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Individualism–collectivism, life events, and self-esteem: a test of two trade-offs

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Abstract

The theoretical implications of individualism–collectivism for self-esteem suggest that collectivism is associated with (1) relatively higher self-liking and lower self-competence and (2) greater change in self-liking in response to social life events. In contrast, individualism is expected to be associated with (1) relatively higher self-competence and lower self-liking and (2) greater change in self-competence in response to achievement-related life events. A 6-month prospective study comparing students in (collectivist) Spain and (individualist) Britain confirmed the expected differences in relative (adjusted) levels of self-liking and self-competence. The predicted differential sensitivity to social events was also confirmed. No evidence for differential sensitivity to achievement-related events, however, was found. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Best conceptualized as a cultural ‘syndrome’ (Triandis, 1994, 1995), the construct of individualism–collectivism incorporates a host of attitudinal and behavioral dimensions that define self–other relations. Some of these dimensions appear to be bipolar in relation to individualism–collectivism; others are aspects of either individualism or collectivism, but not both. Some have emerged as transcultural, others culture-specific. Many of the dimensions interpreted as etic by researchers are based upon relational differences in collectivist versus individualist self-construal.

The self in collectivist cultures has been characterized as enmeshed, ensembled, interdependent, and contextualized, emphasizing its socially contingent nature. The self in individualist cultures, in contrast, has been described as self-contained, isolated, independent, and clearly bounded (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sampson, 1989; Shweder & Bourne, 1984), reflecting a greater degree of social separation and autonomy. These differences appear to hold implications for self-esteem, as comparisons of individualist and collectivist cultures on self-esteem measures have often

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revealed lower scores amongst collectivists (e.g. Bond & Cheung, 1983; Chiu, 1993; Page & Cheng, 1992; Stigler, Smith & Mao, 1985). Speculative interpretations of this disparity have identified greater cultural tightness, harsher attitudes toward personal failures and shortcomings, weaker self-enhancement, less choice in behavioral investment, and greater guilt, shame and pessimism in collectivist cultures as potential causes (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Chiu, 1993; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kitayama, Markus & Lieberman, 1995; Triandis, 1995). A *dimensional* consideration of self-valuation and its antecedents, however, suggests a more complex relation of individualism–collectivism with self-esteem, with regard to both scalar differences and sensitivity to life events.

FIRST TRADE-OFF: INDIVIDUALISM–COLLECTIVISM AND RELATIVE LEVELS OF SELF-LIKING AND SELF-COMPETENCE

Global self-esteem can be conceived as consisting of two correlated but distinct attitudinal dimensions, *self-competence* and *self-liking* (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). The former refers to the generalized sense of one's efficacy or power and the latter to the generalized sense of one's worth as a social object (see also Franks & Marolla, 1976; Gecas, 1971). Self-competence is the valuative experience of overall agency, the inherently positive awareness of oneself as capable that results from successfully imposing one's will upon the environment. Self-liking, in contrast, is the valuation of personhood—one's worth as a social entity with reference to internalized standards of good and bad. Whereas self-competence is a relatively autonomous valuation, determined by chronic success and failure in meeting personal goals, self-liking requires reference to socially transmitted values that define personal worth. Accordingly, self-liking is sensitive to interpersonal feedback expressing approval or disapproval, whereas self-competence is sensitive to environmental feedback signalling the presence or absence of control and self-determination. The two dimensions appear to be functionally distinct in relation to behavior (Tafarodi, 1998; Tafarodi & Vu, 1997), yet are highly correlated. The correlation is presumably due in large part to the causal significance each has for the other, to be addressed later. Methodologically, the overlap necessitates holding each dimension of self-esteem constant when examining the distinctive nomological network of the other.

The two-dimensional model affords specific predictions addressing the significance of individualism–collectivism for valuation of the self. First, a collectivist cultural orientation that prescribes deference, social sensitivity, and subordination of personal goals to collective concerns should be especially conducive to the development of the self-liking dimension of self-esteem. Harmonization of personal behavior with the norms, needs, and expectations of one's ingroups should promote social acceptance and approval by these groups, be they family, friends, neighbors, or co-workers. Reflected appraisals conveying this acceptance and approval should promote the individual's private sense of social worth, or self-liking.

In contrast, an individualist cultural orientation, emphasizing independence, assertiveness and priority of the self over the collective, should be inimical to the development of self-liking. Here, discrepancies between personal intentions and the wishes and expectations of others are often ignored or dismissed as the unavoidable

price of legitimate autonomy, self-expression and initiative. The lack of social modulation implied inevitably breeds interpersonal friction, as ingroup members chafe against the individual's socially discordant behavior. Greater ingroup conflict and mutual frustration results, with reflected appraisals often expressing disfavor and rejection of the individual. Such negative appraisals convey lack of social worth, and should therefore challenge self-liking.

An obverse argument applies to the self-competence dimension of self-esteem. A high degree of deference and abnegation for others entails a partial surrender of autonomy, freedom of choice and self-determination, all of which relate to personal control over one's life. Insofar as the collectivist orientation requires this surrender of control, the growth of self-competence will be inhibited. Control, after all, is integral to the experience of efficacy or competence (deCharms, 1968/1983; White, 1963). In contrast, decreased respect for the needs of the collective allows the individualist greater latitude for self-expression, behavioral choice and identity formation. This results in an expanded sense of personal control and promotes the development of self-competence.

The foregoing 'cultural trade-off' predicts higher average self-liking (holding self-competence constant) and lower average self-competence (holding self-liking constant) in collectivists than individualists. These mirror-image predictions have been confirmed in Chinese versus American and Malaysian versus British comparisons (Tafarodi, Lang & Smith, *in press*; Tafarodi & Swann, 1996). Moreover, statistically equating the latter two groups on critical facets of individualism–collectivism was found to reduce their self-esteem differences to insignificance, supporting the interpretation that individualism–collectivism is responsible for those differences.

Beyond their relation to average levels of self-esteem, collectivist versus individualist tendencies in self-regulation and social behavior hold important implications for the impact of life events on self-esteem.

SECOND TRADE-OFF: INDIVIDUALISM–COLLECTIVISM AND SENSITIVITY OF SELF-ESTEEM TO LIFE EVENTS

The primacy of social identity for collectivist self-understanding entails a commitment to fulfilling ingroup expectations. Self-acceptance is largely a reflection of social acceptance, and is therefore heavily dependent on fidelity to normative prescriptions and proscriptions for personal behavior. Accordingly, collectivist enculturation promotes enhanced sensitivity to social evaluation (Okazaki, 1997). Heightened evaluative sensitivity enables the collectivist to remain responsive to shifting social demands and to rapidly correct for any inadvertent deviations or transgressions that threaten to produce discord and friction (Kitayama, Markus & Lieberman, 1995; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto & Norasakkunkit, 1997). The ability to accurately perceive even implicit or muted valuative signals is further necessitated by normative constraints on overt criticism or rejection of those with whom one is interacting. The imperatives of decorum and avoidance of ingroup conflict in collectivist societies demand sensitivity to the subtlest expressions of negativity, as such signs may betoken intense disapproval.

The emphasis on independence and confident self-assertion in individualist, especially Western, cultures promotes a somewhat different approach to social relations. Acute sensitivity to social feedback is often seen as a reflection of weakness, neuroticism and dependency. It is therefore inhibited through socialization beginning in middle to late childhood. Similarly, habitual adjustment of personal behavior to fit the expectations or wishes of others conveys an undesirable conformity and is seen as antithetical to a stable self-identity. Individualist self-acceptance requires the preservation of autonomy. Whereas maintaining a self-chosen course of action in the face of public censure is viewed harshly by the collectivist, it becomes a celebrated virtue for the individualist. Likewise, principled criticism and frank argument during encounters with ingroup members are more often taken to reflect forthrightness and integrity than social immaturity. The relative lack of cultural constraint on face-to-face expressions of disapproval engenders a considerable amount of negative social feedback with which to contend. In response, a broad repertoire of deflective, attributional and compensatory defences develops to reduce injury to self-esteem (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Whereas the collectivist responds to criticism by sympathetically modifying behavior, the individualist is more likely to ignore, dismiss, or offset its self-relevance.

The foregoing contrast lends itself to specific predictions regarding the differential psychological sensitivity of collectivists and individualists to self-esteem-relevant life events. One reflection of sensitivity is the impact of such experiences on self-esteem. Though characterized by a fair degree of stability over time, global self-esteem has been shown to fluctuate as a function of negative life events, with higher frequency of negative events predicting lower self-esteem (e.g. Lakey, Tardiff & Drew, 1994; Miller, Kreitman, Ingham & Sashidharan, 1989; Mullis, Youngs, Mullis & Rathge, 1993; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman & Mullan, 1981). Evidence concerning the significance of positive life events is more scant. Where relations have been found in normal populations, however, higher frequency of positive events has predicted higher self-esteem (e.g. Cohen, Burt & Bjorck, 1987). Most of the previous research in this area has implicitly adopted a unidimensional conception of global self-esteem. Replacing this with the two-dimensional approach adopted here affords more refined predictions concerning the impact of life events. Given the theoretical origins of self-liking and self-competence as described above, each dimension of self-esteem should be directly sensitive to only those events that are thematically matched with it in their self-valuative relevance. That is, self-liking should be primarily responsive to social events and self-competence to achievement-related events, but not vice versa. The strength of these associations, however, may be qualified by culture.

We suggest here that the collectivist cultural orientation, more than the individualist, promotes loss of self-liking in response to negative social events. This vulnerability stems from the collectivist tendency to amplify the diagnosticity of negative interpersonal feedback and its implications for social regulation (Yamaguchi, Kuhlman & Sugimori, 1995). A symmetric sensitivity to positive social events is also expected. Insofar as such events support and enhance self-liking, collectivists should benefit more noticeably than do individualists from experiences that convey social acceptance, approval and belonging.

Individualists, more than collectivists, are invested in maximizing self-determination, primary control and personal attainment. Self-worth and self-identity are contingent upon individual, often competitive, performance. As regards

sensitivity to life events, then, individualists should be especially prone to diminished self-competence in response to negative achievement-related events, especially those involving failure to realize a desired personal goal. Similarly, positive achievement-related events should be more enhancing of individualist than collectivist self-competence.

This theoretically derived pattern of relative sensitivities for collectivist and individualist self-liking and self-competence constitutes a second form of cultural trade-off.

A Spanish versus British comparison

In the above arguments, collectivism and individualism were counterposed in stark and idealized form. In reality, all cultures have both individualist and collectivist elements and therefore fall somewhere between the two extremes described. To confirm the hypothetical trade-offs, we opted to examine university students in Spain and Britain. As Spain represents a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1984; Leung, Au, Fernández-Dols & Iwawaki, 1992) and Britain an individualist one (Hofstede, 1984, 1991), the study provides an appropriate comparative test of the hypotheses. Previous research on the cultural trade-off in relative levels of self-esteem (Tafarodi, Lang & Smith, *in press*; Tafarodi & Swann, 1996) relied on Asian groups to represent the collectivist cultural orientation. This exclusivity raises the possibility that cultural features common to the Asian groups examined but independent of (or interactive with) individualism–collectivism underlie the differences found. To avoid replicating this limitation here, we compared two Western European cultures. Reliance upon students was more than a matter of convenience, as it rendered the cultural samples comparable on many descriptive dimensions unrelated to culture.

The specific predictions can now be summarized. Reflecting the first trade-off, Spanish students are expected to be higher in self-liking (controlling for self-competence) but lower in self-competence (controlling for self-liking) relative to their British counterparts. In line with the two-dimensional model of self-esteem, social but not achievement-related or other life events are expected to produce significant change in self-liking, with positive events having an enhancing and negative events a diminishing effect. Reflecting one side of the second trade-off, these effects are expected to be stronger for Spanish than British students. Similarly, achievement-related but not social or other life events are expected to produce significant change in self-competence, with positive and negative events having opposite effects as before. Reflecting the obverse side of the second trade-off, these effects are expected to be stronger in British than Spanish students.

METHOD

Overview

British and Spanish students completed a self-esteem measure on two occasions six months apart. They also provided a retrospective record of life events on the second

occasion. Average levels of residualized self-liking and self-competence were examined, as was Time 1 → Time 2 change in each of the two dimensions as a function of intervening life events.

Participants

Forty-four British students at the University of Wales Cardiff and 41 Spanish students at the University of Barcelona took part in the two-phase study. Listwise deletion of incomplete (nine participants failed to respond to all items used in the analysis) or otherwise corrupt data (2 participants failed to use the rating scales as defined) left 41 British (one man, 40 women) and 33 Spanish (four men, 29 women) participants for analysis. Gender ratio was comparable across the two cultural groups, $p = 0.17$ for Fisher's exact test, as was age, $t(72) = 1.45$, $p = 0.15$ ($M = 19.7$ and $M = 18.6$ for British and Spanish, respectively).

Materials and procedure

Participants completed two questionnaires, the second administered six months after the first. Both consisted of nine measures, only three of which are relevant here. British participants completed original, English-language versions of the questionnaires; Spanish participants completed Spanish-language versions that had been created using back-translation methods to maximize semantic equivalence.

Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale (SLCS)

The SLCS (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995) is a 20-item self-report measure of self-esteem consisting of two 10-item subscales, one designed to measure self-competence and the other self-liking. Respondents indicate degree of agreement with global statements reflecting low or high self-competence (e.g. 'I don't succeed at much', 'I am a capable person') and self-liking (e.g. 'I tend to devalue myself', 'I like myself'). Both subscales have an equal number of positively and negatively worded items. Responses are made on a 5-point Likert-type scale, anchored with *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. Tafarodi and Swann (1995) report Cronbach coefficient alphas of 0.89 and 0.92 and uncorrected test-retest (3-week interval) reliabilities of 0.80 and 0.78, for self-liking and self-competence, respectively. They also provide evidence for the discriminant validity of the correlated ($r = 0.69$) subscales (see also Tafarodi & Swann, 1996), supporting the characterization of self-liking and self-competence as interdependent yet distinct dimensions of global self-esteem.

The SLCS was included in both questionnaires.

Life Events Record (LER; Tafarodi & Davies, 1995, unpublished scale)

The LER is a retrospective measure of life events. Respondents recall any personally significant events that occurred during a specified time period, marking each as either

positive or negative. Each event is briefly described in writing and the subjective intensity of its positive or negative impact is rated on a 9-point scale anchored by *mild* (1) and *very strong* (9). Space is provided for up to ten events. Frequencies for negative and positive events, optionally weighted by intensity ratings, are computed. Given its reliance on active recall, the LER is best used for relatively short retrospective periods (i.e. up to six months prior to administration). In contrast to standard life event inventories (checklists), its open-endedness provides a personalized record of what the *respondent* experienced as significant, irrespective of how notable these events would have been for others.

The LER was included in the Time 2 questionnaire, with participants reporting any significant events that had occurred in the six months since Time 1.

Belief in Social Harmonization Scale (BISH; Tafarodi & Lang, 1995, unpublished scale)

The BISH taps the individual's ethical orientation toward behaviors that represent either individualist autonomy or collectivist deference/harmonization. The behaviors are responses to implied self-ingroup inconsistency. Thus, it isolates the very aspect of individualism–collectivism held to be critical for the trade-offs at issue. Respondents rate, according to their personal values, the degree to which each of 22 behaviors reflects a mature adult style rather than an immature, childish style of relating to others. Ratings are made on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *very immature*, 5 = *very mature*). The measure has been found to discriminate individualist from collectivist cultural orientations at the individual level. For example, collectivists tend to rate the following items as reflecting greater maturity than do individualists: 'Being concerned about how your appearance makes other people feel', 'Acting average so you don't stand out in a group', 'Not being honest with a friend to avoid conflict'. In contrast, individualists tend to view the following behaviors as reflecting greater maturity than do collectivists: 'Ignoring the views of others in order to find out what is right for you', 'Telling your parents you disagree completely with their beliefs', 'Turning down a formal invitation from a relative whom you happen to dislike'.

As expected, the University of Barcelona students were higher than the University of Wales students on total BISH score (scaled in the collectivist direction), $t(72) = 2.85$, $p = 0.006$, $M = 58.90$ ($SD = 5.72$) and $M = 54.91$ ($SD = 6.20$), respectively. This provides targeted confirmation of the cultural assumption underlying the choice of national comparison and converges with other research suggesting higher collectivism in Spain (Hofstede, 1984; Leung *et al.*, 1992). The BISH was included in the Time 1 questionnaire.

RESULTS

British and Spanish means on the variables included in the following analyses are compared in Table 1. As indicated, the British were higher than the Spanish in raw (unadjusted) self-competence at both Time 1 and Time 2. No other differences were significant.

Table 1. Mean level of self-liking, self-competence, and life event frequencies for British ($n = 41$) and Spanish ($n = 33$) students

Variable	Cultural group	
	British	Spanish
Time 1		
Self-liking	33.83 ^a (8.34)	32.24 ^a (7.76)
Self-competence	39.41 ^a (4.81)	34.15 ^b (6.41)
Time 2		
Self-liking	35.39 ^a (7.97)	33.12 ^a (7.75)
Self-competence	39.76 ^a (5.33)	35.30 ^b (6.35)
S + events	0.87 ^a (0.57)	1.02 ^a (0.70)
S - events	1.15 ^a (1.04)	1.21 ^a (1.17)
A + events	0.88 ^a (0.60)	0.80 ^a (0.58)
A - events	0.34 ^a (0.48)	0.45 ^a (0.56)
O + events	0.35 ^a (0.57)	0.44 ^a (0.63)
O - events	0.21 ^a (0.43)	0.24 ^a (0.47)

Note: Means in the same row that do not share superscripts differ at $p < 0.05$.

ANOVA revealed no reliable uniform change in self-liking from Time 1 to Time 2, $F(1,72) = 3.17$, $p = 0.08$. Nor did one group increase or decrease more than the other, $F < 1$. Similar results were found for self-competence: $F(1,72) = 1.75$, $p = 0.19$ for Time 1 \rightarrow Time 2 change and the groups were equivalent, $F < 1$.

Comparing levels of self-esteem

The British were predicted to be lower in self-liking but higher in self-competence than the Spanish. To maximize measurement reliability in testing this prediction, each participant's Time 1 and Time 2 SLCS self-liking scores were averaged, as were their Time 1 and Time 2 self-competence scores. Consistent with past research, the two dimensions of self-esteem covaried considerably in the present sample, $r = 0.73$ (the correlation was similar across groups, $z = 1.04$, $p = 0.30$). Such overlap demands that each dimension of self-esteem be held constant when testing for group differences on the other. Hypothesis tests would not be independent and meaningful otherwise. To accomplish this, a one-way (cultural group) ANCOVA was conducted on self-liking, using self-competence as the covariate.¹ As expected, the Spanish were clearly higher than the British on residualized or unique self-liking, $F(1,71) = 7.38$, $p = 0.008$ (see Figure 1 for adjusted means). A parallel ANCOVA was conducted on self-competence, using self-liking as the covariate. Here, the British were clearly higher as expected, $F(1,71) = 23.43$, $p < 0.0001$ (see Figure 1 for adjusted means).

Testing differential sensitivity

Responses on the LER were categorically differentiated to create domain-specific life event scores. Specifically, a pair of judges independently classified all events reported

¹For both ANCOVAs reported in this section, preliminary analyses confirmed homogeneity of covariances across cultural groups.

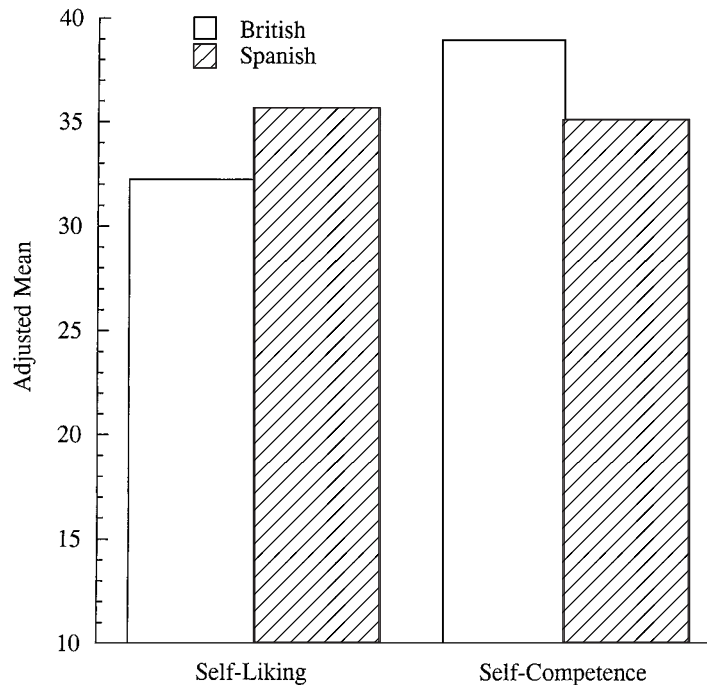


Figure 1. Adjusted means on self-liking and self-competence for British ($n = 41$) and Spanish ($n = 33$) students. Possible range for both dimensions is 10–50

by participants using a three-category scheme. Events of primarily interpersonal significance (e.g. starting a romantic relationship, conflict with a parent or classmate) were placed in the *Social* category. Events with primary significance for ability or competence (e.g. winning a short-story competition, failing an exam) were placed in the *Achievement* category. Remaining events (e.g. one's dog having puppies, suffering the flu) were placed in the *Other* category. The judges concurred on 97 percent of the events. Cohen's (1960) κ was 0.95, a high level of chance-corrected agreement. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

To avoid any distortion of results due to metric disparity between groups on the event intensity scale (see Hui & Triandis, 1985), only the *unweighted* or simple event frequencies were used in hypothesis-testing.² For each participant, frequencies were computed for Positive Social (S+), Negative Social (S-), Positive Achievement (A+), Negative Achievement (A-), Positive Other (O+), and Negative Other (O-) events.

Simultaneous multiple regression was used to test for group differences in the associations of life events with change in self-esteem. All continuous variables were standardized prior to analysis. Three pairs of regressions were conducted.³ One pair was aimed at testing differential sensitivity to Social events. In the first regression, Time 2 self-liking was regressed on the following predictors: Time 1 self-liking, Time 1 self-competence, Time 2 self-competence, S + , S - , a dummy variable representing cultural group, and multiplicative terms representing the S + \times group and

²Analyses using intensity-weighted frequencies produced parallel results.

³To enhance linearity of associations in regression analyses (see Tabachnik & Fidell, 1996), all life event frequencies except for S + were subject to square-root transformation.

S- \times group interactions. Inclusion of Time 1 self-liking allowed life event frequencies to be selectively associated with unique variance in Time 2 self-liking. This is tantamount to associating life events with Time 1 \rightarrow Time 2 change in self-liking (Cronbach & Furby, 1970). Time 1 and Time 2 self-competence were included to prevent variance in self-competence at both times from confounding associations of self-liking with life events, specifically through elimination of any indirect (events \rightarrow self-competence \rightarrow self-liking) effects. The reciprocal influence of the two self-esteem dimensions (see Tafarodi, 1998) recommends such control. S+ and S- were the primary predictors, gauging the unique associations of Positive and Negative Social events with change in self-liking. Finally, the interaction terms provided critical tests of the prediction that both Positive and Negative Social events would more strongly predict change in self-liking for Spanish than British students. Significance of their regression coefficients would reflect differential sensitivity.

The results revealed both interactions to be significant ($\alpha = 0.05$): $\beta = 0.26$, $p = 0.02$ and $\beta = -0.23$, $p = 0.03$, for S+ \times group and S- \times group, respectively. Simple slope testing confirmed the form of differential sensitivity to be in line with prediction, albeit starker than expected. Namely, whereas S+ was found to be positively associated with increase in self-liking for the Spanish, $\beta = 0.26$, $p = 0.002$, no association held for the British, $\beta = 0.00$, $p = 0.97$ (see Figure 2). Similarly, S- was found to be negatively associated with increase in self-liking for the Spanish, $\beta = -0.30$, $p < 0.0001$, but not the British, $\beta = -0.08$, $p = 0.28$ (see Figure 3).

For the next regression, the self-competence and self-liking terms in the model were transposed to associate Social events with change in self-competence. As Social events are not held to be directly relevant for self-competence, no associations were expected. Confirming this, neither the interactions nor S+ and S- were significantly associated with change in self-competence.

The second pair of regressions examined the impact of Achievement events. First, Time 2 self-liking was regressed on Time 1 self-liking, Time 1 self-competence, Time 2 self-competence, A+, A-, group, and the A+ \times group and A- \times group

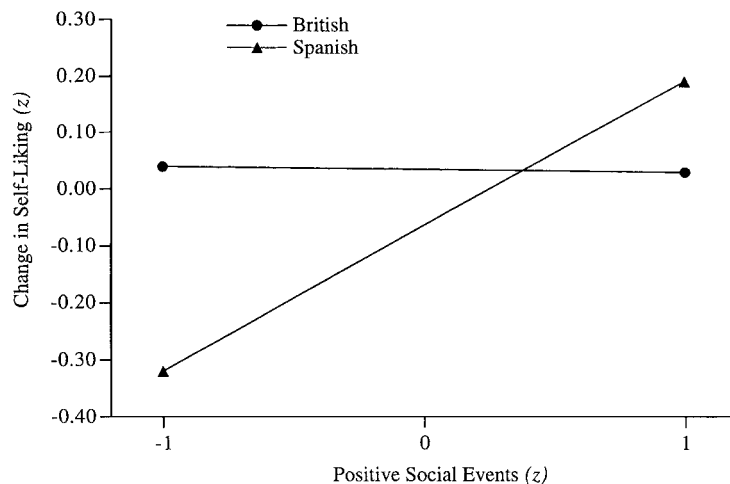


Figure 2. Association of positive social events with change in self-liking for British and Spanish students

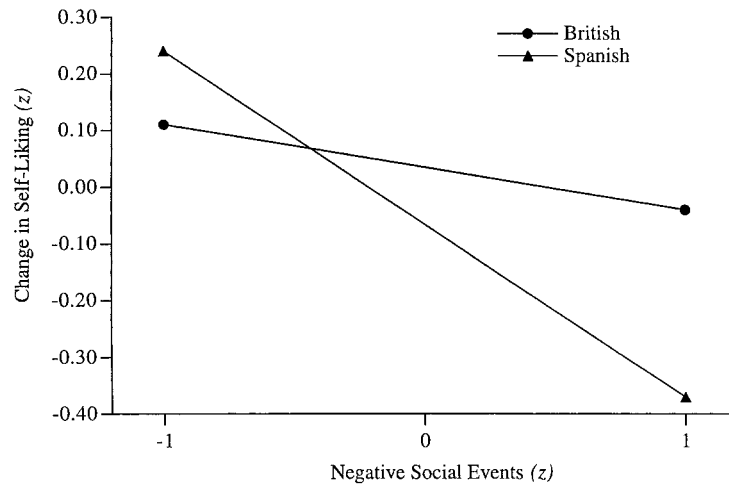


Figure 3. Association of negative social events with change in self-liking for British and Spanish students

interactions. As Achievement events are not held to be directly relevant for self-liking, no associations were expected. Confirming this, neither the interactions nor A + and A – were significantly associated with change in self-liking.

Transposing self-competence and self-liking in the model for the next regression, the prediction that Achievement events would be more strongly related to self-competence for the British than the Spanish was tested. Contrary to expectation, neither the interactions nor A + and A – were significantly associated with change in self-competence.

The final pair of regressions examined the impact of Other events on self-liking and self-competence. The models were structured as before, but with Other events as the primary predictors. No significant simple or interactive associations of O + or O – were expected and none were found.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we aimed to confirm two hypothetical trade-offs that describe the relation of individualism–collectivism to self-esteem. Spanish (collectivist) and British (individualist) students provided an apt cultural contrast. Reflecting the first trade-off, the Spanish were expected to be higher in residualized (unique) self-liking but lower in residualized (unique) self-competence than the British. These predictions were clearly confirmed. In fact, the magnitude of the mirror-image differences observed are similar to those found in previous American versus Chinese and British versus Malaysian comparisons. The uniformity of findings across cultural pairings, despite the representation of European (non-Asian) collectivism in the present study, is consistent with the claim that cultural differences in self-esteem are linked to the etic significance of individualism–collectivism.

The second trade-off addressed differential sensitivity. Drawing from individualism–collectivism theory and research, we offered the novel prediction that the impact of social life events on self-liking would be stronger for Spanish than British students. The prediction was clearly confirmed, with positive events directly related and negative events inversely related to increased self-liking over a 6-month interval for the Spanish only. Though preliminary, this finding identifies psychosocial sensitivity as a potentially important aspect of cross-cultural variation in self-esteem.

The finding that social events were unrelated to change in self-liking for British students, however, should not be taken to suggest that this category of experience is irrelevant for self-liking among individualists. Rather, the absence of association may be largely attributable to the minor, workaday nature and low frequency of events experienced by the participants during a relatively short time interval. No major stressful events were reported by most participants and average change in self-liking was quite modest. Furthermore, the rigorous degree of statistical control implemented in the regression analyses, in the context of a modest sample size, may have produced significant reduction in power. That social events have been found elsewhere to predict individualist self-esteem (e.g. Catlin, 1993; Lakey *et al.*, 1994; Miller *et al.*, 1989) supports this limited interpretation.

The prediction that achievement-related events would be more influential for self-competence in British than Spanish students received no support. For both cultural groups, neither positive nor negative events were associated with change in self-competence. The reason for this disconfirmation is not immediately apparent. Achievement and social events received similar mean intensity ratings ($A + = 6.88$, $S + = 6.89$, $A - = 6.16$, $S - = 6.84$), dismissing the speculation that negative achievement events were comparatively trivial. A more likely possibility relates to a characteristic of the participants. Students at the University of Wales Cardiff and the University of Barcelona can be assumed to possess a fair degree of confidence in their ability to meet goals, having already accomplished much in gaining admittance to a reputable university. This high trait self-competence (significantly higher than self-liking for both groups), relative to that of the general population, may be generally unresponsive to minor failures and successes. That a few commonplace experiences relating to achievement and showing limited variation across participants failed to predict change in level of self-competence is therefore not overly surprising. Research on non-student populations, using more refined tests of sensitivity, are needed to explore this interpretation. Another possibility is that the null findings for achievement-related events belie significant non-linear associations that could not be reliably tested due to sample size. Clearly, further research involving more powerful designs is needed before differential cultural sensitivity to this category of experience can be discounted.

More broadly, social events were expected to have no direct effect on self-competence, achievement-related events to have no direct effect on self-liking, and other events to have no direct effect on either dimension. All these predictions were confirmed, supporting the hypothetical origins of and substantive distinctions between the two aspects of self-esteem. Furthermore, that the demonstrated differential sensitivity of the cultural groups was domain-specific points out that Spanish students are not at more or less *general* risk than are British students for diminished self-esteem in the wake of adversity. Rather, their specific vulnerability aligns with the psychosocial implications of collectivism and its prescriptive emphasis on social

harmonization. This invites the speculation that interpersonal or 'sociotropic' concerns (see Beck, 1983; Robins, 1995) constitute the predominant preoccupation, and social loss the predominant trigger, among Spanish depressives.

The distinction between self-liking and self-competence finds interesting parallel in Wojciszke's (1994) distinction between moral versus competence-based construal of behavior. Recall that the two-dimensional model of self-esteem proposes that we experience our own value both in terms of social worth or 'goodness' (self-liking) and in terms of agency or efficacy (self-competence). Similarly, according to Wojciszke's framework, actions can be judged for both the skill or ability they reveal and the moral significance of their underlying intentions. Furthermore, recent research suggests that collectivistic values emphasize moral interpretation of behavior, whereas individualistic values emphasize competence-based interpretation (Wojciszke, 1997). This fits neatly with the present theory and findings, where collectivism relates to enhanced self-liking and individualism to enhanced self-competence.

A related phenomenon is that people in individualist cultures tend to interpret their own behavior in terms of competence and the actions of others in terms of morality (Wojciszke, 1994). This makes some sense, as the moral meaning of one's behavior is usually self-evident to oneself and only rarely a pressing cause for concern. In contrast, the moral import of others' behaviour is rarely transparent and, in interpersonal contexts, often a legitimate concern. This asymmetry, however, may be attenuated or altogether absent in collectivist cultures where a premium is placed on awareness of how one's behavior is experienced by others. The enhanced social sensitivity found here suggests that collectivists, more than individualists, become adaptively attuned to the moral significance of their actions in the course of regulating social interactions and, as a result, their self-esteem.

The conceptual parallel with the morality versus competence distinction suggests another linkage with social cognitive phenomena. In individualist cultures, self-enhancement in the context of self-other judgments has been found to be stronger for moral than competence-related attributes (Allison, Messick & Goethals, 1989; Van Lange, 1991). That is, we have more of a tendency to see ourselves as superior to others for morally defined qualities such as *honest* and *friendly* than for ability-based qualities such as *intelligent* and *athletic*. Insofar as collectivism demands a heightened focus on the moral aspects of one's actions, this asymmetry may be even more pronounced. Such a cultural difference could hold independent of the much lower level of general self-enhancement in collectivist cultures (e.g. Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kitayama, Markus & Lieberman, 1995).

Limitations and qualifications

Two limitations of the study are pertinent for assessing the significance of the results supporting the first hypothesized trade-off. First, the negligible presence of men in the sample limits the strict generalizability of the findings. Even so, in previous research where gender effects were tested (Tafarodi, Lang & Smith, in press; Tafarodi & Swann, 1996), the pattern of cultural differences in levels of self-liking and self-competence was equivalent for men and women. This suggests that a higher proportion of men in the present sample would not have yielded dissimilar results. Further research is needed to confirm this expectation.

A second limitation relates to psychometric equivalence. In general, interpretation of quantitative differences across cultures on self-report instruments, especially those subject to translation, is complicated by the possibility of response factor and other scalar confounds (Leung & Bond, 1989). There is also legitimate concern over construct equivalence (Hui & Triandis, 1985). The modest sample size in the present study precluded meaningful confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) testing structural (within-construct) parity of the English- and Spanish-language versions of the SLCS. Allaying concern to some degree, previous research on the trade-off suggests that the covariance structure of the SLCS is fairly robust in cross-cultural application. Moreover, as regards response factors, it is highly improbable that differential response tendencies in Spanish and British students could produce adjusted mean differences in opposite directions for the two dimensions of self-esteem, especially as measured by an instrument balanced in positively and negatively worded items.

The scalar findings are consistent with the claim that collectivism and individualism entail inverse costs and benefits for self-esteem. But the 'hydraulic' self-other dynamic held to underlie these differences addresses only the *direct* determination of self-liking and self-competence. It does not represent the *indirect* determination that binds them together. The pronounced correlation of self-liking and self-competence reflects their causal interrelations. For example, self-competence, insofar as it is a reality-bound, performance-determined attitude, implies a roughly commensurate level of actual competence. Actual competence is a socially rewarded quality. Those high in self-competence therefore tend to enjoy greater social acceptance and approval than those low in self-competence. The victorious Olympian is loved as much as respected by her country for her athletic achievements. It is little surprise, then, that those high in self-competence tend also to be high in self-liking. One implication of this connection is that any individual or cultural factor that boosts self-competence through fostering actual competence will also indirectly boost self-liking.

There is also influence in the opposite direction. Though interpersonal feedback is primarily a determinant of self-liking, it also indirectly impacts self-competence. Specifically, a social milieu that is positively disposed toward an individual provides opportunities for and otherwise supports the development of his competence. A loving parent, for example, often feeds both aspects of the child's self-esteem. Neither collectivism nor individualism, then, can be viewed as *uniformly* inimical to either dimension of self-esteem, as pathways of indirect influence militate against any culturally determined inhibition. Still, in terms of direct causation, a hydraulic characterization is justified.

In regard to the observed differences in sensitivity to life events, several concerns about causal interpretation deserve discussion. First, reliance on simple event frequencies in this study raises the possibility that the two groups experienced different sorts of events *within* the same category. For example, Spanish participants may have experienced more objectively stressful negative social events than did Britons, irrespective of frequency. If so, their greater response to these events would be neither surprising nor due to cultural differences in social sensitivity. This possibility is contradicted, however, by the finding that the two groups did not significantly differ in their average intensity ratings for any of the six categories of events.

A second concern pertains to interpreting the association of life events and self-esteem. Our respondent-based approach to life events measurement relies on active recall. Ideally, it should not be biased by response factors. Low self-esteem, however,

has been associated with *negative* bias in memory (e.g. Story, 1998; Tafarodi, 1998). This raises the possibility that even relatively mild loss of self-liking or self-competence caused participants to recall more negative and fewer positive events than they would have in happier times. Such distortion would necessarily inflate the primary associations tested. The frequency with which lack of association was found, however, suggests that such inflation could not have been considerable. More importantly, though, the predictors critical to testing differential sensitivity were the events \times cultural group interactions. Because the magnitude and significance of these interactions is unaffected by simple inflation of their constituent terms, exaggerated primary associations due to memory bias could not in any case account for the differential sensitivity observed.

A third concern is that low self-esteem may itself generate stressful life events (Cohen *et al.*, 1987; Cui & Vaillant, 1997; Hammen, 1991). This suggests another potential source of distortion, if loss of self-liking or self-competence across the 6-month period contributed to the incidence of negative events. Again, however, tests of the cultural hypotheses (interactions) should be immune to such distortion. Moreover, no significant intercorrelations were found among negative social, achievement, and other events, suggesting that lowered self-esteem was not breeding bad experiences in a generalized, pronounced manner.

In this paper, we have repeatedly referred to individualism–collectivism as if it was an undifferentiated, bipolar construct. This simplification was an expedient only, adopted to highlight the agentic dialectic of self- versus other-direction, a dynamic facet of individualism–collectivism that *can* be considered bipolar *within the same social domain* due to the mutually exclusive behaviors that reflect it (cf. Schwartz, 1996). Though Triandis and Gelfand (1998) have included the collectivist expression of this facet within a broader dimension they refer to as ‘vertical collectivism’ and the individualist expression within another broad dimension they refer to as ‘horizontal individualism’, the implied separation is somewhat implausible. For example, a young man cannot at one and the same time defer to his parents’ wish that he study medicine (collectivist resolution) and defy their wish by pursuing his ardent passion for painting (individualist resolution). Each response is the antithesis of the other. Given the demonstrated independence of individualism and collectivism for many other aspects of individualism–collectivism, however, the two constructs should be conceived as *generally* distinct. The bipolarity implicit in our treatment is tightly circumscribed, relating specifically to the conflict between autonomy and deference that is a universal of social life.

Conclusion

In summary, this study provides a moderate degree of evidence for cultural differences in the magnitude and reactivity of self-esteem. Individualist and collectivist cultures appear to support self-esteem in contrasting ways, as reflected in average levels of self-liking and self-competence. Collectivism also appears to engender greater self-evaluative sensitivity to social experience. These differences highlight the importance of individualism–collectivism for defining cultural distance and provide a theoretical basis for anticipating potential difficulties in cross-cultural contact. For example, unequal sensitivity to social feedback implies that normative expectations regarding

the expression of criticism and praise should also be discrepant and, therefore, likely to produce misunderstanding and frustration in encounters between individualists and collectivists. Investigation into the basis of such difficulties should promote a deeper understanding of the regulative role of self-esteem in psychosocial adjustment.

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