Standing out as a signal to selfishness: Culture and devaluation of non-normative characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes and tests a theoretical model articulating when and why differences in devaluation and avoidance of individuals with non-normative characteristics emerge between East Asian and Western cultural contexts. Four main studies examined this theoretical model. In a pilot study, relative to Americans, Koreans devalued a target individual with a non-normative characteristic, and in Study 1 the target’s efforts to forestall disruption of group processes eliminated the devaluation in Korea, with perceived selfishness mediating this process. In Study 2, Koreans, relative to Americans, devalued and avoided coworkers with non-normative characteristics, particularly when the non-normative characteristic was controllable. Study 3 further showed that perceived selfishness mediates this effect with a behavioral dependent variable. Study 4 tested the generalizability to positively valenced characteristics and found that Koreans (relative to Americans) also devalue individuals with positive characteristics at non-normative levels. Implications for individuals with non-normative characteristics, organizational diversity, and cross-cultural interaction are discussed.

Introduction

What are the social and professional consequences of being a little different? For example, how do potential friends, employers, and colleagues evaluate individuals with non-normative characteristics such as being vegetarian, left-handed, or exceptionally curious? It is possible that such characteristics are largely ignored, accepted, or even embraced as charmingly distinctive (Frable, 1993; Kleck & Strenta, 1980). Another possible answer is that non-normative characteristics lead to social and professional devaluation (Choi-Kwon et al., 2004). A third possible answer is that both are true to some extent, and responses differ as a function of the cultural context in which the person with a non-normative characteristic is evaluated. In fact, studies have shown cultural variation in how people evaluate unusual objects and deviant behaviors (e.g., Gelfand & et al., 2011; Kim & Markus, 1999). Yet, little is known about how this cultural variance applies to evaluations of and desire for interaction with non-normative individuals or the psychological mechanisms that underlie such cultural variations. Thus, based on extant literatures on relevant cultural variance and on the processes that influence responses to differentness, we propose and test a model elucidating when and why cultural variance in responses to individuals with non-normative characteristics emerge. More specifically, we test the broad hypothesis that individuals from East Asian (relative to Western) cultures devalue and distance themselves from individuals with non-normative characteristics. We further systematically investigate the psychological processes underlying these potential cultural differences, and also propose and experimentally test the ways in which such devaluation may be countered.

Culture and responses to non-normative characteristics

Established theory and research has demonstrated cultural variance in the importance of behaviorally following social norms and in responses to unusual objects. Specifically, there is evidence of variance in societal levels of cultural tightness—the strength of cultural norms and the sanctions for behavioral norm violation (Gelfand, Nishi, & Raver, 2006; Gelfand & et al., 2011; Triandis, 1989). Tight societies (e.g., Japan) have clear and pervasive strong norms that often prescribe appropriate behavior, as well as low tolerance for deviation from such norms. If having a non-normative characteristic cues disruption of social harmony and group functioning through anticipated behavioral norm violation, individuals with non-normative characteristics would be comparatively more
devalued in tight (relative to loose) cultures. Because Asian cultural contexts (e.g., South Korea, Japan) are much tighter than North American cultural contexts (e.g., USA; Gelfand et al., 2011), this suggests that Westerners may also be more tolerant of individuals with non-normative characteristics than are East Asians.

Although this prior work focused on violation of prescriptive norms (i.e., what is considered proper or good), our current theorizing focuses on evaluations and behavioral avoidance of individuals with characteristics that diverge from what is descriptively normative (i.e., what is typical). Prescriptive norms may be based on descriptive norms, such that what is considered right or proper is sometimes determined in part by what is typical. For example, individuals feel pressure to follow what others do, particularly when their own behavior is visible to others in their environment (Asch, 1956). Importantly, descriptive norms appear to determine prescriptive norms more in East Asia than in the West, as was shown in a large meta-analysis of Asch study replications, in which collectivistic cultures showed stronger effects of conformity than did individualistic cultures (Bond & Smith, 1996). Similarly, collectivistic university students (relative to individualistic university students) were more likely to comply with a request when they were told their peers had complied (Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999). This suggests that in collectivistic (including Asian) societies, there is a stronger connection between what is and what should be. As a result, we predicted that East Asians would also devalue individuals with descriptively non-normative characteristics more than Westerners do.

Also suggesting cultural variance in responses to individuals with non-normative characteristics, Americans value unique objects and visual representations (relative to common ones) more than East Asians do (Ishii, Miyamoto, Rule, & Toriyama, 2014; Kim & Markus, 1999; Kim & Sherman, 2008). For example, after completing a pencil and paper survey in a public place, participants from East Asian or Western cultural contexts were asked to choose one of five pens to take home as a participant gift. One of the five pens was a different color than the other four, and Westerners were more likely than East Asians to choose this unique-colored pen (Kim & Markus, 1999). This and other studies by Kim and colleagues have focused on evaluations and selections of distinctive objects and abstract figures that vary in terms of visual distinctiveness. Because there is substantial overlap in how the human mind processes information about other people and information about objects (Yin, 1969), cultural variance in evaluations of distinctive images and objects would likely translate into cultural variance in evaluations of and desire for social and professional connections with individuals with non-normative characteristics. Based on these previous findings, we propose the first hypothesis (see Fig. 1 for the full theoretical model, including this hypothesis, represented as the indirect path from non-normative characteristics to devaluation and avoidance, moderated by culture).

**Hypothesis 1.** Relative to North Americans, East Asians devalue and avoid individuals with non-normative characteristics.

Hypothesis 1 focuses on the extent to which previously documented cultural differences in preferences for unique vs. common objects translate to similar preferences in terms of judgments of and interactions with individuals with non-normative characteristics. With this in mind, there are greater complexities to how the human mind processes information about humans vs. information about objects (e.g., Medin & Atran, 2004). For example, there is evidence that different parts of the brain manage processing of social and non-social information (Mitchell, Heatherton, & Macrae, 2002; Mitchell, Macrae, & Banaji, 2004). Thus, we also expected greater complexity to the process in evaluations of people with non-normative characteristics than in evaluations of unique or unusual objects.

The present research builds on the established theory and research (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011; Kim & Markus, 1999) in three ways. First, this is the first inquiry into cultural variance in devaluation of persons with non-normative characteristics. Thus, it is important to investigate whether cultural variance in responses to evaluations of unique objects (e.g., Kim & Markus, 1999) and assessments of norm-violating behaviors (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011) would be found in evaluations of persons as well. Second, more importantly, we examined the psychological processes that underlie cultural differences in the social devaluation of non-normative characteristics. In so doing, we also investigated generalizability and specificity of this cultural pattern to different non-normative characteristics that vary in their valence and controllability. Finally, unlike previous studies in which cultural differences were considered primarily in evaluative judgments (Gelfand et al., 2011; Kim & Markus, 1999), the present research examines social and organizational consequences of such differences, specifically the desire to interact and work with individuals and hiring decisions.

**Reasons for devaluation of people with non-normative traits**

There are several known reasons for devaluation of individuals with non-normative traits when they are devalued (e.g., Feldman & Crandall, 2007; Jones et al., 1984; King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singletary, & Turner, 2006; Madera & Hebl, 2012; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). For example, one of Jones et al.’s (1984) dimensions of stigma, which can serve as a tool for understanding devaluation of non-normative characteristics, two have received a great deal of attention with respect to theorizing and empirical investigation: peril (danger to others) and disruptiveness.

Specifically, subsequent research has developed the idea of peril in stigmatization by focusing on potential avoidance of non-normative others due to a perceived relationship between the potentially stigmatizing non-normative trait and contagion risk (e.g., Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Park, Faulkner, & Schaller, 2004). This means that non-normative characteristics that actually signal one is carrying and could transmit a contagious disease (e.g., skin lesions and AIDS) or those that miscue contagious disease (e.g., red skin patches caused by psoriasis, a non-infectious skin disease) should lead to social devaluation and avoidance (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Because disease avoidance is

![Fig. 1. Proposed theoretical model.](image-url)
an evolved adaptive response (and disease cues such as skin sores are similar for all humans), devaluation of individuals with non-normative characteristics due to contagion risk is less likely to vary across cultures.

In the present research, we focus instead on Jones et al.'s (1984) dimension of disruptiveness in the proposed model. Based on established theories of cultural variance in the importance of social and group harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), we theorize that cultural differences in responses to individuals with non-normative characteristics are primarily due to those individuals’ potentially negative impact on social interactions (i.e., being a burden to group functioning). Thus, we propose two related processes that influence the social and professional evaluation of non-normative characteristics as a function of culture.

The key element of the proposed processes is perceived intention to disrupt social harmony and group functioning, and how this perception varies across cultures. Social disruption can lead to social and professional devaluation in extreme forms, even in the West. As a vivid example, Goffman (1963) described how individuals with stutters are devalued because they disrupt the flow of interactions, and there is modern evidence that this is still the case (e.g., Boyle, Blood, & Blood, 2009; Gable, Blood, Tellis, & Althouse, 2004). At this level of disruption, a non-normative trait can even be problematic in the West, but social harmony is more valued in East Asia than in the West (e.g., Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006; Su et al., 1999). Indeed, because East Asians are more likely to understand themselves as interdependent with and connected to close others, they both value social harmony more and invest more in its maintenance than do Westerners (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For this reason, we propose that the threshold for being devalued on the basis of having a characteristic associated with disruption will be lower in East Asia than in the West. Thus, our hypotheses focus on cultural variance in responses to individuals with non-normative characteristics that are positive or neutral in valence, rather than non-normative characteristics that are clearly negative in valence. We expected that in East Asian cultural contexts, there would be a greater assumption that individuals with non-normative characteristics would disrupt group functioning. This assumption, in turn, leads to the devaluation of individuals who have non-normative characteristics (see Fig. 1).

**Hypothesis 2.** East Asians (relative to Westerners) expect more behavioral disruption from individuals with non-normative characteristics, and this process influences their devaluation and avoidance of these individuals.

This perceived intention to disrupt leads to predictions about situational factors that may moderate the cultural difference in response to individuals with non-normative characteristics, both in terms of people’s decisions for courses of action regarding their characteristic and in terms of perceived level of controllability for having the non-normative characteristic. Although East Asians (more than Westerners) were hypothesized to assume that an individual with a non-normative characteristic would be socially disruptive by default, there are situations in which it is clear that the individual will not cause any disruption. If the role of anticipated disruption is the psychological process that underlies the cultural difference, the cultural difference should be significantly attenuated or eliminated when there is clear and explicit information that the individual will not act in a disruptive manner. Thus, we tested this prediction experimentally.

**Perceived controllability as a moderator**

Another factor that impacts the evaluative consequences of having a non-normative characteristic and relates to the expected intention to disrupt social harmony is perceived controllability (e.g., Weiner et al., 1988). In a now classic empirical paper, Weiner et al. (1988) analyzed Americans’ affective responses to potentially stigmatizing characteristics that were either onset-controllable (perceived to be individuals’ responsibility) or not, as well as their desire to help individuals with the characteristics. They found that responses to characteristics that were perceived to be onset-controllable (e.g., being a drug abuser, having HIV/AIDS) elicited more anger and reduced desire to help relative to characteristics that were not onset-controllable (e.g., blindness, paraplegia). This shows that individuals devalue others more when they perceive that they are responsible for having the characteristic on which they could be devalued.

Information on controllability may confirm or eliminate the perception of disruptive intention. When characteristics are understood to be uncontrollable, observers are less likely to ascribe disruptive intention than when the characteristics are understood to be controllable. Although all people surely have some threshold beyond which choosing to be different is problematic, we expected East Asians to have less tolerance for individuals who have a non-normative characteristic by choice (i.e., controllable). Thus, East Asians would devalue and avoid individuals with non-normative characteristics who are perceived to have control over acquisition of their characteristic more than those who are perceived to have acquired it for reasons outside their control (see Fig. 1).

**Hypothesis 3.** Controllability of the non-normative characteristic moderates devaluation and avoidance, such that East Asians (relative to Westerners) devalue and avoid individuals with controllable non-normative characteristics more than they devalue and avoid individuals who have uncontrollable non-normative characteristics.

Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 3 regard how assumed disruption and intentionality influence the devaluation and avoidance of individuals with non-normative characteristics as a function of culture. The remaining question is why disruption of social harmony and perceived intentionality lead to devaluation and avoidance in East Asian, relative to Western, cultural contexts.

**Perceived selfishness as a mediator of devaluation and avoidance**

Behaving in a manner that disregards the impact of one’s behavior on others is less acceptable in East Asian cultural contexts than in Western cultural contexts. For example, asserting the self without attending to others is viewed as immature and problematic in Japan (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Given this, we predicted that when individuals with non-normative characteristics disrupt group functioning (or are assumed to be disruptive) in East Asian cultural contexts, this is interpreted to reflect their selfishness, which in turn leads to their social and professional devaluation. In contrast, if these individuals explicitly choose not to disrupt (by signaling that they will not make disruptive requests for special accommodation) and have not chosen to be potentially disruptive (have involuntarily acquired their non-normative characteristic), the devaluation will not occur because they will not appear selfish. In Western cultural contexts, however, asserting the self is seen as appropriate and is encouraged (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As a result, individuals with non-normative characteristics would be much less likely to be viewed as selfish and subsequently devalued and avoided, even in the absence of a no-disruption signal and when those characteristics were acquired voluntarily (see Fig. 1).

**Hypothesis 4.** Perceived selfishness mediates the interaction effect of culture and having a disruptive non-normative characteristic on evaluations and desire for interaction.
Overview

Four studies empirically examined our proposed theoretical model by comparing American vs. Korean evaluations of (and desire for interaction with) individuals with non-normative characteristics. Koreans served as our East Asian samples because Korea is a particularly tight culture (Gelfand et al., 2011) and has also been used for investigations of cultural responses to unique objects (Kim & Markus, 1999). We examined the hypotheses proposed in the theoretical model in four ways, in three different contexts (a hiring decision, a work dinner party, and a social interaction) and then once decontextualized. Studies 1–3 utilized non-normative characteristics in contextualized situations to most closely approximate how individuals evaluate each other. These studies were designed to include Spencer, Zanna, and Fong’s (2005) methodological tool of manipulating rather than measuring the first process variable, such that disruptive intention was manipulated in these first three studies. Specifically, Study 1 assessed the process variables of behavioral disruption in an interview setting and subsequent perceived selfishness on desire to hire job candidates. Study 2 investigated evaluations of an individual with an intentional non-normative characteristic (vegetarian), an individual with a non-normative characteristic acquired without intention (food allergy), or a comparison individual with no non-normative characteristic (no dietary restriction) in a work dinner party context. Then, Study 3 examined individuals’ behavioral request to socialize with an individual who was vegetarian, had a food allergy, or had no dietary restrictions, and how perceived selfishness mediated this effect. Finally, Study 4 assessed evaluations of individuals with positively valenced non-normative characteristics (unusually friendly, strong extrovert, and extremely curious), to test the generalizability of the main phenomenon of interest.

Study 1

Together, a pilot study and Study 1 examined cultural devaluation of non-normative characteristics as well as the proposed processes (assumed disruption and perceived selfishness) through which non-normative characteristics are devalued in East Asia relative to the West (Hypotheses 1, 2, and 4). Study 1 used left-handedness as the non-normative characteristic, because it is non-normative in both cultures and individuals who are left-handed can choose to disrupt group functioning by making special requests related to their handedness, but they can also avoid making any special requests, thereby maintaining smooth group functioning. In preparation for this study, a separate pilot study compared cultural baseline evaluations of a left-handed individual for his expected disruptiveness and his hirability as a job candidate, as well as how expectations for disruptiveness mediate the cultural difference in hirability. Thus Study 1 sought to isolate the role disruption plays in the devaluation of non-normative characteristics as a function of culture by experimentally manipulating both having a non-normative characteristic and the degree of disruption in an organizational process. We also measured how selfish the individual was perceived to be and tested if this mediated the effects on hiring decisions.

Thus, the pilot study assessed the naturally existing association between devaluation of and expected disruption from individuals with non-normative characteristics, and Study 1 investigated the role disruption plays in devaluation of individuals with non-normative characteristics. If in Study 1 Koreans devalue individuals only when they disrupt an organizational process (but not when they explicitly maintain it), this reinforces the interpretation that the cultural difference in evaluations of left-handed individuals identified in the pilot study is the result of an association between non-normative characteristics and disruption. Stated differently, if there is a culture difference in evaluations of and expectations for disruption from left-handed individuals in the pilot study and then an effect of disruption in Study 1, this would suggest that expected behavioral disruption is a reason for devaluation of left-handed individuals in Korea.

Pilot study

This pilot study was designed to establish baseline culture differences in evaluations of the non-normative characteristic used in Study 1 (left-handedness) among Korean and European American young adults. One hundred one young adults in the United States and South Korea (Age: \(M = 25.01, SD = 3.01\) completed the study online in their native languages\(^1\) and correctly identified the job candidate as left-handed.

Participants read the personal details and an interview transcript of a job candidate who was described as left-handed, and then evaluated his hirability and reported their expectations for him to be behaviorally disruptive. The hirability scale was the average of four items (e.g., “The job candidate is a strong candidate for the Project Manager position.”) anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 8 = strongly agree, that formed a reliable scale both in the United States (\(\alpha = .90\)) and in South Korea (\(\alpha = .89\)). The anticipated disruption scale was also comprised of four items (e.g., “The job candidate might disrupt others’ work if he is hired.”) that were also reliable in both the United States (\(\alpha = .81\)) and in Korea (\(\alpha = .91\)).

The pilot study data supported both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 with respect to left-handed individuals. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, Koreans evaluated the left-handed job applicant as less hirable (\(M = 4.82, SD = 1.06\)) than did Americans (\(M = 6.12, SD = 1.07\), \(t(99) = -5.91, p < .001\)). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, Koreans also anticipated significantly more disruption from the left-handed job candidate (\(M = 3.08, SD = 1.03\)) than did Americans (\(M = 1.86, SD = 0.92\), \(t(99) = 6.00, p < .001\)). Also in support of Hypothesis 2, anticipated disruption was a significant mediator of the culture difference in the left-handed job candidate’s hirability rating as assessed following Preacher and Hayes’s (2008) guidelines using the SPSS INDIRECT macro with 5000 bootstrapped resamples. The 95% confidence interval (CI) excluded zero (point estimate = -.55, CI = -1.04 to -.17). Given the initial support for hypotheses in the pilot study, Study 1 directly examined the role of behavioral disruption in devaluation of a left-handed job applicant.

Method

Participants

Seventy-nine European American (68% female) and 83 Korean (37% female) right-handed students participated in this study in their home country and native language with local experimenters. Korean participants (\(M = 22.95, SD = 2.52\)) were older than American participants (\(M = 20.23, SD = 1.97\), \(t(160) = 7.63, p < .001\)). Age and gender were not significant predictors of any outcomes of interest, and including them in analyses did not influence results.

Design, procedure, and measures

This study was a \(2 \times 2\) design (culture: American, Korean) \(\times 2\) (target characteristic: no information control, left-handed) \(\times 2\) (disruption: yes, no) between-participants quasi-experimental design in which all participants were asked to evaluate a local job candidate. The

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\(^1\) To ensure effective translation, all stimulus materials and measures in the main studies and translated pilot studies were developed in English with the involvement of at least one native English speaker and at least one native Korean speaker, and then translated to Korean and reviewed by bilinguals.
strapped mediated moderation. The statement about the testing number included embedded manipulations of the non-normative characteristic and disruption in the form of a request for special accommodation. Participants were randomly assigned to read that the applicant was left-handed (vs. no handedness information control) and that he asked to move seats for the testing session (vs. no disruption), serving as the disruption manipulation. These two manipulations were in the same “notes” section of the stimulus materials, so it was clear that being left-handed was tied to the disruption for the candidate in the left-handed disruption condition and it was clear that although he was left-handed, he was not disruptive in the left-handed no-disruption condition. See Appendix A for the manipulations.

After reading the manipulations, participants evaluated the extent to which the candidate was selfish and hirable. The selfish scale was comprised of three items (e.g., “The job candidate seems selfish.”) anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 8 = strongly agree, that formed reliable scales both in the United States ($\bar{x} = .79$) and in Korea ($\bar{x} = .71$). The hirable scale was comprised of the same four items from the pilot, plus two additional items, and anchored in the same manner. This scale was also reliable in this sample in both the United States ($\bar{x} = .81$) and Korea ($\bar{x} = .88$).

Results

We first analyzed data with respect to the mediator (selfishness) and the dependent variable (hirability) separately using 2 (Culture: American vs. Korean) × 2 (Target Characteristic: no information Control, Left-handed) × 2 (Disruption: Yes, No) Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs). Then we tested whether perceived selfishness mediated the effects on the job applicant’s hirability using bootstrapped mediated moderation.

Perceived selfishness

There was a main effect of Culture, such that overall, Americans rated the candidate ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.11$) as less selfish than did Koreans ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.23$), $F(1,154) = 14.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .084$. There was also a main effect of Disruption, $F(1,154) = 5.62$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2_p = .035$, but no main effect of Target Characteristic, $F(1,154) = .02$, $p = .897$.

Supporting Hypothesis 4, the main effect of Disruption was qualified by an interaction with Culture, $F(1,154) = 5.81$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2_p = .036$, see Fig. 2a. Simple effects tests revealed that among Americans there was no effect of the disruption on how selfish the job candidate seemed, $F(1,154) = 0.00$, $p = .978$. Among Koreans, however, the job candidate was viewed as more selfish when he made the disruptive request ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.27$) than when he explicitly did not ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.01$), $F(1,154) = 11.80$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .071$. There was only a difference between cultures on selfishness ratings when he was disruptive, $F(1,154) = 19.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .114$. There was no difference between cultures when the candidate explicitly did not disrupt, $F(1,154) = .88$, $p = .351$.

There was also a significant interaction between Target Characteristic and Culture on selfishness ratings, $F(1,154) = 4.43$, $p = .037$, $\eta^2_p = .028$, with no statistically significant simple effects. Among Americans there was a non-significant trend to evaluate the candidate as less selfish when he was left-handed ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.04$) relative to control ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.15$), $F(1,154) = 1.89$, $p = .171$, $\eta^2_p = .012$. Among Koreans, however, there was an opposite non-significant trend to evaluate the job applicant as more selfish when he was left-handed ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.31$) relative to control ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.09$), $F(1,154) = 2.57$, $p = .111$, $\eta^2_p = .016$. Because information was explicitly given about whether the candidate caused a disruption or not in all conditions, the default assumption about disruption was not assessed in this study, so we did not expect a three-way interaction to emerge. As expected there was no three way interaction, $F(1,154) = 1.31$, $p = .255$, see Table 1 for means and standard deviations in all 8 conditions.

Candidate should be hired

Again, there was a main effect of culture, such that overall, European Americans wanted to hire the candidate ($M = 6.57$, $SD = .86$) more than Koreans did ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.11$), $F(1,154) = 85.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .084$. Importantly, the main effect of culture was moderated by the disruption manipulation, $F(1,154) = 4.90$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2_p = .031$, see Fig. 2b. Among European Americans there was no effect of the disruption on desire to hire the candidate, $F(1,154) = 0.20$, $p = .656$. Among Koreans, however, participants wanted to hire the job candidate less when he disrupted the interview by requesting a seat change ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.20$) than when he explicitly did not make any special request ($M = 5.43$, $SD = .95$), $F(1,154) = 7.40$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2_p = .046$.2 No other main effects or interactions were significant, $ps > .110$.

Mediation analysis

To assess if perceived selfishness mediated the effects of the Culture by Disruption interaction on candidate hirability, we used methods suggested by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005) and Hayes and Preacher (2010) with the MECURVE macro for SPSS with all paths set to linear and 5000 bootstrap resamples. As predicted, selfishness was a significant mediator of the interaction term on candidate hirability (point estimate = .46, confidence interval from .07 to .84, see Fig. 3 for the unstandardized regression coefficients for the mediation paths). Perceived selfishness fully mediated the effect of culture and the special request on desire to hire the candidate.

2 The culture effect was also attenuated in the non-disruptive conditions relative to the disruptive conditions with respect to the hiring decision dependent variable. When the candidate was disruptive, American participants found him dramatically more hirable ($M = 6.62$, $SD = .87$) than did Korean participants ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.20$), $F(1,154) = 68.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .307$. When the candidate was not disruptive, however, this culture difference was much smaller with American ($M = 6.50$, $SD = .90$) and Korean participants ($M = 5.43$, $SD = .95$) differing less in their evaluations of his hirability, $F(1,154) = 23.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .133$. 

![Fig. 2. (a) Selfishness as a function of culture and disruption in Study 1. (b) Candidate hirability as a function of culture and disruption in Study 1.](image-url)
Perceived selfishness and hirability in Study 2.

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Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means.

Discussion

This study demonstrated that disrupting an organizational process by requesting special accommodation is more professionally costly in Korean cultural contexts than in European American cultural contexts because requesting special accommodation reflects selfishness for Koreans. One goal of Study 1 was to isolate the process of assumed disruption in professional devaluation of individuals in Korean cultural contexts. Based on the results of this study and its pilot, it is clear that the non-normative characteristic does, indeed, suggest disruption to Koreans, but this can be overcome with explicit information that the individual chooses not to disrupt group functioning. Thus, in support of Hypothesis 2, disrupting social harmony by requesting special accommodation led to reduced hirability ratings among Koreans, but not Americans. In support of Hypothesis 4, Koreans (but not Americans) viewed individuals who chose to disrupt as selfish, and this mediated the effects on hirability ratings.

The findings in this study are bolstered by the fact that we designed the materials in such a way that the job candidate was very competitive for the position, rather than a mediocre or weak applicant. We did this so that participants would have to be strongly impacted by his disruptiveness to devalue him as a candidate. If he was a less strong candidate overall, participants may have been looking for an excuse to not hire him. Thus, we saw this as a conservative test of the hypotheses.

Study 2

Moving to the next stage of the proposed theoretical model, Study 2 examined cultural variance in devaluation of individuals with non-normative characteristics in a dinner party setting. In this study participants evaluated a colleague who was vegetarian, had a food allergy, or had no dietary restrictions. Study 2 again examined cultural variance in evaluations of an individual with a non-normative characteristic (Hypothesis 1), as well as the role of controllability in this response (Hypothesis 3). Recall that Hypothesis 3 proposes that controllability of the non-normative characteristic moderates the effects of culture such that East Asians are more forgiving of individuals who have a non-normative characteristic through no fault of their own. Thus, we chose these two non-normative traits because they lead to the same behavior, but they differ in degree of controllability. These two conditions were contrasted against a control, which provided cultural baselines for evaluations. Thus, both Hypotheses 1 and 3 lead to predictions that the vegetarian and allergic colleagues would be evaluated more negatively than the control colleague in Korea, but not in the United States. Only Hypothesis 3 leads to the prediction that among Korean participants, the vegetarian colleague would be evaluated more negatively than the allergic colleague, because vegetarianism is a matter of choice, whereas a food allergy is not.

Method

Participants

Forty-nine European Americans and 46 South Koreans (100% female) participated in this study in their native language. Korean participants (M = 21.50, SD = 1.92) were older than Americans participants (M = 18.90, SD = 1.05). t(93) = −8.28, p < .001. Age was not a significant predictor of any outcomes of interest, and including it in analyses did not influence results.

Design, procedure, and measures

This study was a 2 (Culture: American, Korean) × 3 (Characteristic: control, vegetarian, food allergy) between-participants quasi-experimental design in which all participants read a short vignette in their native language. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three versions of the materials (see Appendix B for the full texts of the vignettes). In the control condition, they read a story about a work dinner party in which the hostess invited a new colleague to her home with several other guests. In the vegetarian and food allergy conditions, they read the same story with the additional information that this colleague did not eat the main dish because he was vegetarian or allergic. Then participants reported how positive their impression of the colleague was (5 items, e.g., “likable”) on a scale anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 9 = strongly agree. The items formed sufficiently reliable scales in the United States (α = .85) and in Korea (α = .73). Finally, participants indicated their desire to work with the colleague in response to their agreement with the statement “I would like to work with [colleague’s name],” on the same 1–9 scale.

Results

Data for the two dependent variables (colleague evaluations and desire to work with the colleague) were analyzed separately using 2 (culture: American vs. Korean) × 3 (colleague’s characteristic: control, vegetarian, food allergy) ANOVAs.

Colleague evaluation

There was a main effect of Culture, such that overall, Americans rated the colleague (M = 7.75, SD = .86) more favorably than did Koreans (M = 5.61, SD = 1.13), F(1,89) = 119.48, p < .001, ηp² = .573. There was also a main effect of experimental condition, with participants evaluating the colleague differently as a function of his Characteristic, F(2,89) = 4.97, p = .009, ηp² = .100. Importantly, the main effect of condition was qualified by the predicted Culture by Characteristic interaction, F(2,89) = 4.68, p = .012, ηp² = .095 (see Fig. 4a). Specifically, Americans’ evaluations of the colleague did not differ as a function of whether he had a food allergy, was vegetarian, or showed no evidence of a non-normative characteristic, F(2,89) = .72, p = .491, whereas Koreans’ evaluations of the colleague differed substantially, F(2,89) = 8.80, p < .001, ηp² = .165. Among Korean participants, the colleague in the control condition was rated more favorably (M = 6.36, SD = .74) than was the colleague with a food allergy (M = 5.65, SD = .96), mean difference, p = .044 and the colleague who was vegetarian (M = 4.95, SD = 1.89, mean difference, p < .001). The colleague with a food allergy was rated more favorably than the colleague who was veg-

1 Only women were recruited for this study because they participated in an unrelated gender-relevant study immediately following this study.
etarian, $p = .036$.

**Desire to work with colleague**

Again, there was a main effect of Culture, such that overall, Americans wanted to work with the colleague ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.70$) more than did Koreans ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.76$), $F(1,89) = 21.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .198$. There was no main effect of colleague Characteristic, $F(2,89) = 2.18$, $p = .119$. Importantly, the main effect of Culture was qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(2,89) = 5.01$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2_p = .101$, see Fig. 4b. Specifically, Americans' desire to work with the colleague did not differ as a function of having the non-normative Characteristic, $F(2,89) = .494$, $p = .612$, whereas Koreans' evaluations of the colleague differed substantially $F(2,89) = 6.65$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .130$. Korean participants' desire to work with the colleague in the control condition ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.82$) and in the food allergy condition ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.30$, mean difference, $p = .180$) were comparable. However, Korean participants wanted to work with the colleague in the control condition significantly more than the colleague who was vegetarian ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.52$, mean difference, $p = .001$).

**Discussion**

Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 3, Koreans devalued and avoided individuals with non-normative characteristics who disrupted a professional event relative to cultural baselines, whereas Americans did not. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, participants in Korea rated the vegetarian colleague more negatively than the colleague with an allergy. This is consistent with Hypothesis 3 because being a vegetarian is controllable, whereas having a food allergy is not. Note that this study did not directly test Hypothesis 2 regarding associations between non-normative characteristics and behavioral disruption. In this study, having a non-normative characteristic and disrupting the dinner party were manipulated concomitantly, entangling the effects of having a non-normative characteristic with the effects of the disruption. Thus, although not directly examined, this behavioral disruption may explain why the colleague with an allergy was still devalued to some extent in this study. Study 2 also demonstrated converging effects with two dependent measures, a general evaluation of the party guest and the desire for interaction, but it did not investigate the role of selfishness in the cultural difference in devaluation (Hypothesis 4). Therefore, Study 3 was designed to more directly investigate the roles of controllability and perceived selfishness in desire for interaction with individuals with non-normative characteristics as a function of culture.

**Study 3**

The goals of Study 3 were similar to those of Study 2, with the additional goals of minimizing the level of behavioral disruption to better isolate the moderating role of controllability (Hypothesis 3) and measure the mediating role of perceived selfishness (Hypothesis 4) in response to individuals with non-normative characteristics. Moreover, Study 3 tested cultural differences in seeking interaction with individuals with non-normative characteristics (Hypothesis 1) with a behavioral measure. In Study 2, Koreans devalued individuals who chose to be vegetarian more than individuals who had a food allergy (through no fault of their own), and individuals with both non-normative characteristics were devalued relative to control individuals. Yet because both individuals with non-normative characteristics potentially offended the dinner party host by refusing to eat the main dish, the behavioral disruption was sufficiently strong that it is difficult to interpret if merely having an unintentional non-normative characteristic (allergy) and striving to behaviorally disrupt as little as possible would also lead to a negative reaction among Koreans. For this reason, Study 3 was designed to examine responses to individuals with controllable and uncontrollable non-normative characteristics who were actively minimizing potential disruption. Whereas telling a host at a party that he will not eat the main dish due to food allergy is disruptive and could be perceived to be selfish, giving advance warning of a serious food allergy could actually be interpreted as an effort to prevent a possible disruption (i.e., anaphylactic shock requiring emergency procedures). Study 3 also sought to investigate whether the effects of onset-controllability

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Fig. 3. Selfishness mediates effect of culture and disruption on candidate hirability in Study 1.

Fig. 4. (a) Guest evaluations as a function of culture and characteristic in Study 2. (b) Desire to work with guest as a function of culture and characteristic in Study 2.
of the non-normative characteristic, as observed in Study 2, were also mediated by perceived selfishness, as in Study 1.

Method

Participants

Eighty-nine European Americans and 97 South Koreans participated in this study online in their home country and native language, having been invited through their universities’ psychology departments. Six American participants (ages greater than 35 years) indicated that the person in the video was much younger than them, which would reduce their interest in interacting with him, so they were removed from the dataset. Thus, the analyzed sample consisted of 83 American (67% female) and 97 Korean (52% female) participants. Korean participants (M = 23.47, SD = 2.22) were significantly older than American participants (M = 21.04, SD = 3.43), t(150) = 2.89, p = .004 (note, not all participants answered the age question, resulting in reduced degrees of freedom for the age analysis), but age was not a significant predictor of the outcomes of interest. Gender, however, was a significant predictor of the mediator in this study, so all reported analyses include participant gender as a covariate. Inclusion of this covariate did not substantively modify any results.

Design and procedure

This study was a 2 (Culture: American, Korean) × 3 (Partner Characteristic: vegetarian, food allergy, control) between-participants quasi-experimental design in which all participants were asked to indicate interest in having lunch with another college student. The cover story for the study was that they would be evaluating a member of a new university networking service, “Campus Connect,” which enables students to meet other students (face to face) with whom they would otherwise not have an opportunity to interact. Participants watched a video, ostensibly of another student whom they could choose to meet for lunch. Although they were presented as actual students with whom the participants might have an opportunity to interact if they indicated interest, the videos were, in fact, recordings of scripted self-introductions recited by men in their twenties (an American man of European descent for the American participants and a Korean man for the Korean participants). These videos were made to be matched in all possible ways—the men dressed similarly, both wore glasses, etc., and they made the recordings together so that lighting, background, camera angles, timing, etc. were the same. A pilot test demonstrated that these attempts to make the videos equivalent were successful. Twenty (64% female; age M = 30.47, SD = 5.83) employees at an international business school rated the likability of the man in all six videos with the sound turned off using a 4-item semantic differential scale (ranging from 1 to 9) of unlikely to likable, despicable to respectable, untrustworthy to trustworthy, and cold to warm (all zs > .76). These participants were selected for the pilot study because they are accustomed to interacting with both Western and Asian students, staff, and faculty and are neither American nor Korean (pilot participants were European, Singaporean, Chinese, and Indian). The men in all the videos were seen as equivalently likable, F(5,95) = 1.50, p = .197.

Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of three versions of the video (participants always watched a video of a same-sex confederate speaking in their native language) in which the individual they had an opportunity to meet was vegetarian, had a food allergy, or mentioned nothing about dietary restrictions. See Appendix C for the precise wording of the English version of the manipulation. Next, participants evaluated the extent to which the individual in the video seemed selfish, and finally participants indicated their interest in interacting with the prospective lunch partner. This is a behavioral measure because participants were led to believe they would have a chance to meet the confederate if they indicated interest. After completing the study, participants were fully debriefed regarding the fictitious nature of Campus Connect, asked permission to use their responses, and were thanked and compensated for participation.

Measures

The selfish scale included five items (e.g., “[Mike/JoonSu] seems selfish,” “[Mike/JoonSu] seems considerate.”—reverse scored) anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 8 = strongly agree, that formed reliable scales both in the United States (α = .81) and in Korea (α = .74). The desire to meet scale included three items (“I would like to interact with [Mike/JoonSu].” “I would like to be friends with [Mike/JoonSu],” and “I would like to use Campus Connect”). This scale was also reliable in both the United States (α = .84) and Korea (α = .82).

Results

Data for both dependent variables were first analyzed separately using 2 (Culture: American vs. Korean) × 3 (Partner Characteristic: vegetarian, food allergy, control) ANOVAs. Then we tested whether perceived selfishness mediated the effects of the independent variables on desire for interaction.

Perceived selfishness

There was a main effect of Culture, such that overall, Koreans (M = 3.65, SD = 1.06) rated their prospective partner as more selfish than did Americans (M = 2.58, SD = .90), F(1,173) = 47.57, p < .001, ηp² = .216. The main effect of Partner Characteristic was not significant, F(2,173) = 2.25, p = .109, but gender was a significant covariable, such that male participants (M = 3.42, SD = 1.05) saw the partner as more selfish than did female participants (M = 2.97, SD = 1.14), F(1,173) = 4.39, p < .001, ηp² = .025.

Supporting Hypothesis 4, the Culture by Partner Characteristic interaction was observed, F(2,173) = 3.84, p = .023, ηp² = .043, see Fig. 5.

**Fig. 5.** (a) Selfishness as a function of culture and characteristic in Study 3. (b) Desire to meet partner as a function of culture and characteristic in Study 3.
Fig. 5a. Among Americans there was no effect of the prospective interaction partner’s Characteristic on perceived selfishness, $F(2,173) = 0.76, p = .755$. Among Koreans, however, there was a significant effect of the prospective interaction partner’s Characteristic, $F(2,173) = 6.78, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .073$. Koreans saw the partner as more selfish when he was vegetarian ($M = 4.11, SE = .16$) than when he had a food allergy ($M = 3.30, SE = .18, p = .001$) or in the control condition ($M = 3.41, SE = .17, p = .003$).

Meet partner

There were no main effects of Culture or Partner Characteristic on desire to meet the prospective interaction partner, $ps > .210$, and gender was also not a significant predictor in this analysis, $p = .417$. Importantly, supporting Hypotheses 1 and 3, the Culture by Partner Characteristic interaction was present, $F(2,173) = 3.24, p = .042, \eta^2_p = .036$, see Fig. 5b. Among Americans there was no effect of Partner Characteristic on desire to meet him, $F(2,173) = 0.55, p = .581$. Among Koreans, however, Partner Characteristic influenced desire for interaction, $F(2,173) = 3.61, p = .029, \eta^2_p = .040$. Korean participants wanted to interact with the partner less when he was vegetarian ($M = 3.36, SE = .26$) than when he was allergic ($M = 4.22, SE = .28, p = .026$) or in the control condition ($M = 4.25, SE = .27, p = .018$).

Mediation analysis

Consistent with Hypotheses 3 and 4, only the vegetarian prospective partner (not the allergic prospective partner) was perceived to be selfish and behaviorally avoided by Korean participants. To examine whether perceived selfishness mediated the effects of the Culture and Partner Characteristic interaction on desire to meet (Hypothesis 4), we again used the methods suggested by Muller et al. (2005). This time, because the interaction term serving as the independent variable involved a 3 level treatment variable (Partner Characteristic), we used Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes’ (2007) Model 2 specification run in Stata with 5000 bootstrap resamples. Gender was included as a covariate, Culture was dummy coded (Korean = 0, American = 1), and Partner Characteristic was represented with a set of three dummy coded variables (D1: vegetarian = 1, allergic = 0, control = 0; D2: vegetarian = 0, allergic = 1, control = 0; D3: vegetarian = 0, allergic = 0, control = 1) following Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken’s (2003) guidelines. The three resultant Partner Characteristic by Culture dummy coded interaction terms were run in two separate bootstrap models with dummy coded independent variables and the covariate in the model to capture all possible contrasts, and we report the ones testing the mediation hypothesis (Hypothesis 4). Perceived selfishness was a significant mediator of the interaction of Culture x Vegetarian vs. Control contrast, as the 95% confidence interval (CI) excluded zero (point estimate = .46, CI = .04–.88). Perceived selfishness was also a significant mediator of the interaction of Culture x Allergic vs. Vegetarian contrast (point estimate = .64, CI = -.118 to .11). See Table 2 for the unstandardized regression coefficients for all of the mediation paths in the model. As hypothesized, perceived selfishness fully mediated the effect of the Culture and Partner Characteristic interaction on desire to meet the candidate.

Discussion

Study 3 supported Hypotheses 3 and 4 behaviorally in a social context. Whereas Americans’ selfishness judgments and desire to meet the prospective interaction partner were not influenced by either non-normative characteristic, Koreans judged the prospective partner as more selfish and had a reduced desire to meet him when he had a controllable non-normative characteristic (vegetarian). The fact that the allergic prospective partner did not elicit a negative response among Koreans underscores that the onset-controllability was responsible for the behavioral avoidance of the vegetarian in Korea, consistent with Hypothesis 3.

Recall that our proposed model included two potential ways that individuals with non-normative characteristics could intend to be disruptive—either by intentionally having the non-normative characteristic (Hypothesis 3) or by choosing to disrupt group functioning (Hypothesis 2). The results regarding the evaluation of the allergic individual contrasted with those of Study 2, consistent with our thinking that warning a prospective dining partner about a severe allergy could be seen as an attempt to prevent disruption of a social function, rather than as a disruption.

Study 4

Having demonstrated support for the proposed model in Studies 1–3, Study 4 was designed to test the generalizability of the primary hypothesis that non-normative characteristics are devalued in East Asian relative to Western cultural contexts (Hypothesis 1) to positively valenced non-normative characteristics rather than the neutrally valenced characteristics used in our prior studies. For this study, we compared responses to three non-normative characteristics that are viewed as favorable in both cultures within normal ranges (extremely curious, unusually friendly, strong extrovert) in the US and in South Korea. All three characteristics are typically valued, with extraversion rated among the most important qualities individuals seek in others (see Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007).

Pilot study

To ensure that curiosity, friendliness, and extroversion are valued within normal ranges in both the US and South Korea, 164 American and Korean participants answered three questions in their native language. These questions were embedded within other studies as part of paid university participant pools in both cultures. Specifically, participants answered (Yes/No): “Do you think that being curious is generally good?” “Do you think that being friendly is generally good?” and “Do you think that being an extrovert is generally good?” Participants in both cultures reported that curiosity was good (95% of Americans, 94% of Koreans), $\chi^2(1,N = 164) = .049, p = .825$; that friendliness was good (100% of Americans, 98% of Koreans), $\chi^2(1,N = 164) = 1.158, p = .282$; and that extraversion was good (88% of Americans, 94% of Koreans), $\chi^2(1,N = 162) = .926, p = .336$. Thus, all three selected characteristics were indeed seen as positive in both cultures within normal ranges, so all three were presented to participants at non-normative levels in Study 4.

Method

Participants

Eighty-six European American (74% female) and 48 South Korean (58% female) undergraduate students participated in this study online in their native language. Among participants who reported their age (90%), Koreans ($M = 22.15, SD = 2.38$) were older than Americans ($M = 21.44, SD = 1.53$), $t(118) = -1.97, p = .051$. Age and gender were not significant predictors of evaluations, and including them in analyses did not influence results, so these variables were not included in analyses.

Design, procedure, and measures

* Note that three participants skipped at least one question, resulting in different $Ns$ for analyses of different responses in this pilot study.
This study had a 2 (Culture: American, Korean) × 3 (Characteristic: extremely curious, unusually friendly, strong extrovert) within-participant quasi-experimental design in which all participants evaluated “most people” and then individuals with these three characteristics on a positive evaluation scale in their native language. The four item positive evaluation scale (1–7 ratings of being likable, trustworthy, considerate, and desirable as a colleague) was sufficiently reliable with respect to all four types of people in both cultures (American zs ranged from .66 to .81; Korean zs ranged from .77 to .82), so scales were computed. In preparation for analyses, these mean value scales were transformed into difference scores by subtracting each participant’s evaluation of “most people” from his or her evaluation of each of the characteristics of interest (i.e., unusually friendly, strong extrovert, and extremely curious). Thus, values above zero indicate valuing the characteristic and values below zero indicate devaluing the characteristic.

Results and discussion

Data were analyzed using a 2 (Culture: American vs. Korean) × 3 (Characteristic: extremely curious, unusually friendly, strong extrovert) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) in which characteristic was entered as a repeated measures variable. If, consistent with Hypothesis 1, Korean participants (relative to American participants) devalue individuals with these characteristics, then we would observe a main effect of Culture. If they devalue the different characteristics differentially, then we would observe an interaction.

There was a main effect of Culture, $F(1,131) = 11.81$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .083$ (see Fig. 6). As expected, Korean participants significantly devalued individuals with the positive non-normative characteristics (extremely curious, $M = −1.08$, $SD = 1.18$; unusually friendly, $M = −.07$, $SD = 1.47$; strong extrovert, $M = −.32$, $SD = 1.32$) relative to American participants (extremely curious, $M = −.16$, $SD = 1.20$; unusually friendly, $M = .28$, $SD = 1.15$; strong extrovert, $M = .18$, $SD = 1.05$). There was also an unexpected marginally significant interaction, $F(2,130) = 2.84$, $p = .062$, suggesting there may be some differentiation in devaluation of specific positively valenced non-normative characteristics.

Thus, Study 4 also supported Hypothesis 1, in that Koreans (relative to Americans) devalued individuals with non-normative characteristics, which in this case were positively valenced. That this effect emerged for additional characteristics shows that the findings of Studies 1–3 would not be limited to the specific non-normative characteristics selected for use in those studies. That Koreans (relative to Americans) devalued individuals with these positively valenced non-normative characteristics also underscores the breadth of the cultural difference in reactions to individuals with non-normative characteristics.

General discussion

In summary, this research provides strong support for the proposed model and offers useful information about responses to individuals with non-normative characteristics as a function of culture. The present set of studies showed that relative to North Americans, East Asians devalue and avoid individuals with descriptively non-normative characteristics (Hypothesis 1), even for neutral to positively non-normative characteristics, such as being left-handed or unusually friendly. This research also provided evidence consistent with our proposed process variables (see Fig. 1). The patterns of results clearly demonstrated that devaluation of individuals with non-normative characteristics among East Asians occurs as a result of expected disruption to group functioning (Hypothesis 2), and that East Asians devalue and distance themselves from individuals with a controllable non-normative characteristic more than individuals with an involuntary non-normative characteristic (Hypothesis 3). Moreover, perceived selfishness of the individual fully mediated the effects of disruption and controllability on devaluation and avoidance. Taken together, these studies showed that anticipated intention to disrupt that signals selfishness (indicated by either choosing to adopt non-normative characteristic or not showing any effort to minimize disruption) is an important aspect of the process through which cultural variance in treatment of individuals with non-normative characteristics occurs.

Contribution to theories of cultural psychology

In short, the present findings demonstrate when and why cultural variance in devaluation of individuals with non-normative characteristics occurs, contributing to previous literatures on cultural differences in responses to unusual objects (e.g., Kim & Markus, 1999) and potentially inappropriate behaviors (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011). These findings also inform the extent to which deviation from descriptive norms constitutes a violation of prescriptive norms as a function of culture (e.g., Bond & Smith, 1996).
The present studies focused on controllability as one factor that influences how people from different cultures evaluate others with non-normative characteristics. Recall that prior research in the West (Weiner et al., 1988) had shown that responses to negatively valenced characteristics that are viewed as onset-controllable (having HIV) elicited more negative responses than did negatively valenced characteristics that are not viewed as onset-controllable (paraplegia). We did not find this pattern among Western participants with respect to relatively neutral and harmless non-normative characteristics, upon which people were not negatively judged. In East Asia, however, controllability made a difference in devaluation even for neutral and relatively harmless non-normative characteristics. Thus, we interpret the combination of prior findings in the West with the present findings to mean that East Asian and Western cultures also differ in their threshold of devaluation (i.e., only clearly problematic characteristics in the West and more general and broader set of characteristics in East Asia). Individuals in both cultures judge others who are blamed for having a non-normative characteristic more harshly than those who have it through no fault of their own, but this only applies to negatively valenced characteristics in the West.

Furthermore, the present research shows that East Asians were more tolerant of individuals with non-normative characteristics when those individuals sought to minimize disruptions to their fellows. Thus, we see that the application of prior theories of cultural variance in evaluations of unique objects (Kim & Markus, 1999) and potentially inappropriate behaviors (Gelfand et al., 2011) requires careful consideration of the type of non-normative characteristic and how the individual with the characteristic behaves. In fact, an oversimplified application of those theories to cultural variance can be weaker in East Asian cultural contexts (Vignoles, 1991; see Brewer, 2003, for a review), and potentially inappropriate behaviors (Gelfand et al., 2011) require careful consideration of the type of non-normative characteristic and how the individual with the characteristic behaves. Thus, we see that the application of prior theories to cultural variance can be weaker in East Asian cultural contexts (Vignoles, 1991; see Brewer, 2003, for a review), and potentially inappropriate behaviors (Gelfand et al., 2011) require careful consideration of the type of non-normative characteristic and how the individual with the characteristic behaves.

The present findings also show that having a descriptively non-normative characteristic and choosing to disrupt group functioning is sanctioned in personal and professional contexts in East Asia relative to the West. We interpret this in light of the relationship between descriptive and prescriptive norms, consistent with prior evidence that normative influence is stronger in collectivistic than in individualistic cultures (Bond & Smith, 1996; Cialdini et al., 1999). Thus, our findings reinforce the idea that “what is” more strongly influences “what should be” in East Asia than in the West.

In a related vein, people are often very aware of the dominant values within their own cultural system, and this can translate into behaving in a manner consistent with their culture's values (Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008; Zou et al., 2009). Given this, East Asians may try harder to avoid having or revealing non-normative identities relative to Westerners. In combination with motivations to save face and prevent loss as opposed to promote gains (Heine, 2005; Heine et al., 2001), East Asian individuals may be particularly inclined to avoid appearing different from what is perceived to be normal in personal and professional contexts. Furthermore, prior evidence mostly from the West suggests that people sometimes seek to be unique. For example, Snyder and Fromkin (1977) highlighted a need for uniqueness including “abnormality as a positive characteristic”, and uncommon names have become increasingly popular among European Americans (Twenge, Abebe, & Campbell, 2010). Along these lines, Optimal Distinctiveness Theory proposes that individuals require a particular level of distinctiveness within Western cultural contexts (Brewer, 1991; see Brewer, 2003, for a review), and this need for distinctiveness can be weaker in East Asian cultural contexts (Vignoles, Chrysochoou, & Breakwell, 2000). Thus, dominant cultural values may cause East Asians to be more hesitant to choose to have a controllable non-normative trait and to risk being disruptive when they have an uncontrollable non-normative trait.

East Asians may also adaptively be less likely than North Americans to reveal that they have concealable non-normative traits. Relative to East Asians, Westerners also seem comparatively less concerned with being devalued based on their private lives, the sharing of which could be considered deviant or socially disruptive. For example, European American individuals (relative to East Asian individuals) are more likely to disclose very personal information, such as embarrassing life events, secrets, and worries (Schug, Yuki, & Maddux, 2010). Similarly, European American individuals are more likely to seek social support by sharing life stressors with close others (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Kim et al., 2006; Wang, Shih, Hu, Louie, & Lau, 2010). Understood in the context of prior theory and research, our findings suggest that identity management for individuals with concealable non-normative characteristics may indeed differ as a function of culture.

Implications for organizational theories and practice

The present findings have important implications for individuals who have a non-normative characteristic, for organizations, and for diversity scholars (e.g., Lawrence, 1997; Pellet, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). How individuals respond to those with non-normative characteristics in the workplace is a diversity issue, and both researchers and organizations are interested in effectively managing diversity practices. Although our research did not directly examine potential cultural variance in responses to individuals who demographically differ (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) from others in their organizations or teams, there are some inferences that might be tempting to draw. For example, some readers may be quick to interpret our findings as evidence that East Asians are more critical of demographic minorities than Westerners are. But our findings show that the relative devaluation and avoidance of individuals with non-normative characteristics were attenuated or eliminated in all studies when the individual had not chosen to have the characteristic and signaled that he would not be disruptive. Thus, we note that the present theoretical model does not necessarily apply to the devaluation process of demographic minority individuals who did not choose to have those identities. Alternatively, devaluation based on demographic categories such as Goffman’s (1963) “tribal stigmas” is more likely explained by different processes, involving factors such as group identity (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The present work also speaks more directly to the literature on diversity approaches and employee performance. A growing literature has examined how approaches to diversity impact minorities’ performance and psychological wellbeing (e.g., Jehn & Bezrukova, 2004; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). Individuals who believe ethnic differences should be celebrated may also be more accepting of non-normative characteristics than are individuals who downplay cultural differences. This trend would likely also be observed on an organizational level of analysis, as organizations differ in their endorsement of these ideologies (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burkes, 2008). Given that minority performance can be bolstered by a professional culture in which diversity is celebrated (Plaut et al., 2009), cultural contexts in which non-normative characteristics are more readily embraced may also promote the performance of individuals with non-normative characteristics.

Our findings may be particularly relevant to innovation and creative industries. Creativity scholars have shown that collectivism can undermine creativity (e.g., Erez & Nouri, 2010; Goncalo & Staw, 2006). In short, prior research suggests that strict adherence to norms may interfere with collectivists’ creativity. Following this
thinking, there could be a relationship between openness to individuals with non-normative characteristics and creativity, which would also be consistent with classic theorizing that highlighted being non-judgmental in order to increase creativity (Osborn, 1953). Taking this a step further, let us consider one of the characteristics that was relatively devalued in Korea relative to the United States—left-handedness. It is well documented that many high profile artists are left-handed, and there is suggestive evidence of a link between left-handedness and creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). If individuals with non-normative characteristics are undervalued in organizational contexts, it also stands to reason that the special perspectives they offer are not being optimally leveraged. Researchers and practitioners could benefit from specifically considering the treatment of individuals with non-normative characteristics both because of the particular value they can add in terms of novel perspectives and because an organizational culture of inclusiveness, trust, and psychological safety is so closely tied to creative success (Kark & Carmeli, 2009) and team performance more generally (Edmonson, 1999).

We also believe that the organizational culture literature on norms and person-organizational fit (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996; O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) dovetails nicely with our theorizing and findings, as the processes we examined with respect to national culture may be similar with respect to organizational culture. For example, to facilitate an individual’s success, the person-organizational fit may need to be stronger in East Asian, relative to Western, cultural contexts. Individuals may also benefit in terms of emotional wellbeing and productivity from living and working in countries in which the presence or absence of non-normative characteristics fits the dominant national cultural values regarding non-normative characteristics. We encourage future research directly investigating the mutual constitution of descriptive and prescriptive norms and the role of sanctions for having non-normative characteristics in that process.

Conclusion

The most important practical implication of this research is that individuals should be mindful of the culture-specific consequences of having a controllable non-normative characteristic and failing to minimize disruptions associated with it. In North American cultural contexts, there are essentially no consequences, whereas in East Asian cultural contexts, individuals who have a controllable non-normative characteristic and fail to signal that they do not wish to disrupt are seen as selfish, devalued, and avoided in personal and professional domains. Knowledge of these cultural differences can be an essential part of expatriation and acculturation (see Berry, 1997; Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010). Although East Asians may be sufficiently adept at navigating their own cultural contexts with respect to non-normative characteristics, individuals from other cultures should be aware of how to do so. Similarly, East Asians visiting or working in North America should be aware of the generally greater tolerance for non-normative characteristics and for the cultural acceptability of relatively innocuous disruptions.

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Appendix A. Manipulations for Study 1

Manipulations were embedded at the end of a summary of information about the job candidate:

In the disruption, no handedness information control condition:
- HR Notes
  Please make sure his seat ID number matches his name on the test score. He asked to switch his seat with another candidate sitting at the end of the table (assigned 3123 but changed to 3127).

In the disruption, left-handed condition:
- HR Notes
  Please make sure his seat ID number matches his name on the test score. He asked to switch his seat with another candidate sitting at the end of the table to better accommodate his left-handedness (assigned 3123 but changed to 3127).

In the no disruption, no handedness information control condition:
- HR Notes
  Please make sure his seat ID number matches his name on the test score (ID: 3123)

In the no disruption, left-handed condition:
- HR Notes
  Please make sure his seat ID number matches his name on the test score. I noticed he is left-handed but he did not say it was necessary to switch seats, so it is still as originally assigned (ID: 3123).

Appendix B. Vignette for Study 2

Control Condition:
Jason has just moved to a new city to begin work at a new job. He is attending a dinner party hosted by a new friend, Emily, and the other people attending the dinner party are closer friends of Emily. When Jason arrives to the party, Emily introduces him to everyone who is already there. Jason joins a conversation about a popular music group that everyone there likes, and he just loves that groups’ recently released song. Eventually, it is time for dinner, and everyone sits down to eat together. The main dish will be a tasty shrimp recipe, which is Emily’s specialty.

Vegetarian Condition:
Jason has just moved to a new city to begin work at a new job. He is attending a dinner party hosted by a new friend, Emily, and the other people attending the dinner party are closer friends of Emily. When Jason arrives to the party, Emily introduces him to everyone who is already there. Jason joins a conversation about a popular music group that everyone there likes, and he just loves that groups’ recently released song. Eventually, it is time for dinner, and everyone sits down to eat together. The main dish will be a tasty shrimp recipe, which is Emily’s specialty. Jason says that he will not eat the main dish because he is vegetarian. He does not eat the shellfish.

Allergic Condition:
Jason has just moved to a new city to begin work at a new job. He is attending a dinner party hosted by a new friend, Emily, and the other people attending the dinner party are closer friends of Emily. When Jason arrives to the party, Emily introduces him to everyone who is already there. Jason joins a conversation about a popular music group that everyone there likes, and he just loves that groups’ recently released song. Eventually, it is time for dinner, and everyone sits down to eat together. The main dish will be a tasty shrimp recipe, which is Emily’s specialty. Jason says that he will not eat the main dish because he is vegetarian. He does not eat the shellfish.
dinner, and everyone sits down to eat together. The main dish will be a tasty shrimp recipe, which is Emily’s specialty. Jason says that he cannot eat the main dish because he has a severe allergy to shellfish. He does not eat the shellfish.

Appendix C. Manipulations for Study 3

Manipulations for Study 3 were embedded toward the end of the introduction video.

In the Control condition: “...I like to meet new people and would be happy to meet up for lunch. Maybe I’ll see you around...”

In the Vegetarian condition: “...I like to meet new people and would be happy to meet up for lunch. Just so you know, we have to be careful where we eat because I’m a vegetarian. Maybe I’ll see you around...”

In the Allergic condition: “...I like to meet new people and would be happy to meet up for lunch. Just so you know, we have to be careful where we eat because I have a serious food allergy. Maybe I’ll see you around...”

References


