



Culture, method, and the content of self-concepts: Testing trait, individual–self-primacy, and cultural psychology perspectives [☆]

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Abstract

Three theoretical perspectives on cultural universals and differences in the content of self-concepts were tested in individualistic (United States, $n = 178$; Australia, $n = 112$) and collectivistic (Mexico, $n = 157$; Philippines, $n = 138$) cultures, using three methods of self-concept assessment. Support was found for both trait perspectives and the individual–self-primacy hypothesis. In contrast, support for cultural psychology hypotheses was limited because traits and other personal attributes were not more salient, or social attributes less salient, in individualistic cultures than collectivistic cultures.

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The salience of some aspects of self-concept depended on the method of assessment, calling into question conclusions based on monomethod studies.

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1. Introduction

Ethnographic and cross-cultural studies of self-concept continue to interest anthropologists and psychologists. Ethnographic accounts, particularly in Asian and Pacific Island cultures, have contrasted the more relational, collectivistic, or sociocentric conception of self in these cultures with the more individualistic or idiocentric conception of self in Western cultures (Lebra, 1994; Mageo, 1998; Rosenberger, 1994). Similarly, cultural psychologists argue that the self is a cultural construction, and that we can expect significant cultural differences in both content and processes associated with the self (Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A number of cross-cultural studies of the content of self-concepts have been conducted, but they have sampled a limited range of cultures, relied almost exclusively on a single method of data collection, and have failed to directly measure and test the explanatory variables that are hypothesized to underlie individual and cultural differences in self-concept content. In this study, we sought to address these limitations, while testing three theoretical perspectives on cultural universals and differences in self-concept content.

1.1. *Theoretical perspectives on self-concept content across cultures*

1.1.1. *Trait psychology*

Trait psychologists have argued that certain trait dimensions are evolved, heritable, and universal across cultures (MacDonald, 1998; McCrae, 2000). The existence of heritable traits with adaptive significance, in combination with an ecological-realist perspective on person perception (Baron & Misovich, 1993), leads to the prediction that trait attributes will be an aspect of self-concept in all cultures. The ecological-realist perspective postulates that traits can be perceived directly through certain evolved indicators (e.g., facial expression, gait, vocal qualities, etc.), particularly if one is able to observe oneself or others in the context of trait-relevant activities. Similarly, from Funder's (1995) Realistic Accuracy Model, we can expect that people in all cultures interpret behavior in terms of traits to some degree, and thus develop an awareness of their traits as part of their self-concepts. Indeed, even anthropologists who have emphasized the sociocentric nature of the self in some cultures have observed that personality traits are still used to describe people in these cultures, at least under appropriate conditions (Lutz, 1985; Mageo, 1998; White, 1985; Whiting, 1996). The apparent existence of trait terms in all languages (Dixon, 1977; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996) also suggests that trait concepts are a universal aspect of self-concept. For the purpose of this study, trait psychology perspectives will be considered supported if participants in all cultures describe themselves in terms of trait attributes with at least moderate frequency.

1.1.2. *Individual–self-primacy hypothesis*

Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, and Iuzzini (2002, p. 574) defined the individual self as consisting “of those attributes that render the person unique from fellow in-group members”

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