

Running head: CULTURE AND MOTIVATIONAL ORIENTATIONS

Relation of Culture to Motivational Orientations

Kaori Takagi

Advisor: Dr. Shelley Taylor

University of California, Los Angeles

### Abstract

People with different cultural backgrounds may behave differently and have different reactions to similar situations. This study was conducted in order to enhance the understanding of people from different cultures by examining the cultural differences in self-construal and motivation.

The goal of this study was to examine the relationship between independent/interdependent self-construals and approach-avoidance motivational orientations. Participants' (N=74) self-construals and motivational orientations were investigated in two ways: by comparing the levels of self-construals and motivational orientations between Asian American and non-Asian American participants, and by comparing those individually. The results indicate that there are no cross-cultural differences on the levels of self-construals and motivational orientations.

However, when looking at participants individually, the results demonstrate that interdependent participants are higher in avoidance orientation than independent participants, and independent participants are higher in approach orientation and lower in avoidance orientation than interdependent participants. These findings indicate that people's self-construals were strongly associated with their motivational orientations.

### Relation of Culture to Motivational Orientations

Recent research has shown that cultural identifications have an impact on the way people think, feel, and behave. Markus and Kitayama (1991) have addressed two dimensions that can be used to characterize differences between cultures: independence and interdependence. Independence/interdependence can be conceptualized as the way a person construes themselves. According to Markus and Kitayama, Europeans and Caucasian Americans are said to be independent because they tend to emphasize the individual. On the other hand, Markus and Kitayama claim that people from Asian cultures are interdependent because they tend to emphasize the group as more important than the individual. People with independent self-construals strive to develop and express their unique characteristics, whereas people with interdependent self-construals place value on harmonious relationships with others and acceptance in their community. Therefore, Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that these independent and interdependent views of the self influence cognition, emotion, and motivation.

Singelis (1994) argues that interdependent and independent self-construals are two distinct dimensions along which individuals will vary independently on a continuum; for example, if people have parents from different cultures or have opportunities to interact with people from other cultures, they could have two well-developed dimensions of the self. Additionally, a study by Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991) showed that the cognitions of private selves and collective selves were stored differently in the memory. These results support Singelis' postulate that there are two independent dimensions of self-construal.

It has been argued that approach motivations and avoidance motivations are governed by two distinct systems (Schneirla, 1959, & Atkinson & Litwin, 1960). An approach orientation is a system that motivates one to move toward positive outcomes whereas an avoidance orientation

is a system that motivates one to avoid negative outcomes. Gray (1987) states that there are individual differences in people's sensitivity to reward and punishment. An approach orientation involves responding to signals of rewards and being motivated to seek those rewards. In contrast, an avoidance orientation involves sensitivity to signals of punishment and novel stimuli and motivation to avoid those stimuli. High avoidance orientation leads to inhibition of behavior and heightened attention. According to Gray (1994), these two motivational systems are independent; that is, being high in one system does not affect the strength of the other system. It is the interaction between the two motivational systems that regulate people's behavior and emotions.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that people in Western cultures tend to have self-benefiting motivations, such as the need to achieve, self-enhance, or affiliate. Conversely, Asian individuals tend to derive their motivations from what benefits others and a group as a whole, such as the need to be agreeable to others, to accommodate to their needs, and to restrain one's own wishes or wants. Varying cultural norms and expectations may provide differential opportunities: Western cultures provide more opportunities to express feeling via behavior, while Asian cultures tend to suppress such opportunities. Motivational theorists argue that when people focus on achieving their goals, enhancing their self-esteem, and expanding their relationships, their behavior is said to be "approach oriented" and when people focus on suppressing their expressions of true feelings in order to avoid conflicts, their behavior is said to be "avoidance oriented" (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). Examining the relationship between motivational orientation and interdependent/independent cultural orientations may be beneficial to investigate why people in different cultures behave differently.

The purpose of this study is to investigate motivational orientations among different cultures. Compared to European-American culture, Asian cultures tend to place greater value on harmony in their relationships (Markus and Kitayama, 1991); therefore, people from Asian cultures may have a greater tendency to avoid conflict in their interpersonal relationships. Because their motivation is focused on other people, they tend to suppress or inhibit their needs in order to satisfy the need of others or a group as a whole. Thus, they tend to avoid the negative consequences of conflict with other people. Based on this reasoning, it is predicted that people from interdependent cultures may be higher in avoidance orientation than people from independent cultures.

European-American people, on the other hand, may pursue their own desires and goals for themselves, rather than others. Therefore, they tend to explore their potential and exhibit their own true feelings and needs. It is predicted that people from independent cultures will be higher in approach orientation than people from interdependent cultures.

Moreover, looking at participants individually, it is predicted that people high in interdependence will score high in avoidance orientation, and those high in independence will score high in approach orientation. The present study seeks to explore these hypotheses in two ways. First, the relationship between dispositional approach-avoidance orientations and cultural norms will be examined. Second, the investigator will examine how individual differences in independent/interdependent orientations are related to approach-avoidance orientations. Thus, the data will be analyzed both at cultural and individual levels.

## Method

### Participants

Seventy-four people participated in the study. Participants were recruited from a large university campus in Southern California, including undergraduate students, graduate students, and the university staff. Ages ranged from 18-50 years ( $M=24.99$ ,  $SD=7.42$ ). There were 22 males and 52 females in the sample. Thirty percent of the participants were Caucasian, 37.8% were Asian American, 14.9% were Hispanic, 2.7% were African-American, 6.8% were Middle Eastern, and 5.4% were from other ethnic backgrounds.

### Procedure

Participants were approached individually by the investigator and asked to complete a series of questionnaires in order to assess their personal dispositions and background. The investigator selected participants randomly, regardless of their ethnic background, at various campus restaurants. When they agreed to participate, they were given a survey packet.

### Measures

The survey packet included the Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994), Behavioral Inhibition System/Behavioral Activation System (BIS/BAS) Scale (Carver & White, 1994), and a demographic survey.

The Self-Construal Scale is a 24-item scale that assesses the strength of a person's interdependent and independent self-construals. Self-construal is "a constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning one's relationship to others, and the self as distinct from others" (Singelis, 1994, p.581). Participants rated items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The scale has Cronbach's alphas of .73 for the interdependent subscale, and .69 for the independent subscale (Singelis, 1994).

The Behavioral Inhibition System/Behavioral Activation System (BIS/BAS) Scale is a 20-item self-report scale designed to measure a person's dispositional positions of the sensitivity to reward (a behavioral activation system: BAS) and punishment (a behavioral inhibition system: BIS). Respondents answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach alpha coefficients for the BIS scale = .74; for the BAS scale = .72 (Carver & White, 1994).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Cultural Background and Independence/Interdependence. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there was a difference on the level of interdependence between Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans. There was no significant effect of cultural background on interdependence, but there was a trend toward interdependence for Asian Americans ( $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = .66$  for Asian Americans;  $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = .77$  for non-Asian Americans),  $F(1,70) = 2.89$ ,  $p < .01$ . In addition, an analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether there was a difference on the levels of independence between Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans. There was no significant effect of cultural background and independence ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = .77$  for Asian Americans,  $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = .81$  for non-Asian Americans).

### The Relationship Between Culture and Approach/Avoidance Orientations

Analyses of variance (ANOVA's) were conducted to determine whether Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans differ in the levels of approach-avoidance orientations. For BAS, no significant difference between Asian Americans ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) and non-Asian Americans ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = .43$ ) was found. In addition, there was no significant

difference on BIS between Asian Americans ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) and non-Asian Americans ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .59$ ).

#### Individual Differences in Independence/Interdependence and Approach-Avoidance Orientations

Pearson correlations were conducted to determine the relationship between individual differences in the levels of independence/interdependence and approach-avoidance orientations. Three significant relationships were revealed (see Table 1). The correlation between interdependence and BIS was significant,  $r = .25$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating that participants high in interdependence scored high in avoidance orientation. In addition, independence was inversely and significantly correlated with BIS,  $r = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that participants high in independence scored low in avoidance orientation. Moreover, the correlation between independence and BAS was significant,  $r = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that participants high in independence scored high in approach orientation. The correlation between interdependence and BAS was not significant,  $r = .19$ ,  $p > .05$ , indicating that there was no relationship between interdependence and approach orientation.

#### Discussion

In the present study, the relations between approach-avoidance orientations and independence/interdependence were investigated at both cultural and individual levels. The results of the present study partially supported our predictions – the individual investigation supported our hypotheses, but the cross-cultural investigation did not support them. In other words, it was found that when looking at the data individually, people with higher interdependence were more avoidance oriented, whereas those with higher independence were more approach oriented. However, when looking at the data cross-culturally, it was found that

Asian American and non-Asian American samples did not differ significantly in the levels of approach or avoidance orientations.

Contrary to the predictions that non-Asian American people would have higher approach orientation than Asian American people, and Asian American people would score higher in avoidance orientation, none of these cultural differences were observed. The preliminary analysis showed that our Asian American samples did not score higher in interdependence than our non-Asian American samples did, a finding that is incongruent with the past literature results (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991, & Singelis, 1994) that Asian Americans are interdependent and North Americans are independent. There are a few possible explanations for the results. First, our non-significant results may be caused by our inadequate categorizations of the samples. The reason for these contradictory results may be that the sample was quite small and too heterogeneous to see any difference. Moreover, it may be that there is a problem in how Asian American and non-Asian Americans were categorized. In this study, Asian American was defined as anyone who has an Asian American background regardless of his or her generation and immigration status. Most of our Asian American samples were born in the United States. Growing up in the United States, Asian Americans are more acculturated in the Western culture than native Asians. Thus, they may have highly developed independence and less developed interdependence compared to Asians who were born in their native countries. From this reasoning, it is plausible that we failed to categorize and obtain adequate non-U.S. born Asian American samples.

Similarly, there was diversity in the non-Asian American sample. Within 44 non-Asian American participants, 22 people were Latino/a, African-American, Middle Eastern, or “other.” This diversity may have weakened our results, since past literature suggests that Mexicans and

African Americans are more collectivist than European Americans (Triandis, 1994). Therefore, using pure native Asians for Asian American samples and European Americans as non-Asian American samples may have resulted in clearer findings.

Although we did not observe any cultural differences in approach-avoidance orientation, the results showed clear individual differences between people's independence/interdependence and approach-avoidance orientations. As predicted, individuals high in independence displayed high levels of approach orientation, and participants high in interdependence displayed high levels of avoidance orientation. In addition, individuals high in independence displayed low levels of avoidance orientation. Participants' scores on interdependence were not associated with their scores on approach orientation. These results suggest that individuals who cultivated an independent self-construal tend to focus on pursuing positive outcomes, whereas individuals who cultivated interdependent self-construal tend to focus on avoiding negative outcomes.

Moreover, the fact that the results of this study showed a clear difference in motivational orientations between interdependent and independent people may explain the reasons why people with different self-construals go through different processes of cognition, emotion, and behavior in the same situations. It appears that differences in how a person perceives the self may have a role in individual differences in motivational orientations. It is possible that an individual's environment influences their self-construal, which, in turn, influences their motivational orientations. Family, cultural norms, and environmental cues both implicitly and explicitly teach individuals how they should behave and relate to others. For example, in order to maintain harmony, a person from an East Asian culture may be taught to avoid conflict or making inappropriate remarks, giving opinions that are out of the norm, and standing out from other people. By doing these things, they may create a pattern of avoiding negative things, and

that may eventually become their general motivational orientation. On the other hand, in Western cultures, children may be rewarded more frequently for being unique, showing their positive traits to others, and contributing to a group by giving their original opinions. By continuing this pattern of being unique, independent, and assertive, Western people may create a pattern of approaching positive things, which creates an approach orientation. Alternatively, it is possible that self-construals and motivational orientations interact with each other over time to create one's dispositions. However, in order to explore these explanations, further understanding of the relationship between the interdependent-independent self-construals and approach-avoidance orientations is needed.

Some limitations of the present research should be mentioned. First, as noted earlier, the sample of the current study was not well categorized into Asian American and non-Asian American. The inclusion of Asian American as "Asian" might have obscured the differences between Asian American and non-Asian American population. In addition, the categorization on non-Asian American was not well defined. We included Hispanics, African Americans, and Middle Easterners in the non-Asian American population. The past literature (Triandis, 1994) claims that those ethnic groups are higher in interdependence than European Americans. Thus, these sub-groups of the United States should have been studied separately. Moreover, we need to consider the variability among countries of seemingly the same culture. In this study, we used any Asian decent, Korean, Taiwanese, Japanese, Chinese, and others as "Asian American." However, it is possible that there are considerable differences in some characteristics among people from those countries. Finally, the present research was correlational; therefore, definitive conclusions regarding causality are not warranted.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study showed an important relationship between independence/interdependence and approach-avoidance orientations. We demonstrated that individuals' motivational orientations are related to their dispositional tendencies of interdependence and independence. It seems that Markus and Kitayama's (1991) theory of dual self is a good way to investigate the differences in personality among cultures and within individuals. By using the Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994), we were able to investigate how the differences in people's self-construals might affect their motivation, emotion, and cognition. By investigating the cultural differences in this way, we could better understand why people with different cultural backgrounds behave and react differently in similar situations.

## References

- Atkinson, J. W., & Litwin, G. H. (1960). Achievement motive and test anxiety conceived as motive to approach success and motive to avoid failure. Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology, (60), 52-63.
- Elliot, A. J., & Sheldon, K. M. (1997). Avoidance achievement motivation: a personal goals analysis. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73 (1), 171-185.
- Gray, J. A. (1987). The psychology of fear and stress (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). England: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, J. A. (1994). Three fundamental emotion systems. Ekman, P., & Davidson, R. J. (Eds.). The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. Psychological Review, 98, 224-253.
- Schneirla, T. C. (1959). An evolutionary and developmental theory of biphasic processes underlying approach and withdrawal. Nebraska Symposium on Motivation (7), 1-43.
- Singelis, T. M. (1994). The measurement of independent and interdependent self-construals. Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 20 (5), 580-591.
- Trafimow, D., Triandis, H. C., & Goto, S. G. (1991). Some tests of the distinction between the private self and the collective self. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60, 649-655.
- Triandis, H. C. (1994). Culture and social behavior. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Table 1

Correlations between People's Self-Construals (Independence/Interdependence) and Motivational Orientations (BIS/BAS).

	N	M (SD)	INTER	IND	BIS	BAS
Interdependence	72	4.74 (.74)	---	.18	.25*	.19
Independence	73	4.80 (.78)		---	-.38**	.41**
BIS	74	3.75 (.65)			---	.06
BAS	73	3.86(.44)				---

INTER = interdependence, IND = independence, BIS = behavioral activation system, BAS = behavioral inhibition system.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .