



## The effects of culture and gender on perceived self-other similarity in personality



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### ABSTRACT

Gender and culture may influence individuals' perceptions of their similarity to others. 391,454 individuals from 20 countries rated their own personality traits and the personality traits they attribute to other people in general. A multilevel analysis on distinctive profile similarity (Furr, 2008) demonstrated that both gender and culture play a role in perceived self-other similarity. Specifically, women and those from highly collectivistic cultures saw themselves as more similar to others. Country-level analysis based on self-other similarity correlations (e.g., Srivastava, Guglielmo, & Beer, 2010) within each country revealed that cultural assertiveness uniquely predicted this assumed similarity. The findings shed light on how people construe themselves in relation to others and contribute to the understanding of personality within cultural contexts.

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### 1. Introduction

Individuals use information about themselves to “fill in gaps” when information about others is unavailable (Ready, Clark, Watson, & Westerhouse, 2000). Predictions we make about a typical “other” can create biases in interpersonal processes (Srivastava, Guglielmo, & Beer, 2010). For example, individuals may negotiate in ways that assume the other party will behave as they themselves would, or conversely, may assume that others will act quite differently than themselves. Similarly, people may deliver feedback to others with the expectation that recipients will react as they themselves would, or with the expectation that they will react differently if they expect others to act “not like me.” Variance in the extent to which individuals view their own personality attributes as similar to others may also create bias in educational and organizational evaluative contexts, and thus has been a focus of research for several decades.

Given the stability of how individuals perceive others in general over time (cf. Wood, Harms, & Vazire, 2010), there is reason to assume one's culture and gender might influence assumptions made about others' characteristics. Using a large, cross-cultural

sample, the present study evaluates the extent to which similarity between individuals' perceptions of their own traits and their perceptions of others' traits varies across cultures and gender. This study makes several unique contributions. First, although there is extensive research on whether and when we view others as similar or different from ourselves (Cronbach, 1955; Festinger, 1954; Furr, 2008; Kenny, 1994), cultural influences on perceived self-other personality similarity are largely unexplored. Second, much research in cross-cultural psychology has been viewed as employing inadequate conceptualizations of culture, and inattention to levels of analysis issues (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007). We considered culture as measured by the well-respected GLOBE research program (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) to hypothesize and conduct a multilevel analysis using empirically derived cultural dimensions.

Our primary goal in the present research is to provide insight into the cultural factors that influence how similar individuals perceive their own personality traits to be in relation to the traits of other people in general. We tested the effects of cultural assertiveness and institutional collectivism on perceived similarity using a sample of respondents from 20 countries. In the sections that follow, we review existing literature on self-other similarity and the cultural dimensions of interest (assertiveness and institutional collectivism). Related hypotheses are then put forth. Research supporting a hypothesized effect of gender on self-other similarity is also presented.

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### 1.1. Perceived similarity between self and others

The term *generalized other* was first used to explain how individuals view other members of a society in general (Mead, 1934); others have defined the generalized other as people within an environment on average (Kenny, 1994). Early research on individuals' bias towards rating the generalized other as similar to themselves labeled this phenomenon *assumed similarity* (Cronbach, 1955). Hoch (1987) referred to rating others as similar to oneself as a *perceived consensus*.

In the present study, we focus on perceived similarity in personality traits between self and the generalized other for several reasons. First, evidence suggests the way we perceive the generalized other underlies interpersonal behaviors, including troublesome tendencies (e.g. narcissistic behavior, antisocial behavior; Wood et al., 2010). Second, while perceived similarity to specific others may affect behavior towards them, beliefs about the generalized other may affect behavior in new encounters. Third, perceptions of similarity have greater effects on outcomes than actual similarity, as individuals act on their perceptions (Strauss, Barrick, & Connerley, 2001).

### 1.2. Cultural influences on perceived similarity

Examinations of culture's influence on perceived self-other trait similarity are sparse. Allik et al. (2010) found cross-culturally replicable patterns in the relationship between how an individual reports his or her personality as compared to how others rate *that individual's* personality. That is, Allik et al. examined the relationship between how a target individual views his or her personality and how others rate the target's personality; we focus here on similarity between internal perspectives of oneself and the generalized other.

A long research tradition on the concepts of individualism and collectivism has established the multidimensional nature of these constructs and the fact that they are not just opposite poles of the same dimension (Gelfand, Bhawuk, Nishii, & Bechtold, 2004). Further, there are different forms of collectivism: Triandis et al. (1986) established the distinction between societies that value family loyalty (in-group collectivism) from valuing and rewarding collective action and group acceptance (institutional collectivism). Because the generalized other represents an average of all people and thus is likely impacted by perceptions of relationships in the broader society, we chose to focus on institutional collectivism and not the more family-centric in-group collectivism. *Institutional collectivism* is defined as the extent to which practices within a given culture facilitate and reward collective rather than individual action and whether it is deemed important in the society to be accepted by other group members (Gelfand et al., 2004). Practices in institutional collectivistic cultures encourage and reward collaborative thought and behavior, which may foster a perception of similarity between one's own personality and the personality of others. Individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to avoid conflict with members of their group (Leung, 1988); collectivistic individuals may subordinate their individual behaviors to group or societal modal behaviors to ensure interpersonal harmony. Further, individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to possess interdependent self-construals (Singelis, 1994). Such cultures emphasize the importance of acceptance by a group rather than individual focus, which may lead to greater focus on similarities with others.

**Hypothesis 1.** Institutional collectivism affects how similar one views one's traits to those of others, such that individuals in cultures high in institutional collectivism will view others as more similar to oneself than those in cultures low in institutional collectivism.

Assertiveness is associated with voicing one's own wants and opinions (Booream & Flowers, 1978), without having to compromise with others' requests against one's own desire (Lange & Jabuwkoski, 1976). In the GLOBE study, *cultural assertiveness* is defined as the extent to which individuals in a society are encouraged to act forcefully in their interactions with others (Den Hartog, 2004). Den Hartog (2004) notes that in highly assertive cultures individual initiative is valued, individual brilliance is admired, and "super-achievers" in a domain are respected. Because assertive cultures may encourage or even expect individuals to express their unique identity, individuals in such cultures may be accustomed to emphasizing how they are distinct from others. The cultural emphasis on being exceptional or even superior in comparison to others may make individuals less likely to see their personality traits as similar to the personality traits of others. In contrast, having a low standing on assertiveness may indicate cultural expectations for individuals to reconcile their dispositional uniqueness with other people around them and to suppress rather than express uniqueness in their daily behavior.

**Hypothesis 2.** Cultural assertiveness affects how similar one views one's traits to those of others, such that individuals in cultures high in assertiveness will report their own personality traits as more distinctive from the personality traits of others than do those from cultures low in assertiveness.

### 1.3. Gender and perceived similarity

Women tend to perceive themselves as more similar to others than men do (Winqvist, Mohr, & Kenny, 1998). Research on empathic accuracy has found women make better inferences than men about the thoughts and emotions of others, in part because they are motivated to adhere to traditional stereotypes of women as empathic and communal (Laurent & Hodges, 2009). Women tend to exhibit more interdependent self-construals than men do (Cross & Madson, 1997). This emphasis on the overlap among individuals supports a prediction that women may rate their own traits as similar to their ratings of other's traits in general.

**Hypothesis 3.** Gender will affect how similar one views one's traits to those of others, such that women will report their own personality traits as more similar to others than will men.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

We utilized archival data from 415,060 individuals across 55 countries and regions. Given our use of the GLOBE study to operationalize culture, we removed individuals who were not in GLOBE study countries. This resulted in a sample of 395,824 individuals from 20 countries. These data were collected from 2001 to 2009 using an online assessment consisting of 298 personality, perception, and occupational interest items, including 176 personality items (see Measures section below). Approximately 90% of the data were collected in workplace settings, with the rest in career counseling, non-profit, and educational settings, and data were mainly used for developmental purposes, such as executive coaching and leader development (Birkman International, 2013). No substantial differences across countries in the functional purpose of the assessment could be identified. The majority of the individuals in the dataset were from branches of multinational companies, providing some indication that jobs and industries did not vary considerably by country. We excluded the 1.1% of the participants who did not

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