The importance of traits and group memberships

DAVID TRAFIMOW* and KRYSTINA A. FINLAY
New Mexico State University, USA

Abstract

Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans were asked to list five of their traits and five of their group memberships. They were also asked to rank (relative to each other) and rate (on an absolute scale) the importance of these traits and groups. Consistent with the distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures, Mexican-Americans ranked and rated their groups as being more important than did Anglo-Americans. In addition, although participants from both cultural groups gave greatly decreased ratings for less important groups, this decrease was more pronounced for Anglo-Americans than for Mexican-Americans. Finally, the data indicated that the perceived importance of group memberships is only weakly related to their cognitive accessibility. Copyright © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

A considerable amount of research has been performed to explore the accessibility of self-cognitions. In the usual paradigm, participants from individualist or collectivist cultures perform the ‘Twenty Statements Test’ (TST) where they complete sentences to describe themselves beginning with the words ‘I am.’ The usual finding is that people from individualist cultures are more likely than people from collectivist cultures to respond with personal characteristics (e.g. traits such as ‘I am smart’) whereas people from collectivist cultures are more likely than people from individualist cultures to respond with group memberships (e.g. ‘I am a member of my family’) (Bochner, 1994; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). In addition, the accessibility of these two types of responses can be influenced by primes (e.g. Trafimow et al., 1991; Trafimow & Smith, 1997). Priming with individualist concepts (e.g. traits) increases the proportion of responses pertaining to personal characteristics, and priming with collectives (e.g. family) increases the proportion of responses pertaining to group memberships.

Where previous research has fallen short, however, is in relating accessibility to importance. Just because people from individualist cultures tend to have more accessible personal characteristics than people from collectivist cultures, and the reverse is true for group memberships, it does not necessarily follow that personal characteristics are perceived to be more important by individualists, nor that group memberships are perceived to be more important by collectivists. To be sure, there is corroborating evidence from various scales measuring values; individualists value their uniqueness

*Correspondence to: David Trafimow, Psychology Department, MSC 3452, New Mexico State University, PO Box 30001, Las Cruces, NM 88003-8001, USA. E-mail: trafimow@crl.nmsu.edu

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and collectivists value their group memberships (see Triandis, 1994, for a review). But responses about how people value personal characteristics or group memberships in general, are not equivalent to asking people to write down their personal characteristics and group memberships and indicate the importance of those specific items. If traits are more important to members of individualist cultures and group memberships are more important to members of collectivist cultures, then participants from these cultures should be able to say so. An additional advantage to using this paradigm is that it allows us to make a determination of how many group memberships people from individualist and collectivist cultures believe to be important. Although there is a tendency for researchers to assume that many group memberships are important (for example, Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995 asked participants to list 64 group memberships), it might be that only a few of them are perceived to be quite important, and that the others are perceived to be much less important. Finally, using this paradigm will allow us to determine how related accessibility is to importance. The order in which participants list personal characteristics or group memberships can be used as a measure of their relative accessibility, which can then be correlated with importance ratings.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

One hundred and six undergraduates at an American university volunteered to participate in the experiment. Forty-four percent (47) identified themselves as Anglo-Americans and 56% (59) identified themselves as Mexican-Americans. We assumed that the Anglo-American subculture is individualist and the Mexican-American subculture is relatively collectivist (Freeberg & Stein, 1996; Hosch, Chanez, Bothwell, & Munoz, 1991; Schutte, Velerio, & Carillo, 1996).

**Procedure**

Participants were asked to write down five personal characteristics (e.g. traits) and five group memberships that were important to how they think about themselves. However, the items could be written in whatever order the participants preferred. Subsequently, they went back over what they had written, and indicated the importance of the items in two ways (the order in which these two tasks were performed was counterbalanced). One task was to rank order the items in terms of importance for that individual. Thus, ranks were integers between 1 and 10, with 1 being the most highly ranked item and 10 being the least ranked item. A second task was to rate the importance of each item on a scale from 1 to 99, with higher numbers corresponding to greater importance (so higher numbers have opposite meanings for rankings and ratings). Note that in the ranking task, no two items could have been ranked by the same number, but in the rating task, they could have been rated the same.

**RESULTS**

The importance rankings and the importance ratings made by participants were analyzed as $2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed ANOVAs. The between-participants factor was participant Ethnicity (Mexican-American versus Anglo-American). The within-participants factors were Type (personal characteristics versus group memberships).
Let us first examine the main effect of ethnicity across rankings and ratings collapsed across the other factors. Because participants had been asked to rank order all of their responses from 1 to 10, the mean ranking for both ethnicities was 5.5. In contrast, the ratings could have varied, and there was a significant tendency for Mexican-Americans to give higher ratings than Anglo-Americans ($M_{\text{Mexican-Americans}} = 76.26$ and $M_{\text{Anglo-Americans}} = 63.47$), $F(1, 100) = 18.87, p < 0.001$. However, consistent with the assumption that Mexican-Americans are more collectivist than Anglo-Americans, this main effect was qualified by an Ethnicity by Type interaction, $F(1, 100) = 19.14, p < 0.001$. Although Mexican-Americans’ and Anglo-Americans’ mean personal characteristic ratings were approximately equal ($M_{\text{Mexican-Americans}} = 76.42$ and $M_{\text{Anglo-Americans}} = 72.92$), the mean group ratings were extremely different ($M_{\text{Mexican-Americans}} = 76.10$ and $M_{\text{Anglo-Americans}} = 54.02$). Possibly because using rankings eliminated the main effect of Mexican-Americans giving higher ratings than Anglo-Americans in general, an even clearer Ethnicity by Type interaction on ranks showed that Mexican-Americans ranked personal characteristics as less important than did Anglo-Americans ($M_{\text{Mexican-Americans}} = 5.61$ and $M_{\text{Anglo-Americans}} = 4.6$, where a rank of 1 indicates greatest importance), but the reverse was true for group memberships ($M_{\text{Mexican-Americans}} = 5.39$ and $M_{\text{Anglo-Americans}} = 6.41$), $F(1, 100) = 19.14, p < 0.001$.

Now consider interactions involving the Importance factor. There was a main effect whereby rankings and ratings significantly decreased with less important items ($p < 0.001$ in both cases). However, for both rankings and ratings, this main effect was qualified by an interaction with Type ($p < 0.001$ in both cases). Specifically, rankings of groups decreased in importance faster than rankings of personal characteristics (differences $= 7.07$ and 6.30 between rankings of most and least important groups and personal characteristics, respectively) and this was also true for ratings (differences $= 59.35$ and 46.85, between rankings of most and least important groups and personal characteristics, respectively). Note that this is consistent with the possibility that only a limited number of group memberships are perceived to be very important – clearly the importance of group memberships for self-definition decreases particularly rapidly with less important groups.

Also consistent with expectations, this two-way interaction was qualified by a higher order three-way Ethnicity by Importance by Type interaction, $F(4, 400) = 4.78, p < 0.001$; the decrease in rated
importance of groups relative to personal characteristics was significantly more pronounced for Anglo-Americans than for Mexican-Americans. (Because rankings depend on other rankings within each ethnicity, we did not test for a three-way interaction on rankings.) If only ratings of groups are considered, the Ethnicity × Importance interaction is especially clear. Anglo-Americans gave their most important group a reasonably strong rating ($M = 87.29$); but the ratings of their less important groups dropped impressively from there (difference $= 68.05$ from the most important group to the least important group, see Table 1). In contrast, Mexican-Americans gave their most important group an even higher rating ($M = 95.11$), and their ratings of less important groups dropped to a significantly lesser extent than was true for Anglo-Americans (difference $= 50.65$ from the most important group to the least important group, see Table 1), $F(4, 400) = 7.70, p < 0.001$. In sum, Table 1 shows that fewer group memberships matter for Anglo-Americans than for Mexican-Americans. The fact that only two group memberships were in the top third of the rating scale for Anglo-Americans compared to four groups for the Mexican-Americans supports the hypothesis that not many groups are considered to be important by individualists, though a few more may be perceived to be important by collectivists.

The Relationship Between Accessibility and Rated Importance

To assess the extent to which accessibility and importance ratings of group memberships are related, we computed the within-participants correlation between the two variables. We used the order in which group memberships or personal characteristics were written as a measure of accessibility. Although more accessible group memberships were rated as significantly more important regardless of whether rankings or ratings were analyzed, the relationships were weak (mean within-participants correlations are 0.18 and 0.14, respectively, $p < 0.001$ in both cases). The relationship between the accessibility and ranked or rated importance of personal characteristics was even weaker: the mean within-participants correlations were 0.09 ($p < 0.07$) and 0.06 ($p > 0.1$), respectively.

Content Analyses of Group Memberships

It is possible that the Mexican-Americans were particularly conscious of being a minority, which caused their ethnicity to be particularly salient. If so, then this would imply that our findings were the result of being a minority or a majority rather than being a Mexican-American or an Anglo-American. More generally, any differences between the group memberships listed by Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans could provide fuel for alternative explanations. Consequently, we performed a content analysis to determine whether members of the two cultures listed different groups, or listed them in different orders. Most of participants’ group memberships fell into seven categories (there had to be 10 or more responses in a category from either Anglo-Americans or Mexican-Americans to be included). Those group memberships were (1) ethnic category (e.g. White, Hispanic, American, etc.), (2) gender (male or female), (3) religion (e.g. Catholic, Christian, etc.), (4) career-relevant groups (e.g. honorary societies, major, professional group, etc.), (5) political groups/groups with social agendas (e.g. democrat, member of a pro-life group, etc.), (6) groups involving relationships (e.g. family, friends, etc.), (7) groups for a social purpose or a fun purpose (e.g. fraternities, sororities, clubs, etc.). The frequency of responses in each category are presented in Table 2.

1It was possible to calculate this two-way interaction for ranks, and a similar interaction was obtained, $F(4, 400) = 8.33, p < 0.001$. 

Although some groups were clearly mentioned more than others (e.g. career groups were mentioned the most), the percentage of Anglo-Americans versus Mexican-Americans who mentioned each of the groups did not differ. We performed seven 2(Anglo-American versus Mexican-American) x 2(frequency with which the category was mentioned or not mentioned) Chi-Square tests to examine whether any of the seven categories would be mentioned by differential percentages of the two cultural groups, and obtained no discernible differences (p > 0.2 in all seven analyses).

On the chance that Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans differed in the perceived importance of the categories they mentioned, we performed seven 2(Anglo-American versus Mexican-American) x 5(Ranking order: most important group, second most important group, etc.) Chi-Square tests. However, none of these tests resulted in significant differences between Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans in the relative importance with which each group was ranked. Because a few of these analyses resulted in low cell frequencies, we performed seven more Chi-Square tests where the first and second rankings were combined, the middle ranking was left alone, and the fourth and fifth rankings were combined (resulting in seven 2 x 3 Chi-Square tests), and still failed to obtain any significant findings. Finally, to increase cell frequencies even more, we collapsed the five ranking orders into two ranking orders and the criterion for how these two ranking orders were formed was that the frequencies would be as similar as possible. Thus, based on these two ranking orders, we performed yet seven more Chi-Square tests (2 x 2) and, after taking into account that seven of these 2 x 2 Chi-Square tests were performed, and adjusting the alpha level accordingly, we did not obtain any significant findings. In sum, no matter how the data were analyzed, there were no significant differences between the two cultural groups in either how often they mentioned particular categories of group memberships, or in the order of importance of these categories.

We performed a large set of Chi-Square tests on whether the seven categories were differentially accessible to the two cultural groups (see Table 3). These tests were analogous to those described in the above paragraph where importance rankings were analyzed. Similar null findings were obtained regardless of whether accessibility was considered to have five levels or whether it was collapsed to three or two levels.

Table 2. Frequencies of responses indicating the importance of various categories of group memberships for Mexican-Americans and Anglo-Americans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group memberships category</th>
<th>Order of importance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mexican-Americans</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political affiliations</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/relationships</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anglo-Americans</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political affiliations</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td>Social</td>
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Finally, of less theoretical interest, there was a strong category (seven categories) by ranked importance (five levels) interaction, \( \chi^2(24) = 92.29, p < 0.001 \). When family or religion were mentioned, they tended to be ranked as extremely important by members of both cultural groups, whereas the other categories tended to be ranked as less important.

**DISCUSSION**

The data provided support for the hypothesis that members of individualist cultures perceive their personal characteristics as being particularly important relative to members of collectivist cultures, and members of collectivist cultures perceive their group memberships as being important relative to members of individualist cultures. That is, in the particular individualist and collectivist cultures we tested (Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans), the Anglo-Americans tended to emphasize the importance of personal characteristics more than Mexican-Americans, and Mexican-Americans tended to emphasize the importance of group memberships more than Anglo-Americans. It should be noted, however, that even Mexican-Americans tended to rank and rate personal characteristics as slightly more important than group memberships. In addition, Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans differed greatly on the extent to which less important groups received decreased ratings and rankings. For Anglo-Americans this decrease was much more drastic than for Mexican-Americans. Finally, the relation between accessibility and rated or ranked importance of group memberships was weak, though statistically significant. Perhaps the fact that a variety of factors other than importance affect accessibility, such as the recency and frequency with which particular group memberships have been activated in the past, reduced the size of the relation (see Wyer & Srull, 1989, for a review).

We mentioned earlier the possibility that the reason for our effects is that the minority status of Mexican-Americans caused them to see their ethnicity as particularly important. If this were true, then
group memberships pertaining to ethnicity should have been either particularly accessible or ranked as particularly important for Mexican-Americans, but not for Anglo-Americans. However, the data contradicted this argument – there were no significant differences between the two cultural groups in terms of the percentage of responses that referred to ethnicity, the ranked importance of ethnicity relative to other group memberships, or its accessibility.

Another interesting finding from the content analyses is that although Mexican-Americans rated and ranked groups as being more important than did Anglo-Americans, these two cultural groups mentioned particular categories of group memberships with approximately equal frequency. There were also no differences between the two cultural groups in the order in which categories of group memberships were thought to be more or less important, or in their relative accessibility. Thus, the content analyses suggest that members of different cultural groups are similar in terms of who their group memberships are, which group memberships are perceived to be important, and the relative accessibility of different group memberships. Possibly these similarities result from the fact that all the participants reside in the same country. Clearly, additional cross-cultural investigations, with a variety of individualist and collectivist cultures, are needed to address this issue.

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REFERENCES