

A Problem of Cultural Self-Construal Scales

— A Test of the Reference Group Effect —

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Question:

Why do **cultural self-construal scales** often yield incoherent results when their means are compared between cultures?

Answer:

Cross-cultural comparisons with a self-construal scale are plagued by “**the reference group effect.**”

Markus & Kitayama's (1991) Hypothesis

Independent self-construal:

- In this view, people are **separate** and **independent** from each other.
- Dominant in **Western** Society (Europe, North America)



Interdependent self-construal:

- In this view, people are **not separate** from each other, and fundamentally **connected.**
- Dominant in **East Asian** Society



This difference between cultures influences **behavior** and **psychological process**, and vice versa (**mutual construction**).

Empirical Tests of Markus & Kitayama's Hypothesis

- ▶ **Studies with behavioral or cognitive indices** have yielded results **consistent** with M&K's hypothesis. (i.e. Independence in West, interdependence in East Asia)
e.g. Heine *et al.* (2000); Kitayama & Ishii (2002); Kitayama & Masuda (1997); Morris & Peng (1994) ...
- ▶ **However!!**
- ▶ **Studies with self-report scales** have **not** necessarily supported M&K's hypothesis.
e.g. Singelis (1994); Takata, Omoto, & Seike (1996); Gudykunst *et al.* (1996); Leung & Kim (1997) ...
- ▶ Matsumoto's (1999) review:
Out of 10 studies, **only 2** studies supported M&K's hypothesis perfectly.
- ▶ Levine *et al.*'s (2003) meta-analysis:
 - Westerners were more independent than Asian.
 - **But**, Asians were **no** more interdependent than Westerners.

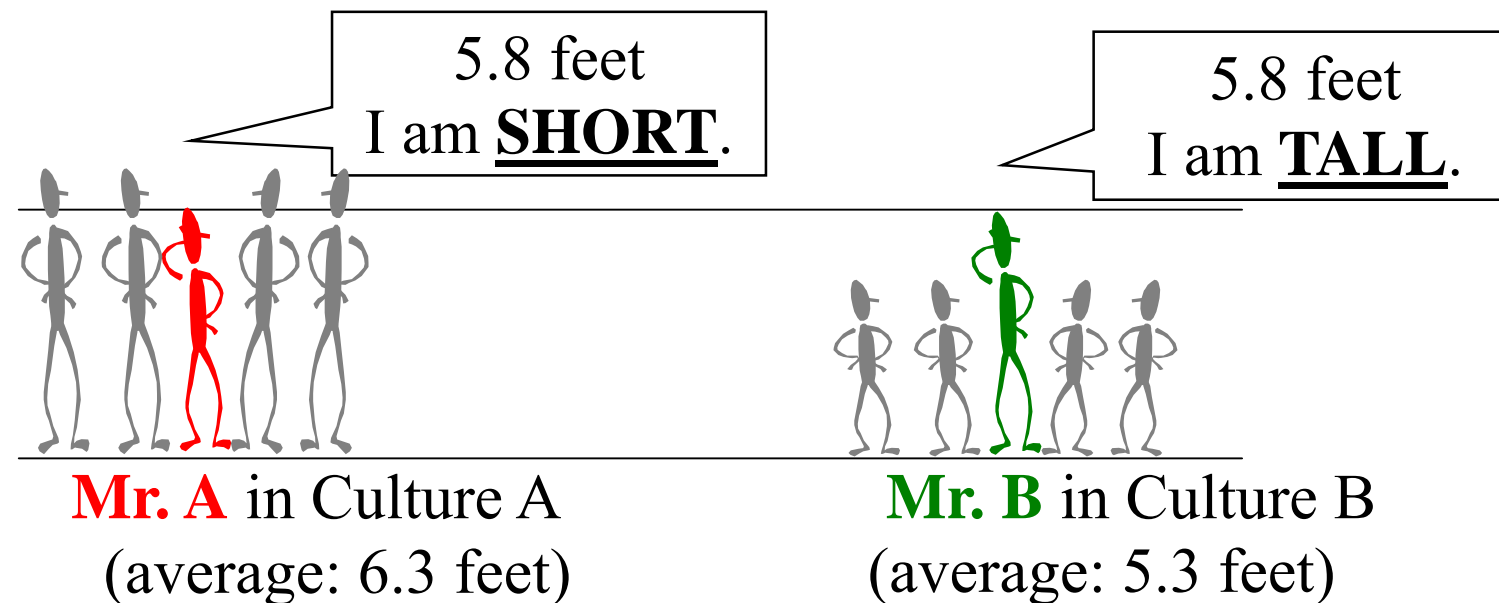
Question: Why do the studies with **self-construal scales** often yield results that are **inconsistent** with M&K's hypothesis, while the studies with behavioral/cognitive indices support it?

Answer: Cross-cultural comparisons with self-report scales can be plagued by the problem of "**the reference group effect.**"

The Reference Group Effect: (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002)

- When there is no absolute criterion, people try to evaluate themselves by **comparing the self with the others** around on the focal dimension.
- Different groups (cultures) may have **different distributions** (the variances, the central tendencies, or “reference points”) of the population.
- A comparison of the means of self-report scales among different groups can be **biased**.

Example: Self-evaluation of one's height



Although there is **no objective difference** between Mr. A and Mr. B, their **subjective evaluations** of the self, which are formed in comparison with others around, may become **different**.

Sample Items of Self-construal Scales:

- I am concerned how I appear to others. (Takata *et al.*, 1996)
- I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I've just met. (Singelis, 1994)
- ▶ These are **self-report scales**, which lack absolute criteria.
- ▶ Therefore, there are dangers of the reference group effect.
- ▶ The inconsistency between the studies with the self-construal scales and behavioral indices may be due to **the difference in central tendencies** (reference points) between cultures.

Purpose of the Present Study:

To test Heine *et al.*'s (2002) reference group effect hypothesis, we conducted a cross-cultural survey with **the self-construal scales** as well as a questionnaire that was intended to measure **daily behaviors**.

Predictions:

1. **Cross-cultural** comparison of the **behavioral scale** will show the results **consistent** with M&K's hypothesis (independence in West, interdependence in East Asia).
2. **Cross-cultural** comparison of the **self-construal scales** will show the results **inconsistent** with M&K's hypothesis.
3. **Within each culture** (where the reference points are shared), behavioral scale and self-construal scale will be **correlated** with each other.

Respondents:

- ▶ 169 Japanese (145 females, 24 males)
- ▶ 52 Asian Canadians (40 females, 12 males)
- ▶ 16 European Canadians (12 females, 4 males)
- ▶ 39 Australians* (25 females, 12 males, 2 unknown) * only European Australian

Questionnaire 1: Self-Construal Scale

- ▶ from Singelis' (1994) scale & Takata *et al.*'s (1996) scale
- ▶ 8 items for Independence: e.g. "I always speak and act confidently."
- ▶ 8 items for Interdependence: e.g. "I am concerned how I appear to others. "
- ▶ 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Questionnaire 2: Behavioral Scale

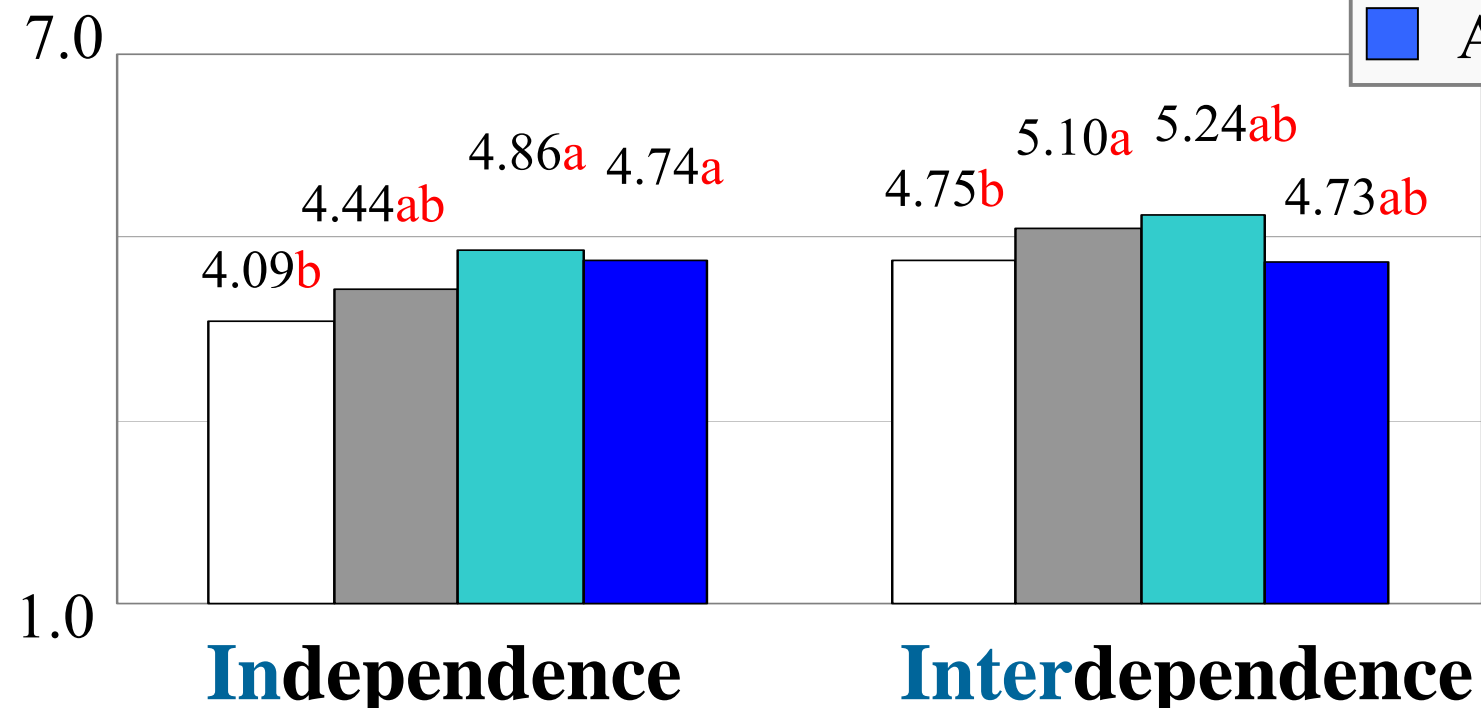
- ▶ Conducted **1 week-after** the Questionnaire 1.
- ▶ Respondents were presented with **9 social situations**, and asked...
 1. If they had **experienced** the situation described,
 2. How they **actually behaved (or would behave)** in the situation, with 3 options: interdependent behavior, independent behavior, other behavior).

Example:

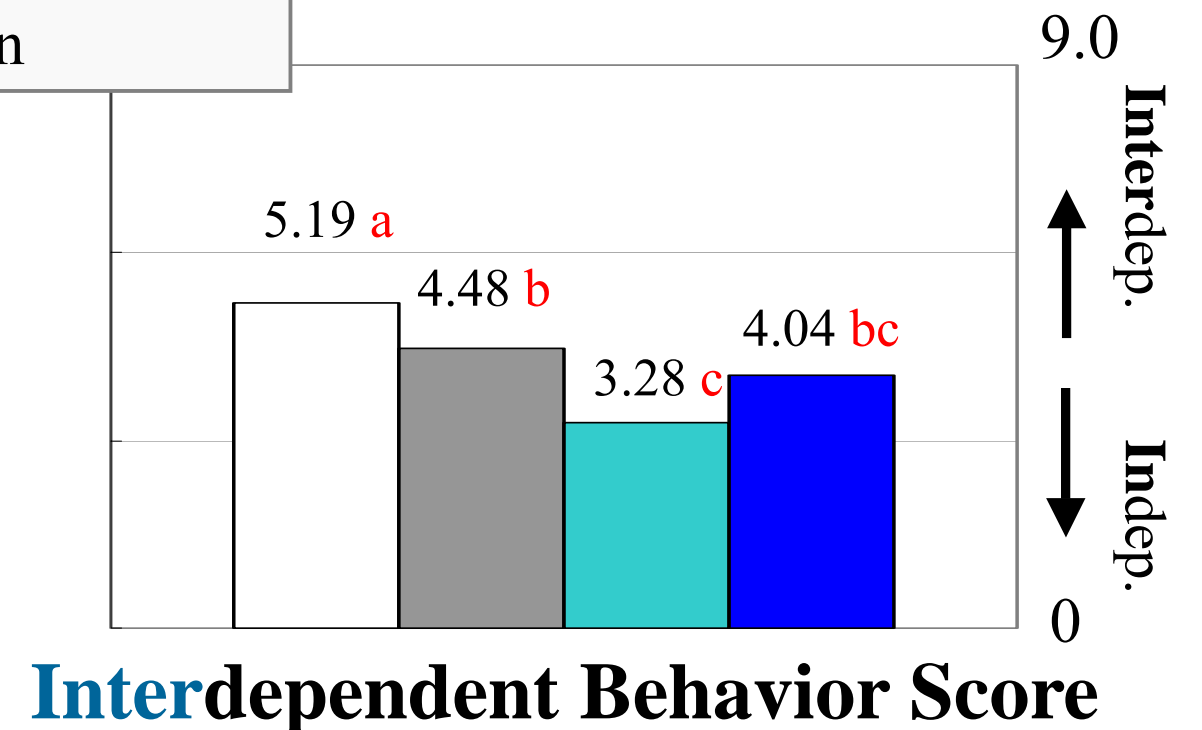
- "Your student club needs many members' participation in a campaign for recruiting new members. If you participate, you would sacrifice your private time."
- Independent behavior: "I didn't participate in such a campaign."
 - Interdependent behavior: "I participated in such a campaign."

Results (1)

Self-Constraint Scale



Behavioral Scale



- ▶ **I**ndependence: Japanese < European Canadian
Japanese < Australian
- ▶ **I**nterdependence: Japanese < Asian Canadian

- Japanese were **no more interdependent** than the Westerners.
- As a whole, **inconsistent** with M&K's hypothesis.

$$= (\text{interdependent} \times 1) + (\text{independent} \times 0) + (\text{other} \times 0.5)$$

- ▶ Japanese > other groups
- ▶ Asian Canadian > European Canadian
- **Consistent** with M&K's hypothesis.

Between cultures, the self-construal scale did **not** correspond to the behavioral scale.

Results (2)

Correlations within Cultures

Correlations of self-construal scales with interdependent behavior scores

	Independent self-construal	Interdependent self-construal
Japanese	-.36***	+.25**
Asian Canadian	-.26+	+.59***
European Canadian	-.25	+.57*
Australian	-.33*	+.09

+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

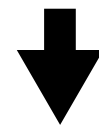
► In all groups, behavioral scores were correlated with independent and/or interdependent self-construal in the predicted directions.

Within each culture, the self-construal scales have validity and reflect individual differences in interdependent behaviors.

Discussion

It was found that the results for the **self-construal scale** were...

- **Inconsistent** with the behavioral scale when the means were compared **between cultures** (where reference points are **not** shared),
- **Consistent** with the behavioral scale when the correlations were examined **within each culture** (where reference points **are** shared).



Cross-cultural comparisons by self-construal scale are plagued by the problem of **the reference group effect.**

Future Directions

In order to avoid the reference group effect...

- Measuring **on-line responses** (i.e. behavior and cognition), rather than using self-reports scales (e.g., Kitayama, 2002).
- Cross-cultural comparison of **correlational patterns**, rather than simply looking at the means (e.g., Uchida *et al.*, 2001; Yuki, 2003).

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