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Family Perceptions Across Cultures

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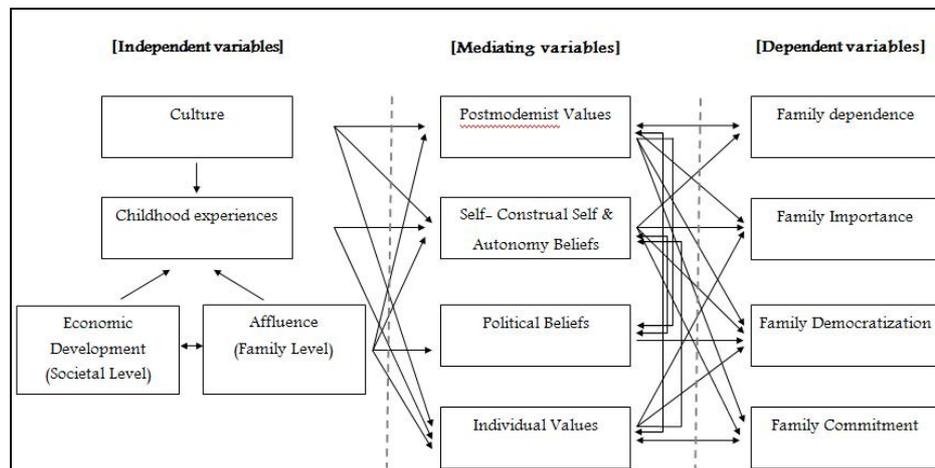
Abstract

This paper consists of the theoretical background and the outlines for the author's current research, which focuses on the perception of family in different cultures. Individuals' cultural environment has far-reaching influence on aspects of family indirectly by shaping the values and beliefs they hold. More importantly, culture and social change can have impact on individuals' perceptions of the family, and it is important to note the impact they have on individuals' family relationships in the present world where globalization and modernization have been taking place. Perceptions of the family, which include family importance and democratization, commitment to and dependence on the family, will be examined in different nations of South Korea, Japan, Canada, and England, where significant differences in cultural orientation, history, rates of economic development, and magnitudes of social change exist.

Introduction

Family perception encompasses individuals' views on issues such as importance of family, level of commitment to family, degree of emotional dependence/ independence from family, and democratization within family. These perceptions are influenced by the values and beliefs toward the 'self', society, and self in relation to close others (Yabiku, Axinn, & Thornton, 1999). In other words, how autonomous individuals perceive themselves to be, how much trust they place on their government, what they view as the society's primary goals, and how dependent or independent they are to their friends and family influence individuals' family perceptions. These individual beliefs in turn are affected by macro-level factors such as culture, social change, and economic conditions in their society. Culture and the pattern of societal and economic change can have an impact on family perception by both forming and transforming individual values and beliefs. For instance, in countries where the economy is flourishing/ improving, the chances of obtaining better and higher education would increase, and this in turn can have liberalising effect on perception of family and gender roles (Trent & South, 1992). Modernising or globalizing states or societies press their internal actors to conform to the models and actions that are appropriate to their goals and ideals (Meyer, 2000). It has been noted that the level of Postmodernist values, value priorities, and political beliefs are influenced by factors such as social change and economic development, for these factors shape individuals' priorities in life and the types of beliefs they hold early on in life (Dalton & Shin, 2003; Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Abramson, 1999; Inglehart, 2003; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Inglehart, 2008). Conditions during the childhood and adolescence including societal atmosphere and educational attainment lead to less autocratic ideology in different spheres of life, including views toward political system and family (Elder, 1965). It is important, thus, to consider individuals' experiences of growing up in certain economic or social climates, for familial attitudes and views,

which mould early in life and tend to be stable over the life course (Bunting, 2004; Trent & South, 1992), can be influenced by the individual's childhood experience.



The significant differences in family and adopted family values stem from factors such as economic development, democratic stability, and cultural traditions unique to each country (Garzon, 2000). Gallup research on family values conducted in 1997 found that individuals in the Asian countries such as Japan, China, and South Korea held more traditional views than their Western counterparts in Europe and North America, and that the individuals in the more industrialised nations in the West such as Germany and the U.K. exhibited less traditional views on aspects such as the importance of children in the sense of personal fulfilment than those in less industrialised parts of the world (Gallup, 2008). Economic developments have been noted to influence societies, but situation-specific factors such as cultural heritage also shape the society's trajectory in which it develops (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). In this sense, the importance of these macrolevel factors is highlighted.

The link between the self, society, and the family is an interesting one to study, as it can be thought that these variables are highly interrelated. The concept of self is sensitive to the cultural context in which the individuals grow up, and the level of autonomy and relatedness in self influence individuals to socialise and interact with close others in their society (Kagitcibasi, 1996). The goals and ideals of the society can often be transmitted to the individuals in that society through the family. More specifically, aspects of the family that relate to individuals' perceptions of the self within the family, and the relationships between the members of the family may derive from and be affected by social, cultural, and economic factors. Those that belong to a culture are likely to share, transmit, and maintain the traditions, values, understandings and knowledge that are specific to the socio-cultural group. Therefore, it can be postulated that family perceptions in a culture may differ in certain ways than those in other cultural groups. In the past decades, most countries around the world have gone through significant social and economic changes, and these changes are likely to have influenced individuals' ideas about family. It has been noted that social and economic phenomena such as

modernisation and large-scale economic growth have brought changes to the meaning, functions, and structure of the family in many parts of the world (Smith 1995; Thornton & Fricke, 1987). In this study, we focus on the effects of culture and social change on individuals' perception of the family roles and interactional patterns and the importance of the family, and their level of commitment to the family in four different countries.

Variables and Measures

Culture: Culture can be conceptualised as a way of life where a group of [individuals] share and transmit from one generation to another' (Murry et al., p.911; 2001), and as shared values, attitudes, ideas, and norms that are specific to a socio-cultural group (Inglehart, 1997; Kagitcibasi, 1996). Culture can have both direct and indirect effects on the opinions individuals living in a geographical zone of particular history hold about family by reflecting the values and attitudes about it and shaping their ideas and thoughts in general. Its impact on these views will be investigated here by comparing between the nations.

Economic Development: This variable refers to the economic changes (mostly upward changes) at the societal level. Both the amount of change and the rate of development in economic situations are important factors in the sense that they can influence the society and the personal experiences of the people, and can cause social changes. Both the importance and the lack of research that examines the patterns of direct effect of economic change on family outcomes have been addressed (White & Rogers, 2000), and thus, this study investigates closely the link between economic development and family perceptions. GDP (Gross Domestic Product) data for the four nations included in the study from the years in between 1990 and 2006 is used in the study to compare the amount and pattern of economic growth in each of the nations. In this study this variable is seen as a direct factor of cultural environment, where the economic conditions of the countries determine the type of environment and influences individuals in a particular country are likely to experience.

Family level affluence: The level of material wealth of the family is likely to have an impact on the childhood experiences of the individuals especially, and influence their attitudes toward life and the world in general. The link between values at societal level and economic affluence has been noted; individualism was found to have close association with affluence (Hofstede, 1980). Moreover, it is also possible that those who grow up in relatively well-off families come to think more positively about life, and the amount of control and autonomy they possess. In this study, we measure the level of family affluence by researching into their parents' occupations and their annual incomes.

Childhood Experiences: This encompasses individuals' experiences as children in the specific culture in which they were brought up. These include societal, economic, political, and cultural factors in both the broader society and the family, where the individuals' sense of freedom, autonomy, control, and security can either develop or hindered depending on the circumstances. Many developmental psychologists claim that children and adolescents construct and internalise cultural influences and develop stable attitudes as result of the process (Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001). For

instance, individuals growing up in a socially and economically stable society are likely to feel stronger sense of control and be more inclined to pursue their own life goals and show concern for the quality of life than those in a developing country where people experience greater social changes. Individuals from wealthier, middle class families and those who are from more individualistic cultures are also more likely to grow up in an environment where 'Postmodernist' values are fostered (Inglehart, 2008). Childhood experiences have been found to have long-term impact (Axinn & Yabiku, 2001). Childhood experiences is an important variable to look at, for it traces the background from which individuals could come to shape much of their ideas, thoughts, and outlooks of life. This variable combines both the level of economic developments in the individual's nation and family affluence.

Postmodernist Values: Inglehart proposes that value changes are almost inevitable in the 'Postmodernist' societies where both economic and societal stabilities have already been settled and guaranteed for their people. Individuals' priorities in life, which are highly sensitive to the societal conditions, will tend to tilt toward one side or the other. His studies of value changes around the world found that the people in the better-off societies now showed different priorities in life: they had more concerns for self-expression and quality of life rather than achievement or accumulating material wealth, which are perceived to be more important for those in the relatively poor developing countries. Individuals in 'Postmodernist' societies also hold less traditional or 'materialistic' values of emphasizing achievement and economic success, show less interest or support for institutionalised forms and of religion and politics and their authority than those from the less well-off nations, and place more emphasis on individuation, quality of life, self-expression, and romantic love (Inglehart, 1997). Moreover, it is found that the fluctuations in economy such as inflation rate change in different years are closely resembled by the pattern of value priority changes (Lesthaegae & Meekers, 1986).

Self-Construals, & Self-Autonomy Beliefs: Beliefs about the self can differ at the individual level, depending on the persisting ideals about the person and the relationships with close others in the particular culture. Individuals in collectivistic cultures may hold very different ideas about the self (embedded and interdependent self) than those in more individualistic cultures (independent, autonomous self). Cross-culturally, the fluidity and adaptability of the self also differ depending on the orientation of the given society. Individuals in collectivistic cultures think of the self as more fluid, adaptable, and malleable concept, whereas those in individualistic cultures think of it as a fixed entity and more strongly emphasize autonomy and individuation of the self than their counterparts.

Individual Values: This variable includes general beliefs and ideas individuals hold toward the world and the others around them. Individuals develop a system of value priorities that meet their needs and are compatible to the types of opportunities and obstacles presented in their specific environment or society (Schwartz, 2007). The type of cultural and historical background and situations shape the individuals' values, ideas, perceptions, and priorities in life, and Schwartz' dimensions of opposite values, openness to change versus conservation, self-enhancement versus self-transcendence was applied in this study. Prince-Gibson & Schwartz (1998)' study found significant effects of

ethnicity on achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, tradition, and conformity values, some of which when pooled together compose the above value dimensions.

Political Beliefs: Individuals' political beliefs often reflect the kind of views they hold about their society and the world in general. Both the form of government and people's belief in the goodness of a political system reflect the historical trajectory of the nation, and with the societal development, changes in these aspects are obvious across the world, nations such as South Korea adopting more democratic ideals while maintaining some of their Confucian traditions and ideas (Dalton & Shin, 2003). A study has found that democratic ideals lead to endorsement of more democratic family organisation, where democratic family has greater inclusion of different family members in decision making and consideration of their ideas and opinions (Elder, 1965, pp.175). According to Elder (1965), autocratic family ideology is associated with societal factors in that it declines with increasing industrialisation, elevation in median education level, and decline of cultural and institutional support. For example, research found correlation between acceptance of authoritarian political policies and demands for obedience from children, confirming the relationship between political opinions and family beliefs. Six questions that relate to participants' political views and behaviours in the study in order to look at its effect on family democratization are included in the study.

Family Perceptions: We split this dimension into four specific factors: importance of family; family democratization; family dependence; and commitment to family. These factors are the dependent variables in the current study, for we hypothesize that they are influenced by the other variables mentioned above, such as culture (example of an independent variable) and individual values (example of a mediating variable). Questions that tap into these dimensions incorporate selected items on Self-in-Family Scale (Kagitcibasi, 2007), Family Allocentrism Scale (Lay et al., 1998), Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998), Individualism: Family Dimension (Bierbrauer et al., 1994), Shortened Individualism-Collectivism Scale (Hui, 1988).

DV1 (Family Importance): This includes general ideas and views about family, and would encompass aspects such as perceived importance of having and maintaining family, perceived benefits and costs of family, and level of satisfaction individuals feel about their own families. The value and meaning of the family would reflect the characteristics and goals of the society (Kagitcibasi, 1996; Kagitcibasi, 2007). Thus, these factors can be important in studying the effects of social change on families and for investigating whether individuals' views about family are indeed changing in the present society.

DV2 (Family Democratization): This dimension closely resembles Larson (1974)'s concept of 'family power', defined as dynamic processes involving 'exchanges among all family members relative to norms, behaviors connected with decision-making or conflict management situations' (p. 127). Family democratization also includes hierarchies and distribution on power within the family, and how much authority falls on each member of the family- whether the father has the most say or each family member can voice their opinions in the family- and can be influenced by the societal norms and individuals' values and attitudes. Equality in family has become a more important issue

in the present. Both gender and role equalities are demanded, especially from the women's side, and there seem to be more egalitarian families especially in the more developed societies. Relationships within the family have become more egalitarian over the last few decades due to democratising societies (Delsing et al., 2003). It is thus possible that the individuals who are born in this social atmosphere endorse more egalitarian family views.

DV3 (Family Commitment): Commitment is defined as a psychological construct that directly influences everyday behaviours in relationships, including decisions to persist (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998, p. 360). Commitment to family includes both the actual commitment level of the individuals, and how important individuals perceive commitment to be in families; Individuals may differ in how much effort and time they are willing to put into initiating and maintaining families, how much commitment they think they will want to put into their families in the future, and how much value they place upon them. This could be important indicators for how much significance is really placed on them, and possibly, whether families would survive in the future or not.

DV4 (Dependence to Family): This includes individuals' views on the appropriate level of dependence to family/ independence from family. For example, in her model of family change, Kagitcibasi (2007) includes the family dependence in one of the facets of family interactions, and claims that it is influenced by culture and socialisation values. The modern trends of increasing emphasis on individuation, tolerance to diverse ideas, and freedom, and reduced commitment to the collective have influence on one's relations to his/her own family (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). It is possible, thus, to think that the influence culture and social change have on how an individual thinks of the self will also have an impact on how independent he/she feels from his/her family.

Hypotheses

This study investigates the effect of culture and social change on the perception of the family through the indirect ways of influencing the self. It is postulated that the beliefs and values of the individuals, which might arise from their childhood experiences and the culture and society in which they grew up, influence the way they perceive their families. (1) In that sense, dimensions such as individual values, level of Postmodernist values, self-construals, and political beliefs should all have influence on family perception. (2) The unique trajectory of social and economic development, as well as cultural traditions and the history of a nation, should be reflected in the individuals' family perception, along with other ideals and beliefs those individuals hold. (3) Countries with similar cultural orientation, such as South Korea and Japan, should share more similarities in family perception, commitment, and democratization ideals, and should differ from cultures believed to be more individualistic and egalitarian such as Canada or the U.K.

The level of societal and economic developments should also produce changes to how the individuals think about themselves and their families. (4) Family perception and ideals in a country with a fast-changing society and high rates of rapid economic growth, such as South Korea, might differ from societies such as Japan & Britain which have

been relatively stable and where there have been slower and steadier developments over the last half-century. For instance, South Koreans might still have stronger traditional beliefs about family. (5) Economic developments at the societal level and affluence at the level of family determine the type of childhood experience, and should have effects on family perception by shaping and influencing individuals' self & autonomy beliefs and values. (6) Family perception in a country with a fast-changing society and high rates of rapid economic growth, such as South Korea, should have significant relationship with individual values, political beliefs, self-construals, and might particularly be correlated with Postmodernist values.

Method and Analysis

University students from South Korea, Japan, Canada, and England are recruited for the study. The questionnaire contained 144 items in total, and is administered in the official language in each country. The analysis of the results comprises of three distinct stages. Mean comparison of scores for the various scales used in the study by nationality, and independent-interdependent cultures, using one-way ANOVA tests is performed first, in order to gain insights into differences between groups of different nationalities. Factor analysis of the family scale items is used as a proof for the four-factor family perception constructs we have suggested. These basic analyses then provide the ground for the testing of the hypothesized model universal to all the cultural groups in the study, using structural equation modelling (SEM). Data collection and analyses have been completed in 2008 and the early part of this year. The results can be obtained from the author and are not included in this paper for the scope of the paper does not allow it.

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