



# Autonomy-connectedness in collectivistic cultures: An exploratory cross-cultural study among Portuguese natives, Cape-Verdean and Chinese people residing in Portugal

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 February 2016

Received in revised form 21 July 2016

Accepted 22 July 2016

Available online xxxx

### Keywords:

Autonomy-connectedness

Culture

Gender

Cross-cultural

Personality, attachment

## ABSTRACT

The present investigation focuses on a recent personality trait construct, Autonomy-connectedness. This concept has been proposed as a three-dimensional variable (self-awareness, sensitivity to others, and capacity to manage new situations), which intends to reflect a more gender- and culture- sensitive notion of autonomy rather than a value based on individualism and hegemonic masculinity. Two studies were conducted. Study I ( $N = 185$ ) aimed to adapt the Autonomy-Connectedness Scale (ACS-30) to Portuguese and evaluate its three dimensions among a Portuguese sample. The subscales showed satisfactory reliability and overall results converge with previous studies on Autonomy-connectedness. Study II aimed to analyze and compare three different cultural groups, namely Portuguese natives and, Chinese and Cape Verdean immigrants residing in Portugal. A total of 90 participants (30 participants per nationality/cultural group) collaborated in the study. The findings suggest cultural differences in autonomy-connectedness, as well as a possible association between acculturation processes and autonomy-connectedness. This study extends to the support of autonomy-connectedness as a conceptually meaningful construct, with contributions to both gender and cross-cultural studies.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of autonomy is widely studied in Psychology. Piaget (1983), Erikson (1980), Mahler, Pine, and Bergmann (1975), Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and many others in the fields of Developmental Psychology and Personality, have written about this concept. Autonomy also appears to be a crucial concept in therapeutic approaches, especially in experiential psychotherapy and existential psychotherapy (e.g. Yalom, 1980).

However, despite the relevance of the concept in the literature in different areas of psychology, as well as its importance in human experience, there is a lack of a consensual definition of autonomy, not only theoretically but also in the instruments commonly used to measure it (Hmel & Pincus, 2002). One of the reasons for this diversity has to do with how culture and context relate to the very definition of the concept of autonomy. Culture influences the development of personality traits (Triandis & Suh, 2002). Thus, the nature and understanding of autonomy varies across cultures and across ethnic groups in the same society, and stands as a crucial trait that differentiates cultures in individualistic and collectivistic pathways of development (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003).

The concept of autonomy-connectedness was developed by Bekker (1993) and it intends to reflect a notion of autonomy that is more sensitive towards gender and culture rather than a value based on individualism and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). This recent concept of autonomy incorporates in its conceptualization the notions of independence and interdependence. Three dimensions have been proposed for this construct – Self-awareness (SA), Sensitivity to others (SO) and Capacity for managing new situations (CMNS). The SA dimension refers to the ability that individuals have of being aware of themselves, of their own opinions, ambitions and needs, as well as the ability of expressing them in social interactions. The SO dimension refers to empathy and the call individuals have for both intimacy and separation. The CMNS refers to the feeling of (dis)comfort occurring when individuals are faced with new situations; therefore, it relates to the tendency to explore new environments, or otherwise, the dependence on familiar structures (Bekker & Van Assen, 2006).

Significant sex differences have consistently been found in autonomy-connectedness, especially in the SO dimension. Women tend to score higher in this dimension than men (Bekker & Van Assen, 2008). The results have also shown that variables such as socioeconomic status, education and income are positively associated with SA and CMNS components. Furthermore, to extend the relevance of this newly developed construct, Van Assen and Bekker (2009) investigated the relation between the components of autonomy-connected and the big five personality factors. Their goal was to examine to what extent autonomy-

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connectedness could be explained by the five major personality factors, and if sex-related differences in the construct of autonomy-connectedness could be mediated by the five major personality factors. They showed, on the one hand, that the big five are not mediators of sex-related differences in the components of autonomy-connectedness and, on the other, that they can only explain a smaller part of the variance of the three components of autonomy-connectedness. These findings speak to the fact that the construct of autonomy-connectedness may not be restricted or encompassed in the big five personality factors, thus it may be considered as a meaningful and distinct characteristic of personality.

Attending to the fact that autonomy may be distinctly defined in different cultures, Bekker, Arends-Tóth, and Croon (2011) studied the relation between autonomy-connectedness and the adherence to the cultural values of independence and interdependences. This study was conducted with young adult women – some native respondents from the Netherlands and others with immigrant background. This was the only study, so far, that incorporated the relation between autonomy-connectedness and cultural group membership. However, it focused on the cultural dimension of individualism vs. collectivism alone. Most cross-cultural studies that have used Hofstede's (1980, 1991, 2011) value-based cultural dimensions, have focused on the individualism-collectivism dualism, consequently, on the independence-interdependence relationship. As a result, there is a considerable amount of information about these dimensions and a reference gap to the other dimensions (Cohen, 2010; Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010). The authors (Bekker, Arends-Tóth, & Croon, 2011) expected that the immigrant group (Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands; a collectivistic labeled group) would be lower in self-awareness and higher in sensitivity to others, when compared to the Netherlands native group. While their hypotheses were not confirmed, this study first explored the concept of autonomy-connectedness among natives and immigrants. This line of research may provide further empirical evidence that the expectable gender differences are an etic principle of the concept of autonomy-connectedness, while also offering an emic understanding of the construct within and between different cultures (Berry, 1997), by exploring the importance and influence of heritage, mainstream culture identity and identity self-representations (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). As ethnic minorities, immigrants face the challenge of acculturation, which takes into account several forms of mutual accommodation that occur as a consequence of interaction between the host culture and their individual members. At the individual level, acculturation implies changes in a person's behavioral repertoire; at a group level, it involves changes in social organizations and in cultural practices (Berry, 2005). Hence, acculturation processes may impact autonomy-connectedness among immigrant groups over time.

Up to the present, the construct of autonomy-connectedness had been studied in the Dutch population, with only one study that included immigrants (from Morocco or Turkey) residing in the Netherlands. Therefore, there is a need to understand if the construct is valid across other cultural groups in order to extend its external validity. In the present study, we aim to assess a Portuguese sample in terms of autonomy-connectedness, as well as differences among different cultural groups of immigrants residing in Portugal. According to the Foreign and Borders Service (SEF, 2013), Cape Verde is the second largest foreign community in Portugal. China, in turn, represents the sixth largest foreign community in Portugal. According to statistical data provided by the Foreign and Borders Service in 2013, the Chinese community in Portugal increased by 6.8% (SEF, 2013). They represent African and Asian historical relationships with Portugal, and distinct cultural and gender social constructs. According to Hofstede (2011), while sharing the collectivistic dimension at a national level, Portugal, China and Cape Verde score differently in the masculinity vs. femininity (M/F) and uncertainty avoidance (UA) dimensions. Portugal presents the highest value for the UA dimension. This means that, compared to China and Cape Verde, Portugal is an uncertainty avoidant culture, which is less tolerant

to what is different; there is a strong need for structure, clarity and rules since the intrinsic ambiguity of life is perceived as a threat. On the other hand, from these three countries, China is the one presenting the highest values in the M/F dimension. In other words, in the Chinese culture, gender differences are perceived as very strict and taken into account. Cape Verde presents the lowest score on the M/F dimension, and therefore may be construed as the most feminine culture presented herein (Hofstede, 2011).

### 1.1. Study goals and research hypotheses

Using an exploratory approach, the present paper presents two major goals, i) a descriptive analysis of the autonomy-connectedness construct in a Portuguese sample, and ii) a descriptive and comparative analysis of the autonomy-connectedness construct and dimensions among Portuguese individuals and residing immigrants, i.e. Chinese and Cape-Verdean immigrants. To achieve these goals, two studies have been conducted. In Study I, the goal was to assess the scores in the three sub-dimensions of the autonomy-connectedness construct among a Portuguese sample, as well as explore sex differences. In Study II, the goal was to compare Portuguese natives, and Chinese and Cape-Verdean immigrants residing in Portugal in their autonomy-connectedness scores. We expected that individuals from different cultures experience interpersonal relationships in different ways. Using participants' nationality/country of origin as an independent variable, we aimed to explore the scores obtained by each cultural group in the components of autonomy-connectedness. Thus, our hypothesis were as follows:

- H1.** ACS-30 (Portuguese version) will present adequate psychometric properties with a three dimensional structure;
- H2.** Sex differences will be found, with women having higher scores on SO.
- H3.** Portuguese participants will present lower scores on CMNS subscale, compared to Chinese and Cape Verdean participants.
- H4.** Cape Verdean participants will present higher scores on SO subscale, compared with Portuguese and Chinese participants.

Furthermore, we explored the effects of acculturation/time of residence on the three dimensions and group differences.

## 2. Study I

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 185 Portuguese individuals. Of these, 120 were female (64.9%) and 65 (35.1%) were male. Ages ranged from 18 to 59 years old ( $M = 28.73$ ;  $SD = 10.79$ ). Sixty 4% (64.9%) of participants were single and 57.8% of participants had a high school education level. As far as occupation is concerned, 47% of participants were students.

#### 2.1.2. Measures

To assess the levels of autonomy-connectedness in a Portuguese sample, we used the ACS-30 (the Autonomy-Connectedness Scale; Bekker & Van Assen, 2006; Portuguese translated version). The ACS-30 is subdivided into three subscales, namely self-awareness (SA), sensitivity to others (SO) and capacity to manage new situations (CGNS). The SA subscale aims to measure the individual's ability to be aware/consciousness of their own opinions, desires, needs, and the ability to express these in social interactions. In the original version (Bekker & Van Assen, 2006), this subscale presented a 0.81 value for Cronbach alpha, representing a good value in terms of reliability. An item example of this subscale is "I have strong opinions on most issues." The SO subscale

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