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Manipulating cultural orientation by BaFáBaFá game: Applicability of Social Identity Theory

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Various studies have indicated that individuals seek a positive self-identity by comparing the self with others (for a review, see Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that an individual can attain a positive self-identity by comparing the in-group with out-groups, because group membership constitutes a part of a person’s self-identity. It has also been suggested that SIT may explain in-group bias because in order to achieve a positive social identity, a person evaluates the in-group more favorably than out-groups.

In Western countries, SIT has been repeatedly analyzed and refined. A central idea of the theory is that a positive social identity is based on comparisons between the in-group and the out-group that favor the in-group. Therefore, SIT predicts a positive correlation between group identification and in-group bias. SIT also assumes that the inter group comparison process is universal and observable in disparate societies. However, Hinkle and Brown (1990) posed the possibility that SIT may not be applicable to all societies and groups. In their review of 14 studies, the correlations between in-group identification and in-group bias was not strong, but quite modest (the highest median was $r=0.41$). They also found evidence that inter-group comparison is not a readily occurring, spontaneous, behavioral phenomenon; leading them to conclude that psychological processes posited by SIT are not applicable to all groups, or to everyone in the same group.

To what kind of groups is SIT most applicable? Hinkle and Brown (1990) proposed a two-dimensional taxonomy based on orientation: individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai & Lucca, 1988), and autonomous-relational. The individualism-collectivism dimension has been widely used in explaining cultural differences between the East and the West. Western countries including North America and Europe are considered to be more individualistic, whereas countries in Asia including Japan and countries in South America are considered to be more collectivistic (Triandis et al. 1998). In collectivistic cultures, the emphasis is on group harmony, and group achievement. In individualistic cultures on the other hand, the emphasis is on individual achievement and intra-individual competition. Hinkle and Brown (1990) argued that SIT is more applicable to those with a collectivist orientation, because the group and group achievement is more important to them.

The autonomous-relational orientation on the other hand, refers to the tendency to make inter-group comparisons. In relational orientation, the concern is with evaluating the in-group, and its achievements, with reference to other groups. Members of sports teams and political parties are likely to be in this pole. In the case of autonomous orientation, comparisons are made in relation to an abstract standard, rather than to the achievement of out-groups. It has been proposed that SIT is more applicable to people with a relational

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Brown, Hinkle, Ely, Fox-Cardamone, Maras, and Taylor (1992) conducted a study to examine the above hypothesis with university students in the U.S. and secondary school students in Britain. Participants were categorized into four groups by dividing the sample at the medians of the individualism-collectivism and autonomous-relational scores. The correlation between in-group identification and in-group bias was the highest in the group that had a collectivistic and a relational orientation, thus supporting the hypothesis. From this result, Brown et al. (1992) concluded that certain psychological processes postulated in SIT do not have general applicability as had once been thought. One limitation of the Brown et al.’s study however, was that it was correlational and participants’ orientation was not manipulated experimentally. It leaves the possibility that some other variable(s) were mediating the observed relationship. Brown et al. (1992) suggested that the next step forward is to replicate the result experimentally. It could be argued that individualism-collectivism orientation is culturally fostered during development, and therefore cannot be easily changed by experimental manipulation. Whereas there are cross-cultural differences in the distribution of individualism-collectivism orientation, there are also intra-cultural differences. This suggests that culture is not a rigid determinant that disallows deviations from the norm. At a basic level, people may maintain their essential orientation on the collectivistic-individualistic dimension, while simultaneously deviating from the norm temporarily, according to environmental influences.

In this study I tried to manipulate individualism-collectivism orientation using a cross-cultural simulation game (BaFáBaFá), and compared the applicability of SIT to two groups. In BaFáBaFá, originally developed by Shirts (1977) to promote cross-cultural understanding and communication, participants were divided into two groups that have distinct rules and customs. One group (Alpha), which modeled patriarchal society in Asia, had collectivistic characteristics. The other group (Beta) modeled competitive Western society, and it had individualistic characteristics. During the course of the game, participants were required to learn the behavioral patterns that are desirable in each group. During the game, it was expected that each participants’ individualism-collectivism orientation would temporally shift toward the group norm. The relational-autonomous dimension was not manipulated in this study, because simultaneously manipulating both dimensions experimentally could confound the results.

Method

Participants

Students (N=78; 14 men and 64 women) in a private university in Japan participated in the experiment. The experiment was carried out twice with 51 participants in the first experiment and 27 participants in the second experiment.

Procedure

The cross-cultural simulation game (BaFáBaFá) was played in the first phase of the experiment to manipulate the individualism-collectivism orientation. An approximately equal number of male and female participants were randomly assigned to two groups, Alpha and Beta. Each had distinct rules that the participants were required to learn through practice. Then, participants visited the other group in units of
four or five, for the duration of five minutes. Visitors could either observe, or join the activities of the other group. Visitors then returned to the original group and reported their experiences and feelings during the encounter with the alien culture. The exchanges of visitors were repeated until all participants had visited the other group.

The Model for the Alpha group was collectivistic Asian cultures. The participants were instructed that the purpose of life in the Alpha group was to "enjoy being with other members". In the Alpha group, the sequence of communication starts with "greetings", "introduction of male members of the family", "a Card game", and the "exchange of initials". During the course of communication, members had to keep touching each other on arms or shoulders, because keeping a distance was considered an insult to others. Alpha members also played a card game in which the aim was not to win, but to share the joy of the game with others. At the end of the communication session, Alpha members signed their initials on a white card held by their partner if they felt that the partner had followed the rules of the culture, and was trustworthy. In this culture, it was considered a valuable asset to hold a card with many initials.

The Beta group was modeled after individualistic Western cultures. Participants were told that a person's worth in the Beta group was determined by the person's ability to be an effective player in a card game. To win points, participants had to exchange cards with others to collect seven card sequences. In this game, others were considered only as resources that hold valuable cards. During the card game, participants had to speak the Beta language, which was a simple language that could be learned in a short time. The use of Japanese was not allowed in the Beta group.

The words "individualistic" and 'collectivistic' were not used when explaining the rules of the game to the participants. The design of the game was such that the two groups had distinct rules, and the information important to one group had no value to the other. In the game, participants learned that it was difficult to understand other group that had different rules and customs.

The total time required for BaFáBaFá game was approximately 1.5 hours. This included approximately 20 minutes to answer the questionnaire described below, and 30 minutes for the debriefing session and group discussion.

**The Questionnaire**

In the questionnaire, unless otherwise specified, responses were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Psychological constructs were measured using composite scales, where the score for each scale was the mean of the scale items.

Participants completed the questionnaire after the BaFáBaFá game. Scales included in the questionnaire were; group identification, group evaluation, individualism-collectivism, group characteristics, and desirability of each characteristic. The last three were used for the manipulation check.

*Group identification.* Group identification was measured using 5 items selected from the organizational identification scale (Abrams, Ando & Hinkle, 1998). The items that fitted the context of the BaFáBaFá game were selected, and the phrase 'this organization' was replaced by 'this group'. In this scale a higher score indicated a higher level of identification. Sample questions were: "I feel strong ties with this group", "I am glad to be a member of this group".
Individualism-collectivism. Individualism-collectivism was measured using 10 items chosen from the Individualism-collectivism scale (Brown et al. 1992), originally developed by Triandis et al. (1988) to measure group attitudes. A higher score indicated a higher level of collectivism. Questions included: “I work better in a group than on my own”, “It is always a good idea to go along with the rest of the group”.

Group evaluation. Evaluation regarding each group was measured using 4 items. Participants answered the question “What do you think about the Alpha (Beta) culture?” by marking the degree to which each adjective (trustable, superior, likable, cold) was applicable to the group. Evaluation regarding the in-group and the out-group was measured separately. A higher score indicated more positive group evaluation. In-group bias was calculated by subtracting the out-group evaluation score from the in-group evaluation score.

Group characteristics. The unique characteristics of each group were measured using 8 items: collectivistic characteristics (4 items) and individualistic characteristics (4 items). The questions were constructed based on responses to a questionnaire that had been administered earlier in a pilot study, in which participants freely described their image regarding each group. Collectivistic characteristics were defined as: “collectivistic”, “cooperative”, “emphasis on relationship”, and “sticking together”. Individualistic characteristics were defined as: “individualistic”, “independent”, “emphasis on self interest”, and “self-centered”. In this scale participants indicated the degree to which these characteristics were applicable to each group.

Desirability of each characteristic. Participants separately rated the desirability of each characteristic that was used in the group characteristics scale. A higher score indicated a higher level of desirability.

Reliability of measures

Cronbach’s alpha for each scale was as follows: Group identification (.84); individualism-collectivism (.55); group evaluation (.78); collectivistic characteristics (.86); individualistic characteristics (.88). The results were indicative of the reasonable internal consistency of each scale except for individualism-collectivism scale.

Group orientation

A T-test was conducted using group membership (Alpha and Beta) as the independent variable, with individualism-collectivism score as the dependent variable. The results indicated that Alpha members scored significantly higher on the individualism-collectivism scale ($M=3.66$ vs. $3.33$, $t(76)=3.842$, $p<.001$). Both groups also scored over 3 points in a scale ranging from 1 to 5, thus indicating that both groups had a more collectivistic tendency.

Figure 1 shows the group characteristics scores. The four items on the left represents collectivistic and the four items on the right individualistic characteristics. Repeated t-tests were conducted using target of the evaluation (Alpha/Beta) as independent variable and evaluation on each score as dependent variable. This analysis was done to check whether BaFáBaFá game was appropriate to manipulate individualism-collectivism orientation. Results indicated that all the items differed significant at the .01 level. Alpha
group was perceived to have more collectivistic characteristics and less individualistic characteristics and the Beta group visa versa.

The hypothesis that Alpha members evaluate collectivistic characteristic more favorably and Beta members evaluate individualistic characteristics more favorably was investigated using t-tests conducted with membership of the group (Alpha/Beta) as the independent variable, and the desirability of in-group characteristics as the dependent variable. The results indicated that the mean scores for items “emphasis on relationship” and “sticking together” differed significantly ($p<.05$) between Alpha and Beta members. Other items, with the exception of “individualistic” and “self-centered” approached significance. Although the differences were small, Figure 2 shows that Alpha members scored higher on the desirability of collectivistic characteristics, and that Beta members scored higher on the desirability of individualistic characteristics.

The figure 2 also shows that “collectivistic”, “cooperative” and “emphasis on relationship”, which were items that represents collectivistic characteristics, were scored higher than other items. On the other hand, the items with the lowest scores were "sticking together", "emphasis on self-interest", and "self-centered". This result may be relevant to the fact that this experiment was carried out in Japanese culture which is supposed to have collectivistic culture.

These results suggest that the Alpha group was perceived as having more collectivistic characteristics. Alpha group members scored higher on the individualism-collectivism scale, and had collectivistic characteristics. The Beta group on the other hand, was perceived as having more individualistic characteristics, and Beta members were less collectivistic than Alpha members. These results indicate that participants shifted their orientation according to their group membership in theBaFáBaFá game.

Differences in group evaluation scores between in-and out-groups were indicative of in-group bias. The mean of identification scores and in-group bias scores are shown in Table 1. It was shown that the identification of the Alpha group members was significantly higher than that of Beta group members ($M = 3.49$ vs. $3.09$, $t(76) = 2.499$, $p < .05$). The mean in-group bias scores of the Alpha group were also significantly higher than that of the Beta group ($M=.827$ vs. .111, $t (76) = 4.103$, $p < .001$). Positive mean values for in-group bias in both groups indicated that both groups evaluated their own group as more desirable than the other group. Comparison of the coefficient of correlation for in-group bias between the two groups indicated that it was significant in the alpha group ($r = .703$, $p < .001$) but not in the beta group ($r = .304$, n.s.). Also, the difference in the coefficient of correlation between the two groups was statistically significant ($Z = 2.38$, $p < .01$).
Fig. 1  Characteristics of each group

Fig. 2  Desirability of each characteristic
Table 1  Levels of group identification / in-group bias and correlations

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<td>Identification</td>
<td>3.49 ( .69 )</td>
<td>3.09 ( .73 )</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-group bias</td>
<td>.827 ( .90 )</td>
<td>.111 ( .62 )</td>
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<tr>
<td>( r )</td>
<td>.703***</td>
<td>.304</td>
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Note. 1. Group identification scale could range from 1 to 5. 2. In-group bias score was computed by subtracting the out-group general evaluation score from the in-group general evaluation score. Range from 4 to -4. 3. Standard deviations are in parenthesis. 4. *** \( p<.001 \)

Discussion

In order to experimentally investigate individualism—collectivism tendencies, the “BaFáBaFá” game was used in the present study, in which one group simulated collectivistic rules modeled on an Asian patriarchal society, and the other group simulated collectivistic rules modeled on Western society. The game lasted for approximately 90 minutes and participants mastered the rules of each group as they played the game. As a result of playing BaFáBaFá, it was predicted that participants in the Alpha culture would temporarily shift towards a more collectivistic position, and those in Beta culture toward a more individualistic position. If this prediction were correct, Alpha members would score higher on the individualism-collectivism scale, as well as on the collectivistic characteristics subscale. Conversely, Beta members would score higher on the individualistic characteristics subscale. SIT suggests that a person is inclined to favorably evaluate characteristics that are unique to the in-group to achieve a positive social identity. Therefore, it was predicted that Alpha members would evaluate collectivistic characteristics, and Beta members would evaluate individualistic characteristics more favorably.

Results of the questionnaire conducted after the game showed a significant difference in the individualism—collectivism dimension between two groups, indicating group orientation has changed as a result of playing the game. Results for the desirability of group characteristic indicated that the Alpha group evaluated collectivistic characteristics more positively than the Beta group, whereas the Beta group tended to evaluate individualistic characteristics as being more desirable, suggesting that the participants’ preferences in the individualism—collectivism dimension were temporarily changed as a result of playing the game.

In this study, I examined the hypothesis that individuals in a collectivistic group would have a stronger sense of belonging to the in-group, and would have a higher in-group bias than those in an individualistic group. Correlation coefficients between identification and in-group bias in the Alpha and Beta groups indicated a strong correlation in Alpha (.703), but not in Beta. The result showed that changes in
individualistic—collectivistic tendencies resulting from the game caused the difference in the correlation. This finding was identical to that of Brown et al. (1992), obtained in a study using a questionnaire, confirming its robustness. In this experiment, it can be assumed that individual identity was more salient in Beta group where individual achievements were emphasized. Under such situation, ingroup bias was not related to the level of group identification.

Another important finding of the present study is that it showed it is possible to manipulate individualistic—collectivistic tendencies experimentally. After the game, the group with collectivistic rules had developed a more collectivistic tendency, whereas the group with the individualistic rules had developed a more individualistic tendency; thereby suggesting that individual tendencies change in different situations just as they differ between different individuals within the same culture. The result indicates that individualistic—collectivistic orientation is not constant over time, but it is possible to change depending on the situation.

It is also necessary to note that experimental manipulations are expected to minimally affect an individual’s basic tendency, because the duration of the manipulation is short, relative to the influence of the national culture. The average values on the individualism—collectivism scale in both Alpha and Beta groups exceeded the median, which is indicative of a slightly higher collectivistic tendency in both groups. Moreover, as can be seen from Figure 2, there was an overall tendency for collectivistic characteristics to be evaluated as being more desirable than individualistic characteristics. This may be because all participants were Japanese who are members of a collectivistic culture.

In this study, I used the scale developed by Triandis et al. (1988) to measure the individualism—collectivism dimension. The difference of this score between two groups was significant, but not large. On the other hand, differences in correlation coefficients for the identification and in-group bias were large, approximately .7 and .3. Also, a clear difference was seen in the cognition of group characteristics. This suggests the possibility that the differences of collectivistic and individualistic groups remain in the aspects which were not measured in the present study. A problem left for the future would be to define individualism—collectivism more precisely.

Pre and post game comparison of the individualism—collectivism dimension may have overcome the problem of sample selection. However, using the scale prior to the game would have influenced the post game responses to the same questionnaire, because participants may have guessed the intentions of the experiment. Moreover, it was not intuitively plausible that two randomly selected groups should differ in their individualism—collectivism dimension. Therefore, I did not conduct a questionnaire survey before the game.

One might argue the possibility that the participants may have guessed the experimenter’s intentions. However, there are two arguments against this proposition. First, the experimenter informed the participants that the purpose of the game was to simulate the experience of encountering a different culture. They were not informed that the game was an experiment. The rules were explained to the Alpha group simply as, “Alpha people enjoy being with people,” without using the words, “individualism” or “collectivism.” Therefore, it could be assumed that there was little possibility the participants noticed the intentions of
the experimenter. The second argument is that, even if the participants were aware that the game was an experiment on individualism—collectivism, it would have been impossible for the participants to imagine the assumptions of the experiment.

In this study, I used participants from the same culture and experimentally changed their tendencies. Brown et al. (1992) also used participants from the same culture. Therefore, the conclusion that can be drawn from the present study is that SIT is not applicable to all individuals, but differs as a factor of the individualism—collectivism dimension. It is important to note that it cannot be concluded that applicability of SIT differs as a function of culture, but differences in applicability of SIT was found as a function of individualism—collectivism in individual level. It indicates the need to verify the validity of the social identity theory with individuals of different cultural orientation. The present result also suggested that individualism—collectivism orientation is possible to alter depending on the situation. It indicates that the cultural characteristics are not always fixed and stable, but they are created to fit the social situation of the relevant time.

References


Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Minoru Karasawa for helping me to conduct this experiment and is also
grateful to Toshikatsu Kakimoto for giving a insightful comment for this manuscript.

Notes

1 The ‘culture group’ in the question does not mean Japanese culture, but alpha/beta group that one belongs.
2 Reverse item
3 Since everyone evaluated the characteristics of both alpha and beta group, this analysis was done as repeated t-tests.
Manipulating cultural orientation by BaFáBaFá game: Applicability of Social Identity Theory

ANDO Kaori

Hinkle & Brown (1990) proposed that the applicability of Social Identity Theory (SIT) might differ depending on the group orientation and found that SIT is most applicable to collectivistic and relational groups. The present study tried to experimentally manipulate individualism-collectivism orientation by BaFáBaFá game. It was hypothesized that the stronger correlation between identification and in-group bias will be found in a collectivistic group. Seventy-eight university students participated in a "BaFáBaFá" game in which one group has collectivistic characteristics and the other has individualistic characteristics. Consistent with the hypothesis, the significant correlation between identification and in-group bias was found only with the collectivistic group. The results suggested that participants' individualism-collectivism orientation has temporarily differed after playing the game.