

Self-Construal Differences in Chile and South Korea: A Brief Report

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Abstract

Latin American and East Asian cultures are generally considered to be collectivistic cultures. However, there are very few cross-cultural studies contrasting these two cultures against each other, as most studies in this field compare them to Western culture. Self-construal is one of the most used constructs to explain cultural differences, elucidating whether individuals of a cultural group see themselves as independent of their environment and others, focusing on personal motivations, or interdependent of others and their context, recognizing their role within it. This study intends to compare the self-construal of Chileans and South Koreans and observe the variability in the presence of these dimensions in these two cultures. A total of 200 participants from Chile and South Korea responded to the Self-Construal Scale. Chileans presented significantly higher scores on independent and interdependent self-construal simultaneously when compared to South Koreans. Also, Chileans presented higher scores on independent self-construal than on interdependent self-construal, while Koreans did not show a preference for either dimension. These results are consistent with previous studies on Chileans, implying that not all Latin American countries would adhere to collectivism.

Keywords

Self-construal, Chile, South Korea, cross-cultural differences, individualism–collectivism

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Introduction

The individualism–collectivism dichotomy is one of the most used constructs to study and explain cultural variability in the area of cross-cultural psychology. Individualistic cultures are characterized by highlighting the worth of the individual over that of the group, highly valuing emotional independence, privacy, autonomy, personal goals, and freedom. On the other hand, collectivistic cultures are characterized by emphasizing the value of the group and collective goals over the individual. These cultures value group harmony, interpersonal dependence, and cooperation (Triandis, 2001).

While individualism and collectivism are categorizations used to explain variability at a cultural level, independent and interdependent self-construals are used to explain differences at the individual level. The concept of self-construal was introduced by Markus and Kitayama (1991) and it refers to the sense of self of an individual and the extent it is constructed in relation to others, which is generally determined by the cultural and social context. Individuals with an independent self-construal would define themselves in regard to personal traits, values, preferences, and abilities, emphasizing one's uniqueness, while those with an interdependent self-construal would define themselves in regard to relationships with others, status, and roles within the groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994).

Generally, Western societies, such as North America and Europe, have been cataloged as individualistic cultures, while Asia and Latin America have been considered collectivistic cultures. Specifically, Chile and South Korea are considered collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980), which would imply that individuals belonging to these cultures would present mainly an interdependent self-construal. However, some authors have reported that research on the individualism–collectivism dichotomy would lack empirical validity, as most of the research on self-perception has been limited to studies on differences between samples from the United States and East Asia, and thus, it cannot be generalizable (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Likewise, there is a lack of research comparing East Asian samples and Latin American samples, as most research compares either of these cultures with Western samples.

In addition, previous research on Chilean population has shown that Chilean people present high scores on independent and interdependent self-construal simultaneously, contrarily to what could have been expected. It has been observed that Chileans present higher scores on both self-construals when compared with a Norwegian sample (Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009). Likewise, Chileans present similarly high scores on independent self-construal and significantly higher scores on interdependent self-construal when compared to a U.S. sample (Santibáñez & Hample, 2015).

In the case of Koreans, there have been mixed results regarding their adherence to self-construals when compared to Americans. Research has shown that Koreans present significantly lower scores on independent self-construal when compared to a U.S. sample while not showing significant differences regarding interdependent self-construal (Sung & Choi, 2012). However, a previous research showed that Koreans have significantly higher scores on interdependent self-construal than Americans (Bresnahan et al., 2005).

The purpose of this study was to examine and compare the self-construal of a Chilean and a South Korean sample. Although Chile has been categorized as a collectivistic culture, it was expected that the scores of independent self-construal would be significantly higher for the Chilean sample than those of the Korean sample. On the other hand, it was expected that there would be no significant differences on interdependent self-construal between the two samples. Finally, it was expected to observe a relation between self-construal and age elucidating possible generational differences on both samples.

Method

Participants

For this study, a Chilean sample of 100 participants (females = 56; mean age = 26.330) and a South Korean sample of 100 (females = 60; mean age = 22.410) were gathered. The Chilean participants recruited from the general population through the Internet and responded to the questionnaire online voluntarily. The Korean participants were university students recruited to participate in an experiment in which several scales were administered. Each Korean participant received 3000 won (roughly \$3 USD) as compensation.

Instrument and procedure

Self-Construal Scale. This scale was designed by Singelis (1994) to evaluate the levels of independent and interdependent self-construal. This is a 24-item scale with 12 items measuring interdependent self-construal and the other 12 items measuring independent self-construal. It is estimated that this scale took approximately 10 minutes to complete. This scale was translated from English to Korean by a bilingual researcher and back-translated by a bilingual assistant. The same procedure was followed for the Spanish translation. All items were scored in a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). This wide-range Likert-type scale was used with the intention to curb extreme responses from Chilean participants, as it has been recommended in previous research with Latin American population (Marin,

Table 1. Independent-sample *t* test for self-construal.

	Chileans		Koreans		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Independent self-construal	7.314	1.213	5.889	1.075	−8.793	.000
Interdependent self-construal	6.730	1.104	6.080	1.080	−4.208	.000

Gamba, & Marin, 1992). Also, this Likert-type scale did not have an explicit middle point to regulate the tendency of East Asians to select it and increase the variability in their response style (Si & Cullen, 1998).

Results

First, Cronbach's alphas were calculated to test the reliability of the self-construal scale for the two samples. The independent self-construal dimension presented acceptable internal consistency with the Chilean sample ($\alpha = .773$) and the Korean sample ($\alpha = .702$). The interdependent self-construal presented questionable internal consistency with the Chilean sample ($\alpha = .698$) and acceptable consistency with the Korean sample ($\alpha = .715$).

While exploratorily analyzing the data, it was unexpectedly observed that the Chilean sample presented a positive correlation between independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal ($r = .499$, $p < .001$), which was not observed in the case of the South Korean sample ($r = -.073$, $p = .467$). Nevertheless, the Korean sample presented a positive correlation between age and interdependent self-construal ($r = .219$, $p = .029$), which was not observed in the Chilean data ($r = -.071$, $p = .483$).

An independent-sample *t* test showed that the Chilean sample ($M = 7.314$, $SD = 1.213$) presented significantly higher scores than the Korean sample ($M = 5.889$, $SD = 1.075$) on independent self-construal, $t(198) = -8.793$, $p < .001$. Likewise, the Chilean sample ($M = 6.730$, $SD = 1.104$) presented significantly higher scores than the Korean sample ($M = 6.080$, $SD = 1.080$) on interdependent self-construal, $t(198) = -4.208$, $p < .001$ (for these results, refer to Table 1 and Figure 1).

Finally, paired-sample *t* tests were also calculated to observe whether there were significant differences between the scores for independent and interdependent self-construal within each sample. In the case of Chileans, there was a significant difference between independent self-construal ($M = 7.314$, $SD = 1.213$) and interdependent self-construal ($M = 6.730$, $SD = 1.104$), $t(99) = 5.020$, $p < .001$. There were no significant differences between the two dimensions in the case of Koreans, $t(99) = -1.209$, $p = .230$ (for these results, refer to Table 2).

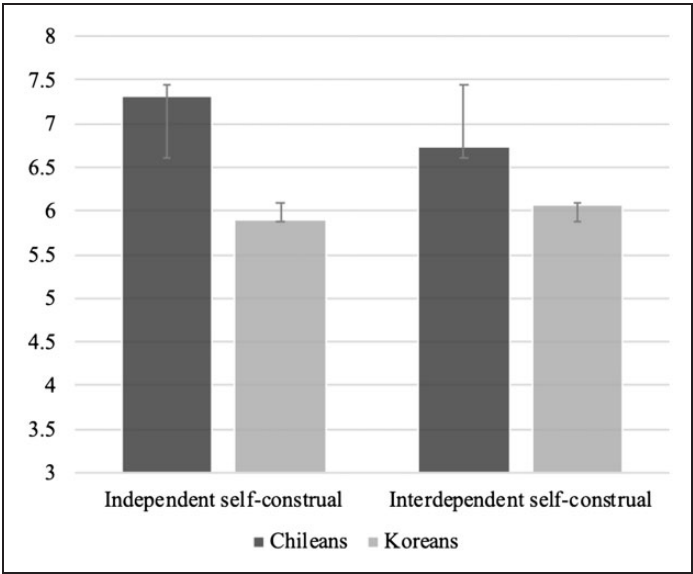


Figure 1. Self-construal differences between Chileans and Koreans.

Table 2. Paired-sample *t* test for self-construal.

	Independent self-construal		Interdependent self-construal		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Chilean	7.314	1.213	6.730	1.104	5.020	.000
Koreans	5.889	1.075	6.080	1.080	−1.209	.230

Conclusions

The results of this study show that Chileans present significantly higher scores on independent and interdependent self-construal than Koreans, which is consistent with previous research showing that Chileans tend to score highly on both self-construals (Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009; Santibáñez & Hample, 2015). However, these results would partially diverge from what was anticipated, as it was expected that there would not be a significant difference on interdependent self-construal between the participants of the two countries studied.

When observing the relation between the two self-construals, Chile presents a positive relation between these two dimensions. This would imply that these two approaches for perceiving oneself would be somehow more intertwined than in the case of South Korea, indicating the presence of a particular mixture of these two dimensions on Chilean individuals.

When comparing the differences between dimensions within each sample, it was possible to observe that, although Chile presented significantly higher scores than South Korea on both self-construals, the scores for independent self-construal were significantly higher to those of interdependent self-construal within the Chilean sample. This could imply that Chile would be a more individualistic country than what has been stated in previous literature (Hofstede, 1980). On the other hand, the Korean sample presented similar scores on both dimensions, not having a clear preference for either type of self-construal.

These results are consistent with what has been observed in previous research regarding self-construal on Chilean population, showing the presence of independent self-construal on equal or higher levels than cultures considered individualistic, while still showing higher scores on interdependent self-construal (Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009; Santibáñez & Hample, 2015).

It was expected the presence of some relation between age and self-construals as a possible indicator of changes due to chronological age. However, this was only observed with the Korean sample, where there was a positive relation between age and interdependent self-construal. This would imply certain changes over the years, where older individuals are more collectivistic than younger individuals, while the latter not necessarily showing to be more individualistic. This could be explained by the characteristics of the sample, as probably the upper level Korean university students would present a sense of "seniority," which would derive from Confucian values and a relativistic understanding of age (Lim & Giles, 2007). In the case of the Chilean sample, there was no relation between self-construals and age, which could mean that the culture in Chile has a fairly homogeneous perception among ages about these construals.

Therefore, these results would indicate that the previous characterization of Latin American cultures as collectivistic would not necessarily be valid for every Latin American country and further research on different nations is required. Along with this, the simple categorization of a country as either individualistic or collectivistic might not be valid, as it is possible that in modern societies there is a larger cultural diversification than what it used to exist in previous generations. This was particularly observed in the case of South Koreans, who would not have a marked preference for either interdependent or independent self-construal and presenting a probable generational change regarding interdependence, as South Korea has been through large social and economic changes in the last few decades (Chun, Doyal, Payne, Cho & Kim, 2006).

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