

Cultural mediators of self-reported social anxiety

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Abstract

East Asians generally endorse higher social anxiety than do Westerners. Widely used measures of social anxiety, however, may not account for different social values across cultures. Drawing from Korean ($n = 251$) and Euro-Canadian ($n = 250$) community samples, this study used a cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between ratings of social anxiety and beliefs and self-views typically found in East Asian cultures. Results indicated that independent self-construal and identity consistency, views of the self that are typically associated with Western cultures, fully mediate the ethnic difference on self-reported social anxiety. Moreover, two indicators of East Asian views of the self in social contexts (interdependent self-construal and self-criticism) were partial mediators. Overall, the data suggest conceptualizations of pathological social anxiety may need to be revised to be useful for studying individuals in East Asian cultures.

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Introduction

Social anxiety encompasses feelings of uneasiness and apprehension that arise when an individual interacts with or performs in front of others and anticipates the possibility of being negatively evaluated. Social anxiety occurs in contexts that are personally meaningful, including shared social values, beliefs and expectations that shape perceptions of social success or failure. Dominant cognitive models point to standards of social performance (Clark & Wells, 1995) and a mental representation of the self in the social situation (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) as important determinants of maladaptive social anxiety. Cultural context likely influences individual perceptions of successful social behaviour as well as the threat value of predicted social consequences of inept or unacceptable behaviour.

Culture may contribute to the experience and report of social anxiety by shaping one's sense of social self as well as expectations of appropriate and successful social behaviour. For example, Western social norms encourage self-promotion within culturally prescribed limits and discourage overt submissiveness and reticence. A prominent concern among Western socially phobic clients is that others will see them as passive or uninteresting, and such clients do show more reticent behaviour than non-anxious persons in socially

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threatening situations (Alden & Bieling, 1998). East Asian social norms, on the other hand, favour less dominant, more avoidant styles of communication (Kim, 1994; Oetzel, 1998a, 1998b). Hence, some social strategies that would be potentially disadvantageous in a Western context, such as overt submissiveness in an effort to please others, may be effective in East Asian cultures. Likewise, some conceptualizations of the self that may be useful in Western social situations, such as self-promotion stemming from a sense of individuation, may not be associated with success in East Asian social groups (Triandis, 1995).

East Asians generally endorse greater social anxiety than do Westerners (Norasakkunkit & Kalick, 2002; Okazaki, 2000, 2002; Okazaki & Kallivayalil, 2002; Okazaki, Liu, Longworth, & Minn, 2002; Singelis & Sharkey, 1995; Zane & Yeh, 2002), although estimated effect sizes range fairly widely from $d = 0.25$ to 1.10. Variation in estimated effect size may relate to features of a given study such as which measure of social anxiety was used or the degree of Western acculturation of East Asian samples. Foreign-born East Asians report higher social anxiety than do those born in the US (Okazaki, 2000), and degree of Western acculturation correlates negatively with self-reported social anxiety (Okazaki et al., 2002). The present study examines cultural mediators of this observed ethnic difference in self-reported social anxiety by focusing on self-construal, identity consistency, and self-criticism as indicators of cultural differences in views of the self in relation to others.

Individualistic cultures like those of western Europe, the US, and Canada are thought to promote an independent view of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), which includes an emphasis on an individual's ability to influence his/her environment and be an agent of change (Markus & Kitayama, 2004; Markus, Uchida, Omeregic, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006). For Westerners, a sense of self-efficacy, self-awareness and positive self-views are emblematic of social maturity and success. Consistent with the features of an *independent self-construal*, the Western self is understood as an integrated set of attributes, abilities and preferences that transcend particular situations or relationships (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2004). Persons with an independent self-construal perceive themselves to be characterized by particular attributes, much like a vase has a set of consistent attributes (e.g., tall, blue, fragile) regardless of the context in which it is placed. Accordingly, Westerners tend to value *consistency across different situations* as a genuine portrayal of the self (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993; Roberts & Donahue, 1994). The belief that an individual's attributes and abilities are central to his or her self-definition goes hand in glove with the social goals of affirming and elaborating unique and positive characteristics of the self (Kanagawa et al., 2001). Conversely, *self-criticism* is seen to impede the achievement of such goals. Among Westerners, self-criticism is associated with social distress that is independent of depression (Mansell & Clark, 1999).

Collectivistic cultures like those of East Asia (i.e., Korea, Japan, China), in contrast, are thought to promote an interdependent view of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). More emphasis is placed on adjusting to (rather than influencing) one's environment and viewing agency as being dependent on context (Markus & Kitayama, 2004; Markus et al., 2006). East Asians tend to exhibit an *interdependent self-construal*, which fosters the pursuit of maintaining within-group harmony or peaceful relations with others. The interdependent self is largely defined in terms of relationships with significant others and predefined obligations and roles (Markus & Kitayama, 1991); personal attributes and abilities are defined contextually in relation to others and the situation.

To return to the metaphor, a single vase may at different times be considered to be the focal point of a room, a part of a collection or a vessel for flowers. Within East Asian social situations, one's social role and the need to adjust to the demands of others take precedence in conceptualizing the self and consequently motivating expected social behaviour. Contrary to a more independent view of the self, the expression and elaboration of inner attributes and opinions are secondary. Given that significant relationships and group membership represent core facets of the interdependent self, affirmation and elaboration of that sense of self is sought through the pursuit of harmony in those relationships and of a sense of connectedness with group members. For more discussion of this construct, see Markus and Kitayama (1991).

With a sense of self that shifts depending on the details of each specific social setting, individuals with an interdependent self-construal are less concerned with showing a consistent persona across situations or experiencing a unitary self-view. The importance of *identity consistency* is more characteristic of Western than East Asian notions of a psychologically healthy self (Donahue et al., 1993; Roberts & Donahue, 1994). In a comparison of Korean and Euro-American research participants, Suh (2002) reported less identity consistency

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