Article

Establishing Commonality Versus Affirming Distinctiveness: Patterns of Personality Judgments in China and the United States

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Abstract

We predicted that members of Chinese groups would tend to express personality judgments that establish commonalities among members, whereas members of American groups would tend to express judgments that affirm how members differ. We had groups of five acquaintances (23 groups at one U.S. university, 28 groups at three Chinese universities) rate their own and each other's traits and subjected the round-robin data to social relations model and social accuracy model analyses. As hypothesized, Chinese were more likely to portray their peers as similar to themselves and to each other as indicated by greater perceived self-other similarity and less variance in target ratings; conversely, Americans were more likely to express a shared understanding of what distinguished each group member from others, as indicated by greater distinctive agreement and target variance (consensus). Collectivistic values mediated effects of country on perceived similarity; individualistic values mediated effects of country on consensus and perceived similarity.

Keywords

cross-cultural differences, person perception, assumed similarity, self-other agreement, individualism collectivism

Being similar to others and being different from others each have advantages and disadvantages. Being different creates opportunities to define one's unique identity, to evince one's unique value, and to enhance one's social status; but standing out can also make one the target of envy and competition and vulnerable to being ridiculed, stigmatized, and ostracized (Leary & Cox, 2008; Schachter, 1951). Being similar to others helps one to avoid such risks and feel more secure, validated, liked, and included (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Because being similar and being different each have risks and benefits, people seek a balance between these motives (Brewer, 1991); however, the optimal balance may vary across cultures (Triandis, 1995).

In particular, research suggests that East Asians favor fitting in, whereas North Americans favor standing out (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In laboratory studies, East Asians show greater behavioral conformity to others than do Americans (Bond & Smith, 1996). When choosing between items or ads conveying conformity versus uniqueness, East Asians are more likely than Americans to choose those conveying conformity (Kim & Markus, 1999). Compared to Chinese students, European American students value self-expression more (Kim & Sherman, 2007) and are perceived as more supportive of others' authentic self-expression (Lynch, LaGuardia, & Ryan, 2009). People in America report a stronger desire to be unique than do people in Singapore (Burns & Brady, 1992) and view behavioral uniformity less favorably than do people in China (Lee & Ottati, 1993).

Several sources of evidence suggest that these cultural differences in preferences for similarity or distinctness extend to styles of person perception. Chinese are more likely than are Americans to infer the personality of a group member from information about traits typical of that group (Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, Hamilton, Peng, & Wang, 2007). In contrast, Americans are more likely than are Chinese to infer an individual's personality from the individual's distinctive behaviors (Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000). Perhaps as a consequence, there is evidence that agreement—among judges or between judges and target individuals—about targets' dispositions is greater in North America than in East Asia (Church et al., 2006; Heine & Renshaw, 2002; Malloy, Albright, Diaz-Loving, Dong, & Lee, 2004; Suh, 2002). In sum, it appears that both Chinese and Americans make judgments about individuals' dispositions but differentially weight information about the individuals' distinctive behavior versus information about others with whom the individuals are connected.

The current study was designed to compare the degree to which personality judgments by Chinese and Americans

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emphasize similarities or differences among group members. We hypothesized that Chinese more than Americans would make personality judgments that establish how different group members—including the self—are similar. Conversely, we hypothesized that Americans more than Chinese would make personality judgments that establish how group members—including the self—are unique. To test our hypotheses, we had groups of acquaintances—23 groups at one university in the United States and 28 at three universities in China—rate their own and each other's personality traits; thus, the ratings formed a round-robin design. We used traits because people from diverse language groups and cultures spontaneously use such terms to describe themselves and others (Del Prado et al., 2007; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996).

We used social relations model (SRM; Kenny, 1994; Warner, Kenny, & Stoto, 1979) analyses to decompose the variance in judgments of others' personalities into *perceiver effects* and *target effects*. A person's perceiver effect is the person's distinctive tendency to ascribe a particular trait to others (e.g., to describe others as "kind"). A person's target effect is the person's distinctive tendency to be ascribed a particular trait by others (e.g., to be described as "kind"). The residual components of personality judgment—not due to perceiver or target effects or the group mean—are due to error or dyadic *relationship effects*. We hypothesized that if Americans more than Chinese make personality judgments that establish distinctions among group members, then *target variance*—variance in target ratings attributable to target effects or perceivers agreeing about which targets are distinctively high or low on particular traits—would be greater in America than in China. Conversely, if Chinese more than Americans make personality judgments that establish similarities among group members, then Chinese groups may show less variance in target ratings (unless within Chinese groups different perceivers have different stereotypes of their group, thereby elevating *perceiver variance*—variance in target ratings attributable to distinctive perceiver effects).

We also used social accuracy model (SAM; Biesanz, 2010) analyses to examine the similarity between a perceiver's target ratings and (a) the average or normative self-rating of group members (*normative agreement*), (b) the target's distinctive self-rating, controlling for the normative self-rating (*distinctive agreement*), and (c) the perceiver's distinctive self-rating, controlling for the normative self-rating (*distinctive perceived similarity*). Normative agreement reflects the match between a perceiver's rating of a group member and the typical group member's self-rating; we had no reason to expect this—the degree to which an accurate understanding of average trait levels aides one's judgments—would differ between countries. Distinctive agreement reflects the match between a perceiver's rating of a group member and that target member's unique (nonnormative) self-rating; because greater agreement indicates the perceiver better understands that particular person's distinguishing traits, we hypothesized it would be greater in America than in China. Perceived similarity reflects the match between a perceiver's rating of a group member and that perceiver's own distinctive self-rating; because it indicates a bias to believe others share one's own traits, we hypothesized perceived similarity would be greater in China than in America.

To summarize, we hypothesized that Americans would be more apt to describe group members as distinct from each other, as indicated by greater agreement between perceivers and targets, and consensus among perceivers regarding what precisely are each individual's distinguishing traits. In contrast, Chinese would be more apt to describe group members as similar to each other, as indicated by greater perceived self-target similarity and less variance in target ratings. Our study is the first to compare levels of peer agreement and consensus in China and the United States, and the first to compare levels of perceiver variance and perceived similarity in Asia and North America more generally. Our study did not directly assess the potential mechanisms that could contribute to cultural differences in person descriptions, such as cultural differences in propensities to display distinctive behaviors, attend to distinctive behaviors, attribute distinctive behaviors to distinctive individual traits, or describe people as having distinctive traits (e.g., in conversations or in psychology experiments), among others (Kenny, 1994).

However, we did test whether individualistic or collectivistic values mediated any observed differences in patterns of person perception between Chinese and American groups. People who value individualism value self-reliance, self-determination, and being distinct from others; people who value collectivism value harmony, conformity, and loyalty within the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Although the focus of considerable critical scrutiny, individualism and collectivism remain the constructs most commonly used to explain cultural differences and are dimensions on which Chinese and Americans reliably differ (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

Method

Participants

Our participants were members of groups of five university students who were the same gender, not close relatives, and had been interacting with each other regularly for at least 2 months. The American participants were University of Idaho students; there were 14 female and 9 male groups (n = 115 individuals, M age = 19.5 years, standard error [SE] = 0.2). Groups had formed through sharing the same residence hall, fraternity, or sorority (n = 20), belonging to the same club or team (n = 2), or sharing classes (n = 1). Each participant received US$10 for participating. The Chinese participants were Yunnan Agricultural University, Yunnan University of Finance and Economics, or Kunming University of Science and Technology students; there were 14 female and 14 male groups (n = 140 individuals, M age = 20.7 years, SE = 0.1). Yunnan and Kunming University students each received 20 yuan. Yunnan Agricultural University students were not paid directly; instead, we contributed US$250 to their university. The Chinese universities are located in a larger city than the American universities, but all four universities are public universities with socioeconomically and academically diverse student bodies.

Table 1. Evaluatively and Descriptively Contrasting Quartets of English and Chinese Trait Terms.

Trait Dimension	High on Dimension				Low on Dimension			
	Desirable		Undesirable		Desirable		Undesirable	
Agency								
	自信的	Self-confident	自大的	Arrogant	谦虚的	Humble	缺乏自信的	Self-doubting
	果断的	Decisive	盛气凌人的	Domineering	乐于助人的	Accommodating	怯懦的	Timid
Communion								
	值得信赖的	Trusting	易受骗的	Gullible	不容易受骗的	Not easily fooled	愤世嫉俗的	Cynical
	乐于合作的	Cooperative	打扰别人的	Intrusive	独立的	Independent	不善于社交的	Unsociable
Conscientious								
	细心的	Careful	难以取悦的	Fussy	无忧无虑的	Carefree	散漫的	Sloppy
	有条理的	Organized	不灵活变通的	Inflexible	灵活的	Flexible	反复无常的	Inconsistent
Neuroticism								
	敏感的	Sensitive	急躁的	Irritable	头脑清醒的	Level headed	缺乏感情的	Unemotional
	多愁善感的	Sentimental	喜怒无常的	Moody	镇静的	Calm	无趣的	Bored
Openness								
	有想象力的	Imaginative	不实事求是的	Unrealistic	实事求是的	Realistic	缺乏想像力的	Unimaginative
	有教养的	Cultured	势利眼的	Snobbish	现实的	Practical	缺乏教养的	Uncultured

Materials

Traits. To ensure that participants' personality judgments sampled a comprehensive swath of evaluative and descriptive territory, we assembled a set of *trait quartets* of the type pioneered by Peabody (1967). (An illustrative trait quartet is *generous*, *extravagant*, *thrifty*, and *stingy*. Descriptively, generous and extravagant both describe giving, whereas thrifty and stingy both describe withholding. Evaluatively, generous and thrifty are both desirable, whereas extravagant and stingy are undesirable.) We began with a list of 96 English traits that reflected desirable and undesirable aspects of each pole of the following dimensions: agency, communion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness/sophistication (i.e., approximately the "five-factor model" dimensions). Students (49 females, 12 males; *M* age = 26.0 years) in University of Idaho online psychology courses rated "how desirable people in general think it is for someone to possess" each of the 96 traits on −4 (*very undesirable*) to +4 (*very desirable*) scales. The students also rated themselves on each trait on −4 (*very untrue*) to +4 (*very true*) scales. We retained 64 traits that were reliably deemed desirable or undesirable (i.e., whose 90% confidence interval [CI] for desirability did not include the scale midpoint) and loaded significantly on the expected dimension when we factor analyzed the self-ratings. Next, we had Chinese students (43 females, 35 males, *M* age = 20.9 years) at Yangtze University provide desirability ratings and self-ratings for these 64 traits. (In both these preliminary studies and the main study, materials were translated from English into Chinese and then—except materials unlikely to influence responses, such as consent forms—were back translated to ensure accuracy.) Finally, using the students' ratings, we created 10 "trait quartets" in each language. Table 1 shows the final set of traits. In a few cases, we chose Chinese and English traits that shared similar psychometric properties but were not direct translations of each other (e.g., "irritable" and "头脑清醒的" had slightly different meanings, but shared similar social desirability ratings and loadings on neuroticism). In our main study, participants rated the self and each group member on each of these 40 traits using the following scale: −2 (*very untrue*), −1 (*somewhat untrue*), 0 (*neither*), +1 (*somewhat true*), and +2 (*very true*).

Individualism-Collectivism. Participants completed 8 items from the individualism-collectivism scales developed by Gudykunst et al. (1996). The statements were prefaced by "When I am part of a group, it is important to me that… " and were rated on the same *very untrue* to *very true* scales as the traits mentioned earlier. The 4 individualism items were "I act as an independent person," "I be self-reliant rather than depend on others," "I be unique and different from others," and "I take responsibility for my own actions" (Cronbach's α = .37 in United States and .45 in China). The 4 collectivism items were "I maintain harmony in the group," "I respect the majority's wishes," "I sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group," and "I stick with the group even through difficulties" (α = .45 in United States and .62 in China).

Group Closeness. We included several measures of group closeness. First, participants reported how many months they had known each member. Second, they reported how frequently they interacted with each member on 0 to 10 scales on which each point was labeled (e.g., 0 = *almost never*, 3 = *once per month*, 5 = *once per week*, 8 = *once each day*, and 10 = *many times each day*). Finally, participants indicated "how much do you like…," "how close and connected do you feel to…," and "how much do you respect… "each member on 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*a lot*) scales; we combined these 3 items into a

Table 2. Mean Group Closeness Ratings, Traits Ratings, and Sources of Variance in Trait Ratings in China and the United States.

	China		United States		Effect of Country		
	M	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*t*
Group closeness							
Months known other members	17.061	1.913	17.339	2.100	0.275	2.842	0.10
Frequency of interaction	7.789	0.267	8.028	0.206	0.239	0.349	0.69
Regard for other members	7.929	0.135	7.665	0.175	−0.264	0.218	−1.21
Trait ratings							
Self-ratings	0.716	0.037	0.729	0.034	0.013	0.051	0.26
Target-ratings	0.666	0.042	0.599	0.039	−0.067	0.056	−1.19
Source of variance in target ratings							
Perceiver	0.274	0.033	0.218	0.024	−0.057	0.039	−1.46
Target	0.072	0.014	0.193	0.033	**0.121**	**0.029**	**4.17**
Relationship + error	0.507	0.036	0.673	0.044	**0.166**	**0.053**	**3.11**

Note. Trait ratings were on −2 to +2 scales; interaction frequency and regard ratings were on 0 to 10 scales. *t*s > 2.0 are boldfaced.

measure of overall regard (α = .86 in United States and .84 in China).

Procedure

We collected data during the 2007–2008 academic year. Participants completed the measures in the following order: (1) individualism collectivism, (2) months known and interaction frequency, (2) trait ratings of self and peers (with ratings of different targets made on different pages), (3) regard ratings, and (4) demographics. Interspersed were several measures irrelevant to the current study. Most participants completed the materials as a web-based questionnaire; however, due to technical problems, 70 Chinese participants completed printed versions of the materials. All participants made their responses privately and understood that their responses would remain confidential.

Results

Data Analysis

Prior to conducting the analyses, we replaced missing data with the mean for that variable. Following standard practice, undesirable traits were reverse scored; thus, for all traits, more positive ratings were more favorable ratings. Country was contrast coded (China = −.5, United States = +.5). Individualism and collectivism were standardized (relative to the full sample). Unless stated otherwise, analyses employed multilevel random coefficient modeling (MLM) using the *lme4* package (Bates, Maechler, & Bolker, 2011) for R (R Development Core Team, 2010). Most tests had approximately 50 degrees of freedom; *t*s > 2.0 were considered statistically significant.

Descriptive Statistics

First, we fit intercept-only models. There were 1,020 (51 Groups × 20 Perceiver–Target Pairs) ratings for each closeness variable, 10,200 (51 Groups × 5 Raters × 40 Traits) self-ratings, and 40,800 (51 Groups × 20 Perceiver–Target Pairs × 40 Traits) target ratings. For closeness and target ratings, intercepts were allowed to vary across perceivers, targets, and groups; for self-ratings, intercepts were allowed to vary across participants and groups. Table 2 shows the results. On average, group members knew each other for 17 months, interacted with each other once per day, and expressed moderately strong positive regard for each other. Trait ratings of both the self and others typically exceeded zero, indicating generally favorable ratings. Next, we added country as a group-level predictor. Table 2 (right side) shows that country did not predict group closeness or the elevation of self- or target ratings; therefore, these variables cannot explain the effects of country reported below.

Finally, we computed the variance in self-ratings and target ratings for each trait within each group. MLM (with group and trait as random variables) showed that variance in self-ratings did not differ between countries (b = .096, SE = .064), whereas variance in target ratings was greater in American than in Chinese groups (b = .231, SE = .069, t = 3.33). Thus, target ratings (but not self-ratings) were more homogeneous within Chinese groups.

SRM Analyses

We used Kenny's (1994) formulas—as implemented by the R package Triple R (Schönbrodt, Back, & Schmukle, 2012)—to decompose the variance in target ratings into perceiver, target, and relationship variance. We estimated perceiver, target, and relationship variance separately for each trait in each group, thereby computing 2,040 (51 Groups × 40 Traits) perceiver variances, 2,040 target variances, and 2,040 relationship variances; because we analyzed each trait separately, relationship variance included error variance. Table 2 (bottom) shows the results of subjecting these estimates of perceiver, target, and relationship variance to MLM, with group and trait as random variables and country as a group-level predictor.

There was significant perceiver, target, and relationship variance in each country. Target variance and relationship/error variance was greater in the American groups than in the Chinese

groups. Perceiver variance showed a nonsignificant trend in the opposite direction. Thus, greater consensus among perceivers about targets' distinctive traits (as well as greater variance unique to specific perceiver–target dyads) explained the greater variance in target ratings within American groups. The histograms in Figure 1 show the number of groups with different levels of perceiver and target variance (averaged across traits) in each country.

Next, we computed the average level of individualism and collectivism in each group; as expected, Americans valued individualism more and collectivism less than did Chinese (*b*s = 0.326 and −0.326, *SE*s = 0.082 and 0.086, *t*s = 4.00 and −3.78). Collectivism was positively associated with perceiver variance ($b = 0.130$, $SE = 0.033$, $t = 3.97$). Individualism was positively associated with target variance, relationship variance, and overall variance in target ratings (*b*s = 0.099, 0.154, 0.186; *SE*s = 0.028, 0.049, 0.065; *t*s = 3.61, 3.17, 2.86; controlling for country, *b*s = 0.059, 0.105, 0.173; *SE*s = 0.030, 0.055, 0.079; *t*s = 1.97, 1.91, 2.19). Sobel's conservative test of mediation showed marginally significant indirect effects of country on target and relationship variance through individualism (*z*s = 1.77 and 1.73, *p*s < .1), and controlling for individualism reduced the direct effects of country on target and relationship variance. Therefore, individualism partially mediated the effect of country on target and relationship variance.

SAM Analyses

SAM analyses complement SRM analyses by analyzing agreement between trait profiles. For each perceiver–target pair, we use variations across the 40 traits in the perceiver's distinctive self-ratings, the target's distinctive self-ratings, and their group's normative self-ratings to predict variations in the perceiver's target-ratings and then use variations in country, individualism, and collectivism to predict variations in these associations across different perceivers and targets.

We modeled the SAM analyses on those described in Human and Biesanz (2011). We predicted perceivers' ratings of each target on each trait simultaneously from the (grand-mean centered) normative self-rating on that trait across all group members, the target's self-rating on that trait, and the perceiver's self-rating on that trait. Within each group, we centered target and perceiver self-ratings for each trait around that trait's group mean. The multilevel models had four grouping variables because target ratings were cross-classified within perceivers, targets, and dyads, which in turn were nested within groups. We let intercepts vary randomly across perceivers, targets, dyads, and groups; we let slopes vary randomly across perceivers and targets. Details of these analyses are provided in online supplementary materials found at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/1948550613506718.

The fixed effect of normative self-ratings on perceiver's target ratings provides an estimate of mean *normative agreement*. The fixed effect of the target's self-ratings on the perceiver's target-ratings provides an estimate of mean *distinctive agreement*. The fixed effect of perceiver's self-ratings on perceiver's target-ratings provides an estimate of mean *perceived similarity*. Table 3 (line 1) shows the unstandardized partial regression coefficients from the basic SAM. Normative, target, and perceiver self-ratings all strongly predicted target ratings; thus, target ratings reflected a mixture of normative agreement, distinctive agreement, and perceived similarity.

Next, we tested the moderating effects of country (by adding to the basic model country and its interactions with the other predictors). Table 3 (line 2) shows the relevant fixed effects. Country moderated distinctive agreement and perceived similarity; conducting the analyses separately on the samples from each country confirmed that distinctive agreement was greater in America ($b = 0.155$, $SE = 0.016$, $t = 9.87$) than in China ($b = 0.081$, $SE = 0.014$, $t = 5.92$), while perceived similarity was greater in China ($b = 0.203$, $SE = 0.019$, $t = 10.41$) than in America ($b = 0.135$, $SE = 0.018$, $t = 7.52$).

To test whether perceivers' individualistic and collectivistic values moderated normative agreement, distinctive agreement, or perceived similarity, we added to the basic model individualism and collectivism and their interactions with each of the basic model predictors. Table 3 (lines 3 and 4) shows the relevant fixed effects. Distinctive agreement was positively associated with individualism. Perceived similarity was associated negatively with individualism but positively with collectivism. Figure 2 highlights how perceived similarity had mirror image associations with collectivism and individualism: Individuals who valued collectivism or devalued individualism assumed moderate levels of distinctive self-other similarity, while individuals who valued individualism or devalued collectivism assumed little self-other similarity.

Controlling for country, the effects of individualism and collectivism on perceived similarity remained significant (*b*s = −0.032 and 0.039, *SE*s = 0.015 and 0.014, *t*s = −2.15 and 2.78), although the effect of individualism on distinctive agreement did not ($b = 0.015$, $SE = 0.008$, $t = 1.77$). Therefore, individualism and collectivism may mediate the moderating effects of country on perceived similarity. Sobel tests indicated indirect effects of country on perceived similarity through both individualism and collectivism (*z*s = −1.90 and 2.29, *p*s <.06). The direct effect of country on perceived similarity was no longer significant after controlling for individualism or collectivism (*b*s = −0.049 and −0.048, *SE*s = 0.028 and 0.027, *t*s = −1.75 and −1.78). Thus, individualism and collectivism mediated the effect of country on perceived similarity.

Group Closeness and Gender

Finally, although not a focus of our study, we tested effects of group closeness and gender because they may interest other researchers. We standardized the closeness variables (months, frequency, and regard) and dummy-coded gender (female = 0, male = 1). Compared to female groups, male groups showed more normative agreement and perceived similarity (*b*s = 0.075 and 0.077, *SE*s = 0.034 and 0.027) but less relationship variance and distinctive agreement (*b*s = −0.118 and −0.063, *SE*s = 0.056 and 0.021). Acquaintanceship length predicted more normative agreement and

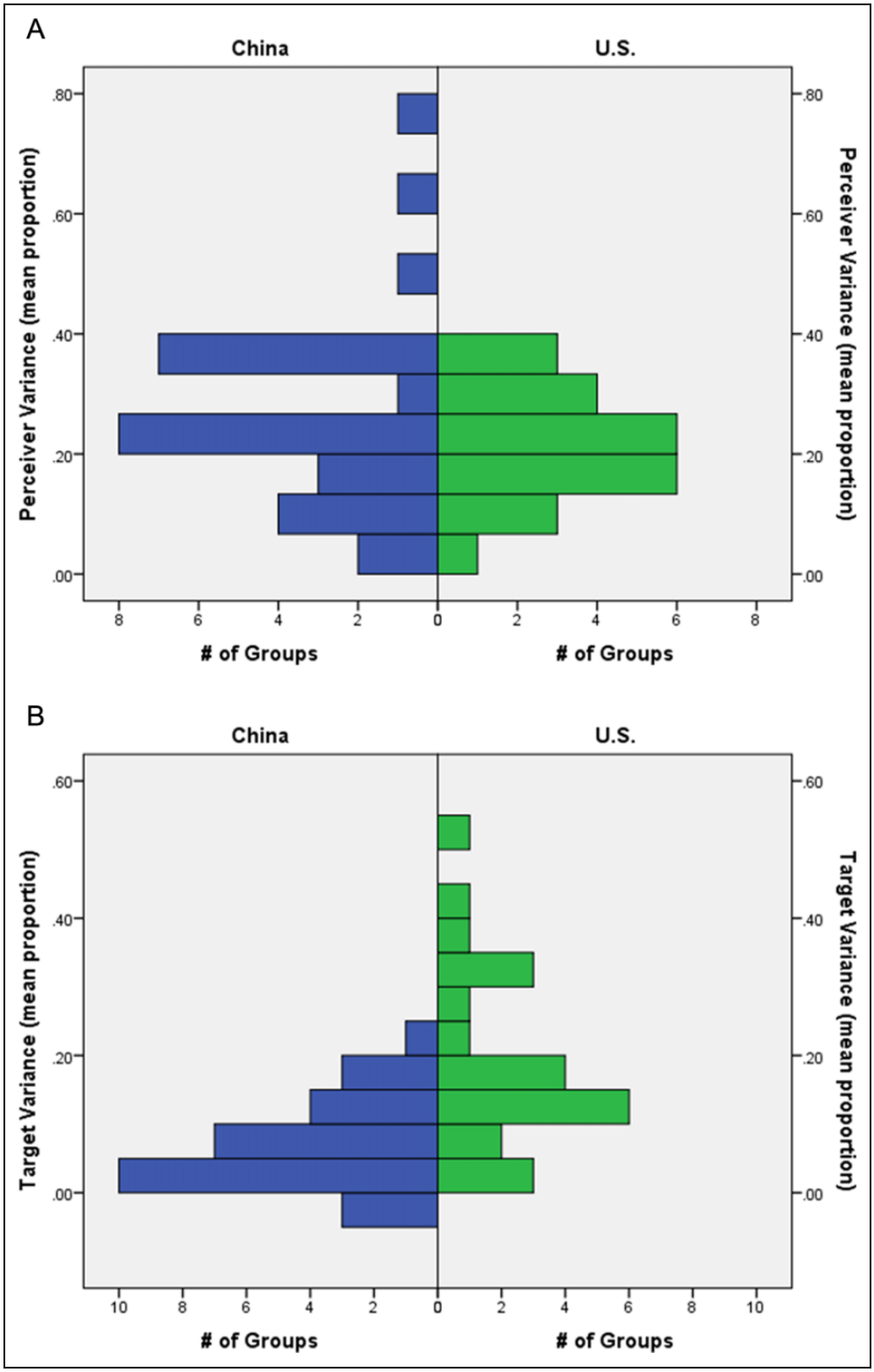

Figure 1. Histograms of the number of groups in each country showing different levels of perceiver variance (A) and target variance (B).

relationship variance (*b*s = 0.028 and 0.131, *SE*s = 0.013 and 0.048) and less perceiver variance ($b = -0.095$, $SE = 0.044$). Frequent interactions predicted greater distinctive agreement ($b = 0.018$, $SE = 0.008$), normative agreement ($b = 0.071$, $SE = 0.014$), and perceived similarity ($b = 0.037$, $SE = 0.010$). Finally, greater regard predicted greater normative agreement and perceived similarity (*b*s = 0.109 and 0.056, *SE*s = 0.012 and 0.009).

Table 3. Results of Regression of Target Ratings on Normative, Target, and Perceiver Self-Ratings, and Their Interactions With Country, Individualism, and Collectivism.

	Normative Self-Ratings			Target Self-Ratings			Perceiver Self-Ratings		
Predictors	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*b*	*SE*	*t*
Average effects	**0.374**	**0.017**	**22.53**	**0.115**	**0.011**	**10.83**	**0.171**	**0.013**	**12.70**
Interactions									
Country	−0.008	0.034	−0.24	**0.075**	**0.021**	**3.62**	**−0.068**	**0.027**	**−2.55**
Individualism	−0.007	0.017	−0.42	**0.026**	**0.008**	**3.08**	**−0.037**	**0.014**	**−2.62**
Collectivism	0.022	0.015	1.43	0.001	0.008	0.13	**0.039**	**0.014**	**2.90**

Note. *b*s are unstandardized partial regression coefficients. Country was contrast coded (China = −.5, US = +.5). *t*s > 2.0 are boldfaced.

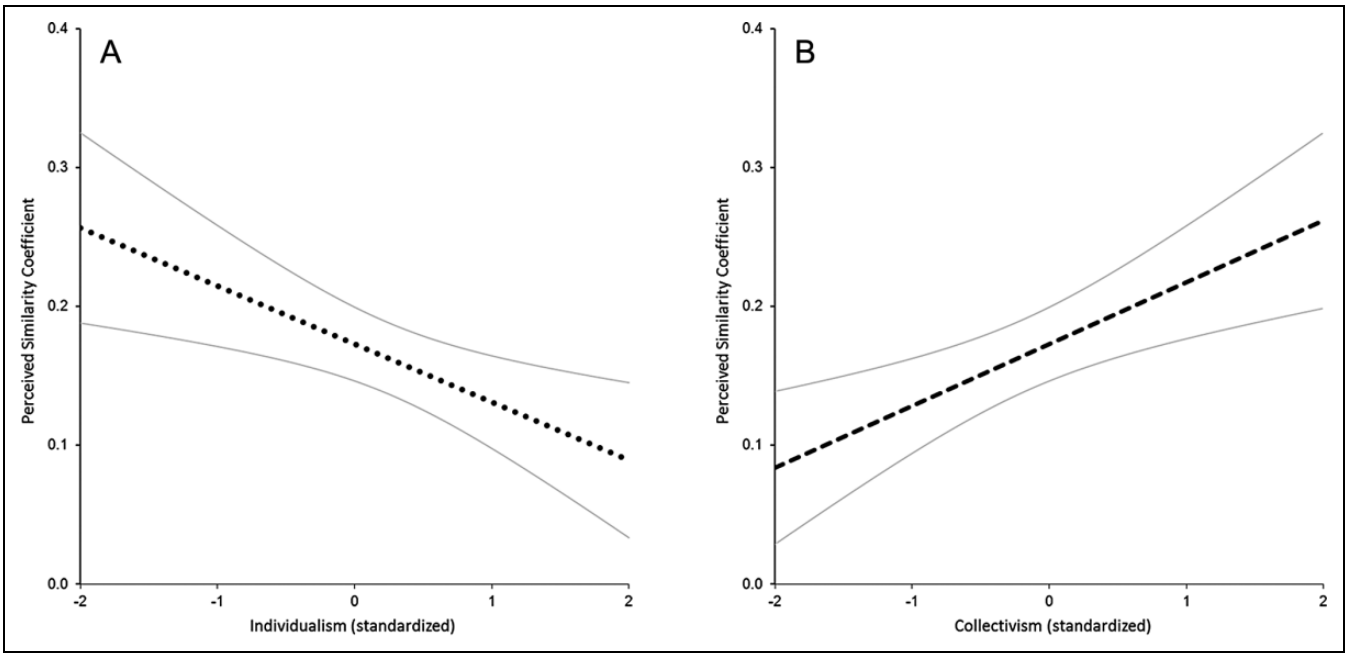

Figure 2. Perceived similarity coefficients as a function of individualism (A) or collectivism (B). The straight lines show the estimated simple slopes for perceived similarity at each level of collectivism or individualism; the curved lines show the 95% confidence bands around those slopes. We computed equations for the confidence bands using utilities developed by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006).

Discussion

Groups of five acquaintances described themselves and each other. Chinese more than Americans portrayed their peers as similar to themselves and to each other (i.e., more perceived similarity and less variance in target-ratings); conversely, Americans more than Chinese displayed a shared understanding of what distinguished each group member—including the self—from others (i.e., more target variance and distinctive agreement). The differences between countries were not attributable to differences in group closeness or the positivity of the ratings.

Individualism was more valued in the United States, whereas collectivism was more valued in China. Stronger individualistic values predicted less perceived similarity and more distinctive agreement, more target variance, and more overall variance in target ratings. Stronger collectivistic values predicted more perceiver variance and perceived similarity. Mediation tests suggested that cultural differences in collectivism help explain the effects of country on perceived similarity, while cultural differences in individualism help explain the effects of country on target variance and perceived similarity; however, future research using experimental (e.g., priming) manipulations and more comprehensive and reliable measures of individualism-collectivism would provide more conclusive evidence.

Many possible explanations exist for the observed group differences in patterns of person perception (Funder, 2012; Kenny, 1994). Perhaps Americans more than Chinese display behavior that distinguishes group members from each other (e.g., Americans agree about who is moodiest because one member does clearly and consistently act moodiest), but if so, self-ratings should also vary more in American than in Chinese groups, which was not the case. Another possibility is that Chinese and Americans conceptualize and use traits in fundamentally different ways, but this suggestion also lacks support, for example,

Ching et al. (in press) found self-reported traits predicted experiences during everyday interactions as powerfully in China as in America. Nonetheless, Americans do appear more apt to attribute others' behaviors to distinctive traits (Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000). Furthermore, if Americans deem individual differences more worthy topics of conversation, such conversations may help solidify shared trait theories (what indicates someone is "moody") and shared impressions of individuals' distinctive traits (who in our group is "moody").

In contrast, Chinese may be less inclined to highlight differences between group members and more inclined to notice and ascribe group traits (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2007). Indeed, our Chinese groups showed less variance in target ratings, suggesting that members shared group stereotypes that influenced how they perceived each other. However, the accuracy of group stereotypes—as gauged by normative agreement—was no greater for Chinese than for American perceivers. Chinese perceivers were not more accurate partly because, as evidenced by their elevated levels of perceived similarity, they overestimated the normativeness of their own distinctive personality traits.

Several features of our study may limit the generalizability of our findings. First, the traits may not be representative of all traits, especially Chinese traits which may less comfortably conform to the five-factor model (Zhou, Saucier, Gao, & Liu, 2009). Second, the results might change if the targets were out-group members rather than liked in-group members; for example, research suggests that people who value communion perceive greater self-other similarity, but only with liked and in-group—and not with disliked or out-group—others (Locke, Craig, Baik, & Gohil, 2012). Finally, the participants—students at specific universities—constitute small, nonrepresentative, subpopulations of the United States and China. The observed differences may be unique to the universities or groups we sampled; studies on others samples are needed in order to conclude that these results reflect differences between Americans and Chinese more generally.

We began by noting that being similar and being different each have costs and benefits. We will conclude by noting how patterns of person perception that emphasize similarities or differences also have costs and benefits, both for individuals and for groups. Research shows that perceived similarity with another person facilitates feeling connected, empathic, cooperative, and altruistic toward that person (Byrne, 1971; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997); thus, the pattern of perceiving greater self-other and within-group similarity may facilitate a sense of inclusion for individuals and harmony within groups. On the other hand, the pattern of greater target variance and distinctive agreement may facilitate a sense of identity for individuals and efficient division of labor within groups (e.g., the "neat" member is tasked with keeping meticulous notes, while the "gregarious" member is tasked with making new contacts). Moreover, it is intriguing to speculate that if the optimal balance between the risks and rewards of fitting in and the risks and rewards of standing out differs between cultures, then there may be corresponding differences between cultures in the relative advantages and disadvantages of each pattern of person perception.

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