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# Culture, Self-construal and Social Cognition: Evidence from Cross-Cultural and Priming Studies

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Members of different cultures vary in basic social psychological processes, such as value orientation, attitudes, attitude-behavior relations, person perception and attribution of observed behavior. Previous researchers have traced back these differences to the respective culture members' self-construal: Westerners define their self primarily in independent terms, whereas Asians are more likely to define their selves in interdependent ways. This difference in construing the self in turn affects the above mentioned judgmental processes. However, when relying on cross-cultural studies alone, the critical role of the self cannot directly be tested. In this chapter I argue that the accessibility of either independent or interdependent self-knowledge plays a critical role, because judgments are assimilated to either autonomous –or social– contents to the degree that independent –or interdependent– self-knowledge is accessible in the judgmental situation. If so, making self-knowledge of one kind or the other temporarily accessible, should mirror cross-cultural differences. I will review a series of studies confirming this assumption. These studies will be discussed with regard to their implications a) for the role of the self in judgment formation and b) for the flexibility of cultural differences.

How does culture affect individual thinking, feeling, and action? What are the psychological mediators by which culture affects individual experience and social cognition, including political judgment and decision making? Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued in their highly influential article in *Psychological Review*, that one of the critical variables by which culture affects the way we think, feel, and act is the individual construal of the self. Culture, so they argued, affects how we construe our identity, and this self-construal in turn influences subjective experience in various domains. In particular Markus and Kitayama differentiated between two fundamentally different perspectives on the self. Within the independent construal, the self is seen as fundamentally different from others. Important self-definitions refer to one's autonomous features, such as traits, abilities, and personal attitudes. This way of defining the self is most prominent in Western, individualist societies. The interdependent perspective which is typical for East Asian, collectivist culture members, stresses the fundamental connectedness of the self to others. Important self-definitions within this perspective refer to one's social roles, group memberships or personal relations to important others. Whenever a psychological process implicates the self, the degree of independence-interdependence will affect the outcome. Markus and Kitayama thus argued that a person's sense of the self is influenced by his or her cultural background and influences in turn how the person thinks, feels and acts. But how exactly does this influence come about? What are the exact psychological processes by which the self affects individual experience?

### **Social Cognition of the Self**

In order to partly answer this question, I put forward a Social Cognition perspective on the self. Within this perspective, the self can be conceived of as a knowledge structure containing the total amount of information an individual encodes in memory across the life-span (Hannover, 1997; Linville & Carlston, 1994; Markus, 1977; for a recent review see Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). At any given moment only a subset of this entirety of self-knowledge can be retrieved from memory. This subset can include both independent and interdependent pieces of self-knowledge. Within this view the *relative accessibility* of independent or interdependent knowledge mediates the self's influence on individual experience. Accessibility describes the ease with which a certain piece of information can be

retrieved from memory. A certain piece of self-knowledge is more accessible, the more recently (*situational or temporary accessibility*) and the more frequently (*chronic accessibility*) it has been retrieved from memory (Higgins & Bargh, 1987). Accordingly, inter-individual differences in self-construal can be interpreted as differences in the relative chronic accessibility of independent versus interdependent self-knowledge. This applies for instance to cultures: Individualist culture members encounter social contexts fostering an independent self-view more frequently than do members of collectivist societies, who on the other hand are more frequently exposed to contexts fostering an interdependent self-view. While encountering either independent or interdependent social contexts, the respective kind of self-knowledge is activated over and over again, thus becoming chronically accessible from memory (Hannover, 1997). At the same time, intra-individual differences in the accessibility of independent and interdependent self-knowledge may result from being exposed to contextual factors which temporarily prime self-knowledge of one kind or the other (Hannover, 1997). Chronic and temporary sources of construct accessibility are functionally equivalent (Higgins & Bargh, 1987).

This Social Cognition perspective offers the possibility to link cross-cultural research (which by definition rests on investigating inter-individual differences) to experimental approaches as frequently used in social cognition research. If indeed the self is one of the critical mediators for cultures' influence on thinking and judgment (as suggested by cross-cultural research), and if furthermore chronic and temporary sources of construct accessibility are functionally equivalent (as proposed within social cognition research), then it follows that experimentally manipulating the accessibility of self-knowledge of one kind or another should result in the same differences on subsequent judgments as the ones we know from comparing people with individualist or respectively collectivist cultural backgrounds (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Haberstroh, Oyserman, Schwarz, Kühnen, & Ji, 2002; Hannover & Kühnen, 2004, 2007; Kühnen & Haberstroh, 2004).

Researchers have identified several priming techniques by which the accessibility of independent and interdependent self-knowledge can be manipulated. For instance, Trafimow and colleagues (Trafimow, Triandis & Goto, 1991; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998) asked American and Asian research participants to think either about what they have in common with their family and friends or what distinguishes them from these relevant others. In a subsequent self-description task, participants used more independent terms after having thought about differences than after having listed commonalities with their family and friends. Another priming technique has been developed by Gardner et al. (1999). These authors had their (American) research participants read a paragraph about a trip to a city. In one condition, the paragraph included first-person singular pronouns only (such as I, me, mine, etc.), whereas in the other condition first-person plural pronouns were used in the text (e.g., we, us, ourselves, etc.). After having circled these pronouns, all participants faced the same open-ended self-description task as in the Trafimow et al. (1991) study. As predicted, participants in the first-person singular condition described themselves in more independent terms than participants in the first person plural condition.

### **Self-Construal and Value Endorsement**

How does accessible self-knowledge of one kind or the other affect judgment and decision making? Independent self-knowledge refers to an individual's attitudes, traits, and abilities that distinguish the person from others (i.e., to autonomous semantic contents). In contrast, interdependent self-knowledge describes an individual's affiliation to others and to particular social contexts (i.e., it contains social semantic contents). Many authors have shown that people use the mental categories which can most easily be retrieved from memory, with judgments being assimilated towards the denotative and connotative aspects of the activated category (Bargh, 1997; Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Higgins, Rholes & Jones, 1977). Therefore, if independent self-knowledge is accessible, be it either situationally due to previous

priming or chronically to a person's cultural background, autonomous contents about the self should guide information processing with incoming new information being assimilated toward them. Likewise, if interdependent self-knowledge is accessible either through priming or culture, social contents about the self should figure more prominently in the respondent's mind. Accordingly, judgments can be expected to be assimilated to these social contents.

This line of argumentation has several implications for (political) judgment and decision making, including value endorsement, political attitudes, attitude-behavior relations and attribution of political attitudes in others. There is ample empirical evidence that Westerners and Easterners have different values, with Western culture members endorsing primarily individualist values, while East Asians endorse collectivist values more strongly. Does independent and interdependent self-knowledge have a causal influence on value judgments? The already mentioned study by Gardner and colleagues (1999) suggests that this is indeed true. After their participants had circled either I, me or mine, etc. in the one condition, or we, us, ourselves, etc. in the other, they did not only fulfill a self-description task, but in addition they answered several value questions taken from Schwartz's (1992) value inventory, some of which referring to individualist values others to collectivist ones. The results were threefold: First, as described above participants' self-descriptions were influenced by the preceding pronoun circling task. Second, participants in the independent prime condition endorsed individualist values more strongly than collectivist ones, with this difference being reversed for interdependent primed participants. Third, and most importantly, a mediation analysis showed that the effect of the experimental priming on value endorsement was mediated by the kind of activated self-knowledge. The we-primed participants endorsed collectivist values more strongly, because interdependent self-knowledge had been rendered accessible by the priming technique. Likewise having circled I, me, and mine activated independent self-knowledge and as a consequence participants endorsed individualist values primarily. This effect shows the causal impact of independent or interdependent self-knowledge being accessible on value judgments. Priming self-knowledge of one kind or the other thus mirrored cross-cultural differences between the members of individualist versus collectivist cultures. In a second study this study's central findings were conceptually replicated with participants from the US and Hong Kong.

### **Self-Construal and Attitude Formation**

The same line of argumentation can be applied to the formation of attitudes. There is a long standing debate about the stability versus flexibility of attitudes. While some attitudes can be directly retrieved from memory and are therefore more stable, others have to be formed on the spot. At least this latter kind of attitudes are partially influenced by pieces of knowledge being accessible in that very moment, and are therefore subject to the impact of situational priming. If the respective attitudes are related to independence-interdependence, priming self-knowledge of one kind or the other should alter them. This is for instance the case with regard to attitudes toward affirmative action (Kimmelmeier, 2003). Affirmation action policies are to a certain extent incompatible with the Western ideal of an independent individual, because within affirmative action individuals are judged on the grounds of their group membership. Accordingly, Ozawa, Crosby, and Crosby (1996) found that Japanese participants endorsed affirmative action much stronger than American participants. Building on this research, Kimmelmeier (2003) first primed either independent or interdependent self-knowledge in his American research participants, before asking them to report their attitudes toward affirmation policies. He found, that participants who were primed for the independent self subsequently resisted stronger to affirmative action policies than interdependent primed participants. Hence, the study by Kimmelmeier mirrors the cross-cultural findings by Ozawa et al. (1996) by means of experimentally manipulating the accessibility of independent and interdependent self-knowledge, suggesting that political attitudes toward affirmative action are at least partially flexible and influenced by accessible self-knowledge of one kind or the other.

Yet not only the formation of attitudes is affected by accessible self-knowledge, but also the impact of attitudes and subjective norms on behavior is influenced accordingly. Trafimow and Finlay (1996) measured the extent to which participants' self-construals reflect independence or interdependence, respectively, using the self-construal scale developed by Singelis (1994). The authors also measured attitudes, subjective norms (i.e., assumptions about the expectations of others) and behavioral intentions in variety of domains. They were interested in the predictability of behavioral intentions, based on attitudes and social norms. Trafimow and Finlay (1996) predicted that attitudes should be more important for participants with primarily independent selves, and hence, for them the attitude-intentions-correlation should be higher than the norms-intentions correlation. By contrast, social norms should be more relevant for interdependent individuals, and accordingly for them behavioral intentions should correlate higher with subjective norms than attitudes. The results confirmed these predictions. While this study provides only indirect evidence of the causal impact of self-knowledge on the respective correlation, Ybarra and Trafimow (1998) used an experimental manipulation to first render either independent or interdependent self-knowledge accessible, before assessing the same attitudes, subjective norms and behavioral intentions as the ones assessed by Trafimow and Finlay (1996). After being primed for independence, behavioral intentions correlated higher with attitudes than subjective norms, while this pattern was reversed after being primed for interdependence. Thus, the findings by Ybarra and Finlay mirror the results from Trafimow and Finlay, suggesting that independent and interdependent self-knowledge does indeed have a causal impact on the relation of intentions to attitudes versus subjective norms.

Building on this research Yugay and Kühnen (2006) recently investigated how a person who behaved according either to his or her attitudes or subjective norms, respectively, would be perceived and judged by individuals with accessible independent or interdependent self-knowledge. If people with an independent self decide for themselves to behave according to their attitudes rather than subjective norms, they might as well appreciate, if others behave similarly. These individuals may regard it as an indication of weakness to behave according to subjective norms. Interdependent individuals by contrast are more willing to behave according to their subjective norms, and so they may also value, if others decide in the same way. Confirming social expectation for them can be considered a means to strengthen the interdependence with others, whereas making one's decision according to one's attitudes rather than subjective norms may threaten this interdependence.

In order to answer this question, we used similar material as Trafimow and Finlay (1996). We measured participants' self-construal by means of Singelis' self-construal scale (1994) and classified them into those with a rather independent construal of the self and those with a rather interdependent one (median split). In addition, we used the pronoun circling task described above (Gardner et al., 1999) in order to activate either independent or interdependent self-knowledge. Our participants then received little vignettes, in which target persons were described experiencing a conflict between personal attitudes and assumptions about the expectations of others (i.e., their subjective norms). The scenarios were similar to the ones used in Trafimow's studies. Our participants were also informed that these target persons behaved either according to their attitudes or to subjective norms. All participants judged the liking for these targets on several dimensions. The results were in line with the predictions and showed that participants with an independent self-construal, as measured by the Singelis' scale, liked the target person better, if he or she acted according to his or her attitudes rather than subjective norms. This finding was reversed for interdependent participants.

In addition, we found a similar pattern for the priming conditions. Participants in the independent prime condition liked the target person better, if he or she behaved according to personal attitudes rather than subjective norms. Again, this pattern was reversed for participants in the interdependent prime condition. Together these results show that independent and interdependent self-knowledge, if accessible, influences not only how individuals make decisions for themselves, but also how they interpret and judge decisions made by others. As in

the previously described cases, priming self-knowledge of one kind or the other mirrors findings from inter-individual comparisons between persons who differ with regard to what self-knowledge is invariably accessible to them.

### **Self-construal and Attribution**

While in the latter study all relevant information about the target persons was directly given to the judging research participants, in natural settings reasons about why a certain person acted in a given way can usually only be inferred by attribution processes. One of the most pervasive tendencies in attribution processes is the tendency to attribute observed behavior to internal features of the actors, such as his or her traits or attitudes, while not taking situational influences sufficiently into account. One of the most frequently studied consequences of this kind of dispositionalism is the correspondence bias, which refers to attributing behavior to the actor's attitudes that correspond with the behavior, even if one learns that the performed behavior was socially constrained. In one of the most frequently used experimental paradigms participants read an essay about a controversial issue (such as capital punishment) and learned that the author was told by someone else to argue either in favor or against this respective issue. In other words, participants learned that the behavior was socially constrained. Subsequently, participants are asked to infer the author's real attitude. The classic finding is that, despite the fact that participants are informed that the author had no choice in writing either a pro- or anti-essay, participants ascribe a more positive attitude to pro- than anti- authors, reflecting the tendency to attribute the behavior (i.e., writing the pro- versus anti-essay) to a corresponding attitude (Jones & Harris, 1967).

Numerous studies converge in showing that Western and Eastern culture members hold very different concepts of agency: Westerners see agency as a property of the individual, whereas for Easterners, it is the group or one's social surroundings that is the origin of agency (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Kitayama & Uchida, 2005; Markus, Uchida, Omorieg, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006). One of the consequences of this different conceptualization of agency is the different extent to which these cultures' members are prone to commit dispositional biases in attribution. Although dispositionalism has been shown to be quite robust across cultures (Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000; Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999), there are at least certain circumstances in which members of "Eastern interdependence" cultures seem to apply situational explanations as well (Choi et al., 1999; Morris & Peng, 1994). That is, both Easterners and Westerners think dispositionally, however, they diverge in the extent to which they additionally consider situational information when making attributions. Whereas Westerners most likely ignore the context, regardless of whether it is applicable to the judgment or not and irrespective of how salient or predictive it is (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Miyamoto & Kitayama, 2002), Easterners take situational factors into account when information about those factors is applicable to the judgment at hand, particularly when the information is salient or highly predictive.

In a recent study by Miyamoto and Kitayama (2002), Western (American) and Asian (Japanese) research participants read either a pro- or con-essay on capital punishment and were informed that the essay writer (a student) had been told by his professor to be pro or con in his/her writing. In addition, Miyamoto and Kitayama varied the length of the provided essay, assuming that a long essay should mistakenly be seen as more diagnostic for the authors' real attitude than a rather short essay. As a consequence, both Western and Eastern participants were expected to exhibit the correspondence bias, if the provided essay was long. If, however, the essay was rather short, Miyamoto and Kitayama predicted that Asians would take the situational impact of the social constraint into account. This should, hence, reduce the observable correspondence bias. For Western research participants on the other hand this was not expected to be the case. Irrespective of whether the provided essay was long (i.e., "diagnostic") or short (i.e., "non-diagnostic"), these participants should attribute more positive attitudes to pro as compared to con authors. These predictions were fully confirmed.

As the above reasoning would suggest, we recently tested whether priming independent versus interdependent self-knowledge would lead to similar effects as the cultural difference (Hannover, Kühnen, Pöhlmann, & Roeder, in review). The design of our study essentially followed the experiment by Miyamoto and Kitayama (2002) with culture as a factor being replaced by experimental priming (our research participants were German students only). We also changed the topic, since a question regarding capital punishment would be inappropriate in Germany. Rather the essays that we used were either in favor of or against banning an extremist Neo-Nazi political party –an issue which is actually a matter of public debate in Germany currently. The essay either supported banning the party or was opposed to it. In addition, the essay was either rather long or short. All participants were informed that the essay's author (a student) was asked by his professor to write about the topic in the respective way. Subsequently, the participants were asked to rate the essay author's real attitude toward banning the party on several scales.

Similar to the pattern from the study by Miyamoto and Kitayama, we found that independent primed participants exhibited correspondence bias, irrespective of whether the essay was long or short, respectively. That is, these participants attributed more positive attitudes to authors in the pro as compared to the con condition, with this difference being independent of the essay's length. This was not so, however, for interdependence primed participants. They exhibited correspondence bias only if the essay was long, but not when it was short and supposedly non-diagnostic for the author's real attitude. That is, if the essay was rather short, these individuals took the situational factor into account (i.e., the professor asking the student to write this essay in the respective way) and, hence, they less likely attributed to the author an attitude supported in the essay.

Both these studies provide empirical support for the notion that independent and interdependent self-knowledge has a causal impact on how we view others and interpret their behavior, either as being a result of the actor (applying the Western conception of agency) or taking more likely contextual factors into account. Making self-knowledge of one kind or the other temporarily accessible, again mirrored the cross-cultural comparison.

### **Conclusion**

The studies reviewed here converge in showing the importance of independent and interdependent self-knowledge for various kinds of judgments such as value endorsement, attitudes toward affirmative action, the relation of attitudes versus subjective norms to behavioral intentions, person perception and attribution inferences. Combined, these findings suggest that the individual construal of the self is indeed one of the critical mediators for the impact of culture on judgment and decision making as already suggested by Markus and Kitayama (1991). The combined approach of cross-cultural studies and priming experiments allows transcending the shortcomings of the quasi-experimental designs in cross-cultural research, in that it provides direct evidence for the effect of self-knowledge, if accessible, of one kind or the other.

At the same time, these studies also challenge cross-cultural research in a certain way. Cultural differences are at least up to a certain extent rather flexible, as the priming studies reveal. This is not to say that there are no stable and reliable cultural differences. The challenge is rather theoretical: if theories about cultural difference refer to the stable aspects of culture alone, they will fail to explain intra-cultural and even intra-individual variation. Incorporating insights from Social Cognition research about the equivalence of chronic and situational accessibility of mental concepts and their impact on human judgment and decision making can help overcome this shortcoming in order to better understand how culture and mind make each other up.

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