



Delineating a method to study cross-cultural differences with experimental control: The voice effect and countercultural contexts regarding power distance

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We propose a method to study cross-cultural differences with experimental control.
- This method uses countercultural conditions to study cross-cultural differences.
- We examine reactions from high and low power distance participants to voice opportunities.
- Experimental conditions remind about countercultural values regarding power distance.
- Cultural and situational high (vs. low) power distance yields weaker reactions to voice.

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a method to study cross-cultural differences with experimental control. We illustrate this method by examining how participants from India (a high power distance culture) and the Netherlands (a low power distance culture) react to being allowed or denied an opportunity to voice their opinions. We argue that one way to evaluate the influence of the assumed cultural differences in power distance is to assign participants to conditions that elicit “countercultural” psychological states, that is, conditions that prime low power distance in India and high power distance in the Netherlands. To the extent that the results in the countercultural (experimental) conditions meaningfully differ from those observed in the control conditions in which no values are emphasized explicitly, we gain insight into the psychological dimensions that account for cross-cultural differences in people's reactions. The findings presented indeed suggest that the random assignment of participants to countercultural conditions provides cross-cultural researchers with a powerful tool to examine the causal impact of meaningful psychological dimensions that are presumed to differ across cultures. The results further reveal that when high power distance was emphasized either because of national culture or situational cues, participants showed less strong reactions to the voice versus no-voice manipulation than when low power distance was emphasized as a result of either national culture or situational cues. Implications and limitations of this countercultural-experimental approach for the study of cross-cultural differences as well as the psychology of voice and power distance are discussed.

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Introduction

People are cultural animals (Baumeister, 2005) and are influenced heavily by their cultural surroundings (e.g., Cohen & Leung, 2009; Fiske, 2006; Hofstede, 2001; Leung, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Martin, 1999; Schaller & Crandall, 2004). It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that many social psychologists are interested in,

indeed fascinated by cross-cultural differences. As a result, many important advances have been made in this field of inquiry (for recent reviews, see, e.g., Chiu & Hong, 2007; Heine, 2010). For example, cross-national research has enabled researchers to evaluate the cross-cultural generality of their findings. Many social phenomena have been demonstrated in Western countries which raises the important question whether these theories apply in non-Western contexts (Heine, 2010; Hofstede, 2001). Indeed, research has shown that some of the most important and robust phenomena in Western-based social psychology do not always emerge or do not emerge to the same degree in non-Western countries (e.g., Brockner, 2003; Leung, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

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Complementing cross-cultural research with experimental control

We argue here that an important concern when studying cross-cultural differences is the need to have experimental control. That is, often cross-cultural research examines people from two or more countries and assumes that the participants differ along certain psychological dimensions, which, in turn, elicit differences in dependent variables of cognition, affect, or behavior. If the research findings suggest that the participants in the different countries react differently, and that these reactions are in accordance with the psychological dimensions presumed to differ across cultures, it is still necessary to provide evidence that the culturally-varying reactions can be attributed to the hypothesized psychological dimensions. For example, if people from cultures that score high on a psychological dimension such as power distance (see, e.g., Hofstede, 2001) react differently toward issues such as opportunities to voice their opinions than people from cultures that score low on the dimension (Brockner et al., 2001), then researchers still need to provide evidence as to why these effects emerged.

Sometimes researchers try to provide such evidence by measuring the relevant psychological dimensions (Brockner, 2003), and then conducting tests of mediation to see whether the cultural differences were attributable to the psychological dimensions. However, measuring the hypothesized mediating psychological dimensions may be difficult (see, e.g., Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). For example, the psychological dimensions may reflect unconscious processes that are difficult to assess. Relatedly, measuring psychological dimensions in cross-cultural research typically involves self-reports, which may be problematic because of people's unwillingness or inability to disclose their true beliefs (e.g., Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Furthermore, a well-known issue in cross-cultural studies is that measures of the same construct may not mean the same thing to people from different cultures (Hui & Triandis, 1985). In short, there may be important problems associated with measuring the psychological dimensions presumed to account for cross-cultural differences.

In addition, even when it is possible to measure reliably the hypothesized psychological mediators of the effects of culture, the ensuing statistical analyses can at best provide only correlational evidence which limits empirical strength of the study in question. This concern is certainly not confined to cross-cultural research. Rather, it is inherent to practically any study in which the independent or intervening variables are measured rather than manipulated (Spencer et al., 2005).

In the present paper we argue that there is a need in cross-cultural research to not only provide evidence of why people from different cultures show different reactions, but also to do so in ways that entail a high degree of internal validity. Therefore, we suggest that it is important to complement extant cross-cultural inquiries with studies that provide experimental control over the psychological dimensions hypothesized to account for differences between cultures. We further argue that for purposes of internal validity it is better to use an experimental approach in which participants are randomly assigned to conditions differing along the dimension hypothesized to account for the results. Indeed, one of the main virtues of such an approach is that it is likely to hold constant all factors other than the construct being manipulated. As a result, differences that emerge on the dependent variable are likely to have been causally influenced by the manipulated construct. In the current paper we illustrate such an experimental approach to cross-cultural research on how people from cultures that are either high or low in power distance react to being allowed or denied an opportunity to voice their opinions.

An experimental approach to cross-cultural differences

Of course, in cross-cultural research it is not possible to randomly assign participants to different cultures. However, it is possible to

randomly assign people from different cultures to either a control condition in which nothing is done and in which people hence are likely to default to the values and beliefs that are predominant to their culture or to an experimental condition which primes values and beliefs that are directly contrary to the default ones in a given culture. If differences emerge on the dependent variable when this methodology is used it is quite likely that they were caused by the construct inherent to the experimental manipulation.

We further note that a basic notion in experimental social psychology dictates that it is easier to interpret research findings when the results found in control conditions can be contrasted with the findings obtained in the experimental conditions. In other words, a significant difference between control and experimental conditions is easier to interpret than a null effect. We therefore propose to prime participants in our experimental conditions with values that are in direct contrast with the default ones in their culture. If the values in the experimental conditions are indeed counter to what is default in the culture that is studied, then priming participants with countercultural beliefs should lead to reliably different effects on participants' reactions to subsequent events, compared to participants' reactions in control conditions in which no explicit values have been primed. Moreover, the internal validity of such findings would be much higher than if the independent variable had been measured rather than manipulated.

In short, we propose an experimental research method to study cross-cultural differences that involves the following features: (1) studying participants from cultures that differ in ways that theory suggests will produce meaningful effects on important human reactions (see, e.g., Chiu & Hong, 2007; Cohen & Leung, 2009; Heine, 2010; Hofstede, 2001; Hui & Triandis, 1985; Leung, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and (2) incorporating the concept of a countercultural psychological state in a controlled experimental design.

Initial support for the value of the experimental method we are advocating was provided in a recent study by Van den Bos et al. (2010). These authors took as their point of departure the results of an earlier study by Brockner et al. (1998) that examined the interactive effect of giving people voice and their perceived competence to provide meaningful input on their satisfaction with the decision-making process. The Brockner et al. (1998) study showed that the tendency for people to be more satisfied when they were given voice was significant among those who believed that they could provide meaningful input. In contrast, the satisfaction level of those who saw themselves as less capable of providing meaningful input was relatively unaffected by their level of voice.

Brockner et al. (1998) conducted their research in the United States in which people have been shown to emphasize competition and achievement, or what Hofstede (2001) has called "masculinity." Van den Bos et al. (2010) hypothesized that in cultures valuing nurturance and equality ("femininity") the results would look rather different: in this instance those who saw themselves as less capable of providing meaningful input were expected to be more motivated to have voice and, as a result, their satisfaction level would be more positively affected by having voice relative to their counterparts who saw themselves as more capable of providing input.

To test their hypothesis Van den Bos et al. (2010) studied participants from both the Netherlands (a culture high in femininity) and the United States (a culture high in masculinity). At random, half of them were induced into a countercultural psychological state (femininity for the Americans and masculinity for the Dutch) whereas nothing was done to the other half, in which participants' default cultural values (masculinity for the Americans and femininity for the Dutch) were expected to be more influential. As predicted, Americans who were experimentally induced to be feminine showed similar reactions as the Dutch to whom nothing was done; in both instances voice was more positively related to satisfaction among those who saw

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