Self-concept consistency and short-term stability in eight cultures

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ABSTRACT

Self-concept consistency and short-term stability were investigated in the United States, Australia, Mexico, Venezuela, Philippines, Malaysia, China, and Japan. Evidence for substantial cross-role consistency and reliable within-individual variability in trait self-perceptions were found in each culture. Participants in all cultures exhibited short-term stability in their self-reported traits within roles and moderately stable if–then patterns of trait self-perceptions. Cultural differences, which primarily involved Japan, were partially accounted for by cultural differences in dialecticism, but not self-construals or cultural tightness. In all cultures, satisfaction of needs in various roles partially accounted for within-individual variability in self-reported traits. The results provide support for integrating trait and cultural psychology perspectives, as well as structure and process approaches, in the study of self-concepts across cultures.

1. Introduction

Western theorists have long contended that a consistent self-concept is important for adjustment and a clear sense of identity (Jahoda, 1958; Jourard, 1965; Maslow, 1954). For example, in Erikson's (1950) theory, healthy mastery of the identity vs. role diffusion stage of development involves self-perceptions of inner sameness and continuity. Similarly, Jourard (1965) argued that a psychologically healthy individual retains a consistent self-view across social roles. Consistent with these theories, studies in American samples have linked self-concept inconsistency to a variety of unhealthy outcomes, including anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem, and lower life satisfaction (Campbell, Assanand, & Di

Paula, 2003; Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997).

At the same time, cultural psychologists have proposed that self-concept consistency is less important in collectivist or East Asian cultures, where the ability to adapt to situational or role requirements is highly valued (Choi & Choi, 2002; Heine, 2001; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010; Suh, 2002). For example, Markus and Kitayama (1994) noted that "[I]nterdependent selves do not prescribe or require consistency [which] may reflect, not authenticity, but a lack of flexibility, rigidity, or even immaturity" (p. 576). Similarly, Heine (2001) observed that "the functional value of consistency is less clear for East Asian selves" (p. 886).

Researchers who have investigated self-concept consistency across cultures have generally done so by quantifying the amount of variability in participants' ratings of their personality traits across various roles or relationships. In the present study, we extended this research by investigating the cross-role consistency and short-term stability of trait self-perceptions in eight diverse cultures. In formulating hypotheses about cultural differences in

consistency it is useful to consider both trait and cultural psychology perspectives.

1.1. Trait and cultural psychology perspectives on consistency

From trait psychology, we anticipate that people in all cultures exhibit a degree of consistency in how they describe their traits in various roles (Church, 2000; Funder & Colvin, 1991; Oishi, Diener, Scollon, & Biswas-Diener, 2004). In this view, heritable traits contribute to a degree of behavioral consistency in all cultures, which, in turn, leads to some consistency in self-perceptions of one's traits in various roles (Funder, 1995; Wood & Roberts, 2006). From the perspective of cultural psychology, however, several cultural dimensions might underlie cultural differences in self-concept consistency.

One theoretical perspective distinguishes independent and interdependent self-construals, which are thought to be more prevalent in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Suh, 2002). People with independent self-construals—who view the individual as a unique and autonomous entity—are believed to have a greater need to express their traits and should therefore exhibit greater consistency. In contrast, for people with interdependent self-construals, situations, roles, and relationships are expected to impact behavior more than traits, reducing consistency (Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1998).

A second theoretical perspective attributes lower consistency specifically in East Asian cultures to dialecticism, a system of thought rooted in Eastern philosophical traditions and characterized by acceptance of contradiction, expectations of complexity and change, and holistic thinking (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010). For example, Choi and Choi (2002) linked East Asians' greater self-concept variability to their dialecticism, which makes them "more able and willing than Westerners to store incompatible and contradictory information about the self in their self-concepts" (p. 1516). People in dialectical cultures are thought to embrace contrasting elements of the self-concept, which are viewed as complimentary and harmonious aspects of the whole (Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010).

A third theoretical framework addresses the cultural dimension of tightness vs. looseness. As defined by Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver (2006), cultural tightness refers to "the strength of social norms and the degree of sanctioning within societies" (p. 1226). Implicit in this framework is the expectation of reduced consistency in tight cultures where situational constraints on behavior are greater (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Only five studies have compared the cross-role consistency of trait ratings across cultures. Consistent with trait perspectives, all five studies found substantial consistency in both Americans and Asians, but also cultural differences consistent with cultural psychology perspectives. Suh (2002) attributed the reduced consistency of Koreans, as compared to Americans, to differences in self-construals, whereas English and Chen (2007, 2011) attributed the reduced consistency of Asian Americans, as compared to European Americans, to dialecticism. Boucher (2010) found that Chinese averaged modestly lower in self-concept consistency across roles than did Americans, and attributed the cultural differences to dialecticism. Church, Anderson-Harumi, et al. (2008) concluded that the cultural differences in their study were better explained by East Asian dialecticism than individualism–collectivism, because only their Japanese sample, and not Mexicans, Filipinos, or Malaysians, exhibited lower consistency than their American and Australian samples. Using a different methodology, Kanagawa, Cross, and Markus (2001) had Americans and Japanese fill out a sentence completion measure of self-concept while situated in different contexts. The Japanese exhibited greater variability than the Americans in the frequency that they mentioned various categories of self-description in these contexts. Kanagawa et al. interpreted the

cultural differences in terms of self-construal differences, but did not directly assess this potential mediating variable.

As revealed by these studies, there is some evidence of cultural differences in cross-role consistency, but this evidence has been limited primarily to comparisons of Americans and East Asians (or European Americans and Asian Americans). Thus, one aim of the present study was to examine the extent of cross-role consistency in a more diverse set of cultures. In addition, given the current status of the literature, it is not yet possible to draw definitive conclusions about whether self-construals, dialecticism, or cultural tightness will best account for cultural differences in consistency. Only two studies directly investigated the ability of one of these dimensions to mediate cultural differences. Both English and Chen (2007, Study 2a) and Boucher (2010) found that dialecticism, as measured by the Dialectical Self Scale (Spencer-Rodgers, Srivastava, et al., 2010), mediated cultural or ethnic differences in consistency. Therefore, a second aim of the present study was to test the ability of self-construals, dialecticism, and cultural tightness to mediate cultural differences in consistency. By integrating trait and cultural psychology perspectives on consistency, we formulated our first two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. At least moderate (i.e., $r \geqslant .40$) cross-role consistency in personality trait ratings will be evident in all cultures.

Hypothesis 2. Cultural differences in cross-role trait consistency can be accounted for, in part, by cultural differences in individualism–collectivism, dialecticism, or cultural tightness.

1.2. Two types of self-concept consistency

English and Chen (2007) observed that research on culture and self-concept consistency has focused on consistency *across* different contexts and not the temporal stability of trait self-perceptions *within* contexts. They hypothesized that Westerners define the self in relatively stable, global terms leading to consistency across *both* contexts and time. In contrast, they proposed that East Asians define the self in stable, if–then terms, leading to reduced consistency across contexts, but comparable levels of temporal stability within contexts. For East Asians, stability *within* relationships is expected to promote relationship harmony, an important goal in collectivistic cultures, by facilitating smooth interactions and a sense of security.

Indeed, English and Chen (2007, 2011) found that Asian Americans exhibited less consistency in trait ratings *across* relationship contexts than European Americans, but comparable levels of *within*-relationship stability across time, supporting the presence of reliable if–then profiles of traits across relationships. In addition, English and Chen (2011) found that cross-role variability was associated with lower perceived authenticity and relationship quality in European Americans but not Asian Americans, whereas lower temporal stability within roles was associated with lower authenticity and relationship quality in both ethnic groups. These results highlight the importance of investigating both cross-role consistency and within-role stability of trait self-perceptions across cultures. Therefore, our third aim was to further examine the distinction between cross-role consistency and within-role stability using a more diverse set of cultures than was studied by English and Chen (2007, 2011). If the analysis of English and Chen is correct, we should find a similar distinction between consistency and short-term stability in a multinational sample that includes participants from East Asian countries and additional collectivistic cultures. We selected an interval of 1 month between measurements, which enabled us to examine the reliability or short-term stability of self-concepts and if–then profiles of traits, but not long-term temporal stability (Watson, 2004). Although we predicted cultural differences in cross-role