



The effects of culture and situational features on in-group favoritism manifested as deception



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of culture and situational features on in-group favoritism manifested as deception. In a 2 (culture: U.S. vs. Russian) \times 2 (lie target importance: high vs. low) \times 2 (outcome importance: high vs. low) independent group experiment, participants responded to a hypothetical scenario, in which an in-group member was underperforming while the participant succeeded. Participants could either deceive to cover up for the in-group member or tell the truth. The majority of Russian participants responded with deception. The cross-cultural differences in justifications for deception were also examined. The implications, limitations, and future research directions stemming from these results are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Intercultural communication can be challenging due to different assumptions about appropriate communication behaviors inherent to a specific culture. For example, Western businesspeople working in Russia are frequently warned about less formalized business practices (Michailova & Hutchings, 2006), the prevalence of nepotism, and the expectation of preferential treatment for in-group members (Sergeyeva, 2005). Preferential treatment may include stereotyping, prejudice, and biased resource allocation (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). These behaviors have been linked to in-group favoritism, defined as “the tendency to see one’s in-group in more positive terms” as compared to out-groups (Chen, Brockner, & Katz, 1998, p. 1490).

Drawing upon both Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Information Manipulation Theory (McCornack, 1992; specifically, a more recent version of the theory, McCornack, Morrison, Paik, Wisner, & Zhu, 2013), this paper examined the effects of culture and situational features on in-group favoritism manifested as deception. This study compared the responses of U.S. (i.e., individual-primacy) and Russian (i.e., collective-primacy) participants to a hypothetical scenario, in which participants could either deceive to cover up for an underperforming in-group member or to reveal the group member’s wrongdoing by telling the truth.

This study seeks to contribute to research on cultural differences in deception. Although examining culture and deception in today’s global society is theoretically and practically important, only a few studies have explored culture and deception (e.g., Aune & Waters, 1994; Bond & Atoum, 2000; Kim, Kam, Sharkey, & Singelis, 2008; Seiter, Brusckhe, & Bai, 2002; Yeung, Levine, & Nishiyama, 1999).¹ This study proposes a theoretical mechanism for why some cultures and not others may engage

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¹ Two of these studies focused on motivation for deception: Aune and Waters (1994) compared U.S. and American Samoa, and Kim et al. (2008) focused on Hong Kong, Hawai’i, and mainland U.S. Bond and Atoum (2000) studied deception detection among American, Jordanian, and Indian participants. Yeung et al. (1999) examined what situations are considered deceptive in Hong Kong.

in deception to cover up for an in-group member. Participants' justifications for truth and deception were also recorded to explore how different cultures conceive of the circumstances warranting deception.

2. Theoretical overview

One theory that explains in-group favoritism is Social Identity Theory (SIT; [Tajfel, 1978](#); [Tajfel & Turner, 1986](#)). SIT posits that social group memberships are central to self-perception, and to maintain positive self-perception, in-groups are often viewed more favorably than out-groups ([Hogg & Abrams, 1988](#)). Studies on SIT consistently demonstrate that these positive in-group perceptions influence people's attitudes and behaviors (see [Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010](#), for a discussion).

Group membership can be primed by providing people with a direct comparison between in- and out-group members ([Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010](#)). However, in-group favoritism can emerge as a result of more subtle inductions, without direct intergroup comparison. For example, simply engaging in intergroup communication has been shown to increase positive in-group evaluations ([Gaertner, Iuzzini, Witt, & Oriña, 2006](#)).

Among other circumstances, in-group favoritism has been demonstrated when an individual performs poorly, and his or her in-group members succeed ([Seta & Seta, 1996](#)); in this case, in-group favoritism is conceptually similar to *basking in the reflected glory* (i.e., a perception of being closer to the in-group as a result of the in-group's favorable performance; see [Cialdini et al., 1976](#); and also [Tesser's, 1988](#), Self-evaluation Maintenance Model). Conversely, when an in-group performs poorly but an individual succeeds, in-group favoritism is less likely because people attempt to psychologically distance themselves from the underperforming in-group members ([Seta & Seta, 1996](#)). This reduction in in-group favoritism, however, does not replicate with representatives of collective-primacy cultures ([Chen et al., 1998](#)).

2.1. In-group favoritism and culture

Individual-primacy cultures are characterized by the need for self-achievement, uniqueness, and greater focus on personal needs and goals, whereas collective-primacy cultures place greater emphasis on group goals, which may supersede individual aspirations (e.g., [Hofstede, 2001](#); [Leung, 1989](#); [Markus & Kitayama, 1991](#); [Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990](#)). Cultural research overwhelmingly finds the U.S. to be an individual-primacy culture (e.g., [Hofstede, 2001](#); [Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, & Kupperbusch, 1997](#)). Although substantially fewer studies have focused on Russian culture, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that in Russia collective primacy predominates (e.g., [Bollinger, 1994](#); [Matsumoto et al., 1997](#); [Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, & Krupp, 1998](#); [Realo & Allik, 1999](#); [Tower, Kelly, & Richards, 1997](#)). For example, Russian (vs. U.S.) participants were found to have significantly more collective-primacy values about family, friends ([Matsumoto et al., 1997, 1998](#)), and colleagues ([Matsumoto et al., 1997](#)).

The motivations behind in-group favoritism differ across cultures. Individual-primacy in-group favoritism arises as a result of self-enhancement: Viewing one's in-group in a positive light allows group members to maintain positive self-esteem ([Hogg & Abrams, 1988](#)). The collective-primacy brand of favoritism is driven by a fundamental need to be connected to one's in-group ([Markus & Kitayama, 1991](#)) as well as reciprocal altruism, defined as an expectation that favoritism will be repaid at some later point ([Oyserman, Sakamoto, & Lauffer, 1998](#); [Tower et al., 1997](#)). Reciprocal altruism in the style of *you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours* can be found in societies with lax regulatory environments, where rules and laws can be easily violated ([Michailova & Hutchings, 2006](#)). In these conditions, personal connections based on reciprocity and in-group relationships are often used instead of reliable institutions ([Michailova & Worm, 2003](#); [Xin & Pearce, 1996](#)).

A few studies have examined in-group favoritism across cultures (e.g., [Brewer & Campbell, 1976](#); [Chen et al., 1998](#); [Wetherell, 1982](#)). Comparing U.S. and Chinese cultures, [Chen et al. \(1998\)](#) found that when in-group members performed poorly but an individual succeeded, a reduction in favoritism manifested only for individual-primacy participants, and in-group favoritism increased among collective-primacy people. [Tower et al. \(1997\)](#) reported similar findings. Their Russian (collective-primacy) and British (individual-primacy) participants were asked to imagine that they performed either better or worse on a task than their colleague, and that their colleague was either a stranger or a friend. When the participants were told that they performed better than their colleague, the colleague's identity affected reward allocation only for collective-primacy people: Russians allocated more money to themselves only when they were told that they were working with an underperforming stranger, but they were willing to minimize personal gain when they were told that their underperforming colleague was a friend.

2.2. Deception as in-group favoritism

If in-group favoritism can result in biased resource allocation, deception as a manifestation of in-group favoritism is also plausible. When an in-group member performs poorly, collective-primacy people may engage in in-group favoritism by lying to protect the underperforming in-group member. Especially if the reasons for the poor performance are face-threatening, collective-primacy people may feel compelled to modify information that shows the in-group member in a bad light. Conversely, because individual-primacy people are less likely to exhibit in-group favoritism when they succeed and an in-group member underperforms, their view of what is normative under these circumstances may be different. They may

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