

RELATIONSHIP STATUS AND SELF-ESTEEM
IN REGARD TO INDIVIDUALISTIC AND COLLECTIVISTIC MINDSETS

by

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Abstract

In previous research, psychologists have vastly examined the relationship between a person's relationship status (e.g., single or coupled) and its impact on various psychological attributes (e.g., self-esteem). When it comes to the concept of self-esteem specifically, researchers have not yet investigated the relationship between how relationship status and self-esteem levels may impact those, who based on their mindsets, may rely more on being in a relationship for their well-being than others. In the current study it was hypothesized that relationship status would have a greater influence on the self-esteem of participants with a collectivistic mindset, such that being in a relationship would link to higher self-esteem levels than being single. Twenty-six participants were examined on various self-report questionnaires examining feelings of self-worth and cultural mindsets. Results showed that there were no differences in the self-esteem levels of participants identifying with either cultural mindset. Further, there were no differences in the self-esteem levels of participants when considering their relationship status. The geographical status of participants could have impacted the results. Future research should consider conducting such a study in a different location that does not have such high levels of cultural assimilation as found in the USA.

Keywords: self-esteem, cultural mindset, individualism, collectivism, romantic relationships

Relationship Status and Self-Esteem in Regard to Individualistic and Collectivistic Mindset

In American society, dating applications and singles websites strive to make sure that no one ends up uncoupled forever. Nonetheless, it has been noted that many single people embrace their lives and are likely to experience more psychological growth than those who married and/or coupled (DePaulo, 2006). According to the 2017 United States Census, a little over fifty percent of the adult population is married while the other forty-seven percent has remained single. The number of individuals who identify as being single has been steadily rising since 2014 (US Census, 2018).

Although being single has become more popular in the last few years, those who are in romantic relationships remain in society's top graces. As opposed to being single, romantic relationships are said to have many desired effects (e.g. feelings of euphoria, closeness and emotional security; (Younger, Aron, Parke, Chatterjee, & Mackey, 2010). Due to these desired effects that are derived from relationships, society often looks upon couples more favorably than those who are non-coupled (DePaulo, 2006). Many family members and friends may remain in constant search for the perfect mate for their singled peer or kin. This continuous quest for pairing the single demonstrates how society further advocates for all to be romantically coupled.

Individualistic and Collectivistic Mindsets

As well as being favored by society, views of romantic relationships are also culturally influenced and dependent on mindset. Previous research has suggested that individualistic and collectivistic mindsets are influential in both mate and career choices (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). The term individualism describes a cultural mindset pattern that focuses primarily on the self, independence and personal identity. On the other hand, collectivism refers to a mindset pattern that promotes selflessness, focuses on how individuals relate to their community, and places the

needs and goals of the group first. In other words, in collectivism, each person is encouraged to do what is best for the community rather than focusing on their own individual needs (Bejanyan, Marshall, & Ferenczi, 2014). Although the two types of mindsets differ in outlook, they share one common belief regarding loneliness. People who identify with either of these mindsets believe that individual loneliness is due to the lack of a romantic partner, and that this loneliness may be alleviated by the upbringing of a romantic relationship (Seepersad, Choi & Shin, 2008). Nevertheless, according to researcher Robin Goodwin (1999) “the lack of a romantic relationship may be amplified in an individualistic mindset as compared to a collectivistic mindset.”

In his book, “Personal Relationships Across Cultures,” Robin Goodwin proposed that western cultures (e.g. North American cultures) place great importance on romantic love being the solution to a sense of loneliness experienced in individualistic cultures (Goodwin, 1989). It is possible that in this particular mindset, the absence of romantic relationships can unnecessarily exacerbate feelings of loneliness as compared to the community-focused collectivistic mindset. Those who identify as having an individualistic mindset and being coupled may experience a greater degree of closeness as compared to individuals from collectivistic mindsets. This may be because of the greater importance placed on romantic love in the individualistic mindset (Seepersad, Choi, & Shin, 2008). However, this does not directly imply that romantic love and relationships are not important to the members of the collectivistic mindset. Although their focus is on community first, within a collectivistic perspective, individuals also place great importance on romantic relationships as they relate to the community and group first (Sorensen & Oyserman, 2009). Thus, any thoughts of the self are in relation to how one may benefit the group or how one’s relationship may benefit the group. Furthermore, in order to engage in a collectivistic appropriate relationship, one’s values, goals, and thoughts only make sense if the

goal is to benefit the group that one belongs to. In other words, from a collectivistic perspective, relationships with others are not merely connected to self-concept, they are the central, defining feature of self-concept (Sorensen & Oyserman, 2009).

Though both individualistic and collectivistic mindsets can play an important role in mate choices, previous research supports that the collectivistic mindset has had a major influence on the romantic mate choices and relationship quality of collectivistic individuals. For example, when researchers Bejayan, Marshall, and Ferenczi (2015) investigated the effects of collectivistic views, their findings supported that parents play an important role in their children's spouse selection. This could be due to the fact that more so than in individualistic cultures, in collectivist cultures families are characterized by respect for parental authority and strong interdependent ties. These views have often allowed for a person's elders (e.g., parents) to approve, disapprove or outright choose their romantic partners. In contrast, individualistic cultures which place an emphasis on personal desires and independence control their own partner selection and relationship maintenance (Bejayan, Marshall, & Ferenczi, 2015). In an earlier study conducted in 2014, Bejayan, Marshall, and Ferenczi found that people from individualistic backgrounds tended to view romantic relationships as an exclusive bond, formed between two individuals who share attraction and love, and that serves their own personal needs. These findings further support that in individualistic cultures the qualities seen as desirable in a partner are a personal choice which arise from one's own preferences and ideals. On the other hand, marriage within collectivistic cultures reinforces family obligations and individuals are expected to marry to fulfill cultural and familial commitments. The stresses brought on by the collectivistic mindset have brought about a lower rate of satisfaction in romantic relationships as compared to the

relationships of the those who identify with having an individualistic mindset (Sorensen & Oyserman, 2009).

The Effect of Relationships on Self-Esteem

Furthermore, whether a person identifies with either a collectivistic or individualistic mindset, romantic relationships have been tied to the rise or fall of self-esteem (Erol & Orth 2016). According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, the term self-esteem is the degree to which the qualities and characteristics contained in one's self-concept are perceived to be positive. Self-esteem reflects a person's physical self-image, accomplishments, capabilities, values, and perceived successes, as well as the ways in which others view and respond to that individual (APA Dictionary of Psychology). In other words, self-esteem is how much we like ourselves. The importance of self-esteem extends to every aspect of life. It defines how we see ourselves in relation to others and the world around us. Self-esteem affects our moods, goals, and outlook on life (Rosenberg, 1989) and refers to an individual's overall positive evaluation of the self. Researchers Gecas and colleagues (1983) explored the importance of self-esteem by studying the looking-glass self, which is a theory by sociologist Charles Horton Cooley. This theory states that individual behavior and self-esteem are dictated by how one thinks others will perceive them. These researchers took this looking-glass concept and expanded on it. These researchers believed that self-esteem is made up of two distinct measurements: competence and worth. The competence aspect refers to the degree to which people see themselves as capable. For example, how skilled one is at performing important tasks (e.g., such as a job, a sport, parenting, or something else deemed as important in life). The worth dimension refers to the degree to which individuals feel valuable or useful in society (Gecas, Viktor, & Schwalbe, 1983). These two measurements of self-esteem are important because they support that self-esteem is no

longer defined solely by how others may view and accept us, rather, self-esteem can be also be defined by a key factor which is affected by one's own individual growth and choices.

Moreover, a perspective of self-esteem similar to the looking glass self is that of Leary and Baumeister's sociometer theory. The sociometer theory suggests that our self-esteem is an internal gauge that monitors the degree to which individuals feel included or excluded by others. This theory epitomizes the definition that self-esteem is a depiction of social acceptance and/or rejection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Specifically, the sociometer theory emphasizes the value of interpersonal relationships and the degree to which these relationships are regarded as positive. As confirmed by Leary and Baumeister (2000), and Cast and Burke (2001), when a person believes they have relational value, they are more likely to have a higher self-esteem. The theory of sociometer is important because it represents a pattern of positive or negative self-esteem triggers and further shows the importance of society on self-esteem.

Positive and Negative Evaluation of Self

When individuals present high levels of self-esteem, they are more confident, optimistic and tend to make better life choices. In contrast, low levels of self-esteem can ultimately lead to poor choices, depression, and a lack of ambition (Cast & Burke, 2001). These factors are important because they can influence an individual's choice of mate or life partner. Moreover, self-esteem has also been previously linked to how satisfied an individual is within a romantic relationship once they are able to find a mate or lifetime partner (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995).

Researchers Tafarodi and Swann (1995) proposed that self-esteem is no longer valued as just a positive or negative review of one's self, but rather, self-esteem has progressed into a person being globally accepted or unaccepted. In other words, social media has extended the boundaries of peer acceptance or unacceptance due to the internet's far reach. This assessment

further supports the sociometer theory of self-esteem as individuals value themselves in accordance with society. So as in the collectivistic mindset, if one's group or society deems a romantic relationship worthy, then the self-esteem of the two participants are positively affected (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002).

The Effects of Self-Esteem on Romantic Relationships

In addition, self-esteem is also tied to individual behavior in romantic relationships. Previous research has shown that feelings of self-worth influence how individuals respond to events that are potentially threatening (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). For example, after an argument, individuals with high self-esteem generally try to strengthen their connection to their romantic partner because they expect the partner to be accepting and responsive to their needs (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). In contrast, following an argument, individuals with low self-esteem are often afraid to attempt a deeper connection with their partner due to their fear of rejection. Previous research has established the link between high levels of self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. Self-esteem not only affects how individuals think about themselves, but also how they treat others, especially in intimate relationships (Lancer, 2018). Furthermore, researchers theorized that this positive correlation was born from the relationship-enhancing behaviors of those with high self-esteem, whereas individuals with low self-esteem showed more dysfunctional and relationship-damaging behaviors such as emotional and physical withdrawal (Murray, Griffen & Holmes, 2000).

Other important factors regarding the connection between self-esteem and romantic relationships are age and development. Luciano and Orth examined these factors and found that in young adulthood, individuals are faced with several important developmental transitions that involve new social roles. One of these major transitions is the establishment of a committed

romantic relationship (Luciano & Orth, 2016). Romantic relationships are a vital life occurrence because, as research suggests, relationships influence personality and relationship outcomes (DePaulo, 2006). For example, successfully maintaining a committed romantic relationship, establishing a family, and getting married may all boost self-esteem (Sciangula & Morry, 2009).

In addition, Luciano and Orth (2016) researched the effects of a breakup on self-esteem. Their findings showed that although a breakup may damage and decrease self-esteem, within three years self-esteem returns to homeostasis, meaning, whatever the level of self-esteem before the relationship. Also, several studies suggest that relationship satisfaction is determined by the individual's self-esteem level (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2011). These researchers conducted a study across multi generations to investigate the effect of self-esteem and its potential influence on life outcomes, such as relationship satisfaction. Their findings reported that self-esteem grew from adolescence to mid adulthood and had a significant effect on important life choices and outcomes.

Current Study

The objective of the current study examined the correlation between relationship status self-esteem, and cultural mindset. The researcher investigated whether cultural mindset affected the association between relationship status and self-esteem. It was hypothesized that relationship status would have a greater influence on the self-esteem of participants with a collectivistic mindset than those with an individualistic mindset, such that, for those with a collectivistic mindset, being in a romantic relationship would have a stronger link to higher self-esteem than for those who identify with an individualistic mindset.

Method

Participants

Twenty-six participants (76.92% female, 15.39% male, 7.69% other) from a public northeastern college in an undergraduate psychology class completed an online study on perception of self-esteem, relationship status and mindsets as part of their research participation in order to receive one research credit. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 26 years ($M = 20.89$, $SD = 6.72$). The participants identified as White/Caucasian (65.39%), Asian (19.23%), Black/African American (11.54%), or Hispanic/Latinx (3.85%).

Materials and Procedure

Rosenberg scale. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) measured general feelings of self-worth. Participants rated 10 statements asking about their levels of self-esteem. Examples of these statements included, "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others" and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" that were rated on Likert-type scales from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree).

Culture Orientation Scale. The culture orientation scale measured participants' mindsets (Triandis, & Gelfand, 1998). Participants answered 16 true or false questions regarding their views on the self and the community. Examples of these questions were, "I'd rather depend on myself than others" and "I feel good when I cooperate with others." Participants answered each item as true or false. Responses were coded such that higher scores were indicative of a higher collectivistic mindset and lower scores represented a more individualistic mindset.

Demographics Questionnaire. To assess participants' relationship status, participants responded to four questions about their relationship status at the time that the study was completed. They indicated their gender, age, race/ethnicity, birth country and their parents'

countries of origin. The country of origin was included to control for the influence of the parents' mindsets on that of the participants. The demographics questionnaire is attached in Appendix C.

Procedures

Participants followed a link provided in the Psychology Participant Pool Moodle page with the description of the study. First, all participants were asked to read an informed consent form and agree to participate. Once the informed consent form was completed, participants were asked to complete a series of questionnaires. The first was questionnaire was The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), followed by the Culture Orientation Scale, and lastly the demographics questionnaire. At the end of the demographic questionnaire, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. Once the study was completed, participants were redirected to a separate survey in which they provided their name and email in order to receive their research credit if applicable. The duration of the study was no longer than 20 minutes.

Results

An independent-samples T-test was conducted using JASP to compare the overall self-esteem scores of participants (whether single or coupled) The results revealed that participants who were in a relationship did not have significantly higher levels of self-esteem on average ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.42$) compared to those who were single ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(24) = -1.15$, $p = 0.263$, $d = -0.46$, 95% $CI [-0.69, 0.2]$. A Pearson correlation analysis was also conducted to examine the relationship between participants' cultural mindset (individualistic or collectivistic) and overall self-esteem scores. The results of the analyses showed that there was no significant relationship between the single participants' cultural mindset and their overall self-esteem scores, $r(24) = 0.19$, $p = 0.508$. Results also showed that there was no significant relationship between

the coupled participants' cultural mindset and their overall self-esteem scores, $r(24) = -0.255$, $p = 0.423$.

Discussion

The purpose of this experiment was to examine the correlation between relationship status and self-esteem. The researcher also investigated how cultural mindset can affect the association between relationship status and self-esteem. It was hypothesized that participants' relationship status would have a greater influence on the self-esteem of participants with a collectivistic mindset than those with an individualistic mindset, such that, for people with a collectivistic mindset, being in a romantic relationship would link to a higher self-esteem than those with an individualistic mindset. However, there were no significant differences in the participants' overall self-esteem levels given their relationship statuses. Similarly, there were no significant differences in the participants' self-esteem levels given their cultural mindsets.

Limitations

There were multiple limitations to this study. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak that occurred at the time that this study was conducted, there was a very limited sample size. If there would have been an increased number of participants, perhaps there would have been different results found in this study. Future researchers should attempt to increase sample size by using other methods of recruitment (e.g., a poster, snowball sampling, etc.) Though there were participants of varying ages, the specific age of the participants may lend itself to a specific view that puts relationship status at the top of importance, leaving mindset and self-esteem naturally at a lower level. More specifically, it has often been supported that college-aged participants put less importance in their relationship status than older participants (DePaulo, 2007). Granted that the participants who took part in this study were college students from a liberal arts school, it

could be said that most of them have limited experience with relationships. Therefore, their self-esteem levels would be less impacted by whether they were coupled or un-coupled. In addition, future researchers should also keep in mind that there was a very small number of participants who were recruited from a small, liberal-minded institution. The students may have been more open-minded due to these liberal tendencies, as students with less traditional mindsets may not experience increased self-esteem from being coupled. Having better feelings about oneself because one is coupled is a very traditional way of thinking, that may not be commonly be observed in a liberal environment. Perhaps the outcome would be different with a sample of participants from a less liberal minded environment.

Implications

This study impacts on future research by opening a gateway to experiments on the relationship between self-esteem, relationship status, mindsets (collectivistic and individualistic). Given the results of this study, there is a suggested need for different methods when examining the relationship between cultural mindsets, self-esteem, and participants' relationship status. Since this study was conducted in a northeastern liberal arts college and most participants may have a sense of belonging to many different cultures, future researchers may include participants from various countries who have had their upbringing with different cultural mindsets. For example, a person who is born and raised in a collectivistic country (e.g. China) may present different outcomes than a person who is born in a collectivistic country but raised in America where their cultural mindset may be influenced by American cultural norms. Additionally, as younger-aged sample groups generally are not as experienced as older age groups, future research should include more participants from older age groups. This lack of experience may result in differing self-esteem outcomes as younger age groups may not place as much

importance on relationship status than older age groups. Future research should include more participants from varying age groups. Given the importance of self-esteem, future researchers should continue to examine how social factor like relationship status may impact it, and how cultural mindsets might play a role in it.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire RSES Instructions

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

STATEMENT		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2.	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3.	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4.	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5.	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6.	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7.	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8.	I wish I could have more respect for myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9.	I certainly feel useless at times.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10.	At times I think I am no good at all.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Your score on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale is: .

Scores are calculated as follows:

- For items 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7:

Strongly agree = 3

Agree = 2

Disagree = 1

Strongly disagree = 0

- *For items 3, 5, 8, 9, and 10 (which are reversed in valence):*

Strongly agree = 0

Agree = 1

Disagree = 2

Strongly disagree = 3

Appendix B

Cultural Orientation Scale

1. I'd rather depend on myself than others.

TRUE (1) FALSE (0)

2. I feel good when I cooperate with others.

TRUE (0) FALSE (1)

3. Family members should stick together, no matter what sacrifices are required.

TRUE (0) FALSE (1)

4. My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me.

TRUE (1) FALSE (0)

5. If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud.

TRUE (0) FALSE (1)

6. Winning is everything.

TRUE (1) FALSE (0)

7. Competition is the law of nature.

TRUE (1) FALSE (0)

8. When another person does better than I do, I get tense and upset.

TRUE (1) FALSE (0)

9. Parents and children must stay together as much as possible.

TRUE (0) FALSE (1)

10. The well-being of my coworkers is important to me.

TRUE (0) FALSE (1)

11. To me, pleasure is spending time with others.

TRUE (0) FALSE (1)

12. I often do "my own thing."

TRUE (1) FALSE (0)

13. I rely on myself most of the time; I rarely rely on others.

TRUE (1) FALSE (0)

14. It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want.

TRUE (0) FALSE (1)

15 It is important that I do my job better than others.

TRUE (1) FALSE (0)

16. It is important to me that I respect the decisions made by my groups.

TRUE (0) FALSE (1)

Appendix C

Demographic Questions.

1. Do you currently have any romantic or sexual partners?

Yes/No

1a. (If yes) Are you currently in a committed romantic relationship with another person or persons (including sexual, romantic or emotional commitments)?

Yes/No

2. For how long have you been dating, “seeing,” “with,” “hooking up with” or been committed to this person?

Months/Years

3. (If no to first question), Do you currently identify as single?

If yes, for approximately how long have you been single?

- Months
- Years

4. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Transgender
- Prefer to indicate another
- Prefer not to indicate

5. How old are you?

6. What is your ethnicity? Please choose all that apply.

Black/African American

White/ Caucasian

Hispanic/Latinx

Asian

Prefer to indicate another

Prefer not to indicate

7. In what country were you born?

8. What is your mother's country of origin?

9. What is your father's country of origin?

10. Why are you participating in our study?

- I need the credit for Intro Psychology
- I am receiving seat-time or extra credit in an elective
- I am interested in this study