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Building Paper 1

Many of the readings of this week focused on whether there was a universal need for positive self-regard (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), or how people from different cultures incorporated others’ judgments into their judgments of themselves. Interestingly, however, towards the end of the Kim, Cohen, and Au (2010) article, the authors suggest that—within a dignity culture—decisions made with regard to how others will think about it are somehow tainted.” That is, those in dignity cultures feel as if they are not being true to their “true self” if they make decisions on the basis of what others think. In a face culture, on the other hand, such a reasoning process would seem to be common—even normative.

Thus, I propose a study where we investigate “caring about caring about what others think.” I hypothesize that individuals from both face and dignity cultures will care about others’ caring about what others think, but in different ways. I hypothesize that those from a dignity culture will see fault in others’ letting themselves be “fenced in” whereas those from face cultures will see such behavior as common and desirable.

The design of the study would be simple. Participants would read a story about an individual who needs to make a decision about something—or perhaps watch a video of an individual in the same position—and the experimenter would vary whether or not the individual made a decision in accordance with social pressures. For example, the participant would read that “Jack knew that others would think ill of him if he made this decision, but he did so anyway” or “Jack was going to make this decision but he knew others would think ill of him so he decided not to” or, simply, “Jack made this decision.”

I would expect that the first two conditions would elucidate differences between face and dignity cultures: in particular those from dignity cultures would judge the individual who changed his decision to conform with social pressures (“peer pressure”) more harshly than those from face cultures; conversely, (depending on the decision, perhaps, and where the individual stands in the social hierarchy) those from face cultures should judge more harshly the individual who makes his or her decision without regard—or in spite of regard—to what social norms seem to deem correct.

While social psychologists know, more or less, how individuals “knot up” their own identity with those around them and the larger cultural norms at play, the question of how they judge others remains relatively understudied. Research into such an are can have impacts on varied domains: for example, clinical psychologists from a dignity background might be confused by a client’s seeming inability to “shake off” what others think of him or her. Likewise, the clinician might meet relative resistance in encouraging the client to make their own self worth in spite of what others think. Thus, investigating “what others think about what others think” is potentially quite fruitful. Judging by the results of this week’s readings, at least, we might expect opposite judgments from those of dignity and face cultures. Those from dignity cultures might view decisions made under social pressure as inauthentic while those from face cultures may view the same phenomenon as merely giving due weight to the expectations at hand. In some circumstances, forming our own opinions about others’ behavior is just as important as forming our own opinions in the first place.