their rigorous effort to maintain health and alter one's mentality of filial piety. This mentality change is also seen in other regions such as Hong Kong and Thailand (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2001; Ng et al., 2002).

#### *Limitations and future direction*

On the one hand, a small sample size and a qualitative approach limit this study's generalizability, but on the other hand, the richness of the accounts informs us about the subtleties of inter- and intra-generational communication. These results warrant further examination. For instance, several studies (e.g., Cai et al., 1998, Noels et al., 2001) have suggested that quality peer communication,

rather than intergenerational communication, is a significant predictor of older people's sense of well being and positive self-esteem in Asia. These studies did not make distinctions between young non-family and young family members. That is, whether or not interaction with older peers has more influence on older adults' psychological well-being than interaction with younger generations or there is significant difference between older family members and older non-family members. There is no direct empirical evidence yet to disentangle these factors in order to understand the impact of peer communication on older adults such as quality of life and successful aging.

Second, these elderly interviewees were in relatively good health. As indicated in the literature, one's health status and his/her age identity are interrelated (Lin et al., 2004). Thus, their good health may affect their perceptions of aging and communication between and within generations. Future studies should attempt to gather discourses from older people with various health conditions and examine their perceptions of inter- and intra-generational communication and discursive strategies in identity management.

Taiwanese older adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, like many elderly in other parts of the world, are facing drastic cultural and societal changes including having a longer life expectancy than previous generations. As these interviewees have come to a point in their lives where they should be the beneficiaries of the societal norm of filial piety, they realized that there may be a shortage of supply on the other end. Intergenerational relationships are less hierarchical and more equal; however, older adults are not completely yielding their authoritarian status, which is a traditional source of their positive identity. Few rubrics are available for Taiwanese older adults to model. Hence, future research should focus on identifying conversation dynamics contributing to positive and satisfying intergenerational communication and successful aging in Taiwan.

Old age in the East in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may not be a harvest time for a person to enjoy prosperity, proper care from his/her offspring, or absolute respect from the public; at least it is no longer a taken-for-granted expectation. How to find a balance between independence and interdependence and how this balance is reciprocated by their adult children are issues with which many older adults in Asia are currently concerned.

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