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Tammy English¹ and Serena Chen¹

Abstract

Self-concept consistency is viewed as central to authenticity and adjustment in Western cultures. The authors propose that the implications of self-concept consistency depend on both the cultural background of the individual and the type of consistency involved. Specifically, although consistency of the self-concept across different contexts may be less important in East Asian than Western cultures, East Asians may still benefit from consistency *within* specific social contexts over time (i.e., maintaining stable, distinct relational selves). Supporting these ideas, across three studies, inconsistency of trait self-perceptions *across* different relationship contexts was linked to lower subjective authenticity and relationship quality for European Americans but not East Asian Americans. However, inconsistency *within* the same relationship context over time showed similar negative associations with these outcomes in both groups. Overall, the results suggest that inconsistency may be less consequential for East Asians relative to Westerners only if it reflects culturally prescribed adjustment to different social contexts.

Keywords

self-concept consistency, culture, authenticity, relationship quality, interactionism

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Western psychological theories have linked inconsistency in the self-concept to various forms of maladjustment (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Festinger, 1957; Jourard, 1963; Lecky, 1945; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961). Recently, however, cultural psychologists have challenged such links, suggesting that inconsistency in the self-concept across different contexts may not be problematic in East Asian cultures, where adjusting the self to others is normatively prescribed (Markus & Kitayama, 1994, 1998). To date, research has focused mainly on how culture moderates the effect of self-concept consistency across different contexts on intrapersonal adjustment (e.g., life satisfaction), leaving open the question of whether the effects of self-concept consistency extend to not only other outcomes but also other forms of consistency.

The present studies examined the link between consistency of trait self-perceptions and two culturally relevant outcomes, subjective authenticity and relationship quality, among individuals socialized in Western versus East Asian cultures. In doing so, we compared two forms of consistency—consistency of self-perceptions across different relationship contexts and consistency of self-perceptions within the same relationship context over time. Applying interactionist theories of personality (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995) to the self-concept, we proposed that for East Asian Americans authenticity and

relationship quality may be rooted in stability of the self-concept within relationship contexts over time rather than in self-concept consistency across contexts because this type of “if-then” consistency allows for culturally valued adjustment to others while also fulfilling basic coherence needs. In contrast, both types of self-concept consistency should promote authenticity and relationship quality for European Americans because Western cultures encourage maintaining a stable, global identity.

Culture and Self-Concept Consistency

All people show some degree of malleability and inconsistency in the self-concept across different contexts (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987), but research indicates that, relative to Westerners, East Asians tend to hold more inconsistent self-concepts (Church, Anderson-Harumi, et al., 2008; English & Chen, 2007; Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Suh, 2002). This

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difference likely reflects cultural differences in how consistency is viewed. In Western cultures, consistency is highly valued and, although some theories suggest that flexible adjustment can be adaptive (Gergen, 1971; Paulhus & Martin, 1988), inconsistencies are generally thought to give rise to psychic tension and adjustment problems (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Jahoda, 1958; Lewin, 1951). In Eastern cultures, by contrast, consistency is thought to be generally less valued (Heine, 2001; Heine & Lehman, 1997, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Suh, 2002). East Asians are encouraged to flexibly adjust to changes in the social environment for the sake of maintaining interpersonal harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1994), and dialectical beliefs grounded in East Asian culture (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) support tolerance of the inconsistency caused by such tailoring of thoughts, feelings, and behavior to the relational features of the situation.

There is also some evidence to suggest that inconsistency has more adverse consequences in Western relative to East Asian cultures (Kitayama & Markus, 1999). Self-concept inconsistency across roles or relationship contexts has been linked to poor psychological adjustment among individuals in the United States (Block, 1961; Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997) but has shown weaker links to adjustment among East Asians and others who define the self centrally in terms of their relationships (Church, Anderson-Harumi, et al., 2008; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Suh, 2002). For example, Suh (2002) found that inconsistency across roles was more weakly associated with life satisfaction and affect for Koreans than Westerners. Similarly, Church, Anderson-Harumi, et al. (2008) found that inconsistency across roles predicted lower life satisfaction and greater anxiety in the United States but not in Japan. However, it is unclear whether self-concept inconsistency also has weaker effects on East Asians' feelings of authenticity and relationship outcomes.

Culture and the Effects of Self-Concept Inconsistency

Subjective authenticity. In Western cultures inconsistency is viewed as a cardinal sign of inauthenticity or of not being one's "true self" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Rogers, 1961; Sheldon et al., 1997). We propose, however, that self-concept consistency across contexts may be less relevant to authenticity among East Asians given the greater value they place on adjusting the self to others. Markus and Kitayama (1994, 2004) argue that in East Asian cultures behavior is conjointly determined by the self and by others, so adjusting to the social context need not result in feelings of inauthenticity. Supporting this, individuals in the United States who define the self largely in terms of their relationships, as East Asians do, show less of an impact of self-concept consistency across contexts on subjective feelings of authenticity (Cross et al., 2003).

On a related note, self-determination theory suggests that feelings of authenticity are bolstered as we gain confidence that we know and are acting in accord with our "true self" (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 1997). Accordingly, there may be cultural differences in the predictors of subjective authenticity to the extent that there is cultural variation in what constitutes one's "true self." Western cultures tend to emphasize elaborating one global self-concept that is invariant across contexts and time (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). East Asians, however, may define the true self in a way that allows for culturally sanctioned adaptation to changes in the social environment (Kashima et al., 2004). Overall, although some initial studies suggest that culture shapes the meaning of authenticity, the link between self-concept consistency and subjective authenticity has not yet been directly compared in East Asians and Westerners. We propose that, relative to Westerners, people socialized in East Asian cultures will show less of an adverse effect, or perhaps even no effect, of inconsistency of the self-concept across contexts on subjective authenticity.

Relationship quality. Self-concept consistency may benefit relationships to the extent that it signals trust, openness, and honesty, all of which are crucial for relationship health (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Reis & Patrick, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Such consistency may also foster smooth social interactions because of the predictability it affords interaction partners (e.g., Swann, 1990; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2007). Supporting these ideas, self-concept inconsistency has been linked to lower relationship quality in Western cultures (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Sheldon et al., 1997; Suh, 2002).

As noted, however, East Asian cultures emphasize adjusting the self to fit social demands (Kitayama & Markus, 1999; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002), making inconsistency across relationship contexts the norm in these cultures. We propose therefore that such inconsistency may not interfere with relationship functioning. Along these lines, Suh (2002) found that whereas Americans rated inconsistent relative to consistent individuals lower in likeability and social skills, Koreans' ratings were not related to the target's self-concept inconsistency. In addition, Cross et al. (2003) found that people who define the self in terms of their relationships, as East Asians do, did not show an impact of self-concept inconsistency across contexts on relationship quality.

Two Forms of Self-Concept Consistency: Across Contexts and Within Contexts Over Time

Existing research on culture and self-concept consistency has focused on consistency of the self-concept *across* different contexts, with the implicit or explicit assumption that consistency arises from the formation of global self-conceptions that are stable over contexts and time. Yet to fully understand the implications of self-concept consistency it may be useful to distinguish consistency across contexts from consistency across time (Conley, 1984; Fleeson & Nofle, 2008; Mischel

& Peake, 1983; Ozer, 1986). Although East Asians tend to show greater inconsistency across contexts and may be less affected by this form of inconsistency relative to Westerners, these cultural differences may not hold for other forms of self-concept consistency.

Interactionist theories of personality (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995) suggest that consistency can be derived from behavior that varies across different contexts but that is nonetheless stable within similar contexts over time. Following the lead of various researchers (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002; Mendoza-Denton, Ayduk, Mischel, Shoda, & Testa, 2001), English and Chen (2007) applied such an interactionist perspective on behavior to the self-concept and found support for the novel proposition that whereas European Americans tend to define the self in relatively stable, global terms, East Asian Americans tend to define the self in stable, "if-then" terms—that is, their self-views show low consistency across relationship contexts but high temporal stability within the same relationship context. Put differently, East Asian Americans maintain stable relationship-specific selves (Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006).

Although the effects of self-concept consistency within contexts over time have received less attention than the effects of self-concept consistency across contexts, various lines of work suggest that temporal stability of the self-concept may be a predictor of authenticity and well-being (Diehl, Jacobs, & Hastings, 2006; Donahue et al., 1993; Rogers, 1961; Swann, 1987). High temporal stability of relationship-specific selves may also promote relationship functioning because this type of consistency bestows partners with a sense of security and facilitates smooth interactions (e.g., Swann, 1990).

Self-concept consistency within relationships over time should benefit both East Asians and Westerners, although different underlying processes may be at play in each group—namely, maintaining relationship-specific selves versus maintaining a global self-concept that is stable across and within contexts over time, respectively. For East Asians, this form of self-concept consistency should allow fulfilling the cultural need to adjust the self to specific relationship partners as well as more universal coherence needs (Church, 2000; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Swann, 1990), in turn enhancing relationship functioning as well as authenticity. For Westerners, the lack of any form of self-concept consistency may be costly because of the heavy value placed in Western cultures on the unwavering expression of one's true self.

The Present Research

The present studies extend past work in two significant respects. First, although prior research has shown a weaker link between self-concept consistency and some forms of adjustment in East Asian relative to Western cultures, this finding has not yet been fully explored with regard to subjective authenticity and relationship quality, outcomes that are of particular cultural interest. Second, past work has focused nearly exclusively on

self-concept consistency across contexts, leaving the impact of other forms of self-concept consistency largely unknown in both Western and East Asian populations. Incorporating an interactionist, "if-then" perspective of personality into the cross-cultural literature on self-concept consistency, the present research addressed these gaps in the literature by examining self-concept consistency both across contexts and within contexts over time among both Westerners and East Asians, with the hypothesis that culture may differentially shape the impact of these two forms of consistency.

Across three studies, we recruited East Asian and European Americans, thus relying on ethnicity as a proxy for culture (e.g., Lockwood, Marshall, & Sadler, 2005; Norasakkunkit & Kalick, 2002; White & Lehman, 2005). Studies 1 and 2 focused on the association between consistency of trait self-perceptions across contexts and, respectively, subjective authenticity and relationship quality. In Study 3, we predicted authenticity and relationship quality from both consistency across contexts and consistency within contexts over time. For consistency *across* contexts, we expected a weaker effect of consistency for individuals of an East Asian relative to Western cultural background. In contrast, for consistency *within* contexts over time, we expected a similarly positive effect of consistency regardless of cultural background.

Study 1: Consistency Across Relationship Contexts and Subjective Authenticity

Extending earlier work (e.g., English & Chen, 2007; Kashima et al., 2004), Study 1 explicitly tested whether subjective authenticity is less tied to consistency of trait self-perceptions across contexts among people with an East Asian relative to Western background. We focused on consistency across *relationship* contexts (i.e., contexts in which relationship partners are the explicit focus) versus other kinds of contexts because research has shown that cultural differences in self-concept consistency are most pronounced across relationship contexts (English & Chen, 2007), likely because of the differential emphasis placed on relationships and roles in East Asian versus Western cultures (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As noted, our main hypothesis was that authenticity would be more strongly predicted by consistency of trait self-perceptions across relationship contexts for European Americans than for East Asian Americans.

Method

Participants. Participants were 55 undergraduates (69% women) enrolled in introductory psychology courses who received partial course credit. The distribution of self-reported ethnicity was 45% European American and 55% East Asian American (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean American). Participants were run in groups of 2 to 5. The East Asian American participants had been living in the

United States for an average of 15.47 years ($SD = 6.10$), and 70% were born in the United States.

Materials and procedure. An experimenter informed participants, upon arrival, that they would be completing several questionnaires about their self-views on the computer. Specifically, participants were asked to rate the self-descriptiveness of 18 different attributes (anxious, bossy, careless, considerate, cooperative, expressive, friendly, insecure, kind, lazy, moody, open-minded, organized, polite, responsible, self-confident, shy, talkative) using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). This list included both positive and negative attributes and both agentic and communal traits given the importance of these dimensions in Western and East Asian cultures, respectively (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003).

All participants filled out the above items for three relationship contexts: self with friend, self with mother, and self with romantic partner. That is, they made self-descriptiveness ratings for their self-concept in the context of their relationship with a friend, their mother, and their romantic partner. For self-with-friend ratings, participants were asked to think of a close friend and write down his or her first name. They were then told to think about their relationship with this friend and what they are like with him or her before making ratings of themselves with their friend. The self-with-mother and self-with-romantic-partner ratings were made in a similar manner, except participants were not asked to write down their mother's name and were told they could describe themselves with another friend if they did not have a romantic partner.

Next, participants completed a subjective authenticity measure adapted from Shelton, Richeson, and Salvatore (2005). The four-item scale consisted of two items keyed true (e.g., "I can be myself with others") and two items keyed false (e.g., "I feel artificial in my interactions with others"), each rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Overall alpha was .85 (European Americans $\alpha = .84$; East Asian Americans $\alpha = .79$). Finally, participants provided demographic information and then were debriefed and thanked.

Index of inconsistency across relationships. To create an index of inconsistency across relationships, we computed the standard deviation of each participant's self-descriptiveness ratings for each trait across his or her three relationships and then averaged the standard deviations across the 18 traits. We chose this index of inconsistency because it is face valid and commonly used to assess variability (e.g., Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006; Church, Anderson-Harumi, et al., 2008; Eid & Diener, 1999; Fleeson, 2001; Matsumoto, Yoo, & Fontaine, 2009; Oishi, Diener, Scollon, & Biswas-Diener, 2004). Also, although this index may be somewhat confounded with mean-level ratings, standard deviations are generally less influenced by irrelevant sources of variability, such as variability across trait ratings within the same context, than are correlation-based indices (Baird et al., 2006). Larger standard deviations indicate greater inconsistency in participants' self-views across different relationship contexts.

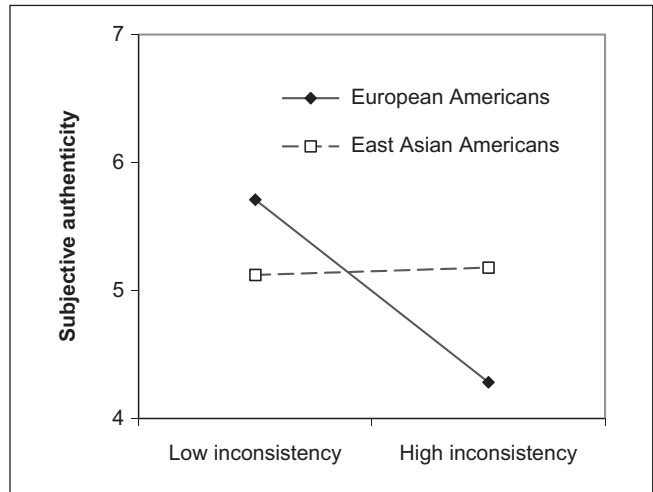


Figure 1. Interaction of self-concept inconsistency across contexts and ethnicity predicting authenticity in Study 1
Note: Low (high) inconsistency represents 1 standard deviation below (above) the mean on self-concept inconsistency.

Results and Discussion

We entered gender as a predictor in the analyses in this and all subsequent studies. Because it did not affect any of our primary analyses, we do not discuss it further.

Consistency of trait self-perceptions across relationships. Replicating past work (e.g., English & Chen, 2007), East Asian Americans ($M = 0.97$, $SD = 0.36$) had significantly higher inconsistency scores across relationship contexts than European Americans ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 0.28$), $t(53) = 2.41$, $p < .05$. That is, East Asian Americans' trait self-perceptions were more tailored to specific relationship contexts.

Predicting subjective authenticity from consistency across relationships. To test Study 1's central hypothesis, we regressed authenticity on self-consistency across relationships, ethnicity, and their interaction. This analysis yielded a significant self-consistency across relationships main effect, $\beta = -.32$, $p < .05$, which was qualified by the predicted interaction, $\beta = .33$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1). To decompose this interaction we tested the effect of self-consistency across relationships in each group and found inconsistency across relationship contexts predicted lower authenticity for European Americans ($\beta = -.53$, $p < .05$) but was unrelated to authenticity for East Asian Americans ($\beta = .03$, *ns*). In sum, as predicted, Study 1's findings suggest that authenticity is less tied to consistency of trait self-perceptions across relationship contexts for East Asian Americans than it is for European Americans.

Study 2: Consistency Across Relationship Contexts and Relationship Quality

In Study 1, we found that inconsistency of trait self-perceptions across relationships was associated with a sense of inauthenticity

for European Americans but not for East Asian Americans. In Study 2, we tested whether inconsistency across relationships would also be less linked to relationship quality for East Asian Americans than for European Americans. Although there is evidence that inconsistency is a general dimension (i.e., not trait or context specific) in both Western (Baird et al., 2006) and East Asian cultures (Church, Anderson-Harumi, et al., 2008), we included a broader range of relationship contexts in this study to provide a more robust test of the effects. Specifically, we linked consistency across five relationship contexts to the average self-reported quality of each of these relationships. We expected inconsistency across relationships to predict lower relationship quality more so for European Americans than East Asian Americans.

Method

Participants. Participants were 96 undergraduates (54% women) enrolled in introductory psychology courses who received partial course credit. Self-reported ethnicity was 51% European American and 49% East Asian American. Participants were run in groups of 2 to 5. The East Asian American participants had been living in the United States for an average of 14.80 years ($SD = 6.04$), and 45% were born in the United States.

Materials and procedure. An experimenter informed participants, upon arrival, that they would be completing several questionnaires about their self-views on the computer. Specifically, participants were asked to rate their standing on eight attributes (anxious, dominant, lazy, outgoing, patient, picky, sensitive, talkative) relative to other college students using a 19-point percentile scale (5% = *way below average*, 95% = *way above average*). As in Study 1, the attribute list included both positive and negative traits and traits relevant to the dimensions of agency and communion.

This type of trait self-perceptions measure has been commonly used as an index of self-enhancement (e.g., Brown, 1986; Dunning, 1999; Heine & Lehman, 1999; Lemyre & Smith, 1985)—that is, people's motivational tendency to view the self more positively than others. Prior research using this kind of measure of has found that, relative to European Americans, East Asian Americans exhibit less consistency across relationship contexts in this motivational aspect of the self-concept (English & Chen, 2007). The present focus is on cultural differences in the impact of consistency of self-enhancement tendencies across relationship contexts.

Each participant filled out the above questions for five relationship contexts: self with friend, self with mother, self with romantic partner, self with sibling, and self with coworker or classmate. For each relationship context, participants were asked to think of a specific person and write down his or her first name. Then they were instructed to think about their relationship with this person and what they are like with him or her before making ratings of themselves with

the person. Participants were told they could describe themselves with a friend (other than the one they had in mind for their self-with-friend ratings) if they did not have one of these relationships.

Next, participants completed a three-item measure of relationship quality adapted from Gill and Swann (2004) for each of the above relationship partners. The items included "I feel satisfied with my relationship with X," "I am very close to X," and "I generally get along very well with X." Participants rated their agreement with each item (e.g., "I feel satisfied with my relationship with my mom") on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). To create an overall relationship quality index, ratings on each of the three items were first averaged across the five relationships, and then we calculated the mean of the three averages. Overall alpha of the three averaged items was .84 (European Americans $\alpha = .85$; East Asian Americans $\alpha = .83$). Finally, participants provided demographic information and then were debriefed and thanked.

Index of inconsistency across relationships. Similar to Study 1, to create an index of inconsistency across relationships, we computed the standard deviation of each participant's self-descriptiveness ratings for each trait across their five relationships and then averaged the standard deviations across the eight traits. Larger standard deviations indicate greater inconsistency in participants' trait self-perceptions across different relationships, or greater inconsistency in their self-enhancement tendencies across different relationship contexts.

Results and Discussion

Consistency of trait self-perceptions across relationships. Consistent with our prediction, East Asian Americans ($M = 16.13$, $SD = 5.32$) had marginally higher inconsistency scores across relationship contexts than European Americans ($M = 14.31$, $SD = 3.81$), $t(94) = 1.94$, $p = .06$. That is, East Asian Americans' trait self-perceptions were more tailored to specific relationship contexts than were European Americans'.

Predicting relationship quality from consistency across relationships. To test Study 2's central hypothesis, we regressed relationship quality on self-consistency across relationships, ethnicity, and their interaction. This analysis yielded only the predicted interaction, $\beta = .23$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 2). To decompose this interaction we tested the effect of self-consistency across relationships in each ethnic group and found inconsistency across relationship contexts predicted lower relationship quality among European Americans ($\beta = -.32$, $p < .05$) but was unrelated to relationship quality for East Asian Americans ($\beta = .11$, *ns*).

In sum, as hypothesized, Study 2's findings suggest that inconsistency of trait self-perceptions across relationship contexts is associated with poor relationship quality among European Americans but not East Asian Americans. As these

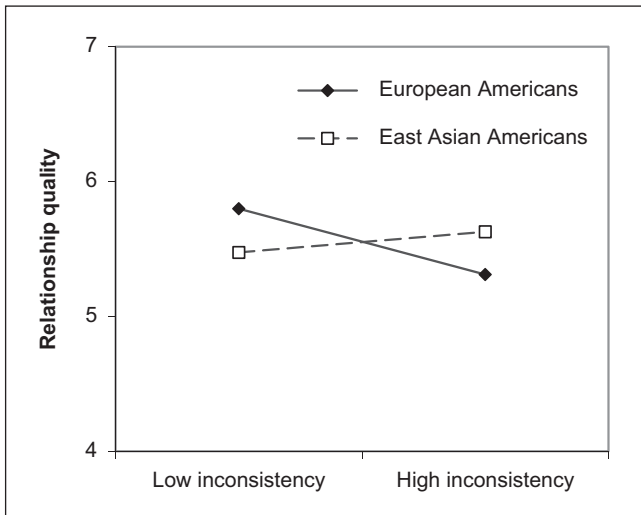


Figure 2. Interaction of self-concept inconsistency across contexts and ethnicity predicting relationship quality in Study 2
Note: Low (high) inconsistency represents 1 standard deviation below (above) the mean on self-concept inconsistency.

trait self-perceptions were obtained using a measure that taps self-enhancement tendencies, these results indicate that to the degree that European Americans, but not East Asian Americans, vary in their tendency to self-enhance across different relationships, their relationship quality suffers.

Study 3: Consistency Across and Within Relationship Contexts Over Time

Together, the findings from Studies 1 and 2 suggest that authenticity and relationship quality are more strongly tied to consistency of trait self-perceptions across relationship contexts for European Americans than for East Asian Americans. In Study 3, we aimed to provide a stronger demonstration of these effects by measuring consistency of trait self-perceptions temporally prior to the outcome measures (i.e., authenticity and relationship quality), thereby decreasing concerns about common method variance causing the effects observed in the first two studies. In addition, we examined another type of consistency that may be more consequential in East Asian culture—namely, stability of relationship-specific self-perceptions (i.e., consistency within relationship contexts over time). Inclusion of both types of consistency allowed us to test whether culture differentially shapes the impact of these two forms of consistency. Overall, we expected that inconsistency across relationship contexts would affect only European Americans (as found in Studies 1 and 2), whereas consistency within relationship contexts over time would have a similarly positive effect on both East Asian Americans and European Americans.

Method

Participants. Participants were 107 undergraduates (78% women) enrolled in various psychology courses who received

partial course credit. Self-reported ethnic identity was 54% European American and 46% East Asian American. Participants were run in groups of 2 to 5. The East Asian American participants had been living in the United States for an average of 12.74 years ($SD = 6.90$), and 51% were born in the United States.

Measures and procedure. At the start of the semester (Time 1) participants completed a self-views questionnaire, embedded in a battery of questionnaires administered to all students in introductory psychology courses, where they described themselves in different relationships. Then participants came into the laboratory (Time 2) to complete measures of authenticity and relationship quality and completed the same self-views questionnaire. Participants who described themselves in the same relationship at both time points were included in this study. The average interval between Time 1 and Time 2 was 34 days ($SD = 21$ days); the average interval was similar for East Asian Americans and European Americans, $t < 1$, ns .

Self-views. Self-views were assessed with the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), modified to refer to three relationship-specific selves: self with friend, self with mother, and self with romantic partner (e.g., “When I am with my mother, I am reserved, quiet”). This scale has two markers for each of the Big Five dimensions (one for the high pole and one for the low pole). Each item was rated on a scale from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*).

Authenticity. Whereas Study 1 assessed global subjective authenticity, in this study subjective authenticity was assessed in each of the three relationships (i.e., friend, mom, and romantic partner) with a modified version of the five-item scale used by Sheldon and colleagues (1997; e.g., “Who I am with X is an authentic part of who I am”). Agreement with each item was rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). To create an overall authenticity index, ratings on each of the five items were first averaged across the three relationships, and then we calculated the mean of the five averages. Overall alpha of the five averaged items was .83 (European Americans $\alpha = .92$; East Asians Americans $\alpha = .76$).

Relationship quality. We assessed relationship quality in each of the three relationships with a four-item scale adapted from Gill and Swann (2004), including two items keyed true (e.g., “I feel satisfied with my relationship with X”) and two items keyed false (e.g., “X has a way of annoying me from time to time”). Agreement with each item was rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). As in Study 2, to create an overall relationship quality index, ratings on each of the four items were first averaged across the three relationships, and then we calculated the mean of the four averages. Overall alpha of the four averaged items was .87 (European Americans $\alpha = .84$; East Asian Americans $\alpha = .82$).

Index of inconsistency across relationships. Similar to Studies 1 and 2, to create an index of inconsistency across relationship contexts, we computed the standard deviation

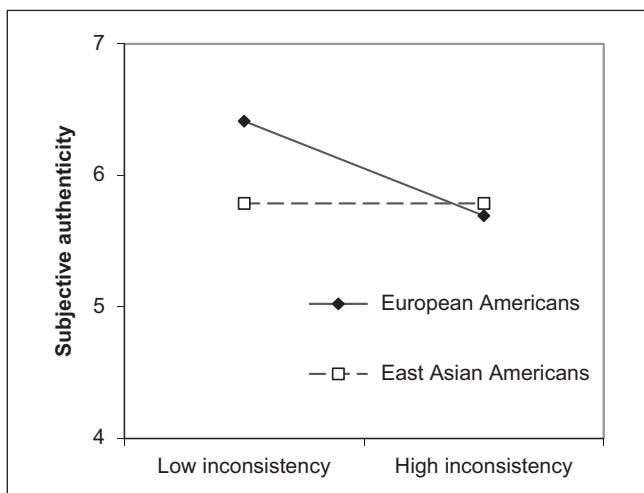


Figure 3. Interaction of self-concept inconsistency across contexts and ethnicity predicting authenticity in Study 3
Note: Low (high) inconsistency represents 1 standard deviation below (above) the mean on self-concept inconsistency.

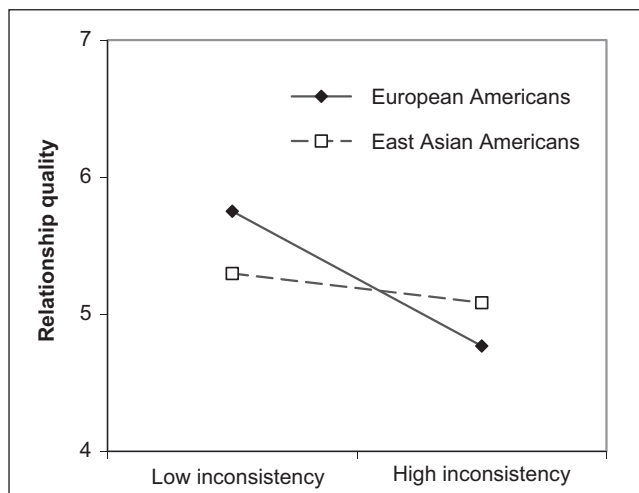


Figure 4. Interaction of self-concept inconsistency across contexts and ethnicity predicting relationship quality in Study 3
Note: Low (high) inconsistency represents 1 standard deviation below (above) the mean on self-concept inconsistency.

of each participant's Time 1 self-descriptiveness ratings for each item across their three relationships and then averaged the standard deviations across the 10 items. Larger standard deviations indicate greater inconsistency in participants' trait self-perceptions across different relationships.

Index of inconsistency within relationships over time. To create an index of inconsistency within relationship contexts over time, we computed the absolute difference between each participant's Time 1 and Time 2 ratings for each trait, averaged the absolute differences across the 10 traits within each of the three relationship contexts, and then averaged across the three relationship contexts. Larger difference scores indicate greater inconsistency in participants' trait self-perceptions within the same relationship context over time.

Results and Discussion

Consistency of trait self-perceptions across relationships. Replicating English and Chen (2007), East Asian Americans ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 0.51$) had significantly higher inconsistency scores across relationship contexts than European Americans ($M = 0.87$, $SD = 0.40$), $t(105) = 1.99$, $p < .05$. That is, East Asian Americans' trait self-perceptions were more tailored to specific relationship contexts than were European Americans'.

Predicting authenticity and relationship quality from consistency across relationships. Next, we regressed authenticity on self-consistency across relationships, ethnicity, and their interaction. This analysis yielded a significant self-consistency across relationships main effect, $\beta = -.44$, $p < .05$, which was qualified by the predicted interaction, $\beta = .33$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 3). To decompose this interaction we tested the effect of self-consistency across relationships in each ethnic group. Replicating Study 1, we found that inconsistency across relationship contexts predicted lower authenticity for European

Americans ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .05$) but was unrelated to authenticity for East Asian Americans ($\beta = -.01$, ns).

Next, we regressed relationship quality on self-consistency across relationships, ethnicity, and their interaction. This analysis yielded a significant self-consistency across relationships main effect, $\beta = -.56$, $p < .05$, which was qualified by the predicted interaction, $\beta = .33$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 4). To decompose this interaction we tested the effect of self-consistency across relationships in each ethnic group. Conceptually replicating Study 2, we found that inconsistency across relationship contexts predicted lower relationship quality for European Americans ($\beta = -.47$, $p < .05$) but was unrelated to relationship quality for East Asian Americans ($\beta = -.14$, ns).

Consistency of trait self-perceptions within relationships over time. Replicating English and Chen (2007), East Asian Americans' relationship-specific trait self-perceptions were on average highly stable over time ($M = 0.95$, $SD = 0.28$), as were European Americans' ($M = 0.93$, $SD = 0.44$). There was no ethnicity difference in the stability of trait self-perceptions within relationships, $t < 1$, ns .

Predicting authenticity and relationship quality from consistency within relationships. Next, we regressed authenticity and relationship quality on self-consistency within relationships, ethnicity, and their interaction. Both of these analyses yielded only significant self-consistency main effects (authenticity: $\beta = -.29$, $p < .05$; relationship quality: $\beta = -.40$, $p < .05$); the interaction effects were not significant (authenticity: $\beta = .15$, ns ; relationship quality: $\beta = .08$, ns). Thus, inconsistency within relationships over time similarly predicted lower authenticity and lower relationship quality for European and East Asian Americans.¹

In sum, the effects of Studies 1 and 2 were replicated when inconsistency and the outcome measures were assessed at a

different point in time, suggesting the effects are not likely the result of common method variance. In addition, Study 3's findings suggest that although inconsistency of trait self-perceptions across relationships adversely affects authenticity and relationship quality only for European Americans, inconsistency within relationships over time is costly for both East Asian Americans and European Americans. These divergent effects of inconsistency across and within relationship contexts for East Asian Americans suggest that inconsistency is not altogether unimportant or inconsequential in East Asian cultures.

General Discussion

The present findings extend prior research suggesting that certain forms of self-concept inconsistency are less costly in East Asian cultures than in Western cultures (e.g., Church, Anderson-Harumi, et al., 2008; Suh, 2002). Specifically, we focused on two important and culturally interesting aspects of functioning that have not been fully explored in the literature—namely, subjective authenticity and relationship functioning. In addition, unlike extant research on culture and self-concept consistency, which has focused nearly exclusively on consistency in the self-concept across different contexts, we examined the impact of two types of consistency—consistency across relationship contexts and consistency within the same relationship context over time.

Study 1 showed that inconsistency of trait self-perceptions across relationship contexts was associated with lower authenticity for European Americans but was not related to authenticity for East Asian Americans. In Study 2 we showed that the prediction of relationship quality from consistency across relationship contexts was also significant only for European Americans. Moreover, Study 2's measure of trait self-perceptions tapped a motivational aspect of the self-concept, namely, self-enhancement tendencies. Finally, the effects of Studies 1 and 2 were replicated in Study 3, where inconsistency of trait self-perceptions was measured prior to the outcome variables. That our findings were obtained using different measures of trait self-perceptions across the three studies speaks to the robustness and generalizability of our results. Importantly, Study 3 also showed that inconsistency within the same relationship context over time, a form of self-concept consistency that has thus far received little empirical attention, predicted similarly low levels of authenticity and relationship quality among both European Americans and East Asian Americans.

Overall, the current results suggest that different forms of self-concept consistency are important in Western and East Asian cultures. European Americans were adversely affected by inconsistency both across contexts and within contexts over time, suggesting that Western cultures value maintaining a global, cross-situationally consistent self-concept. In contrast, East Asian Americans were uniquely affected by self-concept

consistency within relationships over time, suggesting that East Asian cultures value “if-then” consistency in the self-concept, particularly maintaining stable and distinct relationship-specific selves.

Implications for Authenticity

At its core, authenticity is focused on the extent to which an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reflect his or her “true self.” East Asians' “true self” may consist of many distinct relationship-specific selves, rather than a global self-concept that is stable across contexts and time. Accordingly, East Asians' sense of authenticity may be tied to maintaining relationship-specific selves over time. Indeed, as noted, English and Chen (2007) showed that East Asian Americans' self-concept exhibits an “if-then” form of consistency, whereby the self-views of these individuals are more inconsistent *across* different relationship contexts than are the self-views of European Americans but are similarly stable *within* these contexts over time. The present research replicated these findings yet extended them by linking this if-then form of self-concept consistency to subjective authenticity, showing that East Asian Americans feel authentic when they maintain the distinct identities they have negotiated with others.

On a related note, it is likely that, like Westerners, East Asians strive for coherence in their self-concept (Chen, English, & Peng, 2006; Church, Anderson-Harumi, et al., 2008; English & Chen, 2007; English, Chen, & Swann, 2008; Kitayama & Markus, 1999) because coherence provides a crucial sense of prediction and control—a way of organizing past experience, guiding current behaviors, and predicting future events (Church, 2000; Heine et al., 2006; Swann, 1990). We suggest it is possible for East Asians to have an integrated, coherent sense of self, despite their relative lack of self-concept consistency across contexts, because although such consistency may be important for a sense of unity, it is not the only type of consistency that can satisfy one's coherence needs (Fleeson & Nofle, 2008). Coherence can exist as long as there is some type of consistent pattern of responses or an underlying principle driving seemingly inconsistent behaviors (Caspi & Roberts, 2001). Therefore, a sense of unity in the self-concept could derive from global, cross-situationally consistent self-conceptions but can also be based on self-conceptions that vary across contexts but are stable within them (e.g., distinct relational selves that endure over time). East Asians' self-concept may reflect this latter type of “if-then” consistency because it allows for both culturally valued adjustment to the social environment and satisfaction of more universal coherence needs. It is also worth noting that at a higher, more abstract level it may not even be appropriate to call variation across relationship contexts “inconsistency” for East Asians because this type of adjustment to others is culturally prescribed and normative in East Asian culture, leading “inconsistency” to take on a different meaning.

Future research is needed to test specific psychological mechanisms that may account for the weaker effects of inconsistency across contexts on East Asians' sense of authenticity (and relationship quality). One potential mechanism involves cultural differences in epistemologies or lay theories about the world. Eastern dialectical epistemologies emphasize holism, change, and contradiction (Peng & Nisbett, 1999), whereas more linear Western epistemologies emphasize constancy and the resolution of contradiction through integration and synthesis (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Lewin, 1951). From a dialectical perspective, inconsistency across contexts is considered natural and perhaps even desirable. Another interesting candidate for the mechanism underlying these cultural differences in the impact of consistency is control orientation (i.e., primary and secondary control; e.g., Morling & Evered, 2006). East Asians may be less negatively affected by inconsistency across contexts because they value secondary control (i.e., adjusting aspects of the self to fit the existing environment), whereas Westerners emphasize exerting personal primary control (i.e., changing the environment to accommodate the self). Of course, research examining potential mechanisms would need to account for the presence of cultural differences in the impact of inconsistency across contexts, *as well as* the lack of such differences when it comes to the impact of inconsistency within relationship contexts over time.

Implications for Relationship Functioning

Some cultural psychologists suggest that in East Asian cultures inconsistent individuals are seen as more mature and socially skilled than consistent individuals (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Matsumoto et al., 2009). However, there is some evidence to suggest that East Asians may be accepting of inconsistency in others only if it promotes interpersonal harmony (Fu, Lee, Cameron, & Xu, 2001; Iwao, 1988, as cited in Triandis, 1989). In the present research, we did not find any evidence of a positive relationship between inconsistency of trait self-perceptions and relationship quality for East Asian Americans—that is, inconsistency either was not related to relationship quality in the case of consistency across contexts or was associated with lower relationship quality in the case of consistency within contexts over time. Although it is possible that in East Asian cultures interaction partners may view an individual more positively when that person adjusts himself or herself to fit the partner's needs, our results suggest that East Asians with greater inconsistency of trait self-perceptions do not necessarily have better relationships.

Future work is needed to directly address the mechanisms underlying the implications of self-concept consistency for relationship functioning. Theory and research suggest that authenticity is vital to relationship functioning (e.g., Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 1997; Swann & Pelham, 2002). Thus,

one possibility is that self-concept inconsistency across contexts has fewer adverse social consequences for East Asians because these individuals do not perceive such inconsistency as a sign of inauthenticity. In contrast, inconsistency within the same social context over time may interfere with relationship functioning for East Asians as well as Westerners because this type of inconsistency signals inauthenticity in both cultures.

Broader Implications of Multiple Forms of Consistency

By examining multiple forms of self-concept consistency, we were able to show that consistency is not altogether unimportant or inconsequential in East Asian cultures. Although inconsistency in the self-concept across contexts may be tolerated or even prescribed in East Asian cultures, our results indicate that temporal stability of relationship-specific selves may have important implications for authenticity and relationship functioning. More research is needed to systematically investigate the role of culture in influencing different forms of self-concept consistency and, in turn, to uncover the full range of downstream implications of these different forms of consistency. Broadly speaking, the degree and impact of self-concept inconsistency may depend on the type of consistency (e.g., cross-situational consistency, temporal stability within similar contexts, internal consistency), the unit being measured (e.g., self-conceptions, behavior, emotion), and characteristics of the person (e.g., culture, gender).

It may be especially fruitful to explore whether the effects of inconsistency of self-conceptions also hold for inconsistency of behavior. Studies of personality have revealed that, in contrast to their relatively consistent self-concept, Westerners' behavior is quite variable across contexts (Church, Katigbak, et al., 2008; Fleeson, 2001; Mischel, 1968). It is possible that although inconsistency of the self-concept across contexts is relatively problematic in Western cultures, inconsistency of behavior across contexts may be more universally beneficial. Indeed, many theorists have proposed that variability in behavior may be adaptive (Bem & Allen, 1974; Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Snyder, 1974), especially to the extent that it reflects a meaningful and appropriate response to the changing social environment (Gergen, 1971; Paulhus & Martin, 1988).

Caveats and Limitations

One limitation of the present studies is the reliance on self-report measures. Concerns about common method variance accounting for the links observed between inconsistency and our outcome variables were addressed by temporally separating their measurement (in Study 3). However, more work needs to be done, especially using experience sampling and longitudinal designs with multiple assessments of both the

self-concept and the outcome measures. Such future studies could help clarify the direction of effects among inconsistency, authenticity, and relationship quality. Although we have suggested that inconsistency leads to greater subjective inauthenticity and poorer relationship quality, it is also plausible that feeling inauthentic or having relationship difficulties leads to greater self-concept inconsistency.

Another limitation of the present research is the use of relative small samples composed of only college students. Although the consistency of the effects across studies provides greater confidence in our findings, the effects need to be replicated in larger, more representative samples to test their robustness and generalizability. On a related note, it would also be worthwhile to replicate the present findings using an East Asian sample rather than relying on ethnicity as a proxy for culture and to examine which, if any, form of self-concept consistency is valued in a broader range of cultures, beyond North American and East Asian ones.

Concluding Remarks

Elaborating a consistent self-concept may be important in both East Asian and Western cultures, but different forms of consistency may be valuable in each of these cultures. Specifically, our findings suggest that individuals from East Asian cultures benefit from maintaining distinct relationship-specific selves over time, whereas Westerners benefit from maintaining a more globally consistent self-concept. It would be useful, therefore, for future research to make conceptual distinctions between different types of self-concept consistency.

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Note

1. We also tested whether self-concept consistency within a specific relationship was a better predictor of relationship quality within the corresponding relationship than was consistency within other relationships. Indeed, when we regressed relationship quality within each of the specific relationships onto ethnicity and inconsistency within each of the specific relationships, only inconsistency within the corresponding relationship emerged as a significant predictor (e.g., inconsistency over time for self with mom and self with friend did not predict relationship

quality with the romantic partner). The average beta for inconsistency within the same relationship was $-.34$, and the average beta for inconsistency within the other relationships was $.02$.

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