

Testing Homogeneity Hypothesis of East Asians: Self-Description Ambivalence of American and Japanese

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Futoshi Kobayashi

Abstract

Cultural psychologists claimed that self-construals of East Asians are qualitatively different from those of Westerners. The two previous studies with Chinese and American samples found that East Asians possess more ambivalent self-construals than Westerners. However, Chinese are not the only East Asians. By using Japanese and American samples, the present study refined and replicated these two previous studies. Both Japanese (460 high school students, 39 college students, & 90 adults) and American (58 college students, 91.4% Caucasian) participants wrote down 7 self-descriptions in an “I am ...” format. The results indicated that Japanese wrote ambivalent self-descriptions more frequently than Americans as same as the previous studies found.

Key words

cross-cultural studies, Japan, self

Author Note

Futoshi Kobayashi, Faculty of Comparative Culture, School of International Liberal Arts, Miyazaki International College, Japan.

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Please address correspondence regarding this article to Futoshi Kobayashi, Miyazaki International College, 1405 Kano Kiyotake-cho Miyazaki-shi Miyazaki 889-1605 Japan. E-mail: fkobayas@miyazaki-mic.ac.jp

Testing Homogeneity Hypothesis of East Asians:

Self-Description Ambivalence of American and Japanese

Several cultural psychologists claimed that self-construals of East Asians are qualitatively different from those of Westerners because East Asians assume personality is created by the dynamic equilibrium of two opposing characteristics, not by dispositions of specific traits (e.g., Kitayama & Markus, 1999; Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers & Peng, 2004). For East Asians, having two opposing characteristics (e.g., toughness and warm-heartedness) is essential for the integrity of a person (Kitayama & Markus, 1999). In order to test this claim, Spencer-Rogers, Peng, Wang, and Hou (2004) conducted self-description research. They computed the mean proportion of positive, negative, and neutral self-descriptions among each participants' total number of responses and compared the results of Chinese and Caucasian college students. Their conclusion was that the "Chinese exhibited

(non-significantly) greater ambivalence in their open-ended self-descriptions than did European Americans” (Spencer-Rogers et al., 2004, p. 1421). There were at least three issues regarding this research. First, the comparison of the mean proportion of positive and negative self-statements did not always indicate “the coexistence of evaluative opposites” (Spencer-Rogers et al., 2004, p. 1418). For example, “I am friendly” can be coded into a positive self-statement and “I am pessimistic” can be coded into a negative self-statement, but they do not signify ambivalence. In order to be ambivalent, a friendly person should also possess unfriendly characteristics sometimes, and a pessimistic person should also sometimes indicate an optimistic character. Second, the cultural differences they found were not statistically significant. Third, asking participants to write twenty self-descriptions might be an inappropriate research method with East Asians. Bochner (1994) concluded that the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), the test originally created to investigate the self-construal of the Westerners, should reduce the number of self-description from 20 to 7 when it was applied to Easterners, based on his extensive pilot tests and his own cross-cultural research (e.g., Bochner, 1976; Bochner & Perks, 1971). He argued that the Westerners had no problems in writing twenty self-statements, but the Easterners had difficulty in writing that many self-descriptions due to their collectivistic culture. In a collectivistic culture, people are supposed to keep harmonious relationships with their surrounding people so that they need to seek and store rich information of the others more than those who live in an individualistic culture. The richer information of the others they have (e.g., likes & dislikes, social status, family background), the higher probability they can relate to the others in an appropriate manner. On the other hand, those who live in an individualistic culture

keep richer, detailed, and complex information about themselves than they know about those who surround them (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Recently, Spencer-Rogers, Boucher, Mori, Wang, and Peng (2009) asked 3 bilingual research assistants to find various types of ambivalent self-description statements and reported that Chinese wrote ambivalent self-descriptions more frequently than their American counterparts in the Twenty Statements Test. However, Chinese are not the only East Asians. Further research that would use non-Chinese East Asian participants was needed to verify the claims of the cultural psychologists.

In order to address these issues, (1) the present study asked only 7 self-descriptions of the participants instead of 20, and (2) the bilingual coders were specifically instructed to find the self-description sentence containing two opposing cognitions (e.g., “I am afraid of death, but also longing for death.”) or two opposing self-description sentences in the same participant (e.g., “I am talkative”, in the first self-description, and “I am not good at chatting with others”, in the fifth self-description) instead of coding self-descriptions into positive, negative, or neutral, and (3) the present study used Japanese participants instead of Chinese. The author hypothesized Japanese participants would write ambivalent self-descriptions more frequently than Americans, as the previous research found in the Chinese and American comparison.

Method

The Japanese participants were 460 high school students (237 men, 223 women; M age = 16.6, SD age = .95), 39 college students (10 men, 29 women; M age = 20.8, SD age = .71), and 90 adults (58 men, 31 women, 1 unknown gender; M age =

39.0, *SD* age = 10.6) and the American participants were 58 college students (22 men, 36 women; *M* age = 23.8, *SD* age = 7.5). Ethnicity of Japanese participants was all Japanese, whereas 91.4% of American participants were Caucasians. In the present study, Japanese and American participants wrote down 7 self-descriptions in “I am ...” format and two bilingual research assistants, who were unaware of the hypothesis of this study, coded them into ambivalent or not in following the specific instructions as above.

Results and Discussion

The self-description sentences of 18.8% of Japanese participants and 5.2% of American participants were judged as ambivalent, and the inter-rater reliability was .76. The independent t-test on the total numbers of ambivalent statements revealed that Japanese (*M* = .53, *SD* = 1.3) wrote ambivalent self-descriptions more frequently than Americans (*M* = .16, *SD* = .74), $t(96.6) = 3.35$, $p = .001$, $r = .32$.

The results suggested that Japanese self-construals were significantly different from those of Americans in the existence of opposing characteristics in the same person, as several cultural psychologists had argued. The present study seemed to compliment earlier ambivalent self-description studies of Chinese participants (Spencer-Rogers et al., 2009; Spencer-Rogers et al., 2004). In the research of cultural psychology, many arguments had been done under the assumption of homogeneity of East Asians. The future research should use more diverse groups of East Asians in order to confirm the claims of cultural psychologists regarding East Asians.

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