

Examining Self-Advantage in the Suffering of Others: Cross-Cultural Differences in Beneficiary and Observer Justice Sensitivity Among Chinese, Germans, and Russians

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Abstract Other-related concerns for justice are fundamental components of morality and interpersonal behaviors. In this paper, we investigated macro/cultural and micro/individual differences in justice concerns for others. More specifically, beneficiary sensitivity (BS) and observer sensitivity (OS) were compared across China as a typical collectivist society, and Germany and Russia as two individualistic societies. Individualism–collectivism was assumed to mediate the cultural variance of BS and OS. In Study 1, Chinese participants exhibited more BS but less OS compared to German participants. In Study 2, the Chinese participants exhibited

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more BS but not significantly different OS compared to Russian participants. Moreover, collectivism mediated this cultural difference in BS but not OS. In Study 3, collectivist participants identified according to their proposals in social value games exhibited more BS than did individualistic participants, while the two groups revealed no significant difference in OS. Taken together, our studies consistently show that higher collectivism both on the cultural and individual levels is related to BS but not to OS, suggesting that collectivist values make people sensitive to self-advantage in comparison to the suffering of others.

Keywords Justice sensitivity · Beneficiary · Observer · Collectivism · Chinese

Introduction

Confucius says: The superior man comprehends righteousness, while the small man comprehends profit.

—Analects IV, Translated by Fung (1985)

Social justice is a fundamental motive of human beings, and the comprehension of and commitment to principles of justice (“righteousness” in *Analects*) is a crucial virtue of a decent person (Lerner, 2003; Rawls, 1971). Genuine justice concerns need to be and can be differentiated from self-interests and from the justification of the status quo, and are related to sensitivity to moral violation, especially to the suffering of other people (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Lerner, 2003).

Justice Sensitivity

Previous research has shown that individuals differ in how sensitive they are to justice issues. Justice sensitivity (JS) includes a low perceptual threshold for incidents of injustice, strong emotional responses to injustice (anger, outrage, and guilt), the tendency to ruminate about injustice, and the motivation to reestablish justice (Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt & Mohiyeddini, 1996; Schmitt, Neumann, & Montada, 1995). Every incidence of injustice involves up to four perspectives: victim, perpetrator, observer, and beneficiary (Mikula, Petri, & Tanzer, 1990). Whereas perpetrators directly commit injustice to victims, observers and beneficiaries passively witness or profit from injustice that was committed by someone else.

JS can be decomposed into four facets that correspond to these perspectives: Victim sensitivity (VS), perpetrator sensitivity (PS), observer sensitivity (OS), and beneficiary sensitivity (BS). Previous research has found that VS is a mixture of self-related concerns and a sense of justice. The remaining three components have no selfish component. Rather they indicate prosocial and genuine justice concerns. Two components, OS and BS, are especially intriguing because unlike PS, they lack direct involvement. Therefore, strategic behaviors and emotional expressions of

moral outrage and guilt are least likely which make them ideal candidates for investigating pure justice concerns (Gollwitzer, Schmitt, Schalke, Maes, & Baer, 2005; Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer, & Maes, 2010; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005).

BS, OS, and Culture

Past research has revealed many insights into the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of individual differences in the facets of JS (Schmitt et al., 2005, 2010). For example, although OS and BS overlap similarly with prosocial dispositions, they also have distinct correlates. For instance, BS, but not OS, is linked with modesty as a facet of agreeableness which implies a tendency to be humble and considerate of the needs of other; OS, but not BS, is linked with assertiveness as a facet of extraversion which implies autonomy and self-assuredness as an observer in social conflict situations (Schmitt et al., 2010). These distinct correlates raise the question whether and how BS and OS vary differently across cultures. What cultural differences can be expected?

In individualistic societies like Germany, self-enhancement and striving for a privileged status is common because competition among individuals is accepted, encouraged, and even demanded (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). In contrast, in collectivist societies like China, other values such as personal modesty and social prohibition are very important. These values prevent people from engaging in self-enhancement and striving toward self-privilege (Cai et al., 2011; Chen, Bond, Chan, Tang, & Buchtel, 2009; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As a consequence, it seems plausible to assume that citizens of collectivist countries like China are more beneficiary sensitive compared to citizens of individualistic cultures like Germany.

What differences in OS can be expected between individualistic and collectivist societies? Some anthropological, sociological, and psychological studies suggest that Chinese citizens exhibit lower levels of empathic concern compared to individualistic societies (Cassels, Chan, & Chung, 2010; Smith, 1894/1970). Given (a) that empathic concerns for others are related to greater levels of assertiveness and autonomy in providing help, (b) that assertiveness and autonomy in helping are more pronounced in individualistic cultures compared to collectivist cultures (Trommsdorff, Friedlmeier, & Mayer, 2007), and (c) that assertiveness is linked to OS, we expect that OS will be more pronounced in individualistic countries like Germany compared to collectivist countries like China.

Consistent with this reasoning, a preliminary study found that Chinese adults exhibited higher beneficiary than OS (Wu, Schmitt, Zhou, & Han, 2011). The present research follows up on this preliminary study. Whereas our preliminary study only compared BS and OS within a culture, the present research systematically compares both facets of JS across countries that differ in individualism–collectivism.

The Present Research

Three studies were designed to explore differences in BS and OS across cultures that vary in individualism–collectivism. Moreover, we investigated how individualism–collectivism correlates with JS on the micro level of individuals and if this correlation is consistent with differences in JS on the macro level of countries that vary in individualism–collectivism. Finally, using mediation analysis, we tested whether individualism–collectivism can explain differences in JS between cultures. We used samples from the collectivist Chinese culture as well as from the individualistic German and Russian cultures. We test the assumption that collectivist cultures/individuals, compared to individualistic cultures/individuals, are more sensitive to others' suffering in comparison to unfair self-advantage as a beneficiary, but less sensitive to others' suffering that is merely witnessed but unrelated to own advantages. Study 1 tested whether on average, collectivist Chinese participants exhibit a higher BS and lower OS compared to individualistic German participants. Study 2 tested whether Chinese participants exhibit a lower level of individualism and a higher level of collectivism and BS in comparison to Russian participants, and if individualism–collectivism mediates the cultural variance of BS. Study 3 tested whether collectivist participants, as identified via social value games, exhibit a higher BS than individualistic participants do.

Study 1

In the first study, Chinese and German college students were recruited. We expected that Chinese participants would exhibit a higher BS and lower OS than German participants.

Participants

Three hundred and twelve college students from Beijing, in the east of China, and Luzhou, in the west of China, were recruited in class. Eight of them who responded randomly or failed to complete the survey were not included in the analysis, resulting in 304 valid cases (161 female; age 18–25). Three hundred and ninety seven German college students from Landau were recruited in class (300 female; age 18–25).

Materials

We employed the 10-item subscales of the Justice Sensitivity Inventory (JSI) for measuring BS (e.g., “I feel guilty when I am better off than others for no reason” and “It bothers me when things come easily to me that others have to work hard for”) and OS (e.g., “I am upset when someone is undeservingly worse off than others” and “It worries me when someone has to work hard for things that come easily to others”). Participants were instructed to respond to the items on 6-point rating scales (0 = not at all and 5 = exactly) with high scores reflecting high JS. Schmitt et al. (2010) developed the German and English versions of the JSI. The

Chinese version was drafted by Nazlic (2008) and improved by Wu et al. (2011). Estimated reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) of the two scales ranged from .85 to .90 in Study 1. BS and OS scores were obtained by averaging the item scores of the BS and the OS scales, respectively.

Results

Including gender and age as covariates, culture as a between-subject factor, and JS facet as a within-subject factor, a 2 (Chinese vs. German) \times 2 (BS vs. OS) mixed-design multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. With a significant gender effect ($F(1, 687) = 24.04, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$) and no significant age effect ($F(1, 687) = 0.85, p = .36, \eta^2 = .00$), the main effects of JS facet ($F(1, 687) = 1.31, p = .25, \eta^2 = .00$) and culture ($F(1, 687) = 0.07, p = .79, \eta^2 = .00$) were not significant. However, as expected, a significant interaction effect of JS facet \times culture was found ($F(1, 683) = 62.31, p < .01, \eta^2 = .08$). As shown in Fig. 1, Chinese participants exhibited more BS ($M = 2.93, SD = 0.87$ vs. $M = 2.72, SD = 0.84; t = 3.10, p < .01$) but less OS ($M = 2.60, SD = 0.90$ vs. $M = 2.85, SD = 0.74; t = 3.98, p < .01$) compared to German participants.

Study 2

Study 2 served as a replication of Study 1. Instead of German participants, Russian participants were compared with Chinese participants. Moreover, individualism–collectivism was measured in addition to BS and OS. We tested whether Chinese participants would exhibit a higher BS and a lower OS, and a higher collectivism and a lower individualism, compared to Russian participants. Additionally, we tested whether individualism–collectivism mediates the cross-cultural differences in JS.

Participants

Two hundred and sixty college students from Xiamen, in the east of China, and Kunming, in the west of China, were recruited in class. Thirteen of them failed to

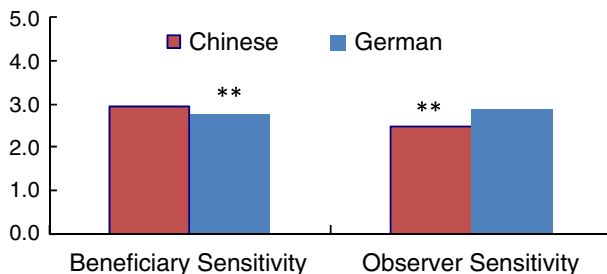


Fig. 1 The beneficiary and observer sensitivity among the Chinese and German participants, ** $p < .01$

complete the survey and were excluded in the analysis, resulting in 247 valid cases (150 female; age: 18–30). Two hundred and eighty Russian college students in Moscow and Voronezh were recruited in class. Seventeen of them failed to complete the survey and were excluded from the analysis, resulting in 267 valid cases (187 female; age: 18–30).

Materials

The same scales as in Study 1 were used for BS and OS. The Russian version of JS was developed by Nartova-Bochaver and Astanina (2014). Estimated reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) ranged from .86 to .91 in Study 2. In addition, Triandis and Gelfand's (1998) Individualism–Collectivism Scale was employed, in which participants were instructed to respond from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We obtained an individualism index via aggregating the 8 individualism items (e.g., “Winning is everything” and “Competition is the law of nature”) and a collectivism index via aggregating the 8 collectivism items (e.g., “It is important to me that I respect the decisions made by my group” and “The well-being of my coworkers is important to me”). Estimated reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) of individualism and collectivism amounted to .72 and .84 for the Chinese sample, and to .67 and .77 for the Russian sample.

Results

Including gender and age as covariates, culture as the between-subject factor, and JS facet as a within-subject factor, a 2 (Chinese vs. Russian) \times 2 (BS vs. OS) mixed-design MANOVA was conducted. With no significant gender effect ($F(1, 489) = 3.54, p = .06, \eta^2 = .01$) or age effect ($F(1, 489) = 0.00, p = .99, \eta^2 = .00$), a main effect of culture ($F(1, 489) = 9.95, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$) but no main effect of JS facet ($F(1, 489) = 0.03, p = .87, \eta^2 = .00$) were significant. Importantly and in line with both our theoretical predictions as well as with the results of Study 1, a significant interaction between culture and JS facet was found ($F(1, 489) = 104.86, p < .01, \eta^2 = .18$). As shown in Fig. 2, Chinese participants exhibited more BS ($M = 3.03, SD = 0.87$ vs. $M = 2.37, SD = 1.04; t(506) = 7.76, p < .01$) but not significantly different OS ($M = 2.64, SD = 0.94$ vs. $M = 2.80, SD = 0.97; t(505) = -1.84, p = .07$) compared to Russian participants.

In line with expectations, Chinese participants revealed lower individualism ($M = 4.66, SD = 0.82$ vs. $M = 5.00, SD = 0.79; t(511) = -4.78, p < .01$) but higher collectivism ($M = 5.48, SD = 0.89$ vs. $M = 5.01, SD = 0.87; t(512) = 6.04, p < .01$) than Russian participants did. In the Chinese sample, individualism had no significant correlation with BS ($r = .08, p = .25$) but a significant correlation with OS ($r = .19, p < .01$), and collectivism had a significant correlation with BS ($r = .25, p < .01$) but no significant correlation with OS ($r = .08, p = .19$). In the Russian sample, unexpectedly, individualism had no significant correlation with BS ($r = -.10, p = .09$) or OS ($r = .06, p = .36$), but collectivism had a significant correlation with BS ($r = .20, p < .01$) and OS ($r = .26, p < .01$).

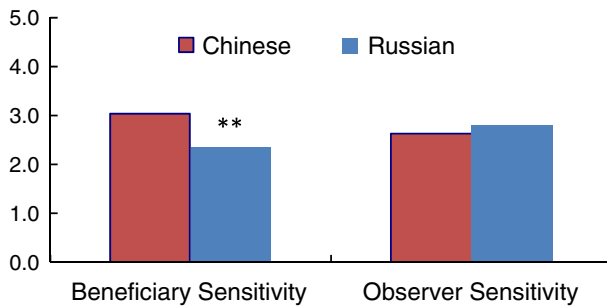


Fig. 2 The beneficiary and observer sensitivity among the Chinese and Russian participants, ** $p < .01$

Next, we tested via the simple mediation model analysis (Hayes, 2013) whether individualism–collectivism can explain the cultural difference in BS between Chinese and Russian participants. We regarded culture as the independent variable (1 = China, 0 = Russia), BS as a dependent variable, individualism and collectivism as mediators, and age and gender as the covariates. The results revealed that culture was significantly related to individualism ($B = -.35$, $SE = .08$, $t(491) = -4.77$, $p < .01$) and collectivism ($B = .52$, $SE = .08$, $t(491) = 6.54$, $p < .01$), and that collectivism ($B = .26$, $SE = .05$, $t(491) = 5.24$, $p < .01$) but not individualism ($B = -.06$, $SE = .05$, $t(491) = -1.16$, $p = .25$) was significantly related to BS. Further, culture revealed a significant total effect ($B = .65$, $SE = .09$, $t(491) = 7.36$, $p < .01$) and a significant direct effect ($B = .49$, $SE = .09$, $t(491) = 5.36$, $p < .01$) on BS. For collectivism, as shown in Fig. 3, we found a significant indirect effect of culture on BS, $B = .13$, $SE = .03$, 95 % CI [.07, .20]. Since this interval excluded zero, this result supported our claim that the cultural differences in BS between Chinese and Russians are at least partially mediated by collectivism. For individualism, we found no significant indirect effect of culture on BS, $B = .02$, $SE = .02$, 95 % CI [−.02, .07]. Since this interval did not exclude zero, this result supported that the cultural differences in BS between Chinese and Russians are not significantly mediated by individualism.

Study 3

Study 3 was designed in order to replicate directly the link between individualism–collectivism and JS that was found in Study 2 and that could partially

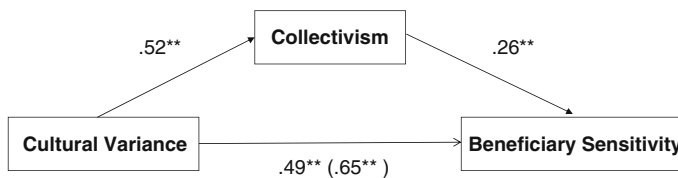


Fig. 3 A simple mediation model showing the direct and total effects of collectivism for the cultural variance of beneficiary sensitivity between Chinese and Russian participants. Numbers on the line indicate the regression coefficients. Note Cultural variance was coded to 1 (China) and 0 (Russia), ** $p < .01$

explain cultural differences in BS. In order to demonstrate the robustness of the finding, we used a different measure of individualism–collectivism in Study 3, the social value games developed by Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman (1997). In these games, participants are requested to choose among several distributions of money between themselves and another party. Based on their choices, people are classified as competitive (people who maximize the difference between their outcome and the outcome of the other party), individualistic (people who maximize their own outcome independent of the outcome of the other party), and prosocial (people who prefer equal distributions even if equality comes at the expense of their own outcome or the total outcome for both parties). We argue that competitive and individualistic people are less BS compared to prosocial people because the former primarily care about their own outcome (individualistic) and even tend to maximize it at the expense of others (competitive), whereas the latter refrain from taking more than the other party gets. Accordingly, individualistic and competitive participants were pooled into one group and compared with prosocial participants. We predicted that prosocial participants would score higher on BS than the other group consisting of individualistic and competitive participants. Moreover, we predicted that the two groups would not differ in OS because our participants did not act in the perspective of a third party who observes two recipients.

Method

A subgroup ($N = 242$) of the Chinese sample from Study 1 participated in nine economic games that were used to identify individual difference in social value orientations according to Van Lange et al. (1997). Every game required participants to make a choice among three distributions corresponding to the social value types defined earlier: larger outcomes for self than for others reflect individualistic choices (e.g., you get 600 dollars and other gets 500 dollars), large differences between own outcome and other outcome reflect competitive choices (e.g., you get 500 dollars and other gets 100 dollars), and equal distributions reflect prosocial choices (e.g., you get 200 dollars and others get 200 dollars). Participants were classified as either individualistic, competitive, or prosocial if at least six choices were consistent with one of these social value orientations. Following these criteria, we identified 40 as individualistic, 10 as competitive, and 89 participants as prosocial; 103 participants (42.56 %) could not be classified. Individualistic and competitive participants were combined into one group and defined as individualistic ones ($N = 50$) for reasons given earlier, and compared to prosocial ones who, in terms of the collectivism construct, were considered as the collectivist participants ($N = 89$). In order to validate the group assignment, participants rated the statement “winning is everything” on a 1–7 point rating scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). As expected, the mean score was significantly higher among individualistic ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.34$) compared to collectivist participants ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.34$), $t(137) = 3.70$, $p < .01$.

Results and Discussion

A 2 (JS facet: beneficiary vs. observer) \times 2 (social value orientation: individualism vs. collectivism) mixed-design MANOVA was conducted. The main effect of social value orientation was significant ($F(1, 137) = 4.01, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$), and the main effect of JS facet was significant as well ($F(1, 137) = 39.93, p < .01, \eta^2 = .23$). Finally and importantly, a significant interaction effect of social value orientation \times JS facet was found ($F(1, 137) = 5.26, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$). In line with expectations and as shown in Fig. 4, BS was higher among collectivist participants ($M = 3.25, SD = 0.77$) than among individualistic ones ($M = 2.85, SD = 0.90$), $t(137) = 2.78, p < .01$, whereas OS did not significantly differ between two groups ($M = 2.65, SD = 0.80$ vs. $M = 2.56, SD = 0.69$), $t(137) = .61, p = .54$.

Discussion

In two studies, we demonstrated that citizens of a collectivist society, China, are more beneficiary sensitive and less observer sensitive compared to citizens of two individualistic societies, Germany (Study 1) and Russia (Study 2). Moreover, we demonstrated for Chinese and Russian participants (Study 2) that the difference in BS can be explained, at least partly, with differences in collectivism. This finding was conceptually replicated in Study 3 in which social value orientation according to Van Lange et al. (1997) was used as an indicator of individualism–collectivism. More specifically, collectivist participants displayed more BS than individualistic participants did. This finding shows that the link between BS and collectivism is robust and can be generalized across methodological paradigms assessing collectivism. The validity of the results that were obtained in Study 3 is further corroborated by the finding that OS did not differ between social value groups. This makes perfect sense because participants are involved in social value games but not neutral third parties who observe allocation conflicts among recipients.

With regard to the collectivist society of our research, China, our findings confirm previous studies showing that the values of modesty and social prohibition

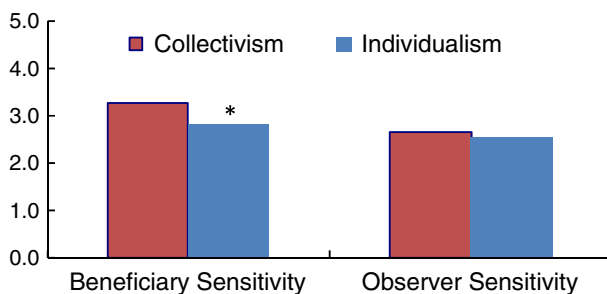


Fig. 4 Beneficiary and observer sensitivity as the function of individualistic–collectivist orientation in social value games, * $p < .05$

are more important than are self-enhancement and competency (Cai et al., 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The emphasis in Chinese culture on modesty and social prohibition seems to make people particularly sensitive to any unfair self-advantage, because this unfair self-advantage violates social harmony. By contrast, individualistic cultures such as Germany and Russia, promote assertiveness and autonomy which in turn correlate with OS (Schmitt et al., 2010). Accordingly, Germans revealed higher OS compared to Chinese citizens in Study 1, and these results are consistent with previous findings about moral behavior (Cassels et al., 2010; Smith, 1894/1970; Trommsdorff et al., 2007). As shown in Study 2, however, Russians revealed a higher individualism but not significantly higher OS compared to Chinese, possibly because Russia is an individualistic country but less typical in individualism compared to other European–American countries (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Robinson, Lopez, Ramos, & Nartova-Bochaver, 2013).

Moreover, the elevated BS of Chinese people may be deeply influenced by their cultural heritage. According to Confucians' moral principle that gentlemen should seek justice against profits, the Chinese were taught over centuries to be sensitive with respect to their own beneficiary status in communications with others. Acting for profit ("li") was disparaged by Confucius and later Confucianists, and the unfair beneficiary was viewed as a "small man." As Confucius himself said in *Analects*, the superior man comprehends and acts according to the standard of righteousness (justice or "yi") whereas the small man comprehends and strives toward profit ("li"). Ever since Confucius made this distinction between "yi" and "li," it was considered to be of utmost importance in moral teachings by Confucianists (Fung, 1985). It is quite intriguing that the current Chinese college students imbued with globalization still seem to adhere to the Confucian anti-profit principle in their justice concerns.

Future research will have to show whether and to what extent (a) individuals' JS can be enhanced through strategies of perspective taking in different cultures, with beneficiary perspective taking presumably having a stronger impact in individualistic cultures and observer perspective taking presumably having a stronger impact in collectivist cultures; (b) individuals' BS and OS can be primed using specific cultural/moral regulation such as focusing on modest and obligation to prohibit self-advantage (should boost BS) versus focusing on assertiveness and autonomy in providing help (should boost OS) (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009); (c) the elevated BS of Chinese citizens can be harmonized with the competitiveness of globalization and, at this point, the multiple implications of BS for social communication in a competitive context are not yet clear. It seems possible if not likely that in the long run, competitive values such as status and power may become more and more at odds with BS and create increasing conflicts, in which a sensitive beneficiary will be liked but not respected (Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009).

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