

PROJECT SUMMARY

Overview:

The existing literature of cultural psychology typically portrays Westerners as independent and non-Westerners as interdependent. The contrast between the West and the 'rest' is often criticized as overly simplistic; however, little systematic psychological work exists on non-Western cultures except in East Asia. Here, we propose that there are at least four distinct forms of interdependence, depending on the strategies adopted to achieve the valued state of interdependence. In self-effacing interdependence (typical of East Asian cultures), interdependence is achieved through conflict avoidance; in self-assertive interdependence (typical of Arab cultures), interdependence is achieved through ingroup protection; in expressive interdependence (typical of Latin cultures), interdependence is achieved through emotional expressivity within relationships; and in argumentative interdependence (typical of Indian and Jewish cultures), interdependence is achieved through logical argumentation. The diverse strategies for interdependence reflect the unique configuration of socio-ecological, geo-demographic, and historical factors of each area or group. Importantly, Western culture is thought to have adopted the existing strategies for interdependence in its adjacent cultures (notably, self-assertion, emotional expression, and logical argumentation) and redefined the psychological function and social meaning of each, not as the means for interdependence but instead as the means for independence.

To test this framework, Study 1 will administer a set of psychological tasks validated to assess three core features of interdependence vs. independence, i.e., (i) predictors of happiness, (ii) holistic attention, and (iii) holistic social explanation. We will also assess three pairs of subsidiary features, i.e., (i) self-effacement vs. assertion, (ii) emotional suppression vs. expression, and (iii) dialectic vs. logical reasoning. We will examine a set of 16 cultural groups from South Asia, Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, as well as North America, Western Europe, and East Asia. We expect to find a broad divergence between the West and the 'rest' in the core features. However, we expect the groups in the 'rest' to be systematically different in the subsidiary features. In Studies 2-6, we will use a priming procedure to test the hypothesis that each of the subsidiary features (self-assertion, logical reasoning, and emotional expressivity) is activated by interdependence in the relevant non-Western groups, but it is activated by independence in the Western groups.

Intellectual Merit:

The proposed research would initiate the second wave of research in cultural psychology, which seeks to go beyond the East-West, independence-interdependence, analytic-holistic dichotomies that have defined the field over the past three decades. This research would help move psychology and associated social sciences beyond dualistic dichotomies to consider more diverse forms of social relations that are represented across the globe, and thus provide the field with a more comprehensive understanding of human psychology. In short, the current work will help globalize the current psychology. Importantly, this work will enable researchers with WEIRD (i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) backgrounds to explicitly theorize the modes of social relations and the self that are backgrounded in their culture.

Broader Impacts:

In the current globalized era, large numbers of people immigrate to new countries for education and jobs on the one hand and to flee conflicts and violence on the other. Universities in many developed countries heavily rely on international students and faculty to fill their ranks. Multinational corporations have employees from all over the world. For example, one of the US's strongest industries, the technology industry in California's Silicon Valley, is heavily dependent on immigrants from India and China. In this context, having a deeper understanding of the psychological tendencies of people from different parts of the world, understanding what makes people tick, is likely to significantly benefit intercultural interactions in the 21st century. Our cross-cultural research team is truly multi-cultural and will include a number of undergraduates with diverse national and socio-cultural backgrounds, many of whom are under-represented in psychological research. They will be trained in scientific methods. We will disseminate findings from this work not only by publishing them in scholarly journals, but also by discussing them in popular news media.