

PSIWORLD 2012

Culture and Self-Construal: Implications for the Social Cognitions of Young Cohorts in Romania

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Abstract

We have examined the manner in which a set of social cognitions such as self-efficacy, authenticity, satisfaction with life and coping style relate to independent-interdependent self-construal on a 435 student sample from Timisoara (Romania). The results describe an ambivalent structure of self-construal, with highest scores for self-reliance and uniqueness (for independent self-construal) and inclusion (for interdependent self-construal). These outcomes are in contradiction with the stereotypical image of Romanian collectivism, on a societal level, and of disengaging social cognitions on an interpersonal level.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of PSIWORLD 2012

Keywords: self-construal, social cognition, young cohorts, independent-interdependent.

1. Culture and self-construal of young cohorts in Romania

Our research studies the role held by the Romanian culture in self-construal and the manner in which it influences a set of social cognitions which generate specific attitudes and behaviours in the young cohorts of Romania. Starting from various previous research which verifies the rather individualistic and particular nature of the Romanian people, catalogued as autarchic (Gavreliuc, 2011a, p. 149-156), and operating with the young, educated cohorts (students) (Gavreliuc, 2011b, p. 198-200) of Romania, proved in previous studies to be more prone to individualism, we have adhered to the theoretic perspective suggested by Markus and Kitayama (1991). Their theory claims that in an individualistic society, the individual develops an independent self-construal, and in a collectivist society, the individual create an interdependent self-construal. The studies realized on the young educated Romanian cohorts have generated different conclusions regarding the level of their independent-interdependent self-construal. While the results of some research conducted to this end certify the existence of a

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high level of interdependence among the young people in Romania (Gavreliuc, 2011a) and a lifestyle compliant with the principles of collectivism, some other researches attest that the Romanian youth show a high score in independence (Voicu, 2001) and values compliant with individualism, suggesting the hypothesis that the young people in Romania are becoming “westerners”.

The self-construal concept refers to the extent to which a person feels separated or connected to “the other” and is the perception of such a person of their own thoughts and emotions in relation to “the other”. An individual with an independent self-construal will always relate to their own cognitive and emotional repertoire, unlike those with and interdependent self-construal who act by constantly relating themselves to “the other”. The relationships between self-construal strategies and social cognition have been deeply examined in different cross-cultural contexts, legitimizing the association between self-construal, on the one hand, and self-efficacy or life satisfaction, on the other hand (Bond & Singelis, 1997; Matsumoto, 1999; Walker, Jinyang, & Dieser, 2005; Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011). In this paper we tested the specificity of these relationships in a Romanian context.

Romania has long been under the auspices of the communist regime, a period of restriction of both their physical freedom, as well as their mental liberty, and they were obliged to live by the rules of the others, subjected to a forced collectivization. One possible explanation for a potential independent self-construal that describes the young Romanian generation is the legacy of a residual communism, which generates a construal of life strategies in contrast with an environment perceived as perverse and burdening (Chelcea, 2000). Therefore, that period of oppression associated with the communist historical period may be the reason for the tendency of the young generation towards freedom and separation from the other, at least on a declarative level.

2. Research description and results

The sample was composed of 435 subjects, all students from the West University of Timisoara, in various humanistic and social areas, and the instruments applied were: for the independent-interdependent self-construal we used the *Self-Construal Scale (SCS)* which belongs to Theodore M. Singelis, and for the social cognition dimensions studied we used the *Authenticity Scale (AS)* – performed by Alex Wood, the *Self-Efficacy Scale (SES)* – of Matthias Jerusalem and Ralf Schwarzer, the *Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)* – elaborated by Eduard Diener and the *Coping Style Scale (CSS)* – of Susan Folkman.

We have examined the manner in which a set of social cognitions such as self efficacy, authenticity, satisfaction with life and coping style relate to independent-interdependent self-construal.

This study aims to research the manner in which a specific self-construal influences a set of social cognitions which generate certain attitudes and behaviours among the young people in Romania, such as:

- *authenticity*, defined the need of an individual to behave in compliance with their own feelings, without being obliged to camouflage themselves according to “the others”. Peterson and Seligman (2005, p. 205) state that “the majority of people confirm that integrity, authenticity and sincerity are the most important characteristics of the human power...”
- *satisfaction with life* is a cognitive process and expresses the “global perception of the life quality of a person, according to self-established criteria” (Shin & Johnson, 1978). There are at least 12 areas contributing to life satisfaction: health, financial resources, family relations, friendship, shelter, a well-paid job, a life partner, recreational activities, religion, self-esteem, transport and access to education (Campbell, 1981).
- *self-efficacy*, a cognitive social construct, refers to „the evaluation an individual makes of their own ability to organize and execute an action in order to obtain a certain type of performance” (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy has proved to be a strong predictor of task performance (Bandura, 1986).
- *coping* refers to the constant alteration of the cognitive and behavioural efforts, in order to handle internal and external requirements (Cummings & Simpson, 1991). In a broader sense, coping methods refer to the

conscious effort made by an individual in order to solve personal and interpersonal problems to reduce stress or conflict.

The results obtained have indicated an ambivalence of self-construal strategies among young cohorts in Romania, with high scores for all the subscales of independent self-construal - self-reliance (M=6.48), uniqueness, consistency and self-direction - and high scores for inclusion (M=6.03) and commitment, as interdependent sub-scales that describe an interdependent self-construal (Table 1). The results have shown that independent self-construal scales positively correlated with authenticity, self-efficacy, satisfaction with life and coping styles; and interdependent self-construal scales was negatively correlated with the dimensions studied (Table 2).

Table 1. The results obtained for the dimensions studied

Dimensions/scales/sub-scales	M	SD
Self reliance	6.48	1.41
Self direction	5.49	1.61
Uniqueness	6.03	1.46
Consistency	5.70	1.41
Inclusion	6.03	1.16
Commitment	5.43	1.16
Harmony	4.81	1.16
Authenticity overall	3.87	.54
Accepting external influence	2.29	.72
Authentic living	3.89	.60
Self alienation	2.29	.72
Self efficacy	3.15	.43
Life satisfaction	4.78	1.10
Confrontive	3.38	.59
Distancing	2.86	.63
Planful problem solving	3.67	.64
Self controlling	3.26	.55
Social support	3.63	.59
Escape avoidance	2.84	.63
Positive reappraisal	3.66	.63
Accepting responsibility	3.39	.64

Table 2. Correlations between self-construal scales and the dimensions studied

SCS	AUT	AEI	AL	SA	LS	SE	D	SC	C	PPS	SSS	EA	PR	AR
SR	.484**	-.425**	.335**	.348**	.189**	.377**	-.019	.112*	.228**	.282**	-.197**	-.180**	.234**	-.016
SD	.369**	-.432**	.234**	.182**	-.031	.326**	.155**	.097	.084	.162**	-.377**	-.060	.193**	-.057
U	.248**	-.242**	.218**	-.121*	-.061	.277**	.498**	.498**	.039	.101*	-.113*	.016	.203**	.092
C	.297**	-.222**	.166**	.281**	.145**	.146**	.214**	.010	.116*	.147**	.039	-.149	.146**	-.060
I	.035	.049	.021	.102*	.182**	.024	.031	-.026	.106*	.083	.415**	.000	.110	.114
Com	-.148	.183*	-.087	.069	.061	-.145**	-.095*	.225**	-.148**	-.120*	.165**	.007	-.060	-.004
H	-.320**	.345**	-.090	.274**	-.096*	-.121*	-.085	.225**	-.388**	-.058	-.079	.128**	-.121	.005

Note. *p<.005, **p<.001, SCS = self-construal scale, SR = self-reliance, SD = self-direction, U = uniqueness, C = consistency, I = inclusion, Com = commitment, H = harmony, LS = life satisfaction, SE = self efficacy AUT = authenticity overall, AEI = accepting external influence AL = authentic living, SA = self-alienation, D = distancing, SC = self-controlling, C = confrontive, PPS = planful problem solving, SSS = social support, EA = escape avoidance, PR = positive reappraisal, AR = accepting responsibility.

3. Discussion

The participants to this study are young people who have not experienced socialization within communism at first hand. However, in Romania, it has been noted a repulsion of the generation that lived during the communism

towards this phenomenon and their tendency to send their children a message – in a more or less direct manner – not to be like them, but to be different, to be free (Câmpeanu, 2002). In a study conducted in Romania (Frost & Frost, 2000), which requested several parents to express the qualities they would want their children to develop, independence proved, as a selected category, a lot more pregnant than obedience. The explanation for this phenomenon, as highlighted by Frost & Frost, is that the young people have chosen, based on the information received, to construe themselves in contrast with the totalitarian practices (including on a relational level) used by Ceausescu against their parents during communism.

The results have shown a high score for the independent self-construal, results incompatible with most studies conducted in this area according to which the young Romanian generation is predominantly interdependent (Gavreliuc 2011a). However, according to our results, the young Romanian generation is characterized by individualistic traits, such as independence, personal autonomy and the need for authenticity, the strongest positive correlation being established between the self-reliance subscale of independent self-construal and general authenticity. However, this authenticity, from the point of view of the subjects forming the social stratum of the study, is only possible as long as they relate to themselves, without taking into account the external influences. Moreover, the „acceptance of external influences” dimension has the lowest specific score, which illustrates the low degree of acceptance for such a potential de facto situation. B. Voicu (2001) has asserted that one aspect describing the post-communist Romanian society, qualified as „pseudo-modern”, is to reject fatalism, the Romanians agreeing, on a declarative level, that they can plan their lives “just as they wish”, the percentage being comparable with the other Western countries. Romania classifies first among the ex-communist countries regarding the rejection of the idea that people’s lives are led or influenced in any way by anyone or anything else than themselves (Voicu, 2001).

The negative correlation between two subscales of self-construal (self direction and consistency) and life satisfaction suggests the idea that the more the Romanian individual conforms more to the requests of the others, the more unsatisfied to his own life he is. These results highlight the cognitive strategies of the Romanian youth, which increasingly resemble those described by various studies conducted in highly individualistic environments. The influence of independence can be noticed on the self-efficacy level, as well. On the one side, there is a strong positive correlation between the four subscales of independent self construal, and, on the other side, there is a negative correlation between self-efficacy and two subscales of interdependent self-construal (commitment and harmony). According to these results, the young people in Romania lean towards individual tasks, considering they are more efficient that way. In addition, relational harmony is shaded by personal efficacy, meaning that, even if it might generate a relational conflict, the Romanian young person prefers to and has better results when working alone, which comes in contrast with the stereotypical image characterized by personal success through the mobilization of “relational resources” (relatives, acquaintances, “clan” networks) (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2002).

Another evidence for the increasing role of independent self-construal of the young Romanian generation is their inclination towards coping strategies characterized by action, direct confrontation with the difficult situation and risk-taking, all aspects specific for independence. The coping strategies most undertaken by young people are those of confrontation, self-control and problem solving. The confrontive coping style has been described as “an aggressive effort to solve a certain problem, supplemented by a certain degree of hostility and risk-taking” (Lazarus, 1993). Lazarus has also added that the emotion afferent to this coping style is anger, which he ascribes to persons who cannot take responsibility for a mistake they commit, and who choose to blame it on “the other”, bad fortune or destiny. Moreover, a negative correlation was established between three subscales of independent self-construal (self-reliance, self direction and uniqueness) and social support coping style. This tendency of the Romanian young person not to relate to “the other”, not even during hard times, stresses once more the „westernization” phenomenon slowly spreading among them. Unlike previous generations, when the most frequently used “coping strategy” was to accept the situation, the young generation chooses to deal with the problem directly, knowing it has sufficient resources to solve it and is not intimidated by the obstacles of life.

4. Conclusions

Following the Markus and Kitayama's theory (1991), which is the basis for this study, and takes into consideration other research which has dealt with the influence of culture on the individual's self-construal, we can observe an ambivalent pattern of self-construal for the young Romanian cohorts. An "occidental", individualistic culture bears people with an independent self, who learn to fight their way through life on their own, who fail to assign the relational capital with the key importance previously granted to it by their predecessors during troubled, unsteady times. For the social stratum analyzed at least, the stereotypical image of Romanian collectivism, on a societal level, and of disengaging social cognitions on an interpersonal level, is infirmed, and we have evidenced the ambivalent self-construal strategies activated (at the same time strength in some specific facets of interdependent and independent registers). Useful especially for the public policies articulated in a structural intervention in the educational system, this research does not employ representative generational samples, like other similar studies (Gavreliuc, 2011a) and, therefore, their results should be interpreted with caution. This change in the cognitive strategies due to the cultural impact, in a new social and political climate, even if encouraging, can only be local and decontextualized.

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