The Effects of Priming Individualism and Collectivism on Social Support Seeking by

Gender

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Abstract

The following study sought to understand whether priming individualism and collectivism would affect social support seeking. Gender was measured to see if it would moderate the influence of the prime on social support seeking. It was predicted that participants primed with individualism would seek more social support than the collectivist condition, that female participants would seek more social support than male participants, and that females in the individualistic condition would seek the most social support while men in the collectivist condition would seek the least. Participants were randomly assigned to either a three-minute collectivist or individualistic priming condition, and then their willingness to seek social support when faced with a hypothetical stressor was measured with the Brief COPE Scale. Our results found that there was no significant difference in social support seeking between the individualistic or collectivist priming condition, as well as no difference between male or females' social support seeking. There was no significant interaction between gender and either priming condition. These findings reveal a need to better understand whether social support seeking is truly influenced by cultures' differences in individualism or collectivism, or, like this study suggests, if there is another variable that contributes to cultures' contrasting social support seeking patterns.

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The impact of culture on human behavior has been extensively studied in the field of psychology. Yet, the literature surrounding culturally influenced behaviors may create the misconception that there is little room for variation in these behaviors because culture is portrayed as a core part of one's identity. Although culture could never be fully manipulated, aspects of culture that influence our self-concept can be (Gardner et al., 1999). This opens multiple doors into influencing behaviors that were conceived to be static products of one's cultural identity. Specifically, this is of interest to social support seeking behaviors, which have been shown to differ in individualistic and collectivist cultures (Chang, 2015; Ishii et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2006). Social support seeking is crucial to study within this context as it is associated with psychological well-being and, when underutilized, can lead to worsening psychological problems (Ashton & Fuehrer, 1993; Chang, 2015). The purpose of the present investigation is to modify Kim and colleagues' 2006 study to see if priming individualistic and collectivist attitudes can change peoples' tendency to seek social support as well as examine how gender might influence this relationship.

Literature Review

Priming Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism and collectivism are concepts used to categorize the different cultures of the world into a dichotomy. Individualism is defined as a mindset in which a person views themselves primarily as a detached individual that is not markedly related to the society around them to which they believe they have few obligations to; they define themselves primarily through their characteristics (Kim et al., 2006; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). On the other hand,

collectivism is a mindset in which individuals view themselves primarily through the connections they hold with groups around them, and thus feel a greater obligation to their group than themselves (Kim et al., 2006; Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

An individual's level of collectivism and individualism can be temporarily shifted with priming (Gardner et al., 1999; Kemmelmeier, 2003; Van den Bos et al., 2015). This priming works because people from individualistic and collectivist cultures not only have knowledge of both individualistic and collectivist qualities, they also likely have aspects of both in their self-concept, which they display according to the context they are in (Gardner et al., 1999; Van den Bos et al., 2015). Whether a person acts more individualistic or collectivist in a given situation depends on what is made salient in that context (e.g. expectations, norms) (Gardner et al., 1999; Kashima et al., 1995; Kemmelmeier, 2003; Van den Bos et al., 2015). For example, in Kim and colleagues' 2006 study, making self-goals salient caused those from a collectivist culture to seek more social support, a behavior not typically associated with collectivist cultures. Therefore, people from individualistic or collectivist cultures act in accordance with their culture because societal expectations and norms prime such behavior (Kashima et al., 1995).

Furthermore, priming individualism and collectivism can help expand cultural psychology research in two key ways. One, priming can help establish better internal validity by isolating a cause and effect relationship between cultural attitudes and the behaviors they are predicted to influence (Van den Bos et al., 2015). Two, priming can isolate the psychological mechanism that causes culture to influence certain behaviors. As eloquently stated by Kemmelmeier (2003), "Even though [priming] cannot adequately capture the full richness of cross-cultural variety, this research strategy allows the experimental isolation of one dimension of difference" (p. 113). In the current study, we will be manipulating the psychological

mechanism of individualistic and collectivist attitudes to test whether it is causing cultural differences in social support seeking.

Social Support

Social support is a state in which an individual feels included by their social groups which is often accompanied by feeling supported and loved (Ishii et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2006). Social support can be emotional or instrumental, and implicit or explicit. Emotional social support can be listening to someone's problems, consoling them, offering affirmation, security, and warmth, whereas instrumental support is palpable or tangible, such as offering someone help or giving them advice (Cahill & Sias, 1997; Kim et al., 2006). Explicit social support refers to asking someone for help, whereas implicit social support is being around others for support but not discussing your problems (Chang, 2015). In the current study, we will be analyzing both emotional and instrumental social support, but only explicit emotional support as modeled by previous studies (Kim et al., 2006).

Individualism, Collectivism, and Social Support Seeking

A clear relationship has emerged between individualism, collectivism, and social support. It should be noted that the literature has focused mostly on studying individuals from individualistic or collectivist cultures rather than priming these attitudes: a void the current study is trying to fill. Overall, European Americans, who represent those from an individualistic culture, tend to seek social support significantly more than Asian Americans, who represent those from a collectivist culture (Chang, 2015; Ishii et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2006). Furthermore, European Americans were more likely to feel pride, heightened self-esteem, and resolve their stressor when seeking social support, compared with those from Asian cultures who were more likely to feel shame and guilt when seeking social support (Ishii et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2006). A

reason for this disparity is because those from collectivist cultures tend to want to avoid any relationship problems that may occur when relying on others for support (Chang, 2015; Ishii et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2006). We predict that the effects of individualism and collectivism on social support seeking will be similar to these trends when the attitudes are primed.

Gender and Social Support Seeking

We also plan to expand Kim and colleagues' 2006 study by examining if gender will influence the effect of cultural priming on social support seeking. Overall, women tend to seek social support more than men (Day & Livingstone, 2003; Kim et al., 2006). Researchers have hypothesized that this discrepancy may be due to men's desire to conform to their gender role in which seeking support is not accepted (Ashton & Fuehrer, 1993; Cahill & Sias, 1997). Thus, because gender is associated with differing levels of social support seeking, we believe that it will influence the impact of cultural priming on participants' social support seeking.

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Overview

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Overall, this study will examine whether priming individualism and collectivism will impact social-seeking behaviors differently by gender. We predict that priming individuals to have a collectivist mindset will cause them to seek less social support when faced with a hypothetical stressor compared to priming an individualistic mindset. Additionally, we hypothesize that women will be more likely to seek social support across both priming conditions when compared with men. Lastly, we anticipate that men primed with a collectivist mindset will be the least likely overall to seek social support, whereas women primed with an individualistic mindset will be the most likely overall to seek social support. This study will help expand Kim and colleagues' 2006 findings by seeing whether priming cultural attitudes can impact social support seeking and if gender will impact the influence of this prime.

Methods

Participants

　　We recruited 136 participants. 46 respondents were excluded from the analysis for incomplete responses. An additional seven were excluded because they did not fit within the binary gender categories of men and women and previous research only provided appropriate rationale to predict results for male and female participants. Thus, the analysis was conducted on the remaining 83 participants (age: $M = 21.63$, $SD = 5.42$). Of those included in the analysis, 42% were male and 58% were female. 46% of the participants were Asian American or Asian, 1% were African American, 19% were Hispanic or Latino, 40% were White or Caucasian, 1% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 15% were Mixed (i.e. their parents were from two different ethnic groups). The participants were recruited through word of mouth conducted by the researchers. They were told the study was investigating Coping and Mindset Orientation. Participants received no compensation or incentives for participating.

Design

　　The following study is a 2 (prime: individualistic vs. collectivist) x 2 (gender: male vs. female) between-subjects quasi-experimental design. Gender was measured as a potential moderator. The outcome variable was social support seeking and was operationalized by the instrumental and emotional subscales in the Brief COPE scale.

Materials

Individualistic/Collectivist Prime

　　We primed participants to be individualistic or collectivist by asking them two questions using the manipulation adapted by Van den Bos and colleagues (2015), which was created by Trafimow and colleagues (1991). In the collectivist prime, they were asked, "Please think for a

minute about what you have in common with your family and friends. How are you similar to each other?" and "'What do your family and friends generally expect you to do?" In the individualistic prime, participants are asked, "Please think for a minute about what makes you different from your family and friends. How are you a unique being?'' and ''What do you generally expect yourself to do?"

Brief COPE Scale

To measure social support seeking, we used four subscales with two items each from the Brief COPE Scale, which typically consists of 14 subscales as developed by Carver (1997). The scale consists of instructions that prompt the participant to think of a recent stressful event. The instructions were adapted to be future-oriented to allow for thought processes that could be impacted by the prime like the following, "We are interested in how people respond when they confront difficult or stressful events in their lives. Imagine a stressful event that has just occurred. How would you respond to the situation?" We asked participants to respond to this prompt with four two-item scales: instrumental support, emotional support, humor, and planning. The instrumental and emotional support subscales were our main outcome measures, whereas the humor and planning scales were used as filler items to better disguise our research intent. Items from the instrumental support subscale included phrases such as, "I would get advice or help from other people about what to do" and items from the emotional support subscale included phrases like, "I would get comfort and understanding from someone": both subscales were slightly adapted to fit the future-oriented prompt. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 was extremely unlikely and 5 was extremely likely which was adapted to better fit the future-oriented prompt. A single social support composite score was created by averaging

participants' answers on the four items from the emotional and instrumental support subscales, α

= .85. Higher social support seeking was indicated by a high social support composite score.

Procedure

The entire study was conducted with a Qualtrics survey. Participants first encountered

instructions that informed them they were participating in a study called Coping and Mindset

Orientation, the ten-minute duration of the survey, that all responses would be anonymous, and

that they had the right to stop participating or not answer a question at any time. Consent was

gathered from participants moving forward from the introduction page. First, participants

indicated their gender. They were then randomly assigned to the individualistic or collectivist

prime and were given three minutes to answer the questions in the prime. Following the prime,

participants filled out the four subscales from the Brief COPE Scale. Lastly, they indicated their

age, ethnicity, and read a written debrief detailing the intentions of the current research.

Results

A gender (male vs. female) X priming condition (individualist vs. collectivist) ANOVA

was conducted with social support seeking as the continuous outcome variable. There was no

main effect of priming individualistic and collectivist mindsets on social support seeking, F(1,

79) = 1.56, p = .215. There was no main effect of gender on social support seeking, F(1, 79) =

0.50, p = .480. There was no significant interaction between gender and priming on social

support seeking, F(1, 79) = 1.88, p = .174.

Discussion

In the following study, we predicted that priming individuals with a collectivist mindset

would cause them to seek less social support when faced with a hypothetical stressor than

individuals primed with an individualistic mindset. Additionally, we hypothesized that women

would seek more social support than men across all priming conditions. Lastly, we also predicted that there would be an interaction between gender and priming condition; specifically that men in the collectivist prime condition would be the group least likely to seek social support, but that women primed with an individualistic mindset would be the most likely group to seek social support. We did not find support for any of our hypotheses.

Although previous research has documented that priming individualistic and collectivist mindsets can change certain aspects of people's behavior -- such as their endorsement of certain values and their perception of what is fair (Gardner et al., 1999; Van den Bos et al., 2015) -- our current study did not find evidence that could extend these findings to social support seeking behaviors. This suggests that there is a possible limit to the types of behaviors cultural mindset priming can influence. Another reason we failed to find an influence could be due to a more complex relationship between culture and social support seeking than previously thought. Based on our findings, it seems that cultural differences in social support seeking are due to more than the different individualistic and collectivist attitudes in these cultures. For example, one study found that a sense of contribution (the feeling that you can help someone with your social support) mediated the relationship between culture and support seeking, implying that it could explain said relationship (Hashimoto & Gherghel, 2021). Thus, sense of contribution, as well as other possible variables, could be responsible for the difference in social support seeking between cultures. Further investigation focused on causality should be done.

Our study also failed to replicate the finding that women seek more social support than men (Ashton & Fuehrer, 1993; Kim et al., 2006). One argument for why this could have occurred is because gender differences in social support seeking could be due to differences in gender expression (masculinity and femininity) rather than gender identity (male and female). A study

by Reevy & Maslach (2001) found no difference in social support seeking between men and women but did find that the three feminine characteristics measured were more associated with social support seeking than three masculine characteristics. Future research should better clarify if differences in social support seeking are due to one's gender expression or gender identity. Another reason no difference was found could be because we did not specify the context (e.g. in person, email, social media) in which participants would be seeking social support. Research has found no difference in social support seeking between men and women when social support was specified to occur in person or through text, but that differences between gender were found in other online contexts (Rife et al., 2016). Considering that we did not specify a context, participants may have assumed the context they are most comfortable in seeking social support, thus attenuating the gender difference.

There are some limitations within the study itself that could have contributed to our lack of findings. Primarily, our small sample size meant our study was significantly underpowered. With more participants not only would our study have been sufficiently powered, but we would have been able to add a no prime condition, which would have allowed us to better see the effects of the individualistic and collectivist priming. Additionally, because the study was conducted fully online, we were unable to control people's environment while they engaged with the priming question which allowed the possibility for them to get distracted or not be fully engaged during the three-minute time limit. This may have ultimately reduced the effectiveness of the prime manipulation as it was adopted from a study that conducted it in person (Van den Bos et al., 2015). Lastly, the lack of any incentives for participants was a major drawback as it imposed limitations on how long our study could be and likely caused participants to be less motivated to put adequate effort into the study. As a result of keeping the study short for optimal

participant engagement, we also lacked a manipulation check which made it difficult to assess whether our prime was successful.

Future studies should replicate our investigation in a lab setting where participants' environments during the priming would be better controlled, and with a bigger sample size to ensure that the study is sufficiently powered. Furthermore, follow-up studies should also implement a manipulation check and a no prime condition so that there is more information on the effectiveness of the priming manipulation. Adding incentives for participation may also help ensure that participants are engaged during the experiment and may help recruit a larger sample. Finally, future research should specify which context (e.g. in person, online, etc.) participants will be seeking social support in to eliminate potential confounds.

To close, studies such as Kim and colleagues' 2006 study -- where individuals in collectivist cultures sought less social support and individualistic cultures sought more social support -- can make it seem like the difference in the individualistic and collectivist mindset of these cultures is what is fueling the difference in social support seeking behaviors. Yet, the results of our study show that when we isolate and randomly assign the mindsets inherent in individualism and collectivism through priming, it does not create the same difference in social support seeking behaviors that were previously found. This implies that there might be more subtle or uncovered cultural differences that are contributing to this difference. Moving forward, we recommend that researchers more closely examine the propensity to put cultures into overarching categories -- like individualistic and collectivist -- as critical knowledge may lie in the spaces between the dichotomy we have limited ourselves to.

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