Chapter 70
A Critical Review of Cultural Stereotypes Underpinning Research on Self-Construal and Cognitive Dissonance

Jamie J.Y. Lee and Senthu Jeyaraj

Abstract Prior cross-cultural dissonance research has relied on cultural stereotypes and assumed that participants from Western cultures are individualistic and have independent self-construals while participants from Asian cultures are collectivistic and have interdependent self-construals. The present article provides a critique of the theory of independent and interdependent self-construals as well as prior cross-cultural research on dissonance, and suggests using self-construal priming to avoid relying on cultural stereotypes in accounting for differences in dissonance experienced. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

70.1 Culture and Self-Construal

Self-construal describes how individuals characterize and assign meaning to themselves [1]. In their seminal article on culture and self-construal, [2] compared independent self-construals typical of American and Western European cultures with interdependent self-construals typical of Asian, African, Latin-American and some southern European cultures.

All individuals construe themselves in independent and interdependent terms, and exposure to cultural practices encourages the expression of one self-construal over another [1]. Similarly, [3] distinguished between the private, public and collective selves, and argued that different cultures led to differences in the expression of these selves. Individualistic cultures encourage the development of the private self while collectivistic cultures encourage the development of the collective self [3].

J. J.Y. Lee (✉)
James Cook University, Townsville, Australia
e-mail: jiayanjamie.lee@my.jcu.edu.au

S. Jeyaraj
OrgCognisance, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: senthu.jeyaraj@orgcog.com

Fig. 70.1 Theory of independent and interdependent self-construals
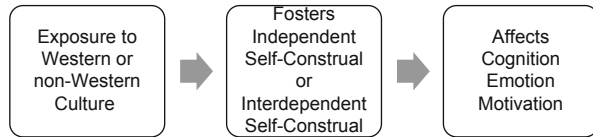
70.1.1 Theory of Independent and Interdependent Self-Construals

Self-construal has a major impact on individuals' cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes [2]. As part of their review of evidence in support of their theory, [2] examined research highlighting cultural differences in perception of the self and other, causal attribution, nature of self-knowledge, emotional experiences, and motivational processes.

As shown in Fig. 70.1, [2] concluded that empirical evidence supported their argument that exposure to a Western or non-Western culture encourages the development of an independent or interdependent self-construal respectively, which impacts upon cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes.

Even though [2] never explicitly stated that independent and interdependent self-construals correspond to the cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism respectively, individualism has typically been associated with independent self-construal and collectivism with interdependent self-construal [1, 4].

More specifically, [2] maintain that Western cultures espouse independent self-construals, where individuals are encouraged to view themselves as distinct from others, and define themselves with internal and stable traits such as personal attributes and abilities. For those with independent self-construals, interpersonal relationships serve as a means of social support and social comparison [1, 2]. Being the same person in different situations is a hallmark of maturity for individuals with independent self-construals [1].

In contrast, non-Western cultures espouse interdependent self-construals, where important interpersonal relationships and group memberships factor significantly in self-definition [1, 2]. As such, behaviour is largely affected by the thoughts, feelings, and actions of close others [2]. Emphasis is placed on cooperation, fitting in, and on maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships while the regulation of emotions and actions to suit situational demands are considered mature behaviour [1, 2].

70.2 Cognitive Dissonance and Self-Construal

Cognitive dissonance theory asserts that dissonance is an uncomfortable tension state that occurs when an individual has two or more cognitions that are inconsistent with each other. That individual is then driven to action in order to reduce the psychological discomfort associated with the state of dissonance. Dissonance can

thus be understood as a driving force that leads to activity targeted at dissonance reduction.

Cognition refers to any knowledge, beliefs, or opinions about oneself, others, or things in the environment. The theory of cognitive dissonance thus extends to different psychological concepts and has a wide scope in terms of applicability. Two cognitions that are consistent are said to be consonant while two cognitions that are inconsistent are said to be dissonant.

Motivation for dissonance reduction increases as the magnitude of dissonance experienced increases. Dissonance reduction can be achieved through a number of ways, one of which is the elimination of discrepant cognitions. For example, if dissonance existed between the behaviour of smoking and the concern about the effects of smoking, dissonance reduction could be achieved by not smoking.

Alternatively, dissonance reduction could be achieved by way of adding consonant cognitions. Thus, using the aforementioned example, adding a consonant cognition to reduce dissonance could take the form of seeking out information regarding the benefits of smoking.

Research has also shown that reducing the importance of discrepant cognitions and increasing the importance of consonant cognitions are effective means of reducing dissonance. Using the aforementioned example, an individual who smokes could actively seek information regarding accident rates on the road and remind himself about the relative harmlessness of smoking compared to driving his vehicle as a means of reducing the importance of a discrepant cognition. On the other hand, he could think about how important it is to him that smoking enables him to socialize with colleagues at work as a way of increasing the importance of a consonant cognition.

The self has been implicated in early revisions to cognitive dissonance theory. To this end, the self-consistency theory of dissonance maintains that dissonance is not merely a result of just any two inconsistent cognitions, but is dependent on significant aspects of an individual's self-concept and expectations about behaviour derived from these self cognitions. As most individuals have positive self-concepts, dissonance reduction is targeted at maintaining a view of the self as morally good and capable.

Similarly, the self-affirmation theory of dissonance asserts that a person engages in self-affirming, image-maintaining processes when confronted with information that threatens the integrity of his or her self-image, and does so until this image is repaired. Hence, dissonance is experienced when a person's positive self-view or self-concept is threatened.

Research has shown that dissonance reduction results from inconsistency between behaviour and cognitions about the self. For example, [16] examined dissonance effects as a result of performances that were inconsistent with performance expectancies. They found that participants demonstrated the greatest dissonance effects when they had high performance expectancies but received low test scores, and they had low performance expectancies but received high test scores. In a study undertaken by [14], participants wrote counter-attitudinal essays and completed a value scale that was either consistent (self-relevant) or inconsistent (not self-relevant) with their value orientations. Results indicated that when participants completed a self-relevant

value scale, they experienced self-affirmation, and did not engage in attitude change indicative of dissonance reduction. However, completion of a value scale that was not self-relevant did not eliminate attitude change indicative of dissonance experienced. Hence, empirical evidence highlights the role of the self in dissonance processes.

70.3   A Critical Review of the Theory of Independent and Interdependent Self-Construals

Reference [4] found fault with the theory of independent and interdependent self-construals [2], stating that the cross-cultural evidence reviewed failed to: (a) directly measure the cultural dimensions of the countries tested, (b) directly measure the self-construals of participants tested, (c) establish that the cultural dimensions of participants tested were associated with the specified self-construals and (d) establish that the specified self-construals were associated with various cognitive, emotional, and motivational outcomes.

Likewise, [17] conducted a meta-analysis of research on individualism and collectivism as well as their psychological implications, highlighting that prior research lacked empirical evidence demonstrating that European Americans were higher in individualism than the comparison group (often East Asians). Reference [17] also criticized prior research for accepting cross-national differences as evidence indicative of between-group differences having a cultural source without directly assessing the cultural dimensions of participants tested.

Hence, past research that purportedly examined cultural differences has really been comparing country or ethnic group differences, where country or ethnicity was the independent variable and the dependent variable was the psychological variable of interest [4]. That is, the observation of between-groups differences does not justify the conclusion that these differences have a cultural source.

70.4   A Critical Review of Cross-Cultural Dissonance Research

Similarly, cross-cultural research on dissonance has typically been undertaken by comparing country (e.g., America vs. Japan) or ethnic group (e.g., European Canadian vs. Asian Canadian) differences. More specifically, prior cross-cultural dissonance research is based on the assumptions that individuals from Western countries come from individualistic cultures that foster independent self-construals while individuals from Asian countries come from collectivistic cultures that foster interdependent self-construals. Researchers have subsequently argued that differences in dissonance findings between countries or ethnic groups tested are due to differences in participants' culturally sanctioned self-construals, thereby assuming that culture was responsible for observed differences without making use of empirical justification.

Furthermore, self-construal differences have potentially been confounded with other variables (e.g., socioeconomic, demographic, or religious variables) that differ between cultures [4]. Reference [4] thus argued for more rigorous methodology to demonstrate that observed differences between groups of individuals tested can be accounted for by differences in culturally sanctioned self-construals.

70.5   A Proposition to Avoid Cultural Stereotypes: The Use of Priming

Priming can be understood as mentally activating a concept to make it accessible. In the field of cultural psychology, the development of priming techniques enabled researchers to move away from self-report measures and from relying on culture as a proxy towards experimental manipulation of self-construal [1]. Furthermore, the use of priming allowed investigation of causal hypotheses by way of temporarily activating a mode of self-construal, while ensuring greater internal validity than relying on quasi-experimental methods of cross-national studies [1].

Even though exposure to one's culture encourages the chronic activation of one self-construal over the other, the rationale underpinning priming is that regardless of cultural background, all individuals think of themselves in independent, relational, or interdependent terms [1]. Priming allows temporary access to an independent, relational, or interdependent self-construal so that the effects of any kind of self-construal on behaviour can be observed [1].

Research has made used of priming to show that temporarily accessible self-knowledge influences behaviour and that the same pattern of behaviour has been observed in comparisons of individuals from individualistic and collectivistic cultures. For example, [26] developed the Similarities and Differences with Family and Friends task to examine the effects of priming the private (independent) or collective (interdependent) self among North American and Chinese students from the University of Illinois [1]. Results indicated that irrespective of cultural background, participants who thought about differences provided more idiocentric responses (responses that referred to personal qualities, beliefs, and attitudes) and less group responses (responses that referred to an experience of common fate or group membership) than participants who thought about similarities. Reference [29] and [30] also found the Similarities and Differences with Family and Friends priming task effective.

Other priming techniques also demonstrated success in making different self-construals accessible. For example, [31] adopted the pronoun-circling priming task to examine self-construal variations on a social judgment task. European American undergraduates read a paragraph about a city trip and were asked to circle pronouns within the text. Participants in the independent condition circled pronouns that represented the individual (e.g., I, mine), while participants in the interdependent condition circled pronouns that represented relationships (e.g., we, our). Results

indicated that participants in the independent condition endorsed more individualistic values while participants in the interdependent condition demonstrated a more collectivistic orientation in social values and judgements, supporting the notion that priming an independent or interdependent self-construal within an individualistic culture mirrored commonly observed differences in individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

In summary, prior research has demonstrated the effectiveness of priming the independent and interdependent self.

70.6 Implications and Future Research Directions

Prior cross-cultural dissonance research has relied on the assumption that Westerners come from individualistic cultures that foster independent self-construals while Asians come from collectivistic cultures that foster interdependent self-construals in surmising that self-construal differences account for observed differences in dissonance findings.

The current review highlights that it is erroneous to assume that those who come from individualistic cultures make use of independent self-construals while those who come from collectivistic cultures make use of interdependent self-construals. Prior research [1] demonstrates that regardless of their cultural background, individuals may be primed to make use of either an independent or interdependent self-construal style—this implication extends to businesses at the professional development level—for example, when new staff are being inducted into a company, priming may be used to assimilate them into the existing corporate culture.

Future research may address the aforementioned limitations by making use of priming to avoid relying on cultural stereotypes. For example, regardless of their cultural origin, participants may be exposed to an independent or interdependent prime before they complete a dissonance inducing task. In this way, direct evidence demonstrating that self-construal variations account for differences in dissonance experienced can be obtained.

70.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper critiques the theory of independent and interdependent self-construals [2], as well the methodology made use by prior research that examined how self-construal differences affected cognitive dissonance experienced. The authors suggest that future research make use of priming to strengthen methodology and obtain empirical evidence which demonstrates that differences in dissonance experienced between individuals from an individualistic Western culture and collectivistic Asian culture were due to self-construal differences.

References

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