



Men as Cultural Ideals: How Culture Shapes Gender Stereotypes

**Amy J. C. Cuddy
Susan Crotty
Jihye Chong
Michael I. Norton**

Working Paper

10-097

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RUNNING HEAD: Men as Cultural Ideals

Men as Cultural Ideals: How Culture Shapes Gender Stereotypes

Amy J. C. Cuddy, Harvard Business School

Susan Crotty, Dubai School of Government

Jihye Chong, Seoul National University

Michael I. Norton, Harvard Business School

Word count: 3670

Reference list items: 27

Abstract

Three studies demonstrate how culture shapes the contents of gender stereotypes, such that men are perceived as possessing more of whatever traits are culturally valued. In Study 1, Americans rated men as less interdependent than women; Koreans, however, showed the opposite pattern, rating men as more interdependent than women, deviating from the “universal” gender stereotype of male independence. In Study 2, bi-cultural Korean American participants rated men as less interdependent if they completed a survey in English, but as more interdependent if they completed the survey in Korean, demonstrating how cultural frames influence the contents of gender stereotypes. In Study 3, American college students rated a male student as higher on whichever trait – ambitiousness or sociability – they were told was the most important cultural value at their university, establishing that cultural values causally impact the contents of gender stereotypes.

Men are independent; women are interdependent. Westerners are independent; East Asians are interdependent. Both of these statements have overwhelming empirical support, yet taken together they raise a potential paradox: Are East Asian males seen as independent – reflecting the universal male stereotype – or as interdependent – reflecting the values of their culture? One prediction is two main effects: East Asians are seen as more interdependent than Westerners, and within each culture, men are seen as more independent than women. Instead, we suggest – and the studies below demonstrate – a counterintuitive interaction: Men are seen as embodying those traits that are most culturally valued, such that while American men are seen as more independent than American women, Korean men are actually seen as more interdependent than Korean women. More broadly, we demonstrate that men are seen as possessing more of any traits that are culturally valued – whether chronically or temporarily – such that men serve as *cultural ideals*.

Gender Stereotypes and Cultural Values

The contents of gender stereotypes – the traits that are perceived as uniquely characteristic of women versus men – turn on the dimension of independence-interdependence. Men are stereotyped as independent, agentic, and goal oriented; women are stereotyped as interdependent, communal, and oriented toward others (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). These stereotypes affect important life outcomes such as hiring and promotion (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Gorman, 2005; Heilman, 2001), job performance evaluations (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), academic performance (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000), and even sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007). The contents of gender stereotypes are accepted as pervasive and universal (Heilman, 2001), and are endorsed by both men and women (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Wood & Eagly, 2010) and across cultures (Williams & Best, 1990).

A parallel distinction that also hinges on the independence-interdependence dimension sorts cultures and their core values – the defining values that are strongly endorsed by the members of a

culture (Wan, Chiu, Tam, Lee, Lau & Peng, 2007). Cultures can be characterized as individualistic versus collectivistic (Triandis, 1989), or independent versus interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), based on the degrees to which individuals versus relationships are emphasized, respectively. Individualistic/independent societies, such as the United States, emphasize autonomy, individual goals, and self-reliance; collectivistic/interdependent societies such as South Korea, in contrast, emphasize social embeddedness, communal goals, and social duties and obligations (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 1994; Triandis, 1989). Cultural differences in independence-interdependence manifest in domains such as communication (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, & Ting-Toomey, 1996), creativity (Schwartz, 1999), and even basic cognitive processing (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001).

Conflicting Stereotypes

Given that men as a group possess higher status in virtually every nation in the world (United Nations, 2009), and that higher status groups tend to be viewed as possessing more of whatever skills their society most values (Ridgeway, 2001), cultural values and gender stereotypes seem to sometimes align. In cultures that value independence such as the United States, for example, men are seen as possessing more of the most culturally valued trait – independence. In those cultures where independence is not highly valued, however, a mismatch arises: If stereotypes of men do indeed reflect cultural values, then how should we expect Asian men to be stereotyped relative to Asian women – as more independent, consistent with the “universal” male gender stereotype, or as more interdependent, consistent with Asian cultural values?

We propose that men are seen as embodying cultural ideals: Where independence is valued (such as in the United States), men will be seen as more independent than women; where interdependence is valued (such as in South Korea), men will be perceived as more interdependent than women. In short, we suggest that gender stereotypes are *not* universal, but rather are moderated

by culture: Given their dominance in virtually all cultures, men are believed to possess more of the characteristics that are most culturally valued, whatever those characteristics are. In addition, this prediction is not limited only to stereotypes of independence and interdependence – we suggest that when *any* trait is culturally valued, that trait becomes linked to males.

Overview

In the studies below, we present evidence that culture shapes the contents of gender stereotypes. In Study 1, we examine the extent to which people from independent or interdependent cultures – the United States and South Korea – rate men and women within their cultures on independence-interdependence. In Study 2, we explore whether bi-cultural individuals – Korean-Americans – perceive men or women as more independent-interdependent depending on which culture they are considering, the United States or South Korea. Finally, we experimentally manipulate which traits are culturally valued within a given population by informing American college students that either sociability or ambitiousness is the key cultural value at their university, examining whether cultural values causally impact the contents of gender stereotypes.

Study 1: A Cross-Cultural Test

In Study 1, we presented American and Korean participants with snippets of social networks and asked them to predict the social closeness among members of the network. For instance, they were told that “Katie and Linda are friends” and that “Linda and Mary are friends”; our measure of perceived interdependence was participants’ perceptions of (a) whether Katie and Mary – one node removed in the network – were also friends, and (b) how close their friendship was. Participants rated either members of all-male networks or members of all-female networks. We predicted that Americans would perceive men to be more independent (i.e., as having less close friendships) than women, but that Koreans would perceive men to be more interdependent (i.e., as having closer friendships) than women.

Method

Participants

South Korea Sample. One hundred undergraduate students (52% female, $M_{age} = 22.0$) at the Korean University in Seoul, South Korea completed the questionnaire in exchange for course credit.

United States Sample. One hundred undergraduate students (56% female, $M_{age} = 20.1$) at Rutgers University in New Jersey completed the questionnaire, along with several unrelated ones, in exchange for course credit. One incomplete questionnaire was dropped from the analyses.

Materials & Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to complete a questionnaire that measured perceived interdependence among male or female targets. They read a vignette about a fictitious American (in the US sample) or South Korean (in the Korean sample) town whose residents had purportedly completed a questionnaire that assessed their social networks by measuring their reports of who their friends were, and were told they would view snippets of this social network. Participants were presented with five snippets, each of which listed two pairs of friends. To make the task more interesting, some networks included three people with a shared friend (e.g., “Matt and George are friends. George and John are friends”) and some included four people without a shared friend (e.g., “Adam and Sam are friends. Joe and Tom are friends.”).¹

For each of the snippets, participants were asked to estimate the interdependence between the first and last person listed (Matt and John, or Adam and Tom, respectively). On a 10-point scale ranging from “0-10%” to “91-100%,” they answered the question, “What’s the probability that [the first person] and [the last person] also are friends?” Next, they were asked to “circle the picture below that best describes the relationship between [the first person] and [the last person]” followed by a 5-point scale depicting the relationship between two circles, ranging from two distant, non-overlapping circles to two almost entirely-overlapping circles (adapted from Aron, Aron, &

Smollan, 1992; see Appendix A). We converted responses on the circles measure from a 5-point to a 10-point scale, and then created a composite measure of perceived interdependence by combining the ten responses (S. Korea $\alpha = .85$, U.S. $\alpha = .78$).

The questionnaire was originally written in English. The Korean version was translated to Korean by a bilingual translator, and then back-translated by a second bilingual translator. No discrepancies were identified in the back-translation.

Results and Discussion

We entered the perceived interdependence ratings into a 2 (culture: South Korea, United States) \times 2 (sex of target: male, female) between-subjects ANOVA.² The culture \times sex of target interaction was significant, $F(1,198) = 9.27, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$ (Figure 1). As we predicted, American participants rated the male targets as significantly less interdependent (i.e., more independent, $M = 4.14, SD = 1.16$) than the female targets ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.28$), $F(1,98) = 4.34, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Most importantly, Korean participants showed the predicted opposite pattern, rating the male targets ($M = 4.95, SD = 1.75$) as significantly more interdependent than the female targets ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.51$), $F(1,99) = 5.06, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. There were no main effects, $F_s < 1, p_s > .35$.

These results support our hypothesis that men are perceived as possessing more of the characteristic that reflects a fundamental value in their culture: interdependence in South Korea and independence in the United States. These data offer our first evidence that gender stereotypes of independence and interdependence are not universal, but are moderated by cultural values: In cultures where interdependence is valued, men – and not women – were seen as having greater social closeness.

Study 2: A Bi-Cultural Test

Study 1 revealed that Americans and Koreans differed in their ratings of the independence-interdependence of men and women, thus revealing the presence of cultural differences in the how men and women are perceived. However, given that we could not randomly assign participants to one of those two cultures, which differ in ways that go beyond independence-interdependence, Study 1 does not allow us to make any claims about the causality of the relationship between cultural values and the contents of gender stereotypes. Taking a step closer toward establishing a causal link, we manipulated the cultural frame of Korean-American participants, randomly assigning half of them to complete a survey in English and rate American social networks, and the other half to complete the same survey in Korean and rate Korean networks. For bicultural people (e.g., Chinese Americans), language (e.g., Mandarin vs. English, respectively) cues the associated culture (e.g., Chinese vs. American, respectively), thus priming that culture's norms and values (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism, respectively) (Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002).

We expected that completing the questionnaire in Korean would prime a Korean cultural frame making salient Korean values (i.e., interdependence), while completing the questionnaire in English would prime an American cultural frame making salient American values (i.e., independence). We predicted that results from Korean-American participants who completed the survey in English would resemble those of our American participants from Study 1 – rating women as more interdependent than men – while results from those who completed the survey in Korean would resemble those of our Korean participants from Study 1 – rating men as more interdependent than women.

Method

Participants

Sixty Korean-American Rutgers University undergraduate and graduate students (47% female, $M_{age} = 20.0$) volunteered to complete the questionnaire. Four incomplete questionnaires

were excluded from the analyses. Participants were recruited at meetings of extra-curricular organizations and via acquaintances. 73% of the participants were born in the US, while 27% were born in S. Korea. For 95% of participants, both parents were born in S. Korea. 81% reported that Korean was the primary language spoken in their childhood households; only these participants ($n = 47$), who we expected to have equal access to both cultural frames, were included in the analyses.

Materials & Procedure

We used the same materials as in Study 1. Half of the participants completed the survey in English – about Americans in a town in the United States – and half completed the survey in Korean – about Koreans in a South Korean town.

As in Study 1, we collapsed across all ten items to create a composite closeness measure (English $\alpha = .88$, Korean $\alpha = .67$).

Results & Discussion

In the 2 (language: English, Korean) \times 2 (sex of target: male, female) between-subjects ANOVA, there was no main effect of language ($F < 1$, $p > .30$), and a main effect of sex of target, with male networks receiving overall lower closeness ratings than female targets, $F(1, 47) = 7.74$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$.

Most importantly, this main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 47) = 23.31$, $p < .001$ (Figure 2), partial $\eta^2 = .35$. Participants completing the English version of the questionnaire rated male targets as significantly less interdependent (i.e., more independent, $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.10$) than female targets ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.78$), $F(1,21) = 17.12$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .46$. Participants completing the Korean version of the questionnaire, on the other hand, rated male targets as significantly more interdependent ($M = 5.26$, $SD = .83$) than female targets ($M = 4.58$, $SD = .75$), $F(1,24) = 4.62$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$.

These results extend our results from Study 1 by demonstrating that a shift in cultural frame can change people's perceptions of the extent to which men versus women are interdependent-independent, such that bi-cultural Korean-Americans who were primed with a Korean frame perceived men as more interdependent than women, while bi-cultural Korean-Americans who were primed with an American cultural frame perceived women as more interdependent than men.

Study 3: An Experimental Manipulation of Cultural Values

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that men are seen as more representative of cultural values than women; when interdependence is either chronically (Study 1) or situationally (Study 2) most salient as a cultural value, participants rated men as being more interdependent than women; the reverse was true when independence was the salient value. Study 3 tests the causality of this link between cultural values and the contents of gender stereotypes by experimentally manipulating the values of the participants' culture. In addition, Study 3 aims to generalize the findings beyond the specific cultures and traits used in the first two studies, to support our more general contention that males are seen as possessing *whatever* traits are culturally valued. To do this, we instructed college students that the most culturally valued trait at their university was either ambitiousness or sociability. We predicted that a fictitious male student would be rated as more ambitious when ambitiousness was valued, and as more sociable when sociability was valued.

Method

Participants

Participants were 120 Northwestern students (59% female, $M_{age} = 20.7$) who completed the study for \$8.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were presented with an "executive summary" of a survey of Northwestern students who had reported the most valued cultural traits of Northwestern students. Some

participants were informed that this trait was *ambitiousness*, while others were told that the most valued trait was *sociability* (see Appendix B for stimulus materials).³ After reading the description of the cultural values survey, participants read a paragraph about either a male or female Northwestern student, which described the student as ambiguous on both ambitiousness and sociability (see Appendix B).

Finally, participants rated this student on four items related to ambitiousness (ambitious, hardworking, driven, and diligent) and four items related to sociability (sociable, fun-loving, outgoing, and life of the party), all on 7-point scales (1: “not at all descriptive” to 7: “perfectly descriptive”). We created composite measures for both ambitiousness ($\alpha = .84$) and sociability ($\alpha = .78$).

Results & Discussion

We conducted a 2 (cultural value: ambitiousness, sociability) \times 2 (sex of target) \times 2 (trait: ambitiousness, sociability) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the final factor. The predicted three-way interaction was significant, $F(1,116) = 7.74, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$ (Figure 3). There was also a main effect of trait, such that across conditions ambitiousness ratings ($M = 5.49$) were higher than ratings on sociability ($M = 5.05$), $F(1,116) = 21.10, p < .01$. Because of the main effect of Trait, we present subsequent analyses as standardized z-scores for simpler visual comparisons. There were no other significant effects, $F_s < 1.7, p_s > .20$.

To unpack the three-way interaction, we conducted separate 2 (cultural value: ambitiousness, sociability) \times 2 (trait: ambitiousness, sociability) mixed ANOVAs for male versus female targets. For male targets, the cultural value \times trait interaction was significant, $F(1,58) = 5.99, p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$: men were rated as higher on sociability in the sociability condition ($M = .34$) than in the ambitiousness condition ($M = -.15$), and as higher on ambitiousness in the ambitiousness condition ($M = .09$) than in the sociability condition ($M = -.31$). For female targets,

although all means fell in the expected direction, the cultural value x trait interaction was not significant $F(1,58) = 1.99, p = .14, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$ (Figure 3).

We hypothesized that participants would rate the male student as possessing more of whichever trait – ambitiousness or sociability – was culturally valued. As predicted, the male student was perceived as more ambitious when ambitiousness was the salient cultural value, and as more sociable when sociability was the salient cultural value. Although these two traits share some overlap with independence and interdependence, respectively (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008), they are not identical to them, allowing us to generalize our findings beyond the specific cultural context of Westerners versus East Asian and independence versus interdependence. Just as people shift beliefs about their own traits based on the perceived desirability of those traits (Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989), these results suggest that people shift their perceptions of gender stereotypes using a similar process.

General Discussion

We explore a paradox created by two rich research streams in psychology; one suggests that men are universally perceived seen as independent, and another suggests that independence is valued in only some cultures, while interdependence is more highly valued in others. How can men – the dominant, higher status group compared to women in nearly every culture – be perceived as independent in cultures that value the opposite? Our studies demonstrate that the commonly-endorsed “independent-man” and “interdependent-women” stereotypes are not actually universal, but are moderated by cultural values. People perceive men as independent in cultures where individualism is valued – with Americans perceiving men as having less close social networks – but perceive men as more interdependent in cultures where connectedness is valued – with Koreans rating men as having closer networks (Study 1). These differences appear even when the same individuals reflect on the social networks of men and women with either an independence or

interdependence frame, with Korean-Americans seeing men as less interdependent when considering American social networks, but women as less interdependent when considering Korean social networks (Study 2).

Most importantly, this paper presents the first evidence of a causal relationship between core cultural values and the contents of gender stereotypes: men *in general* are seen as possessing more of *whatever* characteristic is most culturally valued. This finding suggests that gender stereotypes are actually flexible, dynamic, and cross-culturally varied – deviating from the widely-held belief that they are rigid, static, and universal. The first two studies focused on the well documented cultural values of independence and interdependence, showing that members of an interdependent culture, South Korea, perceived men as more interdependent than women, deviating from the “universal” stereotype of male independence. The third study moved beyond these specific traits and cultures, however, demonstrating that American participants rated a male member of their community as possessing more of whatever trait they were told was most valued in their culture – ambitiousness or sociability. Thus, across different cultures and different traits, men are seen as cultural ideals, possessing whatever traits are chronically or temporarily valued.

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Footnotes

1. All names used in the US version of the questionnaire were among the 50 most popular names in the United States for at least one decade of the 20th century, according to US Census Bureau data. Although we were not able to identify a similar resource in South Korea, popular names were also selected for the Korean version of the questionnaire.
2. Sex of participant had no main or interaction effects in any of the studies presented in this paper.
3. To generate organic cultural values for the main study, we administered an open ended questionnaire to twenty Northwestern undergraduates that asked them to “Please think about the undergraduate culture of Northwestern and list the five characteristics you think are most valued by Northwestern students in general.” The two most commonly categories of characteristics were *ambitiousness* (e.g., diligence, being motivated, competitiveness) and *sociability* (e.g., fun-loving, outgoing, and friendly), which were selected for the main experiment.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Bonneil Koo for his generous help with Study 2 data collection.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Study 1: Interdependence ratings for male and female targets as a function of participants' culture (South Korea or United States).

Figure 2. Study 2: Interdependence ratings for male and female targets as a function of language condition (Korean or English).

Figure 3. Study 3: Ambitiousness and sociability ratings (presented as z scores) for male and female targets as a function of cultural value condition (ambitiousness or sociability).

Appendix A: Sample Closeness Measure

Please circle the picture below that best describes the relationship between [Adam] and [Tom].



Appendix B: Study 3 Materials

*Part I: Cultural Value Manipulations**Sociability*

In a survey of 523 Northwestern University undergraduate students, we found that “*sociability*” was the most valued cultural trait or characteristic for a Northwestern University student to possess. Sociability included associated traits such as *fun-loving, outgoing, and friendly*. Students overwhelmingly listed sociability as the most important trait for a Northwestern student.

Ambitiousness

In a survey of 523 Northwestern University undergraduate students, we found that “*ambitiousness*” was the most valued cultural trait or characteristic for a Northwestern University student to possess. Ambitiousness included associated traits such as *diligence, being a hard worker, being motivated, studiousness, and competitiveness*. Students overwhelmingly listed ambitiousness as the most important trait for a Northwestern student.

Part II: Target Sex Manipulation

Matt [or Sarah] is a sophomore at Northwestern University majoring in political science. He [She] generally works hard in his [her] classes, but sometimes he [she] skips reading assignments to go out with friends. He [She] is friendly and outgoing and goes to parties, but only once or twice a week and never on weekdays. Sarah wants to do well in school and usually studies very hard for tests, but in some classes he [she] tries harder than others. He [She] got an “A” in the most difficult history course at Northwestern last quarter. Matt [Sarah] has a lot of friends at Northwestern and he [she] belongs to several clubs, but he [she] does not participate in as many activities as some people who live in her dorm.





