Conceptions about “What It Means to be Human” in East Asia: Similarities and Differences between Japan and Korea

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Recent research has highlighted the concept of human being as significant in social psychological processes. At an interpersonal level, people often regard themselves as possessing characteristics reflective of human nature more than others. At an intergroup level, some out groups are denied characteristics that are unique to humans (For review, Haslam, Loughnan, Kashima, & Bain, 2008). Although both Korean and Japanese languages have a word that signifies human nature (ningensei in Japanese, inganseong in Korean), it is yet unknown whether human nature has the same meaning across cultures, or would be rather culture-specific.

Haslam (2006) has proposed that people consider what it means to be human in two different ways – human nature (HN) and human uniqueness (HU). HN is represented by warmth, agency, and openness, and theorized as early emerging and common across all humans, while HU reflects socialized and refined human characteristics, which distinguish humans from other species. Research in Australia has shown that those two are independent from each other, and people tend to regard the HN, but not HU, aspect as an essential part of being human (Haslam, Bastian, & Bissett, 2004).

We aimed to extend this Australian finding to East Asia where people are said to have different conceptions of what it means to be human. The study focused on two East Asian countries, Japan and Korea. Despite their overall similarity as East Asian cultures, past research has found that self-concepts differ somewhat between them (Kashima et al., 1995), and therefore their conceptions of human nature may slightly vary as well. Although being close to each other, the two countries might have developed somewhat different views of what it means to be human, in part influenced by different historical and geographical factors. Thus, both similarities and subtle differences between the two cultures were expected.

METHOD

Participants. Seventy-six Japanese undergraduates (45 males, mean age = 19.6, SD = 3.9) at Nagoya University, Nagoya, and 97 Korean undergraduates (31 males, mean age = 21.8, SD = 3.3) at Korea University, Seoul, participated.

Materials. Two versions of questionnaire booklets were prepared. For each version, 56 personality trait terms were listed, and rated on different dimensions. One version included three items assessing the HN dimension (asking about the extent to which each trait reflects human nature, emerges early in life, and is common to all people) and an HU item (asking about the extent to which each trait is uniquely human), whereas the other version asked people to evaluate each trait on four dimensions (extent to which it is desirable, individualistic, relational, and collectivistic). Both versions asked people to evaluate each trait on four dimensions that are designed to tap the extent to which it is essentialized (ES), namely, how it is informative, inherent, immutable, and consistent across situations. A 7-point scale was used for each judgment. All materials were made cross-culturally equivalent by the back-translation procedure.

Procedure. The studies were conducted in classes for course requirements in each country. In both countries, participants were given verbal instructions, followed by plain language statements. They were randomly assigned either of the two versions, and debriefed after the studies.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

In preliminary analyses, both HN and ES items were averaged to compute composite measures. These composites and other judgments were averaged for each trait within each culture to compute the level of HN, HU, ES, desirability, individualism, relationism, and collectivism for each trait. The following analyses were conducted using traits as units of analysis. The extent to which traits are individualistic, relational, collectivistic, and desirable were highly correlated across the two cultures, ranged from .862 to .935 (ps = .000). Although weaker than them, judgments of perceptions about HN, HU, and ES also showed cross-cultural consistencies, rs = .693, .631, .628, respectively, ps = .000. HN and HU were not correlated in either culture, and both Japanese and Koreans essentialized HN traits (rs = .581 &and .766, ps = .000) more than HU (rs = .027, ns & .416, p = .001). HU was essentialized in Korea only.

There were several cultural differences as well. Overall ratings on HU were significantly lower in Japan, t(85) = -.756, p = .000, suggesting that Japanese tend not to see humans as very different from other animals. Likewise, only Koreans considered both HN and HU traits as desirable, rs = .546, .431, ps = .000.

This study found that Korean and Japanese conceptions of human beings were fairly similar across cultures. At the same time, however, subtle differences between the two East Asian cultures point to the need for further investigation of culture-specific forms of what it means to be human.

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