Being American, being Asian: The bicultural self and autobiographical memory in Asian Americans

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Abstract

Studies of autobiographical memory have shown that the degree to which individuals focus on themselves vs. social relations in their memories varies markedly across cultures. Do the differences result from differing cultural self-views (i.e., an autonomous vs. a relational sense of self), as often suggested in the literature? Experimental evidence is required to answer this question. In the present study, Asian American participants (N = 118) were primed to focus on their American or Asian self prior to recalling important autobiographical events, and participants in a control group described things in nature prior to the memory recall. Those whose American self was activated recalled more self-focused and less socially oriented memories than those whose Asian self was made salient, with the control group falling in between. The findings shed light on the mechanism underlying cultural influences on autobiographical remembering. They further highlight the dynamic nature of the memory-self interplay in cultural contexts.

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1. Introduction

Cross-cultural studies have observed systematic cultural differences in autobiographical memory, that is, memory for significant personal experiences from an individual’s life (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). When remembering past events, Euro-Americans, both adults and children, frequently refer to their own roles, feelings, and predilections, whereas native and immigrant Asians often describe group activities and social interactions (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Mullen, 1994; Wang, 2001, 2004, 2006; Wang & Conway, 2004; Wang & Ross, 2005). These cultural differences in memory content have been attributed to differing belief systems, particularly prevailing self-views, across cultures (Kağıtçibași, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The Euro-American cultural emphasis on individuality and an autonomous sense of self may drive cognitive resources into processing and remembering self-focused event information, whereas the Asian cultural emphasis on interdependence and a relational sense of self may motivate individuals to attend to information about significant others and social groups (Pillemer, 1998; Wang & Ross, 2007). Although this proposal is theoretically compelling, there has been little experimental evidence to directly attest to it. Against this backdrop, the present study tested within a priming paradigm the effects of cultural self-views on autobiographical memory, in a sample of Asian American young adults.

The Asian American population is particularly interesting in this context because of the bicultural self, or “double-identity,” many Asian American individuals come to develop in relation to two contrasting cultural belief systems (Devos, 2006; Lee & Zane, 1998; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). The literature suggests that on the one hand, Asian Americans often willingly take on mainstream American values such as independence, autonomy, and personal efficacy, a belief system that sustains an “American self;” while on the other hand, they actively preserve values and practices from their home cultures, advocating social conformity, mutual dependence, and collective interest, a belief system that affirms an “Asian self.” This bicultural self permits Asian American individuals to react flexibly to situational variations in their everyday lives (Kim & Omizo, 2006; Ryder et al., 2000). It also proves responsive to experimental manipulations. For instance, Hong, Ip, Chiu, Morris, and Menon (2001, Experiment 2) asked Chinese Americans to describe themselves as being Americans and being Chinese. The participants mentioned more individual rights and fewer collective duties in the American identity prime condition than in the Chinese identity prime condition. The dynamic nature of the Asian American bicultural self thus presents a unique opportunity to examine the influence of different cultural self-views on the ways that individuals remember their autobiographical experiences.

Conceivably, if the content of memory reflects the nature of the self in relation to one’s cultural belief system, then making one aspect of the Asian American self salient is likely to increase the retrieval of memory content pertaining to that aspect of the self. As cognitive theories have suggested, the working self modulates access to autobiographical information to make memory consistent with the individual’s current goals, self-images, and self-beliefs (Conway, 2005; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Ross, 1989). Thus, in this study, Asian American participants were primed
to focus on either their American or Asian self prior to recalling important autobiographical events. It was expected that Asian Americans whose American self was made salient would provide more self-focused and less socially orientated memories compared with those whose Asian self was made salient. Participants in a control group, where no self-priming was administered, would fall in between the two priming groups in terms of the personal and social content of their memories.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

One hundred and eighteen Asian American undergraduate students (66 females) at Cornell University participated in the study for partial course credit or $5.00. They were recruited from a variety of science, social science, and humanity courses. They were informed that this study concerned people’s memory for personal experiences, and no specification was made about the study’s focus on Asian Americans. All the participants were US citizens and had on average lived in the US since age 3.78.

2.2. Procedure

Participants met with a trained research assistant in small groups of 1–5. They were told that this was a memory study and that they would be asked to recall memories of personal experiences and to provide some background information about themselves. Participants were randomly assigned to the American self-priming, Asian self-priming, or control condition. The priming manipulation was achieved using a sentence completion task, where each participant was asked to complete 10 sentences in a questionnaire. In the priming conditions, the first five sentences were started with “As an American (Asian), I am...” and the last five sentences were started with “In general, Americans (Asians) are...”. Participants in the control condition completed sentences about things in nature, such as “The tree is...” and “The sky is...”. After the sentence completion task, participants were asked to write in detail two memory events, from any period of their lives, that were personally important to them both at the time of occurrence and in retrospect. At the end, participants provided demographic information and were debriefed and thanked.

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1 One participant was a Chinese national and one did not provide memory descriptions. They were excluded from the study. Students of other ethnic backgrounds who signed up for participation took part in another ongoing study of autobiographical memory.

2 For other research purposes, participants also reported and dated their earliest childhood memories and provided various ratings of the memory events on 7-point scales. The results were not included in this paper.
2.3. Coding

Memory content was coded using a coding scheme adapted from Wang (2001, 2004). The content focus or gist of each memory was first categorized globally as either “personal,” when a memory focused exclusively on the rememberer (e.g., success, frustration, fears, and nightmares), or “social,” when a memory focused on shared experiences of the rememberer with significant others or social groups (e.g., family outings, school activities, and relationships). Personal memories were scored as 0 and social memories were scored as 1. Then more fine-grained coding was performed to capture the personal and social content of each memory. Proposition, defined as a subject–verb construct, was used as the coding unit (Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995). Each unique or implied verb in an independent clause forms a propositional unit (e.g., “My dad carried me and walked around the room” was coded as two propositions). Personal autonomy was coded by counting the participants’ references to their own emotions, preferences, judgments, and agency in their memories (e.g., “I was so upset” and “I wanted to do something challenging”). Social interaction was coded by counting the participants’ references to social interactions and group activities (e.g., “My friend and I listened to Korean music in my house” and “I kissed her on the forehead”). Two trained research assistants, both blind to the hypotheses and the experimental condition of the participants, first coded 20% of the data for reliability check. The inter-coder reliabilities (r) ranged from .85 to .97. One assistant then coded the rest of the data.

3. Results

Priming manipulation check showed that the priming was effective. The typical responses participants gave in the sentence completion task included, for example, “As an Asian, I am humble, I am faithful to my family, and I am well-behaved;” and “As an American, I am independent, I am self-assured of my possibilities, and I am free to do things as I please.” The length of the memories, indexed by the number of words participants used per memory, did not differ significantly across groups (Asian prime: $M = 80.50$, $SD = 42.98$; American prime: $M = 101.84$, $SD = 49.89$; control: $M = 100.30$, $SD = 68.59$). Gender had no significant effects in preliminary analyses and was therefore not considered further. In view of the hypotheses, planned contrast analysis was performed with each memory variable, assigning weights of 1 and $-1$ to the two priming groups and a weight of 0 to the control group (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 2002). Data of the two memory events each participant recalled showed identical patterns; thus results for data averaged between the two memories are presented.

3.1. Memory focus

The memory focus scores averaged between the two memories ranged from 0 (i.e., recalling two personal memories) to 1 (i.e. recalling two social memories). Partici-
pants in the Asian self-priming condition (1) were expected to recall more social memories than those in the control condition (0), followed by those in the American self-priming condition (−1). Contrast analysis confirmed the prediction, $F(1, 115) = 9.49, p = .003, r = .28$. Fig. 1 illustrates the average number of social memories recalled as a function of experimental condition.

3.2. Individual autonomy

It was expected that participants in the American self-priming condition (1) would describe most frequently their opinions, predilections, and agency in their memories, followed by those in the control condition (0), and participants in the Asian self-priming condition (−1) would give fewest such descriptions. The prediction was confirmed, $F(1, 115) = 10.02, p = .002, r = .28$. The mean frequency of references to individual autonomy as a function of experimental condition is illustrated in Fig. 2a.

3.3. Social interaction

Contrary to individual autonomy, participants in the Asian self-priming condition (1) were expected to describe more incidences of social interaction than those in the control condition (0), followed by those in the American self-priming condition (−1). Contrast analysis confirmed the prediction, $F(1, 115) = 4.96, p = .03, r = .20$. The mean frequency of references to social interaction as a function of experimental condition is illustrated in Fig. 2b.

3.4. Memory examples

The following two memory examples help to illustrate the self-priming effects on memory retrieval. Both memories were about the time when the rememberer received
the news of being accepted to Cornell University. However, the first memory, provided by a participant in the American self-priming condition, focused on the rememberer’s own experience and personal emotions and predilections, whereas the second memory, provided by a participant in the Asian self-priming condition, focused on the shared experience and social interactions between the rememberer and significant others. Thus, the two memories, although virtually about the same event, differ in content and perspective as a function of the cultural self being activated at recall.

Memory 1: I got the acceptance letter for Cornell. I did not like my high school at the time & most of the people in, so this was very good news to me. I remember flipping up and down on my bed upon reading it, and then taking the car keys & going for a drive. I recall the Van Halen song, “Standing on Top of the World” being played on the Radio, and me sing along to it, with the window
down. Then I remember getting out of my car in a big parking lot, and screaming at the top of my lungs. I was ecstatic. The hard work paid off, and I was getting out of this town.

Memory 2: The day I got my letter of acceptance to Cornell gave me a sense of relief. I had made it. I thought this would make my parents pretty happy. Well, they were happy. But, they knew better than to abandon their caution. You’ll have to work hard, they say. I know I do. So it’s not the fact of accomplishing something that makes my parents happy or puts them at ease. It’s the ability to plan and the existence of some sort of personal ambition. That’s it.

4. Discussion

The present study tested within an experimental paradigm the effects of cultural self-views on autobiographical remembering, taking advantage of the bicultural characteristic of the Asian American self. Instead of simply attributing cultural differences in cognitive functioning to certain pan-cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism–collectivism), this approach seeks to identify specific mechanisms in individual social-cognitive processes that give rise to the cultural differences, which represents a significant advance for the study of cultural diversity in human cognition (Hong & Chiu, 2001; Hong et al., 2001). As expected, Asian American participants whose American self was made salient were more likely to recall memories of exclusive personal experiences and focused more on their own roles and perspectives and less on social interactions and significant others, when compared with those whose Asian self was made salient, with the control group falling in between. Thus, the content of autobiographical memories reflects and supports the nature of the self being activated at the time of recall.

The memory differences further parallel those found in previous cross-cultural studies (Han et al., 1998; Wang, 2001, 2004, 2006; Wang & Ross, 2005). For instance, in Wang (2001) where native Chinese and European American young adults were asked to recall their earliest childhood memories, the Chinese on average provided .77 (77%) social memories, whereas the Americans provided .58 (58%) social memories. The resemblance with the current findings is striking: Asian Americans whose Asian self was activated recalled on average .78 social memories, and those whose American self was activated recalled .52 social memories (Fig. 1). Obviously, future research that includes both single-cultural and bicultural individuals and uses a variety of priming techniques, including subliminal priming, is necessary to corroborate the current findings and further reveal the dynamic, constructive nature of culture, self, and memory.

It appears that how the self is represented in a particularly context, that is, which aspect of the self is active, salient, and accessible, may determine which memories and which aspects of the memories are likely to be accessed and retrieved. When one aspect of the self is activated and put online, cognitive resources may be chan-
neled into the privileged processing and retrieving of autobiographical information that confirms the goals and motivations associated with that aspect of the self (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The current findings shed light on an important mechanism that mediates cultural influences on autobiographical memory. Individuals in different cultures often uphold self-views (e.g., an autonomous vs. a relational sense of self) endorsed by their respective cultural belief systems (Kagitçibaşi, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Such self-views may remain active, salient, and stable given the constant reinforcement of the specific cultural context individuals reside in, where cultural artifacts, language, and even the physical characteristics of the environment may all serve as effective primes (Nisbett & Masuda, 2003; Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002). The self-views then “shape both the accessibility of memories and the accessibility of their content” (Conway, 2005, p. 595), thus giving rise to cultural differences in autobiographical memory.

Importantly, the relationship between autobiographical memory and the self is a reciprocal one in which they interact and substantiate each other while both incorporating the belief systems of the culture. The self enables privileged encoding and retrieval of autobiographical information relevant to the goals and motivations of the self prioritized by the culture. This process is further facilitated by the elaboration of cues embodied in an individual’s immediate environment. Autobiographical memories, in turn, are reconstructed to confirm the goals and motivations of the cultured self. This dynamic interplay between memory and self sustains the stability of a self-identity adaptive to the larger cultural context, and in the meantime lends flexibility to the individual self in response to situational demands in the daily life.

References


