

Social niche construction

Toshio Yamagishi¹ and Hirofumi Hashimoto²

Humans are niche constructors who create physical and social environments to which they adapt. The social niche construction approach to human behavior analyzes behavior as a strategy to further long-term self-interest given a specific institution — that is, a set of stable and predictable responses from others to one's own behavior. We illustrate the logic of social niche construction analysis using examples of individualist and collectivist institutions, and explain how independent and interdependent self-construal can be viewed as strategies adapting to and collectively sustaining individualist or collectivist institutions. We discuss how the social niche construction approach is related to similar approaches used in cultural psychology, namely the socio-ecological approach, intersubjective approach, equilibrium approach, and gene–culture co-evolution approach.

Addresses

¹ Graduate School of International Corporate Strategy, Hitotsubashi University, 2-1-2 Hitotsubashi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101-8439, Japan

² Department of Psychology, Yasuda Women's University, 6-13-1 Yasuhigashi, Asaminami-ku, Hiroshima-shi, Hiroshima 731-0153, Japan

Corresponding author: Yamagishi, Toshio (yamagishitoshio@gmail.com)

Current Opinion in Psychology 2016, 8:119–124

This review comes from a themed issue on **Culture**

Edited by **Michele J Gelfand** and **Yoshihisa Kashima**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 13th October 2015

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.10.003>

2352-250X/© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Social niche construction

Organisms create and alter the very environment to which they adapt. Niche construction is a term used in evolutionary biology [1] to describe this process. A good example is the beaver's fin-tail and waterproof fur that have evolved to adapt to the lakes they create. Humans make clothes, build houses, and create many other material and social artifacts, and these artifacts influence how humans adapt to the environment of such artifacts. The goal of this paper is to discuss how to analyze the relationship between collectively created socio-cultural environments and human psychology as a process of niche construction.

Institutions as a set of predictable responses

What constitutes the most important environment for humans is what we call an institution or a stable set of

incentives that makes consequences of human behavior predictable. We consider institution-building to constitute the core of social niche construction. An institution is a set of incentives (i.e., predictable responses made by others to one's own behavior) that encourages or discourages people to behave in specific ways. The incentives themselves collectively consist of the behavior of the incentive-following individuals [2]. The social niche construction (SNC) approach analyzes institution-specific psychology and behavior as a strategy to maximize individuals' long-term fitness given a specific institution. Understanding institutions in this way requires a social definition of incentives. Incentives are things that an individual desires. As a social species, what a human desires is often provided by others, be it money, love, prestige, or numerous other possibilities. In this sense, incentives are inseparable from the actions taken by others to provide the desired object. Accordingly, incentive-driven behavior is a strategy to elicit a behavior from others that provides the object. We thus use the term 'incentives' to refer to the responses of other individuals to an individual's response-eliciting strategy.

Individualist and collectivist social institutions

In this paper, we discuss two types of social institutions: *collectivist* and *individualist*. We use 'individualism–collectivism' to refer to features of social institutions, rather than shared values and preferences. In modern societies, social order is maintained through the legal system, which is enforced by various authoritative entities, such as the police and the courts of law. The legal system protects all citizens against criminal victimization and arbitrary use of power by rulers. In the absence of a lawful framework supported by an impartial enforcement agency, people often form coalitions among like-minded individuals in which members help and protect each other. We use the term collectivist institution to describe a situation in which individuals linked by stable relationships expect help and protection, and provide such to others. In this sense, a collectivist institution provides social order within a network of strong ties [3,4].

Strong ties is the term used by Granovetter [3] to characterize the type of interpersonal relationships connecting individuals on multiple social domains (rather than a specific domain), over frequently repeated interactions, over a long period of time. Individuals who are connected to a third party through strong ties tend to be connected through strong ties as well, thus forming a tight and closed clique (a group of mutually connected people). Strong ties constitute the basis of the bonding type social capital or a network of mutual help [5], as is often found among

immigrants in ethnic communities. Granovetter [3] contrasts this type of social relationship with another type, which he calls weak ties, in which information rather than material or psychological help is exchanged. One prominent feature of weak ties is that they do not constitute a clique; rather, weak-tie networks expand beyond the immediate interaction partners. Thus, weak-tie networks constitute a bridging-type social capital, which can bridge individuals across cliques.

The world outside such a network is a social jungle where individuals must defend themselves against social predators. A *collectivist institution* thus produces social order through the practice of in-group favoritism, according to which group members treat each other more favorably than they treat outsiders, with the expectation that other group members will do the same [6]. Another feature of strong-tie networks, which was recently detected in a computer simulation, is the promotion of a culture of cooperation by people who do not tolerate free riders [7]. Insofar as individuals stay in a strong-tie network and future interactions are certain, the positive benefit of scaring away potential free riders through punishment becomes fitness enhancing rather than costly [7]. Once enough individuals adopt the strategy of favoring in-group cooperation and in-group targeted punishment, it is advantageous for individuals to behave cooperatively within strong-tie networks. This is because only those who are cooperative can receive favorable treatment from similar others, and those who do not can be ostracized or punished. Once a threshold is achieved among a group of people connected through stable and strong ties, a collectivistic institution for maintaining social order is generated, in which cooperation is expected with others with whom long-term future relationships are anticipated.

The legal system provides the minimum protection outside the realm of the strong-tie network, and makes it possible for individuals to seek opportunities outside it. Through encouraging opportunity-seeking activities outside strong-tie networks, the rule of law nurtures psychological and behavioral traits that help people successfully explore opportunities [8^{••}]. We use the term individualist institution to describe a situation where the legal system enforces social order and allows people to act outside the constraints and protections provided by networks of strong ties. In societies where the rule of law is not fully established, the need for protection by the group is much greater, causing people to forego outside opportunities [8^{••}].

Behavioral and psychological adaptations to macro institutions

In order to adapt to individualistic social institutions, people must acquire certain psychological and behavioral traits that are subsumed under the rubric of *independent self-construal* [9]. These are largely different from the

traits that are summarized as the *interdependent self-construal* [9] required for adaptation to a collectivist social institution. Those who aspire to succeed in an individualistic institution face the challenge of exploring opportunities while minimizing the potential risk that prevails outside the strong-tie networks. They deal with prospective interaction partners whose behavior is not disciplined by the threats of exclusion from strong ties. Although the legal system regulates possible risks to a certain extent, people must cope with the remaining risks on their own. One way to cope with these risks is to develop the sensitivity and skills to select the right individuals with whom to interact, and to acquire the ability to discern internal traits — such as honesty and trustworthiness — of potential interaction partners. This requirement for success under individualist institutions leads North Americans and Western Europeans to direct attention toward a focal figure [10,11] and seek the causes of an interaction partner's behavior within that person [10,12]. North Americans and Western Europeans practice internal attribution more often than East Asians [12], because detecting internal traits of potential partners is critical for selecting desirable interaction partners under individualist institutions in which the partners' behavioral honesty is not assured by threats of exclusion or punishment in strong ties [6].

In addition to detecting internal traits of potential interaction partners, those living in individualistic institutions must successfully signal to prospective interaction partners that they too have similar desirable internal traits. That is, adapting to an individualist institution requires the willingness and skills to make one's future behavior predictable to others. A person can make his or her behavior predictable by behaving in a consistent way (see the discussion of the commitment problem in economics [13]). This requirement leads North Americans and Western Europeans to exhibit cognitive and behavioral consistency compared to East Asians [14]. Similarly, expressing one's private thoughts, values, and intentions is more widespread in North America and Western Europe than East Asia [15]. In short, adaptation to an individualist institution requires focusing on other's character traits, making oneself predictable by adhering to consistent behavioral principles, and expressing one's feelings and thoughts. Those traits help to develop bridging-type social capital, compared to the development of bonding-type social capital consisting of strong ties [5].

In a collectivist institution created by a network of strong ties, a collectivist strategy for adaptation will prevail. Theoretical studies in mathematical biology [16] explain the evolution of cooperation through indirect reciprocity. Indirect reciprocity is a strategy of acting altruistically toward people who have a reputation of being altruistic toward similar others. In a group where the majority behaves in this manner, having a negative reputation is

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/879315>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/879315>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)