



# Autonomy-connectedness, acculturation, and independence–interdependence among various cultural groups in a multicultural society

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## ABSTRACT

The present study was aimed at investigating the relationships between autonomy-connectedness and adherence to independent and interdependent values in second-generation Dutch immigrant women with a background in countries labeled as collectivistic, and same-aged indigenous Dutch women ( $N = 180$  and  $N = 157$ , respectively). Both groups completed the Autonomy-Connectedness Scale (ACS-30; Bekker & Van Assen, 2006) and the Self-Constraint Scale (Singelis, 1994). Additionally, those with an immigrant background filled out the Acculturation Questionnaire (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003). Contrary to expectations, both groups had similar levels of self-awareness, whereas the indigenous Dutch women were – after controlling for educational level – more sensitive to others. In both groups, but even more in the group with an immigrant background, adherence to independent values appeared to contribute substantially and positively to self-awareness as well as capacity for managing new situations, and negatively to sensitivity to others. In addition, adherence to interdependent values contributed, for both groups, positively to sensitivity to others, and, for those with an immigrant background, negatively to self-awareness. The ACS-30 appeared to be useful for assessing autonomy-connectedness in the immigrant groups that participated in the study. The results confirm that a simple distinction between native and immigrant Dutch groups in terms of being self- or other-focused should be rejected, and give rise to further, clinically relevant research questions.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most well known dimensions along which cultures can be compared is individualism versus collectivism (I/C; e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 1997; Hofstede & Bond, 1984), expressing the individual's relationship with the group and the society. In individualistic societies, the interests and rights of the individual would prevail above the group's interests and the individual's duties. Individuals would primarily see themselves in terms of 'I', and they would distinguish each other more by means of personality traits than by group positions. In collectivistic societies the emphasis would be primarily on the interest of the group. Individuals within these societies would predominantly be seen as group members, and their identity would reflect their participation in the group.

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Various authors have criticized the I/C distinction. For example, Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002) observed a paucity of studies at the societal level on the structures that support and maintain I/C differences (see also Matsumoto, 1999). Many authors, e.g., Allik and Realo (2004), argued that cultures are neither entirely collectivistic nor individualistic. To their opinion, it makes more sense to categorize the various cultures according to their relative positions on the dimension between the two extremes. This point of view agrees with that by Triandis (1985) of idiocentric versus allocentric.

At the individual level a comparable difference in point of view can be observed regarding the concept of autonomy, a psychological condition to be reached at the beginning of adulthood. The classical concept of autonomy, developed by Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975), Erikson (1974), and Kohlberg (1984), reflects the ability to be independent and stresses separation and individual identity. The more modern autonomy concept, however, incorporates, beside the ability to be on one's own, also the capacity to satisfactorily engage in relationships with others (e.g., Bekker, 1993; Bekker & Van Assen, 2006; Hmel & Pincus, 2002; Noom, Deković, & Meeus, 1999). In order to express the co-existence of both aspects more explicitly Bekker and Van Assen (2006) introduced the concept of autonomy-connectedness. The self-regulative intra- as well as inter-individual functioning that autonomy-connectedness implies (Hmel & Pincus, 2002) presumes self-awareness (the capacity to be aware of one's own opinions, wishes, and needs, and the capacity to express these in social interactions) as well as sensitivity to others, i.e., sensitivity to the opinions, wishes, and needs of other people; empathy; and capacity and need for intimacy and separation (Bekker, 1993; Bekker & Van Assen, 2006). A third component of autonomy-connectedness is capacity for managing new situations, reflecting the drive for exploration that, from an attachment theory perspective, is inherent to secure attachment (also labeled "autonomy" (e.g., Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1969, 1973).

The idea behind the modern concept of autonomy-connectedness agrees with recent cross-cultural theorizing regarding independence and interdependence. Whereas Hofstede (1980), at the country level, described individualistic countries as emphasizing individuals' autonomy – in the classical meaning of independence – later authors, e.g., Singelis (1994) argued that people might simultaneously be independent and interdependent, herewith theorizing at the individual level. From this perspective, both independence and interdependency are separate, unipolar dimensions within individuals. Also Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede (2004) and Kagitçibasi (2005), pointing to the universal necessity for individuals of finding a balance between individual and group needs, argued that independence and interdependency exist as two unipolar dimensions. Whether independence or interdependency dominates within the individual, depends, according to these authors, not only on their domination in the surrounding culture but also on individual differences in personality and interpersonal experiences.

It is an intriguing question to what extent the self-concepts of individuals with various cultural backgrounds in terms of their relative emphasis on independency or interdependency vary in terms of autonomy-connectedness components. This question is also important, as autonomy is a clinically relevant concept. Defects in autonomy are generally seen as the core of mental illness (e.g., Laor, 1982; Bekker, 1993), and autonomy-connectedness proved to be associated with anxiety and mood disorders (Bekker & Belt, 2006), eating disorders (Van Loenhout, Bekker, & Kuipers, submitted for publication), and antisocial behavior (Bekker, Bachrach, & Croon, 2007). Despite the relevance of autonomy-related issues for mental health care and the multi-cultural character of mental health care in Western-European countries, autonomy-connectedness was not earlier investigated in relation to cultural concepts such as adherence to cultural values and acculturation. A better insight into the relationships between the self-concepts – in terms of autonomy-connectedness components – of individuals with various cultural backgrounds, their values regarding independence and interdependency, and their level of acculturation might aid mental health care of clients with non-native cultural backgrounds.

The present study was therefore designed to investigate the relationships between autonomy-connectedness, and adherence to independence- and interdependency-reflecting values in young adults with different cultural backgrounds. Because sex differences are well-established in both the area of autonomy-connectedness, particularly its component sensitivity to others (e.g., Bekker & Van Assen, 2008), as well as the values under study (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997), we confined our study to women only. Before further outlining our study design, we will below first describe our expectations regarding the possible relationships of autonomy-connectedness with adherence to cultural values in terms of independence and interdependency. Thereafter, we will discuss and hypothesize about the role of acculturation.

### 1.1. Relationships between autonomy-connectedness and adherence to independence or interdependence

As independence or individualism focuses on the individual with his or her own interests, choices, and decisions, particularly adherence to this cultural value might be expected to contribute to the self-awareness of that individual. Adherence to collectivism or interdependency, i.e., focusing on one's group belongingness and loyalty, might plausibly contribute more to one's sensitivity to others. However, one could wonder to what degree adherence to cultural values might predict both these components of autonomy-connectedness acknowledging that autonomy-connectedness has – almost universally (e.g., Bowlby, 1973), its roots in individual attachment and personality development (see also Hofstede et al., 2004; Kagitçibasi, 2005). All in all, we hypothesize that adherence to independency related values will contribute positively but moderately to self-awareness, whereas we expect adherence to interdependence related values to have a moderate positive contribution to sensitivity to others.

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