

Research Article

Is There Any “Free” Choice?

Self and Dissonance in Two Cultures

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ABSTRACT—Four experiments provided support for the hypothesis that upon making a choice, individuals justify their choice in order to eliminate doubts about culturally sanctioned aspects of the self, namely, competence and efficacy in North America and positive appraisal by other people in Japan. Japanese participants justified their choice (by increasing liking for chosen items and decreasing liking for rejected items) in the standard free-choice dissonance paradigm only when self-relevant others were primed, either by questionnaires (Studies 1–3) or by incidental exposure to schematic faces (Study 4). In the absence of these social cues, Japanese participants showed no dissonance effect. In contrast, European Americans justified their choices regardless of the social-cue manipulations. Implications for cognitive dissonance theory are discussed.

Making a choice is often psychologically costly. In choosing between two objects, people may have to give up positive features of the rejected object and accept negative features of the chosen object. Researchers have hypothesized that the resulting awareness that the choice might not be ideal may threaten significant aspects of the self, such as perceived competence and efficacy, and thereby induce discomfort called dissonance (Aronson, 1968; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Festinger, 1957; Steele, 1988; see also Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999, and Stone & Cooper, 2001, for further theoretical refinements). People are then motivated to reduce this dissonance by justifying their choice (Brehm, 1956). To do so, they often increase their liking of the chosen object and decrease their liking of the rejected object—an effect known as the postdecisional spreading of alternatives.

Although dissonance is typically considered to be pan-cultural, there may be systematic cross-cultural variation. Because practices and public meanings of different cultures promote and sanction different views of the self (Kitayama & Uchida, in press; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the aspects of the self that are threatened in any given circumstances may or may not be culturally relevant. We suggest that free choice could be personally costly (i.e., produce dissonance-motivated self-justification) if the threatened aspects of the self are culturally relevant, but could also be “free” (i.e., entail no psy-

chological cost and, therefore, cause no self-justification) if they are not. The current report addresses this possibility by comparing middle-class European American and Japanese participants’ tendencies to justify their choices across a variety of experimental conditions.

DISSONANCE: PERSONAL VERSUS INTERPERSONAL

We propose that self-threats can have two distinct sources. In some cases, threatening evaluations may be based on the person’s own judgment about him- or herself. But in other cases, threatening evaluations may be based on others’ appraisals. Correspondingly, awareness that a choice may not be ideal can lead to two distinct identity-related concerns. On the one hand, one may doubt one’s own competence or efficacy (“Am I foolish to have made this choice?”). On the other hand, one may worry about what others might think about the choice one has made (“Would they think I am a fool because of the choice I made?”). We suggest that these two concerns—personal and interpersonal—may be differentially threatening, depending on one’s view of the self as either independent or interdependent.

In previous work (Kitayama & Markus, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2004), we have proposed that the practices and lay theories of middle-class European American contexts encourage a view of the self as independent. Individuals engaging with these contexts are strongly motivated to confirm positive, self-defining attributes of the self, such as competence and efficacy (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). As a consequence, concerns about competence and efficacy will be very threatening to these selves. It is this personal worry (or dissonance), then, that motivates these individuals to justify their choices by spreading alternatives.

In contrast, the practices and meanings of middle-class Asian—especially Japanese—contexts encourage a view of the self as interdependent (see also Triandis, 1989). Individuals engaging with these contexts are thus motivated to adjust to and fit in with the expectations of socially meaningful others (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). As a consequence, approval and acceptance by others in a relationship figure prominently in the definition of the self. For these selves, worry over possible rejection (e.g., losing others’ respect, approval, and commitment) will be very threatening. It is this interpersonal worry (or dissonance), then, that motivates these individuals to justify their choices by spreading alternatives.

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PREVIOUS EVIDENCE

Existing evidence is consistent with the foregoing analysis. Heine and Lehman (1997) found that Japanese showed no dissonance effect in the standard free-choice paradigm. In this and most other standard free-choice studies, however, participants made choices in total privacy, in a situation set up by a total stranger. In these circumstances, it seems very unlikely that one would experience interpersonal worry.

Other evidence indicates that Asians may show dissonance effects when their behaviors are made public, as public scrutiny may produce worries about interpersonal rejection. For example, Sakai (1981) used an induced-compliance paradigm and found that Japanese showed dissonance effects only when they were led to believe that peers were monitoring their behaviors. More germane to the present analysis is a recent study by Hoshino-Browne, Zanna, Spencer, and Zanna (in press), in which Canadians of either Asian or Caucasian heritage made choices for either themselves or a friend in the standard free-choice dissonance paradigm. Participants understood that their friends would know which choice they made. Replicating Heine and Lehman's (1997) results, these authors found that Asian Canadians, especially those strongly identified with Asian culture, showed no dissonance effect when they chose for themselves. However, when they chose for a friend, they justified their choice by indicating afterward that the friend would like the chosen object more and the rejected object less than they had indicated before the choice. Although consistent with our analysis, this evidence does not identify conditions in which interdependent selves would justify choices they made for themselves.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Our analysis suggests that interdependent selves should show a dissonance effect (i.e., spreading alternatives) in the standard free-choice paradigm when they are induced to worry about what meaningful others might think about their choice. The aforementioned studies by Sakai (1981) and Hoshino-Browne et al. (in press) suggest that among Asians, public scrutiny often gives rise to this interpersonal worry and thus to a reliable dissonance effect. In the present studies, we went a step further and investigated the hypothesis that even when there is no realistic possibility of public scrutiny, interdependent selves may experience dissonance when social cues associated with such scrutiny are made salient. If this is the case, Japanese should show a reliable dissonance effect in the standard free-choice paradigm when images of meaningful social others are salient.

STUDY 1: SOCIAL CUES AND DISSONANCE IN JAPAN

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that Japanese will reliably spread alternatives in the standard free-choice paradigm when social others are primed. To prime social others, we asked participants to think of the opinions of the average student in their own university before making a choice for themselves.

Method

Participants

Fifty-four Japanese undergraduates (31 males and 23 females) at Kyoto University in Japan participated in exchange for 500 yen (about

\$5). Participants were tested individually. They were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: standard, other-reference/self-first, and other-reference/other-first.

Procedure

The procedure was closely modeled after that of Heine and Lehman (1997) and of Steele, Spencer, and Lynch (1993, Study 1). When participants entered the lab, they were greeted by a female experimenter and informed that the study involved a consumer survey sponsored by a CD retailers' association. The participants were given a list of 30 Japanese pop CDs, listed by title and artist. Extensive pretesting ensured that the list was up to date and reflected college students' musical preferences. The participants first crossed out all of the CDs on the list that they already possessed, then circled the 10 CDs they would most like to own. Next, the experimenter took the list to an adjacent room and returned with the covers of the 10 most-wanted CDs.

The participants then ranked the CDs. Participants in the standard condition ranked the 10 CDs according to how much they would personally like to own them. Participants in the two other-reference conditions also ranked the 10 CDs according to their personal preferences.¹ In addition, however, they ranked the CDs according to the presumed preferences of the "average college student." In this way, a meaningful social other was primed.

In order to explore the generality of the priming of social other, we ran two other-reference conditions that differed in the order in which the two ranking tasks were given. In the other-reference/self-first condition, participants first ranked the 10 CDs according to their own preferences and then ranked the CDs according to the average college student's preferences. The order of tasks was reversed in the other-reference/other-first condition.

Once participants completed the ranking tasks, the experimenter asked them to complete an alleged music marketing survey while she prepared the next part of the study in the adjacent room. After a few minutes, the experimenter returned to the testing room and told participants that the CD retailers' association sponsoring the survey was offering a CD to them as a token of the association's great appreciation for their participation. The experimenter apologetically added, however, that she had only two CDs in stock. She then presented two CDs and asked the participants to choose one of them. In each case, the two CDs, in fact, were the ones that the participant had ranked as his or her personal fifth and sixth favorites. After choosing a CD, the participants were left alone for approximately 10 min while they completed the marketing survey.

After 10 min, the experimenter returned and explained that the study sponsors also wanted to know how people might feel about the CDs after they left a CD shop, when they were no longer exposed to the CD covers. Participants then ranked the 10 CDs once more, according to their own preferences, but this time without seeing the CD covers. Participants were encouraged to indicate how they felt right at that very moment, regardless of their previously reported preferences.

After this task, participants were thoroughly debriefed and thanked. They were also asked to donate their gift CDs back to the study, because the study was not actually sponsored by CD retailers. All

¹The participants also rated the 10 CDs on 9-point rating scales. In all studies, the rating data closely paralleled, but were somewhat weaker than, the ranking data. We therefore focus on the ranking data in this report.

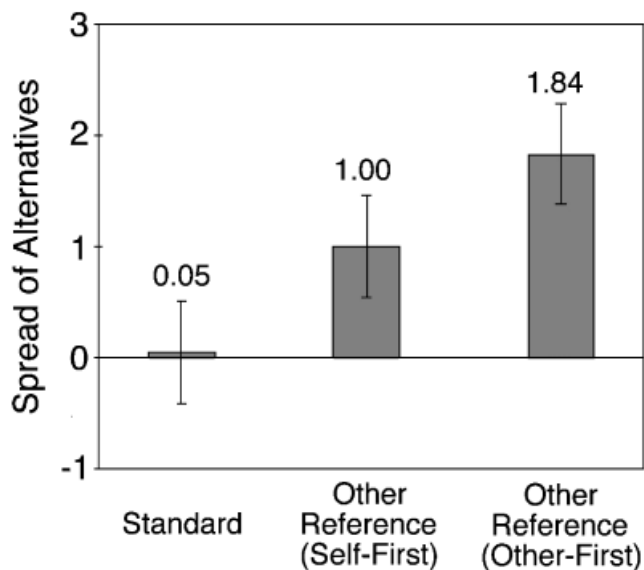


Fig. 1. Spread of alternatives (SAs) for Japanese participants in the standard and other-reference conditions (Study 1). Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

participants agreed to do so. In lieu of the CD, they received the promised monetary reward.

Results

Critical data were participants' rankings of their initially fifth- and sixth-ranked CDs before and after the choice. In all the studies reported here, the postdecisional increase in rank of the chosen CD was no different from the postdecisional decrease in rank of the rejected CD. Thus, when participants justified their choices, they did so by both augmenting their evaluations of their chosen CD and depressing their evaluations of the rejected CD. Accordingly, we simply added the two change scores (i.e., change in ranking for the chosen CD + change in ranking for the rejected CD) to obtain an overall measure of the spread of alternatives (SA) for each participant.

The SA measure was submitted to a 3 (condition: standard, other-reference/self-first, other-reference/other-first) \times 2 (gender: male, female) analysis of variance (ANOVA). As predicted, the main effect of experimental condition proved significant, $F(2, 48) = 4.31, p < .05$. Means and standard errors are presented in Figure 1. Post hoc tests² indicated that SA was greater in the two other-reference conditions than in the standard condition, and the two other-reference conditions were not significantly different from each other. Moreover, t tests against zero showed that SA in the standard condition was no different from zero, $t(20) = 0.11, n.s.$, replicating Heine and Lehman's (1997) results. As predicted, however, SAs in the two other-reference conditions were significantly different from zero: $t(16) = 3.03, p < .01$, in the other-first condition and $t(15) = 2.83, p < .05$, in the self-first condition.

Approximately 70% of the participants in each condition chose the fifth-ranked CD over the sixth-ranked CD. Further, in the two other-reference conditions, the CD rankings estimated for the average

²For all the analyses reported in this article, we used post hoc least significant difference (LSD) tests.

student were no higher for the chosen CD than for the rejected CD ($M_s = 5.21$ vs. 5.15), suggesting that SA in the other-reference conditions was not merely a result of participants conforming to a perceived norm. We replicated these two general patterns for both Japanese and Americans in subsequent studies.

STUDY 2: SOCIAL CUES AND DISSONANCE IN JAPAN AND THE UNITED STATES

In Study 2, we sought both to replicate the findings of Study 1 among Japanese participants and to explore the effects of other-referencing for European American participants. Because European American cultural contexts encourage a belief that choice is an expression of the self that is independent of any social others (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), we hypothesized that upon making a choice, European Americans are mostly concerned with threats to their personal attributes, such as competence and efficacy, regardless of the salience of social others. We therefore predicted that European Americans would spread alternatives in both the standard and the other-reference conditions.

Method

Forty-two Japanese undergraduates (22 males and 20 females) at Kyoto University in Japan and 51 European American undergraduates (14 males and 37 females) at Stanford University in the United States participated in exchange for 500 yen in Japan and \$8 in the United States. Compensation rates reflect the standards at the two universities. The procedure was identical to the one in Study 1, except that extensively pretested American pop CDs were used in the United States. All instructions and materials used in Study 1 were carefully translated into English and back-translated into Japanese to ensure that the original meanings were preserved in the English versions. Finally, both the Japanese and the English versions of the experimental materials were finalized after in-depth discussions among all four authors. Because SAs in the two other-reference conditions of Study 1 were no different from one another, we included only the self-first version in Study 2. In the United States, the study was conducted in English by a European American; in Japan, the study was conducted in Japanese by a Japanese experimenter.

Results

Mean SAs were submitted to a 2 (country: Japan, United States) \times 2 (condition: standard, other-reference) \times 2 (gender: female, male) ANOVA. As predicted, the interaction between condition and country proved significant, $F(1, 85) = 6.23, p < .02$. As shown in Figure 2 and confirmed by post hoc tests, Japanese participants spread alternatives significantly less in the standard condition than in the other-reference condition. Moreover, Japanese participants in the standard condition spread alternatives significantly less than did European American participants in both conditions. Study 1 was replicated, as the mean Japanese SA was significantly different from zero in the other-reference condition, but not in the standard condition, $t(20) = 4.23, p < .001$, and $t(21) = 1.22, n.s.$, respectively. European American participants' mean SA did not differ between conditions. Moreover, the European American mean SA for the two conditions combined was significantly different from zero, $t(50) = 4.19, p < .001$. Finally, there was a significant main effect of gender, with males

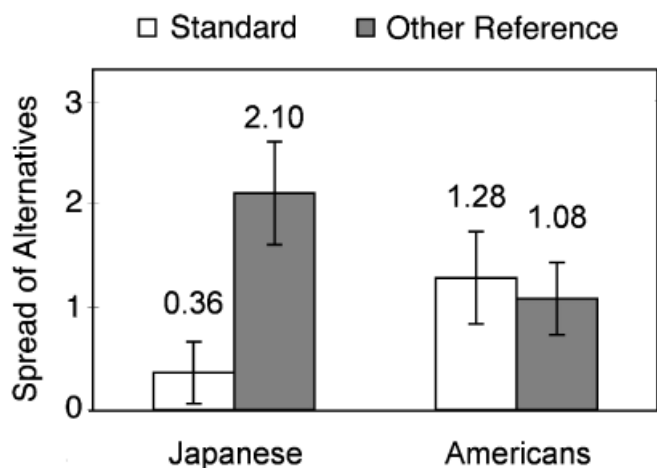


Fig. 2. Spread of alternatives (SAs) for Japanese and European American participants in the standard and other-reference conditions (Study 2). Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

showing significantly greater SA than females ($M_s = 1.81$ vs. 0.79), $F(1, 85) = 6.51$, $p < .02$. Effects of gender were not found in any other studies, however, and therefore are not discussed further.

STUDY 3: LIKED VERSUS DISLIKED OTHERS

Study 3 addressed the possibility that not just any social other arouses anxiety about potential rejection, even for interdependent selves. Specifically, potential rejection by liked others would be much more threatening to interdependent selves than would potential rejection by disliked others. We therefore expected that Japanese participants would justify their choices only when they considered the preferences of liked others before making their choices. In contrast, we expected that when Japanese participants considered the opinions of disliked others, they would not justify their choices. Once again, European Americans' dissonance was expected to be uninfluenced by the salience of social others. Thus, we expected European Americans to justify their choices regardless of whether the salient social other was liked or disliked.

Method

Thirty-seven Japanese undergraduates (27 males, 10 females) at Kyoto University and 28 European American undergraduates (17 males, 11 females) at Stanford University participated in exchange for 500 yen in Japan and \$8 in the United States. Participants were randomly assigned to either the liked-other or the disliked-other condition. The procedure for these conditions was identical to that of the other-reference/self-first condition of Study 1, except that in Study 3, participants were asked to evaluate the CDs according to the opinions of either someone they liked or someone they disliked, rather than according to the opinions of the average college student.

Results

Mean SAs were subjected to a 2 (country: United States, Japan) \times 2 (condition: liked other, disliked other) \times 2 (gender: female, male) ANOVA, which revealed the predicted interaction of country and

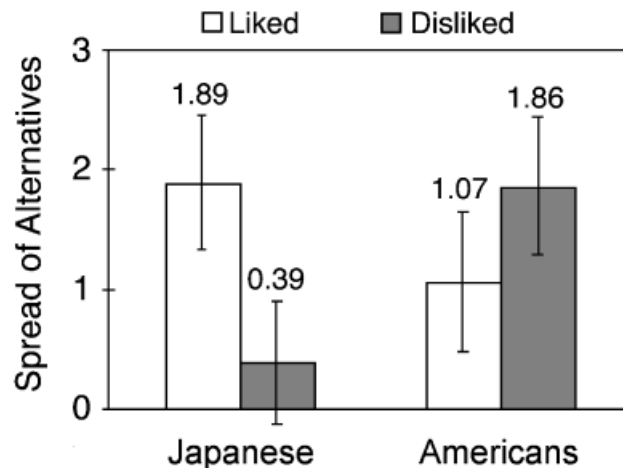


Fig. 3. Spread of alternatives (SAs) for Japanese and European American participants in the liked- and disliked-other conditions (Study 3). Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

condition to be significant, $F(1, 57) = 4.09$, $p < .05$. Figure 3 illustrates the pattern of means for this interaction. Post hoc tests showed that Japanese participants in the disliked-other condition spread preferences significantly less than did Japanese participants in the liked-other condition. Moreover, t tests against zero confirmed that significant SA was not evident for Japanese participants in the disliked-other condition, $t(17) = 0.76$, n.s., whereas significant SA was evident for Japanese participants in the liked-other condition, $t(18) = 2.97$, $p < .01$. Post hoc tests also showed that European Americans' mean SAs did not differ between conditions, and a t test against zero confirmed that European Americans significantly spread alternatives, $t(27) = 4.09$, $p < .001$.

STUDY 4: INCIDENTAL PRIMING OF SOCIAL OTHERS

In the experiments we have reported so far, we explicitly asked participants to think about others in order to prime social others. The purpose of Study 4 was to examine whether the priming of social others might be accomplished in a much subtler fashion, by means of an incidental exposure to a schematic picture of others "who are looking at me." Participants in an implicit-social-context condition were unobtrusively exposed to a poster that included highly abstracted, yet emotional faces whose gazes were directed upon them. We predicted that this subtle priming procedure would lead Japanese participants to experience interpersonal worry and dissonance, as had the more explicit priming of meaningful social others in Studies 1 through 3. No effect of priming was expected for American participants.

Method

Twenty-nine Japanese undergraduates (19 males, 10 females) at Kyoto University and 32 European American undergraduates (16 males, 16 females) at Stanford University participated in exchange for 500 yen in Japan and \$8 in the United States. Participants were randomly assigned to either the standard or the poster condition.

The procedure was identical to the procedure in the standard condition in Studies 1 and 2. In the poster condition of this study,

The different features that resulted in significant main effects

Note: Each of the features in a composition gave effects in the same direction (high or low) on a semantic dimension as the other features in the same composition.

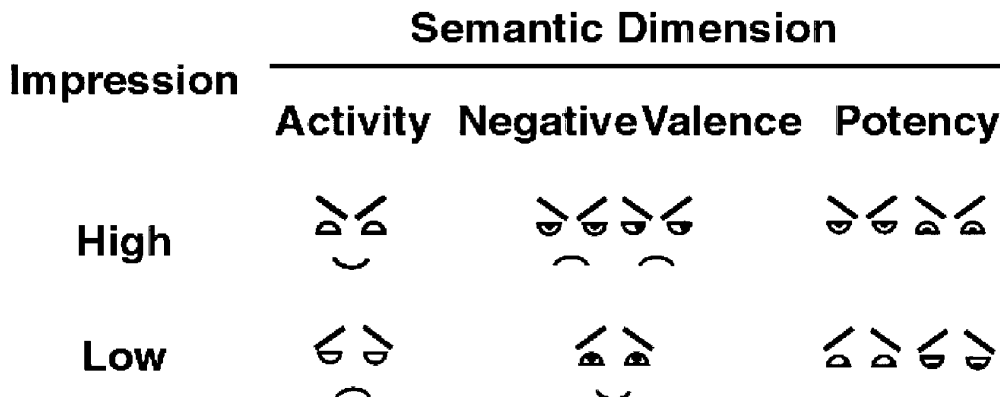


Fig. 4. The wall poster used to prime social context in Study 4. This poster, which reproduced a figure in Lundqvist, Esteves, and Öhman (1999), summarized and explained the stimuli and results of their Experiment 2. The full caption at the top of the poster was “Fig. 5. The different features that resulted in significant main effects in Experiment 2.” The poster was expected to prime social context because of the schematic eyes that were depicted.

however, an alleged conference poster was hung on the wall of the lab. The poster, which measured approximately 40 cm × 60 cm, was modeled after a figure in a recently published study by Lundqvist, Esteves, and Öhman (1999) and depicted several schematic faces with direct emotional gazes (see Fig. 4). When participants in this condition were seated, the poster hung right in front of them at eye level. These participants were asked at the end of the session whether they noticed “anything unusual” in the room. No participant reported any suspicion about the poster.

Results

A 2 (country: United States, Japan) × 2 (condition: standard, poster) × 2 (gender: female, male) ANOVA performed on mean SAs yielded a significant interaction between country and condition, $F(1, 53) = 11.71, p < .01$. Figure 5 illustrates the pattern of means for this interaction. Post hoc tests showed that Japanese participants spread alternatives significantly less in the standard condition than in the poster condition, whereas European American participants’ mean SA did not differ across conditions. Moreover, t tests comparing means with zero verified that Japanese participants significantly spread alternatives in the poster condition, but not in the standard condition, $t(14) = 3.89, p < .01$, and $t(13) = 0.00, n.s.$, respectively. As predicted, European American participants’ mean SA was significantly different from zero, $t(31) = 3.13, p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

In these experiments, Japanese justified their choices by spreading alternatives only when self-relevant social others were salient. In contrast, European Americans justified their choices in all conditions, regardless of the social-cue manipulations. This data pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that European American participants’ dissonance reflects a worry about their own competence and other

related internal attributes, but Japanese participants’ dissonance arises from a worry about possible rejection by others. Moreover, this worry appears to be evoked automatically by very subtle cues, such as gazes, that are associated with social engagement.

Like the vast majority of dissonance studies, the present study did not examine mediators of the dissonance effect. Future work should seek direct evidence for the two types of worry. Misattribution procedures (Zanna & Cooper, 1974) may be useful in capturing the subliminal evocation of worries or anxieties (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Dissonance: An Expanded View

Our data suggest that it may be futile to try to decide whether cognitive dissonance is universal or culture dependent. It is both. There

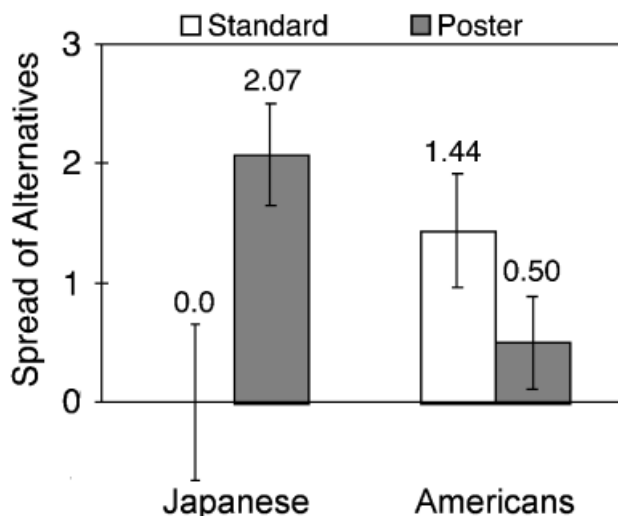


Fig. 5. Spread of alternatives (SAs) for Japanese and European American participants in the standard and poster conditions (Study 4). Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

are some general features of dissonance that are found across cultures. We have argued that (a) dissonance involves anxiety about the self; (b) this anxiety is inadvertently evoked by an actor's own behavior; (c) this anxiety motivates behavior-consistent beliefs and attitudes, thereby prompting the actor to justify his or her original behaviors; and (d) this justification reduces anxiety.

Yet it is equally important to keep in mind that these core features of dissonance are differentially configured in terms of the cultural views of the self as either independent or interdependent. As suggested by the present evidence, the interpersonal dissonance that may be more characteristic of interdependent than of independent selves is evoked only when social others are made psychologically salient. An additional hypothesis arising from this evidence is that impression management may be a more viable way to reduce interpersonal dissonance than to reduce the personal dissonance that may be characteristic of independent selves. Moreover, although affirming the self may eliminate both forms of dissonance (Steele, 1988), the effective means of affirmation might vary (Hoshino-Browne et al., in press). Together, the two forms of dissonance proposed here may provide a useful heuristic framework for organizing future work in this area.

Independent Versus Interdependent Selves Revisited

The present work highlights the importance of analyzing the culturally divergent structures (rather than semantic contents) of the self. Specifically, whereas independent selves are centrally defined by their internal features, interdependent selves are centrally defined by their engagement with others in relationships (Kitayama & Uchida, in press; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These structural features of the self may be largely implicit, and therefore inaccessible to conscious observation (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002, for weak evidence for cultural differences in semantic contents of self). Thus, cultural differences in self-construal may be detected only by carefully designed, real-time measures (Kitayama, 2002; Wagar & Cohen, 2003). Future research should be aimed at developing measures of these structural features of the self. With such measures, it will be possible to obtain more direct evidence for the role of the self in mediating the two dissonance processes we have postulated.

Concluding Remarks

The most important contribution of the present work is its demonstration of cultural variability in dissonance processes. Future work should examine specific mechanisms underlying these cultural differences. It is possible that, like many psychological processes, culture-specific dissonance processes are constantly afforded and maintained by surrounding cultural practices and meanings (Kitayama, Karasawa, & Mesquita, in press). One important implication is that these processes might be stable only insofar as the surrounding cultural practices and meanings remain stable; with a change in the latter, the former might also change (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Kitayama & Uchida, 2003). Cultural priming procedures (e.g., Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999) may be quite useful in exploring this issue. Research along these lines may lead to a reformulation of many psychological processes, including dissonance, as dynamically afforded and closely intertwined with sociocultural processes, rather than as fixed and hardwired.

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