Gender Comparisons in the Private, Collective, and Allocentric Selves

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ABSTRACT. Researchers (e.g., M. B. Brewer & W. Gardner, 1996; H. C. Triandis, D. K. S. Chan, D. P. S. Bhawuk, S. Iwao, & J. P. B. Sinha, 1995) have suggested expansion of the standard model of individualism–collectivism to include people's close personal relationships in addition to their identification with in-groups. There has been considerable discussion of the hypothesis that women are more collective, interdependent, relational, and allocentric than men (e.g., S. E. Cross & L. Madson, 1997; Y. Kashima et al., 1995). In the present study, the authors used the Twenty Statements Test (M. H. Kuhn & T. McPartland, 1954) to examine gender differences in the self-concept by assessing the accessibility of private, collective, and allocentric self-cognitions. The U.S. women described themselves with more allocentric and more collective self-cognitions than did the U.S. men. Discussion focuses on the implications of those data for interpretation of other gender differences as well as for traditional models of individualism–collectivism.

Key words: allocentric self-cognitions, collective self-cognitions, gender differences, private self-cognitions

HOW DO MEN AND WOMEN think about themselves in relation to others? According to a growing body of research, some people think about themselves primarily in terms of their relationships with others, whereas other people think about themselves primarily in terms of their own unique characteristics. Researchers have developed various constructs to describe this distinction, including the collective versus the private self (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991) and the interdependent versus the independent self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A variety of researchers (e.g., Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama; Trafimow et al., 1991; Triandis, 1989) have used
those constructs to analyze cross-cultural differences between Eastern and Western cultures. Generally speaking, people from Western cultures think about themselves as individuals independent of their relationships, whereas people from Eastern cultures are more likely to think about themselves in terms of their group memberships and relationships with others.

One explanation for those cross-cultural differences is the two-baskets theory (Trafimow et al., 1991): Cognitions that emphasize personal characteristics (i.e., private self-cognitions) are stored in one location in memory that forms the private self. Cognitions that emphasize the characteristics of one’s in-groups (i.e., collective self-cognitions) are stored in a separate location in memory that forms the collective self. Cross-cultural differences exist because one’s culture determines the relative accessibility of the private and collective selves. Specifically, living in a collectivist culture makes the collective self and the collective self-cognitions stored in that location more accessible. Living in an individualistic culture makes the private self and the private self-cognitions stored in that location more accessible (Bochner, 1994; Trafimow, Silverman, Fan, & Law, 1997; Trafimow & Smith, 1998; Trafimow et al., 1991; for reviews, see Trafimow, 2000; Triandis & Trafimow, 2001).

Recently, researchers have articulated a different conceptualization of collectivism, one that emphasizes close personal relationships rather than group memberships. Constructs representing this idea include relatedness (Kashima et al., 1995), the relational self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), familism (Gaines, 1995; Gaines et al., 1997), allocentrism (e.g., Triandis, Chan, Bhawuk, Iwao, & Sinha, 1995; Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clack, 1985), and personal collectivism (Verkuyten & Masson, 1996). For the present research, we adopted Triandis’s construct of allocentrism. Although each of the foregoing conceptualizations has some unique aspects, all share the idea that allocentrism focuses on personal relationships with individuals rather than on relationships based primarily on shared group membership (see also Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994). Allocentric values are similar to collectivistic values in that individuals emphasize warmth, interpersonal closeness, sensitivity, and attending to the needs of close others. In fact, Triandis and his colleagues (Triandis et al., 1995; Triandis et al., 1985) have argued that allocentrism results from the application of collectivistic values to individual relationships.

It follows from the foregoing reasoning that a culture that emphasizes allocentrism increases the accessibility of allocentric self-cognitions. In fact, some (Maccoby, 1990; Maltz & Borker, 1983) have argued that men and women grow up and live in distinct subcultures that differ in precisely that way. Specifically, women are socialized to be interdependent and attuned to relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stivey, & Surrey, 1991; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Markus & Oyserman, 1989; Surrey, 1991), whereas men are socialized to be autonomous, independent, and self-reliant (Bakan, 1966; Maccoby, 1990). Given their different socialization, one would expect women to
express more allocentric self-cognitions than men and men to express more private self-cognitions than women. In other words, U.S. women may define themselves in terms of their relationships, as interdependent, similar, and connected to others, whereas U.S. men may define themselves in terms of their uniqueness and separateness from others. Furthermore, to the degree that allocentrism is an application of collectivism (Triandis et al., 1995; Triandis et al., 1985), one would also expect women to express more collective self-cognitions than men. In fact, according to the findings of some researchers (Kashima et al., 1995; Triandis et al., 1995; Verkuyten & Masson, 1996; see also Cross & Madson, 1997), women were more collective, allocentric, or interdependent than men, and men were more independent or individualistic than women.

Unfortunately, the distinction between allocentrism and collectivism has been somewhat muddied in the literature. For example, Cross and Madson (1997) interpreted a number of gender differences as consistent with women's greater interdependence, although it is unclear whether their conceptualization of interdependence was analogous to allocentrism, collectivism, or both. Triandis et al. (1995) concluded that Japanese women are more allocentric than Japanese men because the women endorsed collectivistic values more than the men did. Kashima et al. (1995) argued that cross-cultural differences are best understood in terms of collectivism and that gender differences within cultures are best understood in terms of relatedness.

Furthermore, investigators of gender differences in allocentrism, collectivism, or both have used measures that assess different aspects of those constructs. For example, some scales measure priority given to group rather than personal goals (e.g., Yamaguchi, 1994), some measure collectivistic or allocentric behaviors (e.g., Sinha & Verma, 1987; Verma, 1992), and others measure interdependence versus independence (e.g., Gudykunst et al., 1996; Singelis, 1994). Although those scales all measure values or behaviors related to allocentrism or collectivism, it is unclear how allocentrism and collectivism are related to, or reflect the structure of, the self-concept.

In the present study, we used the Twenty Statements Test (TST; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) to assess gender differences in the self-concept. The TST, a technique to measure self-representations, has been used by a number of researchers (e.g., Bochner, 1994; Dhawan, Roseman, Naidu, & Rettek, 1995; Ma & Schoeneman, 1997; Newman, Duff, Schnopp-Wyatt, Brock, & Hoffmann, 1997; Rhee, Uieman, Lee, & Roman, 1995; Trafimow et al., 1991; Triandis et al., 1995; Watkins & Gerong, 1997; Watkins, Yau, Dahlin, & Wondimu, 1997). Unlike the scales discussed in the preceding paragraph, the TST is a direct measure of the relative accessibility of the private, collective, and allocentric self-cognitions. In the TST, the participants write 20 statements that complete the stem "I am." On the basis of Trafimow et al. (1991), we classified the TST statements into three types: (a) Private self-cognitions are statements that refer to personal qualities, traits, characteristics, beliefs, or behaviors that do not relate to
other people (e.g., “I like to play basketball”). Collective self-cognitions refer to demographic groups, in-groups, or other people with whom one shares a relationship with a sense of “common fate” (e.g., “I am a woman” or “I am a Cubs fan”). Allocentric cognitions imply interdependence, responsiveness to others, friendship, or sensitivity to the viewpoints of others (e.g., “I am kind to others”).

We made three predictions. First, given that U.S. society is extremely individualistic relative to other cultures, we expected both U.S. men and U.S. women to express more private self-cognitions than collective self-cognitions or allocentric cognitions (see Trafimow et al., 1991, Experiment 2). Second, given traditional gender role socialization for women, we expected the women to express more allocentric cognitions and more collective self-cognitions than the men. Third, we expected the men to express more private self-cognitions than the women.

Method

Participants

A sample of 317 introductory psychology students (183 women and 134 men) participated in partial fulfillment of their course requirements. All students were from a North American cultural background.

Procedure

The participants had 5 min to complete the 20 “I am” items of the TST (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). After they had completed their responses, we arranged all booklets in random order. Then, two coders blind to the hypotheses coded the data from the participants’ “I am” responses. They classified each response as a private, a collective, or an allocentric cognition. We calculated the percentage of agreement to examine interrater reliability. The coders agreed on 98% of the responses. To control for chance agreement, we also calculated a kappa statistic (.98).

Results

We calculated the proportion of each of the three types of cognitions by dividing the number of that type of cognition by the total number of responses (maximum of 20). For example, we calculated the proportion of allocentric cognitions by dividing the number of allocentric responses by the total number of responses. Similarly, we calculated the proportion of private and collective cognitions. We analyzed the results by using a 3 (type of cognition) × 2 (gender) repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance with type of cognition as the within-subjects variable and participant gender as the between-subjects variable.

Consistent with the pervasive emphasis on individualism in Western culture,
we obtained an overall effect of type of cognition, $F(2, 308) = 4235.61, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .96$. The participants retrieved far more private self-cognitions than collective self-cognitions ($Ms = .88$ and $.05, SDs = .12$ and .06, respectively), $F(1, 315) = 8337.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .96$. Interestingly, the participants also wrote more allocentric cognitions than collective self-cognitions ($Ms = .08$ and $.05, SDs = .10$ and .06, respectively), $F(1, 315) = 25.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$.

That main effect was qualified by the hypothesized Type of Cognition x Gender interaction, $F(2, 314) = 10.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$. We performed three $t$ tests to explore the interaction. Consistent with the hypotheses, the women, in comparison with the men, wrote significantly more allocentric cognitions ($Ms = .10$ and $.06, SDs = .10$ and .09, respectively), $t(315) = 2.97, p = .003$, and more collective cognitions ($Ms = .06$ and .03, $SDs = .07$ and .05, respectively), $t(315) = 3.57, p < .001$. In addition, the men wrote significantly more private self-cognitions than the women ($Ms = .90$ and .84, $SDs = .11$ and .12, respectively), $t(315) = 4.47, p < .001$.

### Discussion

As expected, the women were more likely than the men to describe themselves by using allocentric cognitions that stressed interdependence, friendship, and sensitivity to others. The women also reported a higher proportion of collective cognitions than the men did. The men, in contrast, were more likely than the women to describe themselves in terms of their own unique abilities and traits. Taken together, those results suggest that the women thought about themselves in terms of their relationships with others (both personal relationships and group identities) more than the men did. The women's collective and allocentric selves appeared more accessible than the men's.

What caused that difference in accessibility? According to the two-baskets theory, it may have been attributable to gender role socialization. One's culture may determine the relative accessibility of different aspects of the self. If the culture emphasizes collectivistic values, the accessibility of the collective self and collective self-cognitions increases. To the degree that women and men live in different subcultures in which women are socialized to emphasize interdependence and relationships with others and men are socialized to emphasize autonomy and uniqueness, the women's collective and allocentric selves may become more accessible than the men's. It is also possible that the women's collective and allocentric selves were chronically accessible (see Bargh, Lombardi, & Higgins, 1988), because of the consistent and repetitive activation of these self-structures over time.

Alternatively, the greater accessibility of the women's collective and allocentric selves may have been a result of their incorporating more relationships than the men did into their self-concepts. Most people integrate certain close relationships (e.g., family, spouses) into their self-concepts (Trafimow et al., 1991; see also Trafimow & Smith, 1998). In addition to such intimate relation-
ships, women may integrate less intimate relationships (e.g., friends, coworkers) into their self-concepts. Consequently, a greater range of relationships and situations would activate the allocentric and collective selves more in women than in men and would increase the accessibility of those constructs.

If that is the case, there may be relationships that activate the collective or allocentric self in women but not in men (e.g., having friends) and relationships that activate those structures in men but not in women (e.g., being a member or a fan of a sports team, participating in a fraternity). Because it would be unreasonable to assume that all women incorporate their friends into their self-concepts and that no men do so, one might also ask what distinguishes men who think allocentrically about their friends from men who do not? Or, similarly, what distinguishes women who think collectively about sports teams from women who do not? There is also the related issue of priming the private self. Do situations that elicit the private self differ between men and women? Do some situations prime the private self in men but not in women?

A gender difference in the accessibility of the allocentric and collective selves may help integrate a number of gender differences evident in the literature (for a review, see Cross & Madson, 1997). For example, women may place greater importance than men do on harmonious intimate relationships because those relationships are self-defining for women. As such, women may be at greater risk for depression when relationships end or when they experience conflict. Women may also be more likely than men to experience distress vicariously when close others face negative life events. In fact, a number of researchers have argued that women's emphasis on relationships is one variable that may put women at greater risk for depression (e.g., Kenny, Moilanen, Lomax, & Brabeck, 1993; Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987; Robbins & Tanck, 1991). In addition, the tendency for women to think about themselves in terms of their relationships with others may help explain women's greater nonverbal skills and sensitivity (DePaulo, 1992; Hall, 1984). Nonverbal behaviors are particularly effective in communicating emotions and communicating an interest in and concern for others (Ekman, 1993; Ekman & Friesen, 1984; Izard, 1991). As such, they are important in the development and maintenance of intimate relationships (Clark & Reis, 1988). Women may develop greater nonverbal skills than men because they are a primary avenue for fostering mutual self-disclosure, emotional closeness, and caring.

The present data provide further evidence that current conceptualizations of the self-concept (e.g., private self vs. collective self, individualism vs. collectivism) may need to incorporate a third structure that represents one's relationships with individuals. In particular, the two-baskets conceptualization may be sufficient for understanding cross-cultural differences, but the third, relational structure may be a more accurate conceptualization of gender differences within a culture (Kashima et al., 1995). Although a resolution to the issue of the number of self-structures is outside the scope of the present study, our findings aug-
ment a growing body of literature that suggests that women and men think differently about themselves in relation to others.

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