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Prediction and cross-situational consistency of daily behavior across cultures: Testing trait and cultural psychology perspectives [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Trait and cultural psychology perspectives on the cross-situational consistency of behavior, and the predictive validity of traits, were tested in a daily process study in the United States ($N = 68$), an individualistic culture, and the Philippines ($N = 80$), a collectivistic culture. Participants completed the Revised NEO Personality Inventory [Costa, P. T., Jr., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). *Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) professional manual*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources] and a measure of self-monitoring, then reported their daily behaviors and associated situational contexts for approximately 30 days. Consistent with trait perspectives, the Big Five traits predicted daily behaviors in both cultures, and relative (interindividual) consistency was observed across many, although not all, situational contexts. The frequency of various Big Five behaviors varied across relevant situational contexts in both cultures and, consistent with cultural psychology perspectives, there was a tendency for Filipinos to exhibit greater situational variability than Americans. Self-monitoring showed some ability to account for individual differences in situational variability in the American sample, but not the Filipino sample.

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1. Introduction

“...an implicit promise of trait theories is to account for consistency across a range of situations.” (Moskowitz, 1994, p. 921).

“In personological formulations, the person should at least be stable over time and across situations that are very similar” (Diener & Larsen, 1984, p. 872).

“...the functional value of consistency is less clear for East Asian selves (Heine, 2001, p. 886).

“Personality is less evident in collectivist cultures than it is in individualistic cultures, because the situation is such a powerful determinant of social behavior.” (Triandis, 1995, p. 74).

As illustrated above, trait and cultural psychologists offer a range of views regarding the prediction and consistency of trait-relevant behavior. In discussing these differences in emphases or expectations, it is useful to distinguish trait and cultural psychology perspectives. While acknowledging the role of situational influences, trait psychologists anticipate a degree

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of cross-situational consistency of behavior, and predictive validity of traits, in all cultures. In contrast, some cultural psychologists have predicted that behavior will be less consistent across situations and that traits will have less predictive value in collectivistic cultures, where behavior is thought to be more influenced by contextual factors such as roles and relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Suh, 2002; Triandis, 1995). Both trait and cultural psychology perspectives would be correct if a degree of consistency and predictive validity is evident in all cultures, but more so in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures. The goal of the present study was to test and integrate trait and cultural psychology perspectives on consistency and predictive validity in an individualistic culture, the United States, and a collectivistic culture, the Philippines (Church, 1987; Hofstede, 2001).

1.1. Trait and cultural psychology perspectives on consistency

A core assumption of trait theory is the existence of relatively stable trait attributes of individuals that predict their behavior across time and situations (Johnson, 1997; Kenrick & Funder, 1988). For example, in their Five-Factor Theory, McCrae and Costa (1996) proposed that the Big Five dimensions of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience are universal and heritable dimensions that should predict relevant behavior in all cultures. Some cultural differences in the behavioral manifestations of traits are still consistent with a trait perspective. In addition, trait prediction of behavior is generally viewed as probabilistic rather than deterministic. Nonetheless, from a trait perspective, a degree of cross-situational consistency in trait-relevant behavior is expected in all cultures (Church, 2000).

Whereas trait psychologists generally endorse a universalistic perspective on the importance of traits across cultures, cultural psychologists emphasize the socially constructed nature of personality and some have questioned the universality and predictive value of traits across cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Shweder, 1991). For example, Markus and Kitayama (1998) have argued that different assumptions underlie conceptions of personality in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In individualistic cultures, a person is viewed as an independent or autonomous entity with a distinctive set of traits or attributes that determine behavior. In contrast, in collectivistic cultures, a person is viewed as interdependent with others, and behavior is a consequence of being responsive to one's social roles and relationships. Although Markus and Kitayama (1991) acknowledge the existence of internal attributes such as personality traits, these attributes are viewed as situation-specific, elusive and unreliable, and not very powerful in predicting behavior.

More recently, Markus and Kitayama (2003) also contrasted the different implicit models of agency that underlie action in individualistic and collectivistic (or at least East Asian) cultures. They argued that a disjoint (independent) model of agency is predominant in individualistic cultures, and actions follow from the expression of individuals' preferences, intentions, and goals. In contrast, in collectivistic cultures, a conjoint (interdependent) model of agency is predominant, and actions are responsive to social obligations and expectations and to situational contexts. Markus and Kitayama (2003) explicitly linked these two models of agency to differences in cross-situational consistency. Specifically, less cross-situational consistency is anticipated in collectivistic cultures, where the conjoint (interdependent) model of agency is predominant. Indeed, some cultural psychologists have argued that in collectivistic cultures cross-situational consistency may be viewed as inflexible, immature, and unresponsive to social contexts (Choi & Choi, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Suh, 2002).

As Oishi, Diener, Scollon, and Biswas-Diener (2004) have noted, it is important to distinguish between *relative* and *absolute consistency*, particularly in cross-cultural studies. Relative or interindividual consistency reflects the extent to which the rank-order of individuals on a given trait or behavior is stable across different situations, without regard to the absolute level of scores, which may vary across situations. Relative consistency is typically quantified in terms of correlation coefficients, computed across individuals between two or more situations, and addresses whether there are trait-like individual differences in behavior across situations. In contrast, absolute or intraindividual consistency refers to whether individuals tend to exhibit the same amount or level of the trait or behavior across different situations and addresses the impact of situational effects on behavior. With the exception of Oishi et al. (2004), cultural psychologists have not distinguished between relative and absolute consistency in their theorizing about cultural differences in consistency. It would be possible, for example, for relative consistency to be moderately high in all cultures, consistent with trait perspectives, and, at the same time, absolute consistency could be lower in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures as a result of stronger situational effects. In the present study, we examined both relative and absolute consistency.

Finally, cultural psychologists seem to imply that the behavior of individuals in collectivistic cultures is less traited or consistent in general, that is, for all or most traits (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Snyder's (1974, 1987) original self-monitoring theory postulated just such individual differences in general traitedness versus situational determination of behavior, and thus may provide a framework for understanding individual or cultural differences in consistency. Snyder (1974) hypothesized that high self-monitoring individuals, who are concerned about the situational and interpersonal appropriateness of their behavior, would be relatively "trait-free" and would thus show considerable cross-situational variability in their behavior. In contrast, low self-monitoring individuals, who are less sensitive to situational cues and more guided by internal dispositions, would be relatively "traited" in their behavior and show greater behavioral consistency. Snyder (1987) said little about cultural differences, but did suggest that self-monitoring would be higher, on average, in Japan, a collectivistic culture, than in the United States. In the present study, we investigated whether self-monitoring can account, in part, for individual and cultural differences in cross-situational consistency.

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