

Abstract

We propose a new framework for understanding cultural differences by noting the two-sidedness of independence and interdependence—the engaging side and the disengaging side—that has been largely overlooked in the literature. The engaging side promotes relationships with others, whereas the disengaging side keeps individuals away from others. It is generally believed that interdependence promotes positive relationships with others, and independence makes people distinct from others. We term the generally assumed conceptions of interdependence as engaging interdependence and that of independence as disengaging independence. The importance of disengaging interdependence was recently noted by Hashimoto and Yamagishi (2013) who proposed that the east-west cultural differences in interdependence lie in rejection avoidance (i.e., disengaging interdependence) and not in the other aspect of interdependence which they called “harmony seeking” (i.e., engaging interdependence). We propose a similar distinction between engaging and disengaging aspects of independence based on the niche construction approach advanced by Yamagishi (2011a). The core of engaging independence lies in self-expression—making inner thoughts and values visible to others—to promote relationships with relative strangers. The core of disengaging independence is the self-assertion to be unique and not influenced by others, i.e., the protection the self from threats from others. Based on these distinctions, we constructed four scales to measure engaging independence, disengaging independence, engaging interdependence, and disengaging interdependence and found, in a cross-cultural questionnaire study with Japanese and North American responders, that the cultural difference expected in cultural psychology existed when engaging independence was contrasted with disengaging interdependence. Japanese participants scored higher than Americans on disengaging interdependence and lower on engaging independence. No cultural

difference was found in disengaging independence. We found a cultural difference in engaging interdependence, but our findings were the opposite of what is generally expected in cultural psychology: American participants scored higher than the Japanese on engaging interdependence. These findings are consistent with the social niche construction model, which views culture as a social niche.