

Differences in Fear of Isolation as an explanation of Cultural Differences: Evidence from memory and reasoning

Kyungil Kim *, Arthur B. Markman

Department of Psychology, University of Texas, USA

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that members of East Asian cultures show a greater preference for dialectical thinking and sensitivity to context information than do Westerners. We suggest this difference is rooted in a greater chronic Fear of Isolation (FOI) in East Asians than in Westerners. To support this hypothesis, we manipulated FOI in a group of Westerners and assessed their relative preference for dialectical proverbs and sensitivity to context. For cross-cultural validation of our hypothesis, we assessed the relationship between chronic levels of FOI and dialectical reasoning in Koreans. Consistent with our proposal, both experimentally primed FOI (Experiment 1A and 2) and chronic levels of FOI (Experiment 1B) were positively related to relative preference for dialectical proverbs. This effect was independent of participants' level of negative mood (Experiment 2). A third experiment showed that sensitivity to context was affected by FOI in a manner consistent with previous studies of cultural differences (Experiment 3). © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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There has been sustained interest in research on cultural differences in reasoning and decision making, because of observations that members of different cultures may exhibit radically different behaviors in a number of tasks that were previously thought to reflect more universal human tendencies (Hsee & Weber, 1999; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Further the study of cultural differences has practical implications for international commerce and theoretical implications for claims about the universality of cognitive processing. A critical question in this work is whether cultural and individual differences can be captured in terms of variations in a small number of underlying dimensions or whether radically different theories are required to describe decision makers from different cultures.

In this paper, we begin by highlighting some key cultural differences in reasoning observed in previous re-

search. Then, we discuss limitations of approaches that suggest there are fundamental differences in the cognitive architectures of members of different cultures. We focus on the possibility that individual difference variables are at the root of many observed cultural differences (Weber & Hsee, 2000). We suggest that members of East Asian and Western cultures may differ in their chronic Fear of Isolation (FOI). We then present studies in which induced differences in FOI lead to differences in cognitive performance.

Cultural Differences in Cognitive performance

Nisbett and his colleagues have catalogued a number of cultural differences in reasoning performance (Nisbett et al., 2001). This work suggests that East Asian and Western thought differ in style with East Asians having a more holistic style and Westerners having a more analytic style. In addition, members of East Asian cultures tend to be dialectical in their thinking. That is they re-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Kyungil@psy.utexas.edu (K. Kim).

tain basic elements of opposing perspectives by seeking a “middle way,” and focusing on relations among individuals. In contrast, Westerners are more comfortable with formal logic and focusing on individuals. Generally speaking, East Asians tend to seek a compromise solution when reconciling conflicts and contradictions (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000).

For the purposes of this paper, we highlight two key findings from this research. First, Peng and Nisbett (1999) found that East Asians have a greater appreciation for dialectical proverbs than do Westerners. Dialectical proverbs are those that embody a contradiction such as “Sorrow is born of excessive joy,” as opposed to nondialectical proverbs such as “Half a loaf is better than none.” Presumably, the appreciation of these proverbs requires the ability to resolve the contradictory aspects described.

A second key finding is that East Asians are more strongly influenced by context in recognition memory than are Westerners. Masuda and Nisbett (2001) showed participants pictures of animals against a background. At test, people were asked whether they recognized the animal (regardless of the context in which it appeared). The test pictures used either the same background as was shown during study or a different one. East Asians were more likely to recognize an animal seen during study when it appeared in the same background context as at study than when it appeared in a different context. In contrast, Western participants were not sensitive to this change in the background.

Explanations of cultural differences

Much of the research on Asian/Western cultural differences is based on the *individualism vs. collectivism* paradigm. On this view, East Asian culture is thought to value the collective work of groups and the closeness of social structures. This view suggests that members of East Asian cultures are taught to seek compromise and to explore the relationships between items and their context (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). In contrast, Western cultures are thought to value the strength of individuals. Western cultures are thought to teach their members to resolve contradictions in favor of one side or another, and to isolate objects from their context when doing causal reasoning (Nisbett et al., 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999).

There are clear limitations of the individualism vs. collectivism distinction. Comparisons of nationalities or of subgroups within a country indicate that the empirical basis for the conclusions from the individualism vs. collectivism dichotomy is not as firm as the paradigm suggests. For example, European Americans are not more individualistic than African Americans, or Latinos, and are not always less collectivistic than Japanese or Koreans. Among Asians, only Chinese show

large differences with Westerners, being both less individualistic and more collectivistic than Americans (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

In our view, this dichotomy-based approach has limited our understanding of culture in at least three ways. First, the individualism vs. collectivism paradigm downplays variations within cultures. In fact within-culture variations are much greater than between-culture differences in many cross-cultural studies (Hong & Chiu, 2001; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993). Second, cultures that are relatively collectivistic on one dimension may be relatively individualistic on another dimension (Triandis, Mccusker, & Hui, 1990).

Third, Oyserman et al. (2002) suggest that researchers often accept a diffuse array of cross-national differences as evidence of the individualism vs. collectivism distinction. This propensity is especially evident when researchers do not directly assess individualism and collectivism, but rather use cross-national or cross-group differences to infer that these differences are due to the individualism vs. collectivism-based differences in psychological processes. On this view, any cultural difference is taken to be consistent with the paradigm.

Finally, research motivated by the individualist/collectivist distinction often treats members of different cultures as if they differ not only in their sensitivities to reasoning strategies primed by environmental factors but also in their cognitive architecture (Donald, 2000; Nisbett et al., 2001). Before concluding that members of different cultures differ at the level of their cognitive architecture, it is important to identify psychological variables that differ between cultures that would help to unify research on cultural differences with research on other kinds of individual differences. To this end, we explore the possibility that cultural differences reflect straightforward differences in chronic social factors rather than fundamental differences in knowledge gathered over years of experience within a culture.

Fear of Isolation as a social variable that affects reasoning

We suggest that sensitivity to *fear of isolation* may be responsible for some observed cultural differences in cognitive performance. “Fear of Isolation” refers to anxiety or fear in situations in which one experiences loneliness, a lack of community, solitary, confinement, or a quarantine (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998; Gilbert, 2001; Walters, Marshall, & Shooter, 1960). Communication theories define FOI as a person’s fear of being negatively evaluated by others and, consequently, a force that leads people to conceal their views when they believe they are in a minority (Kenamer, 1990; Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Shoemaker, Breen, & Stamper, 2000). This pressure is assumed to be related to their fears of being negatively evaluated by others. The theory maintains that mass

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