Spontaneous Self-Descriptions and Ethnic Identities in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

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The Twenty Statements Test (TST) was administered in Seoul and New York, to 454 students from 2 cultures that emphasize collectivism and individualism, respectively. Responses, coded into 33 categories, were classified as either abstract or specific and as either autonomous or social. These 2 dichotomies were more independent in Seoul than in New York. The New York sample included Asian Americans whose spontaneous social identities differed. They either never listed ethnicity-nationality on the TST, or listed it once or twice. Unidentified Asian Americans' self-concepts resembled Euro-Americans' self-concepts, and twice identified Asian Americans' self-concepts resembled Koreans' self-concepts, in both abstractness-specificity and autonomy-sociality. Differential acculturation did not account for these results. Implications for social identity, self-categorization, and acculturation theory are discussed.

There are two proposals in the literature regarding the effect of individualism-collectivism on the self-concept.1 One is that the self-concept varies along an interdependent-independent dimension. That is, individualistic cultures produce more independent and private self-descriptions and fewer interdependent and collective self-descriptions because the role of other people is less central in the self-conception in individualistic than collectivistic cultures (Bochner, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989b). The second proposal is that the self-concept varies along a concrete-abstract dimension. That is, individualistic cultures produce more abstract (not situated) and fewer concrete self-descriptions (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Cousins, 1989; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). However, independent-interdependent and abstract-concrete often seem to be used interchangeably in this literature.

Spontaneous self-descriptions reveal "the dimensions in terms of which people tend spontaneously to think of themselves, what the aspects of the self are that concern the person" (McGuire & McGuire, 1981, p. 149). One purpose of the present study was to compare spontaneous self-descriptions from individualistic and collectivistic cultures on each of these two self-concept dimensions, to determine whether they differ as expected, and to examine whether these dimensions are interchangeable. A second purpose was to examine the spontaneous self-descriptions of Asian Americans who differ in their spontaneous ethnic identities.

Individualism, Collectivism, and Self-Descriptions

In several studies, differences have emerged in the self-descriptions offered by English speakers from the United States, Australia, or Britain and those offered by Chinese, Japanese, or Malaysian participants. Cousins (1989) found that Americans' self-descriptions contain more traits than do Japanese descriptions, whereas Japanese students' self-descriptions contain more concrete attributes and social categories. Bond and Cheung (1983) also found that Japanese students used fewer traits than American students.2 Traimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991) found that native English speakers from the United States gave more private self-descriptions (e.g., kind and

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1 The issue of whether individualism-collectivism is a single dimension or two dimensions is not addressed here.

2 However, their Hong Kong students did not differ from American students in trait use. As the authors noted, "Hong Kong is a colonized territory, composed in large part of a refugee population. Many Chinese see themselves as a mix of Chinese and western cultures" (Bond & Cheung, 1983, p. 155).
honest) than did Chinese participants, who gave more collective self-descriptions (e.g., brother and student) than native English speakers. Bochner (1994) found that Malaysians gave more collective and fewer idiocentric self-descriptions than did Australians and British.

These differences in descriptions have been attributed to differences in the extent to which the cultures referred to are individualistic or collectivistic in orientation. Individualism describes cultures, such as those of the United States and Western Europe, in which people maintain "loose ties" with each other and a belief in the inherent separateness of people. These cultures emphasize autonomy, emotional independence, individual initiative, a right to privacy, primacy of personal goals over in-group goals, behavior regulated by attitudes, and acceptance of confrontation (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1989a; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Furthermore, individualistic cultures emphasize personal goals and preferences, personal autonomy, and distinctive personal characteristics. These cultural imperatives lead one to view people, including oneself, in terms of both autonomy (independent of specific others) and abstract dispositions (internal attributes that are invariant over time and context; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1988). Newman (1993) found that individualists are more likely to make trait inferences spontaneously.

In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups. These cultures emphasize collective identity, emotional dependence, in-group solidarity and harmony, duties and obligations, behavior regulation by in-group norms, family integrity, and strong in-group-out-group distinctions (Kim, 1994; Triandis, 1989a; Triandis et al., 1990). Thus, people from collectivistic cultures view the "person" not as an autonomous being with abstract qualities but in terms of specific relationships to significant others, which Shweder and Bourne (1984) labeled "sociocentrism." The focus is on specific, situation-bound behaviors and social categories rather than on abstract personality traits, because the person may change across social contexts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1984). People from collectivistic cultures do describe personal attributes, such as abilities, opinions, judgments, and personality characteristics, but these attributes are understood as situation specific, as sometimes elusive and unreliable, and as not particularly diagnostic. According to Triandis (1989b), people from non-Western cultures are more likely to possess a "collective self" because their child-rearing practices emphasize the in-group.

A Korean sample offers the opportunity to extend these findings in two ways. The first is by a change in sample. Korea has been described as one of the most collectivistic cultures (Bond, 1988; Hofstede, 1980), and a replication of the results obtained from Chinese and Japanese students could strengthen earlier interpretations. The second is by determining whether the two dimensions often referred to as part of an individualistic-collectivistic difference (abstract-specific and autonomous-social) are identical.

Asian Americans, Acculturation, and Social Identity

There is little research on Asian Americans' spontaneous self-descriptions, but Asian Americans are a particularly interesting group because they may participate in both an individualistic and a collectivist culture. In preliminary work, we found that spontaneous ethnic identities can be assessed with the Twenty Statements Test (TST; Rhee, Uleman, & Roman, 1991), which asks respondents to reply 20 times to the prompt "I am." In a sample of 61 Asian Americans, social identities fell into three groups. Some (32%) did not identify themselves as being Asian, Asian American, or of any particular nationality (although we could so identify them from another questionnaire). Others (50%) identified themselves by either ethnicity or nationality, and the rest identified themselves by both ethnicity (Asian or Asian American) and nationality (Chinese, Indian, or Korean). Our hypothesis in the present study was that the self-descriptions of doubly identified Asian Americans would resemble those of Koreans most closely, that the self-descriptions of unidentified Asian Americans would resemble those of Euro-Americans most closely, and that the self-descriptions of singly identified Asian Americans would fall between the preceding two categories. We also expected these differences to be related to acculturation to the United States.

Acculturation is a multifaceted process that refers to individual changes over time in identification, attitudes, values, and behavioral norms through contact with different cultures (Berry, 1980; Berry; Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986). Even though cultural identity is an important aspect of acculturation, there is no research on how it influences people's self-concepts and which self-characteristics they consider most important (Phinney, 1990). What is clear is that the process of acculturation is an uneven one. For instance, people may subjectively identify with their ethnic group and have ethnic friends but not speak the ethnic language.

Both acculturation theory and social identity theory predict differences in self-descriptions among the three groups (Berry, 1980; Sue & Wagner, 1973; Tajfel, 1978a, 1978b). Three of Berry's (1976, 1980) four modes of acculturation may be relevant to Asian American's spontaneous ethnic identities. unidentified Asian Americans, who mentioned neither their ethnic group nor their national group on the TST, may be Berry's assimilators. Singly identified Asian Americans, who mentioned either their ethnic or national group, may be integrators. Doubly identified Asian Americans, who mentioned both ethnic and national groups, may be Berry's rejections, strongly asserting their ethnic distinctiveness. If this is correct, and if acculturative influences are reflected in spontaneous self-descriptions, then unidentified Asian Americans should describe themselves similarly to Euro-Americans and doubly identified Asian Americans should resemble Korean participants. Singly identified Asian Americans should incorporate aspects of each culture into their self-descriptions, falling between the other groups.

Social identity theory generates similar predictions. Ethnic identity is defined as a person's subjective awareness and acceptance of membership in a particular social category (Tajfel, 1978a). People have multiple social identities; however, ethnic identity is particularly relevant in multicultural societies such

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3 We use the term ethnic identity to refer to both ethnic and national identity.
as the United States, where many minority groups coexist with a dominant social group (Ethier & Deaux, 1990; Gibbs & Huang, 1989; Phinney, 1990; Sue & Wagner, 1973; Tajfel, 1978b). According to social identity theory, identity is based on two kinds of social comparisons: those between people and those between groups. Ethnic identity seems to be neither salient nor important to unidentified Asian Americans, so they should make primarily interpersonal comparisons, referring more often to abstract, autonomous categories such as traits and less often to intergroup categories such as social roles. In contrast, ethnic identity seems to be very important to doubly identified Asian Americans, so they should make more intergroup comparisons, referring to more social identities and fewer traits. Singly identified Asian Americans should fall between the preceding two groups.

The Present Study

We predicted that the self-descriptions of participants with Western European backgrounds (referred to herein as Euro-Americans) would be more abstract and more autonomous than those of Koreans. In addition, we examined the relationship between these two dimensions among Euro-Americans and Koreans. We also expected that other self-description differences found in prior cross-cultural research would be evident, thus extending these findings. Koreans should qualify those traits that they do use more than Euro-Americans because Koreans give more weight to contextual factors (Cousins, 1989). Consistent with previous findings, Koreans should use more global self-descriptions (e.g., "human being") than Euro-Americans (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Cousins, 1989). Euro-Americans should express more emotions than Koreans because the norm in Asian cultures is to restrain expression of feelings (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Our Asian American participants were divided into ethnically unidentified, singly identified, and doubly identified categories on the basis of the TST. We predicted that this three-level ethnic identity variable would predict how much their self-descriptions resembled those of the individualistic Euro-Americans and collectivistic Koreans. We also expected these differences to be related to the degree of acculturation to the United States.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 105 psychology majors from Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea (68 men and 37 women), and 97 Euro-American (37 men and 60 women) and 151 Asian American (54 men and 97 women) college students from introductory psychology courses at New York University. The Asian American students included Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, and Korean Americans. Euro-Americans were so classified if at least three of their grandparents were from Northern or Western Europe or if their grandparents were Americans. (Our U.S. sample also included 38 men and 63 women with Eastern or Southern European backgrounds by the three-grandparent criterion. These Southern–Eastern Euro-Americans were analyzed separately [see Footnote 15].) The mean age of the Korean sample was 20.5 years; Euro-Americans averaged 18.9 years of age, and Asian Americans averaged 18.9 years.

Seventy-one Asian Americans were first-generation immigrants, 51 were second-generation immigrants, and 1 was a third-generation immigrant. Ninety-eight of them considered themselves bilingual, whereas 32 spoke only English. Generational information was unavailable for 28 Asian Americans, and some of the language information was unavailable for 9.

The educational and socioeconomic levels of the students were roughly equivalent. Yonsei University is one of the most prestigious private universities in South Korea; it is located in a large urban setting, with students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. New York University is a highly ranked university, and the socioeconomic diversity of its students is similar to that of Yonsei University; however, New York University is less selective in its admission standards.

The U.S. students' ethnicity was established from a personal information questionnaire given shortly before the TST. This questionnaire also included questions about parents' socioeconomic status, the students' own generational status, bilingualism, first language learned, age at which English was first learned, and the extent of English use at home, at school, in the community, and in general, both while growing up and at present. The Korean students completed only the TST and a questionnaire about their parents' socioeconomic status.

Materials

The TST instructed participants to provide 20 answers to the question "Who are you?" This was followed by 20 blank lines beginning with the stem "I am." It was given to the U.S. students, in a mass testing session at the beginning of the fall term in introductory psychology, after they had completed a personal information questionnaire. The TST was given to the Korean students as the first questionnaire in a small survey during a regular class. All materials were translated into Korean and back-translated into English to confirm the semantic equivalence of the questions for the Korean sample (Brislin, 1970, 1980).

TST Coding System

We developed a coding system for the TST that preserved traditional coding categories and included the two dimensions noted earlier (referred to here as abstract–specific and autonomous–social). The present coding system was based on Cousins's (1989) elaboration of works conducted by McPartland, Cumming, and Garretson (1961). Cousins used four basic categories, each representing a different level of abstraction. The present system extended these categories to eight; also, 33 subcategories were developed to be as inclusive as possible. They are shown in Table 1.

Each subcategory was classified as either abstract or specific (see Table 1); past practices were followed whenever possible (especially those of Cousins, 1989). For example, traits were divided into abstract (autonomous) and specific (social) states, the social traits being more specific because they referred to specific interpersonal contexts. The autonomous–social categories were designated in the same way, relying heavily on Markus and Kitayama's (1991) description of independent and interdependent selves. Self-descriptions that are invariant over time and context and that constitute an internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, actions, desires, preferences, and abilities were classified as autonomous. Self-descriptions that refer to social context, other people, time, and

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4 This category is similar to Bond and Cheung's (1983) "self and social category," although the present coding did not include names.

5 We refer to the abstract–concrete distinction as abstract–specific to avoid the negative connotation that concrete has among academics. We refer to independent–interdependent as autonomous–social for greater precision.
and specific locations and are thus situation bound were classified as social.

Following Bond and Cheung (1983), our unit of analysis was meanings rather than responses, because one response may contain several meanings. For instance, “I am a good student” contains “I am a student” and “I am good.” Such responses that contained an evaluation and a role were coded for the more distinctive role rather than the less distinctive evaluation. However, if “I am a student” had been a previous response, then “I am a good student” was coded as an evaluative description. When several closely related descriptions were given in a response (e.g., “I am friendly and kind” or “I am a daughter and sister”), only the first description was coded, and the subsequent elaboration was ignored. If a response was repeated, the second one was ignored.

### Scoring the TST

Responses from the Korean sample were translated into English and then back-translated into Korean. Translation reliability was .99 on a subset of 20% of the responses (approximately 400 of 2,000). The first author and a native-English-speaking coder unaware of the hypotheses assessed coding reliability on a subset (20%) of all of the responses (approximately 1,800 of 9,000). Coders were unaware of all information not on the TST. Intertester reliabilities for the two dimensions categories were .97 for abstract, .96 for specific, 1.00 for autonomous, and .84 for social. Reliabilities for the specific categories were .98 for pure traits, 1.00 for qualified traits, .95 for social identities, 1.00 for specific attributes, .83 for evaluative descriptions, 1.00 for physical descriptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and subcategories</th>
<th>Mean proportion</th>
<th>Abstract or specific</th>
<th>Autonomous or social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traits</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure (kind, friendly)</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualized (with someone, at home)</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal (sometimes, a little)</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identities</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role-status (student, major)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family information (sister, son, last child)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity/race/nationality</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (boy, woman)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-ascribed identities (musician, dancer)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin (from Hong Kong)</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion (Christian, child of God)</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (salesperson)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negation (not a Christian)</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific attributes</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences (interests, likes, dislikes, fond of)</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous (like books)</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social (like children)</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations (wishes, hopes, wants)</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous (be a doctor)</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social (help people)</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities (activities, habits)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous (take the bus)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social (visit friends)</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative descriptions (abilities, evaluations, beliefs)</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous (good in math, may not know myself)</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social (good listener, have many friends)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical descriptions</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive (cute, short, sexy)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual (height, weight, eye color)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical condition (near sighted)</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional states</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous (worried, afraid)</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social (in love)</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral information</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate situations, states (tired, hungry)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present residence (live at home)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other's descriptions</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessions (clothes, ears)</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global descriptions</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal–oceanic (human being, earthling)</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential (me, myself)</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Proportions are rounded upward. Responses such as “I am a whale” and repeated descriptions were coded as nonsense.
.76 for emotional states, 1.00 for peripheral information, and 1.00 for global descriptions. The native-English-speaking coder’s scores were used in data analyses.

Fifty Asian American students (33%) did not identify themselves on the TST as Asian, Asian American, or of a particular nationality (Chinese, Indian, or Korean); 82 (54%) identified themselves either by ethnicity (8) or nationality (74); and 19 (13%) identified themselves as Asian, as Asian American, and by nationality.6 This subjective ethnic identification was used to categorize the Asian Americans as unidentified, singly identified, or doubly identified.

To control for variations in the number of TST meaning units, we calculated proportions of responses in each category and subcategory on the basis of the total number of meaning units for each participant, excluding ethnic identifications. Table 1 presents the mean proportions of each category and subcategory for the entire sample.

Results

The results are organized as follows. Table 2 presents the correlations between the two dimensions in each subsample. Table 3 presents the proportion of self-descriptions that fell within each category. Figure 1 displays the proportion of each subgroup’s self-descriptions that were abstract or specific, and Figure 2 displays the proportion that were autonomous or social. These results point to (a) the need to distinguish between the two dimensions and (b) the similarity between the Korean and the doubly identified U.S. groups and the difference between these two subgroups and all others.

Correlations Between the Two Dimensions

The structure of the scoring system almost ensured that the proportion of abstract self-descriptions would correlate positively with the proportion of autonomous self-descriptions and that specific self-descriptions would correlate positively with social self-descriptions. Three of the four abstract subcategories (representing about 95% of the abstract responses) were also autonomous, and 18 of the 29 specific subcategories (representing about 60% of the specific responses) were also social (see Table 1). However, this did not prevent correlations from differing among subsamples. Accordingly, the proportion of abstract self-descriptions was correlated with the proportion of autonomous self-descriptions within each subsample, specific descriptions were correlated with social descriptions, and these correlations were compared between subsamples.7 Cohen’s (1988) effect sizes for differences between two correlations were calculated to test the significance of differences between correlations.

The use of abstract and autonomous categories and specific and social categories was highly correlated among Euro-Americans and unidentified and singly identified Asian Americans but only moderately correlated among doubly identified Asian Americans and Koreans (see Table 2). These correlations were significantly higher among Euro-Americans than Koreans for abstract and autonomous categories, q(104) = .67, p < .01, and for specific and social categories, q(104) = .56, p < .01. They were also higher among unidentified and identified Asian Americans than among Koreans for abstract and autonomous categories, q(67) = .62, p < .01, and q(92) = .60, p < .01, respectively, and for specific and social categories, q(67) = .56, p < .01, and q(92) = .54, p < .01, respectively. None of the other comparisons was significant, partly because some samples were quite small. These results indicate that the abstract–specific and the autonomous–social dimensions overlap to different degrees in different cultural subgroups and that they are not synonymous.

Table 2
Correlations Between Poles of Each Dimension by Ethnic Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Specific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Euro-Americans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>-.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>-.58**</td>
<td>.74**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified Asian Americans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous</td>
<td>.75**</td>
<td>-.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>-.52**</td>
<td>.74**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singly identified Asian Americans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>-.61**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubly identified Asian Americans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koreans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.37**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.  ** p < .01.

6 There were no major differences among the Chinese American, Indian American, and Korean American participants. Thus, these groups are referred to by a more general label, Asian Americans.
7 We focused on these rather than the abstract–social and specific–autonomous correlations because the other pairs are often treated as synonymous in the literature. Clearly, these four correlations are related, but they are not redundant because the coding system does not include all responses.
8 Analyses of specific categories yielded essentially the mirror image of the results for abstract categories, so they are omitted here. For the same reason, analyses of social categories are omitted.
9 There was also a significant cubic trend, F(1, 348) = 15.83, p < .001, because Euro-Americans used fewer abstract categories than expected.
doubly identified Asian Americans, $h(28) = .56$, $p < .05$, or Koreans, $h(68) = .61$, $p < .01$. Singly identified Asian Americans differed from Koreans, $h(92) = .32$, $p < .05$, whereas doubly identified Asian Americans did not, $h(32) = .05$, $n.s.$.

To examine differences in the use of abstract–specific descriptions within groups, we calculated difference scores for each group and tested against the null hypothesis of no difference. As expected, Koreans used specific more often than abstract self-descriptions, $h'(105) = 1.47, p < .01$. Singly identified and doubly identified Asian Americans also used specific more often than abstract self-descriptions, $h'(82) = 0.75, p < .01$, and $h'(19) = 1.46, p < .01$, respectively. Unidentified Asian Americans showed no difference in the use of specific and abstract self-descriptions, $h'(50) = 0.11$. Unexpectedly, Euro-Americans used specific more often than abstract self-descriptions, $h'(97) = 0.40, p < .01$.

There were also significant differences among the groups in autonomous descriptions, $F(4, 348) = 6.84, p < .001$ (see Figure 2). This was due in part to the predicted linear trend among groups, $F(1, 348) = 36.06, p < .001$.10 However, no groups differed significantly from each other in their use of autonomous self-descriptions (h's ranged from .02 to .33). All groups except the doubly identified Asian Americans, $h'(18) = 0.26$, used autonomous more often than social self-descriptions (h's ranged from 0.55 to 1.36, $p < .01$).

**Ethnic and Subsample Differences on the Six Categories**

Even though groups generally differed on the two dimensions as predicted, it is informative to examine results for each of six coding categories. Table 3 shows the proportions in each group and between-groups differences on each category.11 As expected, Koreans used fewer traits than Euro-Americans and unidentified and singly identified Asian Americans; the largest difference was between Koreans and unidentified Asian Americans, $F(4, 348) = 21.09, p < .001$. This same pattern was true of pure traits, which are unqualified by context or time. Again, the largest difference was between Koreans and unidentified Asian Americans, $F(4, 348) = 24.36, p < .001$.

The three groups of Asian Americans were arrayed as expected, with unidentified Asian Americans using the most traits and doubly identified Asian Americans using the fewest. This provides clear evidence that subsamples of Asian Americans, defined in terms of their spontaneous ethnic identity, differ predictably in other (logically unrelated) aspects of their spontaneous self-description.

We expected social identities (e.g., student and sister, excluding ethnicity and nationality) to be most common among Koreans and least common among Euro-Americans, but the reverse occurred, $F(4, 348) = 9.76, p < .001$ (see Table 3).12 We also expected doubly identified Asian Americans to use more social identities than unidentified Asian Americans, with singly identified Asian Americans falling in between the other two groups. This expectation was confirmed. However, unlike the

10 Again, there was a significant cubic trend, $F(1, 348) = 20.17, p < .001$, because Euro-Americans used fewer autonomous descriptions than expected.

11 Even though there were eight categories in the coding scheme, the results of only six categories are discussed. We had no predictions for the evaluative descriptions or peripheral information categories. However, the F tests for these categories were significant at $p < .01$ (see Table 3 for proportions).

12 There were no significant differences among the groups in the use of the less frequent qualified traits, $F(4, 348) = 0.31$.

13 To examine differences in the use of social identities more closely, we conducted analyses on the most frequent subcategories: role–status and family information. There were significant differences for both the role–status and family subcategories, $F(4, 348) = 6.24, p < .001$, and $F(4, 348) = 3.52, p < .01$, respectively. As expected, doubly identified Asian Americans used more than singly identified Asian Americans, who used more than Euro-Americans and unidentified Asian Americans. However, Koreans used fewer than expected. When self-ascribed identities were excluded from the social identities, Euro-Americans and Koreans no longer differed.
earlier result for traits, this result is open to the simple and uninteresting alternative interpretation that the use of some social identities (e.g., ethnicity) predicts the use of others such as membership in a family or institutions.

Because specific attributes (preferences, aspirations, and activities) and physical descriptions are specific rather than abstract categories, we expected them to be most frequent among Koreans’ and doubly identified Asian Americans’ self-descriptions. As predicted, Koreans used specific attributes (preferences, aspirations, and activities) most frequently (26%), whereas the other groups did not differ (less than 13%); F(4, 348) = 35.97, p < .001. The particular subcategories that accounted for this effect were preferences, F(4, 348) = 12.80, p < .001, and aspirations, F(4, 348) = 35.76, p < .001. However, there was a significant difference among groups on the physical descriptions category, F(4, 348) = 18.29, p < .001. Mean proportions among Asian American subsamples were ordered as predicted, but Euro-Americans and Asian Americans were higher than predicted and higher than Koreans.

We predicted that emotional states would be most frequent among Euro-Americans and least frequent among Koreans and doubly identified Asian Americans. This was confirmed, F(4, 348) = 4.77, p = .001. On the basis of prior results, we also predicted that Koreans would use the most abstract category, global descriptions, more often than the other groups. This too was confirmed, F(4, 332) = 2.88, p < .05. In particular, Koreans used more universal descriptions than the other groups, F(4, 332) = 5.06, p = .001, consistent with Cousins’s (1989) findings.

In sum, Euro-Americans used more traits, pure traits, and emotional states than Koreans, as predicted. They also used fewer specific attributes and global descriptions than Koreans, as predicted. The Asian American subsamples were also ordered as predicted for four of these categories, with traits, pure traits, and emotional states decreasing and specific attributes increasing from unidentified to doubly identified Asian Americans. Asian American subsamples were also ordered as expected for three other categories, with social identities and physical descriptions increasing from unidentified to doubly identified Asian Americans.

There were only two significant unexpected findings. Euro-Americans used more social identities and physical descriptions than Koreans. These unexpected differences prompted us to compare our samples’ self-descriptions with those from the only other published study of which we are aware that has used some of these same categories to compare individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Cousins, 1989). Our Korean sample appeared to be comparable to Cousins’s Japanese sample in the use of traits (13% and 19%, respectively), social identities (35% and 27%, respectively), and physical descriptions (4% and 5%, respectively). However, our Euro-Americans appeared to use fewer traits (27% vs. 58%), more social identities (38% vs. 9%), and more physical descriptions (12% vs. 2%) than Cousins’s American sample. Possible explanations are offered in the section to follow.15

14 Direct comparisons on the full measure were not possible because Cousins (1989) reported proportions for the five most important attributes checked by each participant. To obtain a comparable measure, we recalculated our proportions on the basis of only the first five responses; we did so on the arguable assumption that these most accessible categories were also the most important.

15 Because the literature suggests that individuals from Southern and Eastern Europe differ from Euro-Americans (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989b), the former participants were compared with Euro-Americans on the self-description dimensions. Participants were classified as Southern-Eastern Euro-Americans if at least three of their
Acculturation Predictions of Ethnic Identity and Self-Descriptions

Acculturation variables were examined to determine whether they could predict Asian Americans' spontaneous ethnic identities or self-descriptions. The Asian American groups did not differ in generation status, $F(2, 116) < 2.0$; socioeconomic status, $F(2, 139) < 1.0$; or bilingualism, $F(2, 139) < 1.0$. The three groups also did not differ in English use at home while growing up, at school, in the community, and in general, $F(2, 139) < 2.0$, $p > .10$. They did differ marginally on present English use at home, $F(2, 139) = 2.52$, $p = .084$. The only clear differences were in the age at which they learned English, $F(2, 139) = 4.80$, $p = .01$, and whether English was their first language, $F(2, 139) = 6.75$, $p < .01$. Unidentified Asian Americans learned English at a mean of 3 years of age, whereas singly identified Asian Americans learned it at a mean of 5 years and doubly identified Asian Americans learned it at a mean of 6 years. Unidentified Asian Americans learned English as a first language 83% of the time; the correspond-}

grandparents were from Southern or Eastern Europe or if their parents were from these countries. Most of the Southern-Eastern Euro-Americans were Jewish, Greek, Italian, and Russian. Their mean age was 19.4 years. They were divided into unidentified ($n = 42$) and identified ($n = 59$) subgroups. Overall, identified Southern-Eastern Euro-Americans used more specific and more social dimensions than unidentified Southern-Eastern Euro-Americans and Euro-Americans. Thus, as with the Asian American subsamples, spontaneously self-identified Southern-Eastern Euro-Americans were more collectivistic in their self-descriptions than unidentified Southern-Eastern Euro-Americans and Euro-Americans.

**Figure 2.** Proportion of autonomous and social categories (see Table 1) by subgroup. EURO = European Americans; UNID = unidentified Asian Americans; SINGLY-ID = singly identified Asian Americans; DOUBLY-ID = doubly identified Asian Americans.

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16 In an attempt to increase the predictive power of the acculturation variables, we factor analyzed them. All variables except socioeconomic status loaded on Factor 1. However, the means of these variables had fewer significant relations with the self-description category use than their components did.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in self-description by members of individualistic (Euro-American) and collectivistic (Korean) cultures, as well as by Asian Americans who differ in their level of ethnic identity. Past research on individualism-collectivism has emphasized two dimensions of the self-concept: abstract–specific and autonomous–social.

The Abstract–Specific and Autonomous–Social Dimensions

Results showed that the abstract–specific dimension is empirically distinct from the autonomous–social dimension, even though the two are often discussed in the literature as though they were interchangeable. We found the expected positive correlations between the use of abstract and autonomous categories and between the use of specific and social categories; however, there was also significant variation among groups. The correlations were highest among most U.S. subsamples and relatively low among Koreans. Thus, abstract–specific and autonomous–social categories have more similar referents in Euro-American culture than in Korean culture. Descriptively, this was because some categories that are largely specific and autonomous (specific attributes such as preferences, aspirations, and activities, as well as evaluative descriptions) or abstract and social (global descriptions) were more frequent in the Korean sample. As clearly shown in Figure 1, Koreans’ spontaneous self-descriptions were predominantly specific. Conversely, pure traits and emotional states, which are abstract and autonomous categories, were more frequent in the Euro-American sample. Figure 2 shows that Euro-Americans’ spontaneous self-descriptions were predominantly autonomous.

The predominance of autonomous self-descriptions among Euro-Americans is very consistent with, and perhaps explained by, their culture’s individualistic emphasis. The predominance of specific self-descriptions among Koreans may result from the in-group focus of collectivistic cultures and the value placed on not standing out from other in-group members. Highly specific self-descriptions distinguish one from other members of the in-group (which a self-description must do) while providing only narrow bases for that distinction. Highly specific self-descriptions thereby allow a person to be distinctive but not generally different from others. Conflating the abstract–specific and autonomous–social dimensions obscures the distinction between them and, particularly, oversimplifies the characterization of self-descriptions from collectivistic cultures.

Note that specific and autonomous descriptions were most frequent overall (see Figures 1 and 2) and were never less frequent than abstract or social descriptions in any group. This simple fact is also obscured if the two dimensions are conflated.

As predicted, we also found a significant linear decrease in both abstract and autonomous self-descriptions when moving from Euro-Americans through unidentified Asian Americans, singly identified Asian Americans, and doubly identified Asian Americans to Koreans. This suggests that both dimensions are useful and accurate in characterizing differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. More interestingly, both dimensions also show differences among Asian Americans who differ in their spontaneous ethnic identities. Those who identified least with their collectivistic origins were most similar to the Euro-Americans, and those who identified most were most similar to the Koreans. This provides evidence that the strength of spontaneous ethnic identities is systematically related to other aspects of the self-description that are characteristic of the culture of origin and supports the validity of this measure of ethnic identity.

Particular Euro-American and Korean Differences

Euro-Americans and Koreans differed significantly on each of the eight coding categories, although not always in the predicted direction. As expected, Euro-Americans used traits (especially pure traits) and emotional states more than Koreans; Koreans used specific attributes and global descriptions more than Euro-Americans. However, Euro-Americans unexpectedly used social identity and physical description categories more than Koreans. What might account for this? One possibility is that ethnic identities were particular salient to our U.S. sample. New York City and New York University are more ethnically diverse than the University of Michigan, where Cousins (1989) gathered his data. New York University arts and science undergraduates are about 33% Asian American, 10% African American, and 10% Latino. According to the distinctiveness postulate (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978), situational distinctiveness (on visible features such as gender, ethnicity, and hair color) influences self-description. In the more ethnically diverse New York group, ethnicity and associated characteristics such as physical attributes are more salient. Such factors may account for their frequent use by our Euro-Americans.

In addition, self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987) distinguishes between personal identity and social identity. Because the self is dynamic (Markus & Wurf, 1987), different aspects of the self are made salient, or sampled, in different situations and times. There are at least three levels of abstraction of self-categorization: (a) one’s human identity, (b) one’s social identity, and (c) one’s personal identity. These identities are based, respectively, on interspecies, intergroup, and interpersonal comparisons between oneself and others. Personal identity is more salient in intragroup contexts, whereas social identity is more salient in intergroup contexts. Thus, even though our Euro-American participants may often think of themselves in terms of the abstract traits associated with interpersonal comparisons, the ethnically diverse student body and testing situation may have prompted intergroup comparisons. This may explain their high use of the social identities and physical descriptions relative to Cousins’s (1989) U.S. sample from Michigan.

Self-Descriptions Among Asian Americans

The self-descriptions of the three subsamples of Asian Americans (unidentified, singly identified, and doubly identified) varied as expected on the two dimensions and on most categories. Unidentified Asian Americans, like Euro-Americans, used abstract descriptions and autonomous descriptions the most,
whereas doubly identified Asian Americans, like Koreans, used these descriptions the least. Singly identified Asian Americans fell between these other Asian American subsamples. Singly and doubly identified Asian Americans also used more specific than abstract self-descriptions. On six of the eight coding categories, especially the most frequent ones, the three Asian American subsamples also responded largely as predicted. Unidentified Asian Americans used more trait and emotional state categories and used fewer social identity, specific attribute, and physical description categories. These findings are consistent with our predictions from both acculturation and social identity theories.17

Interestingly, unidentified Asian Americans were more extreme than the Euro-Americans on several categories. They used significantly more traits and fewer social identity and physical description categories than the Euro-Americans. It is as though they “bent over backwards” to adopt a Euro-American perspective in their self-descriptions and, in the process, “overshot” the norm of the dominant culture (Triandis, Kashima, Shimada, & Villareal, 1986). According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978a), people are motivated to maintain a positive self-image. If the group they belong to precludes this, they may leave it and try to “psychologically pass” as members of the dominant group, identifying with the mainstream culture.

Unexpectedly, the acculturation variables used in this study did not account for differences in the self-descriptions of Asian American subsamples. Perhaps these variables failed because the range of acculturation was attenuated, given that this entire subsample had been admitted to New York University. Alternatively, perhaps the acculturation concept and variables were simply too remote from the processes that determine self-descriptions. By contrast, social identity and self-categorization theories proved to be quite useful, perhaps because they address the determinants of spontaneous self-descriptions more directly.

Future Research

Hofstede’s (1980) observation that cultures vary on individualism–collectivism has begun to generate a great deal of research, as well as measures at the individual level. The TST is one such measure and is particularly important because of hypothesized differences in spontaneous self-descriptions. Although prior work (Cousins, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) has discussed abstract–concrete and independent–interdependent dimensions as unidimensional, the present results suggest that they are two dimensional: abstract–specific and autonomous–social. Furthermore, these two dimensions are most distinct in collectivist cultures. Future research should examine the generality of this result.

Our speculations about the effects of a multicultural context on the TST suggest future research on its stability across a variety of testing conditions. Alternatively, the TST’s sensitivity to manipulations of individualism–collectivism should be examined. We are currently looking for effects of the language used to administer the TST to bilingual speakers, predicting that language will invoke other features of the culture and affect the resulting self-descriptions. One might also vary the salience of in-groups and out-groups or of communal and exchange relationships (Batson, 1993; Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993).

The psychometric properties of the TST should also be explored (Wylie, 1974). The test–retest reliability and internal consistency of scores derived from the present coding system and from Cousin’s (1989) coding system are unknown. Spontaneous ethnic identity, assessed by the TST, also appears to be promising measure. If is systematically related to many other categories of self-description in ways that are theoretically meaningful. However, the same reliability questions can be raised about it. Can the number of “items” be increased by expanding the range of responses that indicate the strength of ethnic identity? How much is it subject to situational influences, particularly multicultural contexts?

Finally, future research should address the relation of this TST measure of ethnic identity to other, theoretically related measures. One would expect relations with acculturation measures, particularly multi-item measures with a larger range than that found in the current sample. Aspects of both acculturation and social identity theory also suggest that unidentified Asian Americans, if they have renounced their cultures of origin, may differ on collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1990).

Conclusion

Individualism–collectivism, as a cultural variable, seems to be related to at least two distinct dimensions of the spontaneous self-description: the abstract–specific dimension and the autonomous–social dimension. These dimensions were only moderately correlated in our Korean and doubly identified Asian American U.S. sample, and they were both significantly related to differences between Euro-Americans’ and Koreans’ spontaneous self-descriptions. In addition, our results show that the TST can be used to assess the strength of spontaneous social identities among minority groups in a majority culture. Among our U.S. Asian American subgroups, this measure was reliably related to other features of the spontaneous self-description that one would predict from differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

17 Note that whatever the effect of the assessment context for the U.S. sample, it was the same for all of these subgroups. That is, all of the U.S. samples, regardless of ethnicity, completed the TST in an ethnically heterogeneous class setting.

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of Hofstede's individualism/collectivism distinction. 


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