Cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency across cultures: Integrating trait and cultural psychology perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The Social Relations Model was used to compare cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency in trait judgments in the United States, Mexico, Venezuela, and China. Target participants recruited friends and family members who comprised separate friend and family round-robin groups. Consistent with trait perspectives, in all cultures, (a) consensus and self-other agreement in trait judgments was found for most traits within the friend and family contexts, (b) across-context consensus was observed for at least some traits, and (c) self-concept consistency across contexts was substantial. Consistent with cultural psychology perspectives, consensus was generally greatest in the United States, intermediate in Mexico and Venezuela, and lowest in China. However, measures of dialecticism, self-construals, and cultural tightness failed to account for the cultural differences.

1. Introduction

In a series of studies we have sought to integrate trait and cultural psychology perspectives, two dominant approaches in the study of culture and personality (Church, 2000, 2009). While some theorists have questioned their compatibility (Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Shweder, 1991), there is support for both perspectives (Church, 2000; Heine, 2012; McCrae, 2000; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010b). This suggests that an integrated approach will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between culture and personality. In the present study, we applied this integrated approach in the study of cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency in personality judgments, a topic of considerable importance for trait psychology and interpersonal perception generally (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & West, 2010; McCrae et al., 2004).

Researchers have differentiated two types of cross-observer agreement: consensus and self-other agreement (Kenny & West, 2010). Consensus refers to agreement between two or more raters of a third person target, whereas self-other agreement refers to agreement between the target and other raters. In the present study, self-concept consistency refers to consistency in self-ratings across contexts (Boucher, 2011; Church et al., in press). Consensus, self-other agreement, and self-concept consistency all imply a degree of consistency in trait-relevant behavior and thus the existence of stable traits. At the same time, cultural psychology theory suggests that cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency will be lower in less Western or individualistic cultures, calling into question the relative importance of traits in these cultures. In the present study, we compared cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency in four cultures while testing hypotheses based on an integration of trait and cultural psychology.

1.1. Trait and cultural psychology perspectives on agreement and consistency

From the perspective of trait psychology, we expect a degree of agreement in personality trait judgments between observers in all cultures. The existence of heritable and stable traits (Jang, McCrae, Angleitner, Riemann, & Livesley, 1998; Terracciano, Costa, & McCrae, 2006), combined with an ecological-realist perspective on person perception (e.g., Baron & Misovich, 1993; Funder,

1995), leads to the prediction that traits will be perceived with some accuracy by self and others in all cultures, leading to agreement in trait judgments.

In contrast, cultural psychologists—who emphasize the "mutual constitution" of culture and personality—have proposed various cultural dimensions that might underlie cultural variation in cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency. One theoretical perspective distinguishes independent versus 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 are believed to have a greater need to express their traits and act in accordance with personal preferences and goals. This should lead to greater behavioral consistency and hence greater cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency. In contrast, for people with interdependent self-construals, behaviors are more responsive to social obligations and situational contexts, reducing behavioral consistency and hence cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency (Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1998).

A second cultural psychology perspective attributes lower behavioral and self-concept consistency, and hence lower cross-observer agreement, to East Asian dialecticism (Boucher, 2011; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010b). Dialecticism is 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). One aspect of dialecticism is a greater tolerance and expectation of cognitive and behavioral change, which could lead to reduced cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency in trait judgments, at least across different situational contexts.

A third theoretical framework addresses the cultural dimension of tightness versus 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 behavioral consistency in tight cultures where situational constraints on behavior are greater (Gelfand et al., 2011). Again, the predicted result would be reduced cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency in tight cultures, as compared to loose cultures.

It is possible that cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency will be lower in collectivistic, dialectical, or tight cultures even *within* particular contexts (e.g., with different family members) to the extent that one interacts differently with different individuals within this context. In any case, if cultural psychology theory is correct, we should expect lower cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency in trait ratings *across* interpersonal contexts in these cultures (e.g., with friends versus family members).

1.2. Available cross-cultural evidence

1.2.1. Cross-observer agreement

Studies in the United States have generally found moderate cross-observer agreement when judges are well-acquainted (Biesanz, West, & Millevoi, 2007; Connelly & Ones, 2010; Funder & Colvin, 1988; Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995; Kenny, 1994; Kenny & West, 2010; Malloy & Albright, 1990; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000). Indeed, some agreement is found even when judges have had little if any prior interaction with each other, particularly for the trait of extraversion (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Kenny, 1994). Agreement across contexts has rarely been investigated, but Malloy, Albright, Kenny, Agatstein, and Winquist (1997) found weaker agreement across friend, family, and cowor-

ker contexts than within contexts, indicating that trait perceptions are somewhat context dependent even in Western cultures.

Cross-cultural studies of cross-observer agreement are fairly rare, and we could identify only one cross-cultural study that examined agreement across interpersonal contexts. Malloy, Albright, Díaz-Loving, Dong, and Lee (2004) investigated well-acquainted college students and found that agreement in trait ratings, both within and across social contexts (i.e., friends vs. family), was higher in Mexican students (and similar to American levels) than in Chinese students. Malloy et al. concluded that Mexicans, because of their cultural norm of simpatía, have general prescriptions for social behavior that lead to trait consistency across friend and family contexts. Both Mexicans and Americans, they argue, are socialized to evaluate others in terms of traits. In contrast, Chinese have dyadic prescriptions for social behavior that derive from Confucian traditions of filial piety, leading to behavior that is dyad specific. Malloy et al.'s results would support cultural psychology predictions regarding individualism-collectivism only if Mexican culture is relatively individualistic. Accordingly, Malloy et al. argued that one cannot predict the extent of cross-observer agreement from the individualism-collectivism dimension.

McCrae et al. (2004) also questioned whether there are cultural differences in agreement between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. They summarized existing cross-observer agreement data with the NEO Personality Inventory and other Big Five measures and concluded that agreement is as high in less individualistic cultures (e.g., China, Russia, Korean students in the United States) as in North America. Limitations of these data included the use of single rather than multiple raters and the fact that the Asian findings involved self/spouse agreement, which tends to be higher than agreement between other judges (Connelly & Ones, 2010).

More consistent with cultural psychology perspectives were studies by Heine and Renshaw (2002), who found higher self-other agreement among well-acquainted students in the United States than in Japan, and Church et al. (2006b), who found somewhat lower consensus and self-other agreement in Filipino students than in European American, Asian American, and Mexican students. In a zero-acquaintance study, Albright et al. (1997) found significant consensus among Chinese students, but noted that the level of consensus was lower than typically found in the United States. In contrast, Yik, Bond, and Paulhus (1998) found high levels of consensus in a Hong Kong sample, perhaps because of greater Western influences.

1.2.2. Self-concept consistency

A few studies have investigated cultural differences in self-concept consistency, generally by correlating participants' trait self-ratings in different roles or relationships. Consistent with trait perspectives, these studies have reported substantial self-concept consistency across cultures, as well as cultural differences that support cultural psychology perspectives. Suh (2002) attributed the reduced self-concept consistency of Koreans, as compared to Americans, to differences in self-construals. English and Chen (2007, 2011), who found lower self-concept consistency in Asian Americans than in European Americans, and Boucher (2011), who found lower self-concept consistency in Chinese than Americans, attributed the cultural differences to dialecticism. Finally, Church and colleagues (Church et al., 2008, in press) found similar levels of self-concept consistency in Americans, Australians, Mexicans, Venezuelans, Filipinos, Malaysians, and Chinese, whereas Japanese exhibited significantly lower consistency than the cultural groups.

In summary, there is some evidence of both cross-observer agreement and self-concept consistency across cultures, which is consistent with trait perspectives. Evidence of cultural differences is more mixed and has most often involved comparisons with se-