

Individualistic, Autonomous, and Permissive: Examining the Link  
Between Self-Construal and Sexual Permissiveness

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### Abstract

Three studies examined the extent to which participants with an individualistic self-construal would endorse sexually permissive attitudes to a greater degree than individuals with a collectivistic self-construal. In Study 1, we performed a secondary analysis of published data sets and found a positive correlation between a nation's degree of individualism and its population's mean sociosexuality score (an index of sexual permissiveness). In Study 2, participants' degree of individualism was associated with sexual permissiveness whereas their degree of collectivism was associated with sexual restrictedness. In Study 3, participants primed with individualism reported more permissive sexual attitudes than participants primed with collectivism. These findings highlight the influence of culture in the development and expression of sexual attitudes.

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The *self-construal* continuum, a prominent facet of culture, captures variability in people's preferences for the desired level of interpersonal distance, with the preference for autonomy on one side (*individualism*) and the preference for intergroup harmony (*collectivism*) on the other side (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Self-construal may likewise transcend into people's attitudes towards casual sex (i.e., sexual permissiveness), given that casual relationships entail lesser degrees of interdependence than do committed relationships (e.g., Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Thus, individualism should be associated with more permissive sexual attitudes (i.e., beliefs about the acceptability of sex in casual, uncommitted relationships; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988). We tested this hypothesis in three studies: (1) a secondary analysis of published data sets at the level of the country; (2) a correlational analysis of our hypothesis at the level of an individual using a cross-cultural sample; (3) an experiment in which we primed participants with either an individualistic or collectivistic self-construal and examined self-reported sexual permissiveness.

### Study 1

**Overview.** At the level of the nation, we tested our hypothesis that individualism should be positively associated with permissive sexual attitudes, using published data sets. We used *sociosexuality*, measure of people's sexual behaviors (e.g., number of sexual partners within the previous year) and attitudes (e.g., the degree to which one believes that sex is acceptable without love; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), as an index of sexual permissiveness. At one end of the sociosexuality continuum is *restrictedness*, or

the belief that sex is unacceptable without commitment. On the other end of the continuum is *unrestrictedness*, or the belief that sex does not require commitment (i.e., sexual permissiveness).

**Materials.** Schmitt (2005) reported the mean sociosexuality levels of 48 nations; we used his results as our national index of sexual permissiveness. We obtained countries' degree of individualism from Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010) cross-cultural analysis. Due to non-overlapping countries that Schmitt and Hofstede and colleagues analyzed, our final sample consisted of 31 countries for which we had indices of both individualism and sociosexuality. We also included two control variables in this analysis. First, we included religiosity, a significant dimension of culture (Norenzayan, Schaller, & Heine, 2006) which greatly influences sexuality (e.g., Gall, Mullet, & Shafiqhi, 2002), operationalized as the percentage of people in a given country who find religion important to them (Gallup Poll, 2012). Second, we also included the human development index (HDI), an index of a country's standard of living computed as a function of life expectancy, income, and education (United Nations Development Programme, 2011). Prior work showed that standard of living impacts sexual attitudes (Schmitt, 2005).

**Results.** We tested our hypothesis by examining the correlation between countries' individualism and sociosexuality while controlling for religiosity and HDI. As predicted, countries' degree of individualism positively (and fairly strongly) predicted the mean sociosexuality of its population,  $r_{\text{partial}}(26) = .53, p = .004$ .

## Study 2

**Participants.** We recruited a total of 346 participants (57.2% men) using

Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The age range of this sample was diverse ( $M = 28.49$ ; range: 18-67). The countries represented in the sample included Austria, India (modal country of participants' origin;  $n = 263$ ), Greece, Mexico, Nigeria, Serbia, Singapore, and United States. We excluded 12 participants who chose not to disclose their sex, as sex was one of our control variables (see below). We also excluded 36 participants who had too many missing data (e.g., not completing entire predictor measures). Thus, our final sample was 298 participants.

### **Procedure**

**Materials.** Volunteering MTurk users clicked on a link to the survey. We presented the measures of self-construal and sexual permissiveness to the participants in random order.

**Self-construal.** We measured self-construal using Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand's (1995) 32-item scale that assesses two dimensions of individualism and collectivism: vertical (i.e., acceptance of inequality) and horizontal (i.e., emphasis on equality). Because we were interested in global indices of individualism and collectivism, we aggregated over the horizontal and vertical dimensions of each self-construal type to compute composite individualism and collectivism scores. Sixteen items measured individualism (sample item: "I am a unique individual;"  $\alpha = .88$ ) and 16 items measured collectivism (sample item: "To me, pleasure is spending time with others;"  $\alpha = .92$ ). Each item was measured using a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* and 7 = *Strongly agree*).

**Sexual Attitudes.** Participants completed two measures of sexual attitudes. The first measure was the three attitudinal items of Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) *Sociosexuality Orientation Inventory (SOI)* (sample item: "Sex without love is OK"),

measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *I strongly disagree* and 7 = *I strongly agree*). The other measure was based on Sprecher et al.'s (1988) five-item Premarital Sexual Standards Scale (*PSS*; sample item: "I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me on a first date"), measured on a 6-point scale 1 = *Disagree strongly* to 6 = *Agree strongly*). We used only the first two items of the *PSS*, which measured participants' attitudes towards having sex on a first date and in casually dating relationships. In this sample, we excluded one *SOI* item ("I would have to be closely attached to someone [both emotionally and psychologically] before I could feel comfortable and fully enjoy having sex with him or her") because it did not agree with the other two *SOI* items ( $r_s = .01$  and  $.09$ ). We computed our dependent measure, an index of sexual permissiveness, by standardizing (given that the *PSS* and *SOI* were measured on different scales) and aggregating the four items into a composite score ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

***Sex role ideology.*** Because individual differences in sex role ideology may also influence one's sexual permissiveness, especially across cultures (e.g., Schmitt, 2005), we included it as a control variable. We measured sex role ideology using 11 items from Kalin and Tilby's (1978) 30-item sex-role ideology scale. We selected 11 items with face validity to prevent participant exhaustion in completing the survey (sample item: "A married woman should feel free to have men as friends;"  $\alpha = .77$ ). The items were measured using the scale: 1 = *Not at all important*, 3 = *Somewhat important*, 5 = *Quite important*, and 7 = *Very important*.

***Demographic information.*** We used four demographic items (sex, religiosity, age, and education) as control variables. We measured *religiosity* with a single item ("How important is religion in your life?") using the scale, 1 = *Not at all important*, 3 =

*Somewhat important*, 5 = *Quite important*, and 7 = *Very important*. We measured *age* by asking participants to provide their age in years (two people reported their birth year; we calculated their age by subtracting the current year [2012] from their reported birth year). We measured *education* with the item “How many years of schooling have you completed?” The choices were: 1 = *Less than high school*, 2 = *High school*, 3 = *Some college*, 4 = *College*, 5 = *Graduate school*.

**Overview of Analysis.** We predicted individualism to be positively associated with sexual permissiveness (H1a). Because we were also able to measure collectivism in this study, we extended our hypothesis to predict that collectivism would be negatively associated with sexual permissiveness (H1b). We controlled for sex, age, religiosity, sex role ideology, and education in our analyses. Individualism and collectivism are not necessarily orthogonal (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Singelis et al., 1995), and we likewise found a positive correlation between them,  $r(296) = .63, p < .001$ . We thus controlled for collectivism in our analysis of H1a and we controlled for individualism in our analysis of H1b.

**Results.** Supporting H1a, individualism was positively associated with sexual permissiveness,  $r_{\text{partial}}(285) = .23, p < .001$ . Likewise, supporting H1b, collectivism was negatively associated with sexual permissiveness,  $r_{\text{partial}}(287) = -.13, p = .024$ .

### Study 3

**Participants.** A total of 55 undergraduate students (40 females) at a large urban Midwestern American university participated in this study for course credit (mean age = 20.33).

**Procedure.** To prime individualism or collectivism, we use a procedure similar to

the one employed by Na & Choi (2009). We randomly assigned participants to write about either how *different* they were from their friends and family (individualism prime) or how *similar* they were to their friends and family (collectivism prime). After the writing task, participants completed measures of sexual permissiveness and demographic information (e.g., sex).

**Materials.** Participants completed the *PSS* and the three attitudinal *SOI* items, in random order. We computed our index of sexual permissiveness identically to that of Study 2 ( $\alpha = .91$ ). We included the measure of religiosity that we used in Study 2 and sex as covariates.

**Results.** We tested our hypothesis that participants primed with individualism would report more permissive sexual attitudes than participants primed collectivism with an ANCOVA, using sex and religiosity as covariates. Confirming our hypothesis, the individualism prime led participants to report more permissive sexual attitudes ( $M = 0.23$ ,  $SD = 0.15$ ) than did the collectivistic prime ( $M = -0.20$ ,  $SD = 0.14$ ;  $d = 0.43$ ),  $F(1, 51) = 4.08$ ,  $p = .049$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ .

## Discussion

In this research, we found support for our hypothesis that individualism will be associated with more permissive sexual attitudes in three studies: Countries' degree of individualism predicted its populations' sociosexuality (Study 1); people's degree of individualism predicted sexual permissiveness whereas their degree of collectivism predicted sexual restrictedness; people primed with individualism (vs. collectivism) reported more permissive sexual attitudes. Collectively, our research revealed a mechanism by which culture can influence romantic bonds. People oriented towards

greater social distance appear to endorse more favorable attitudes towards casual sex – and thus casual relationships characterized by fairly little degree of interdependence – than those oriented towards more social cohesion. Perhaps people’s desired interpersonal distance may extend to other facets of relationship interdependence. For example, individualism may predict a greater likelihood of committing infidelity or ending a relationship, possibly due to one’s motivation to maintain lesser degrees of interdependence with his or her partner. These speculations, of course, remain to be tested in future research.

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