



Self-evaluations and social behaviour differences between Dutch and Greek individuals

Analysis of data collected at NIA on 16-11-2011

In the framework of a lecture delivered by Dr Katerina Pouliasi at the Netherlands Institute in Athens on the 16th of November 2011 a small experiment was conducted. Dutch and Greek attendees completed a short questionnaire related to the topic of the lecture: *Do individuals in one culture make sense of their lives in different ways than individuals in another culture? Comparisons between North and South Europeans.*

Questions discussed during the lecture were for example the following:

- Are aspects of the self specifically emphasised in one cultural context, but not in the other, and *if so, how* can these differences relate to one's psychological well being?
- Are certain values more important in the one compared to the other cultural context?
- Do people from different cultures differ in the ways they reason about social behaviour?

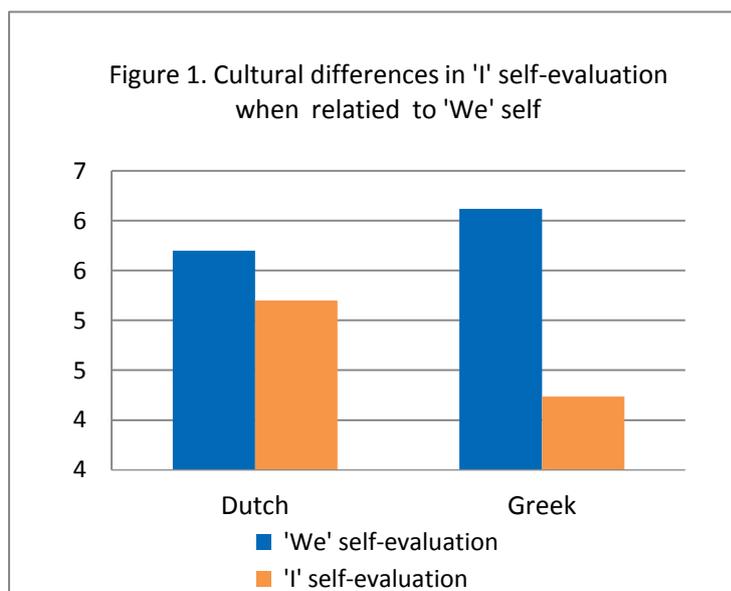
Answering such questions, which form the subject of comparative cultural psychology, has important implications for consultancy in psychology.

It has been argued and robustly confirmed over the last 30 years in many cross-cultural comparative studies that individuals growing up in a individualist cultural context shape a self that most likely differ in certain aspects than that of those in a collectivist cultural context. In the more individualist North-Western European and North American cultures there is, for example, a strong faith in personal autonomy and freedom, personal privacy and personal pleasure. The main institutional aim is to foster autonomous individuals by discovering and subsequently promoting their unique internal attributes. This tendency is strengthened by encouraging them to perceive and present themselves both favourably and positively and to maintain consistency with their self no matter the varying situations and social contexts they find themselves in. The boundaries between the self and others become clearly drawn and the psychologically and emotionally detached self becomes self-directed and self-monitoring in promoting personal goals. On the contrary, in Eastern- or Southern European cultures the emphasis is on maintaining harmony in one's relationships, on mutual expectations of, and commitments to, others. This emphasis promotes a tendency to incorporate the close-others into the self, an inclusion which, over time, even forms criteria for self-worth and performance in personal goals.

Together with Professor Maykel Verkuyten at the University of Utrecht, Katerina Pouliasi has extensively compared the Dutch to the Greek culture. Their research findings related to one's attitude towards the self, values or the ways one reasons about events in life have both confirmed typical differences between a North and a South European culture as well as revised our understanding of these differences. One of these findings, discussed during the lecture, is the tendency among the Dutch people in the Netherlands to evaluate their "I" feeling significantly more positively compared to that among the Greeks in Greece.



As always at NIA, attendees to the lecture were first welcomed by the director Dr Christiane Tytgat. They were then kindly asked if they wanted to fill in a questionnaire specifically designed to make the content of the lecture more concrete. The attendees consisted mainly of Dutch¹ and Greek individuals. The Dutch attendees typically had lived in Greece for more than 10 years and were all proficient in the Greek language. They, however, were asked to complete the Dutch version of the questionnaire, which was also illustrated with typical Dutch icons, as theoretically it makes sense in the way one would behave. The Greek attendees answered the corresponding Greek version, also illustrated with typical Greek icons. Analysis of the answers re-confirmed that indeed culture makes a difference in the way one thinks and responds. The results on the ways the two cultural groups self-evaluated their personal self ('I' feeling) and social self ('We' feeling), and the way they explained social behaviour are presented below. For the latter aspect, they were shown a photo of a man drinking his coffee all alone by himself, while others in the same room are together in groups. Participants were asked to provide an explanation why this person is drinking his coffee alone. They were also asked to think of and report three statements that relate to their own 'We' feeling and then to evaluate this feeling on a 7 point scale ranging from 'strongly negative' (1) to 'strongly positive' (7) with 'neutral' (4) in the middle. Finally, they were asked to do the same with their 'I' feeling.



The cultural influence on the degree to which one considers 'self' either as separated and independent from others, or rather as belonging in a unit of persons or as an extension of (a) close-other(s) has been extensively studied, following the landmark theoretical work of Markus and Kitayama (1991) and later work by Triandis and Hofstede. This marked influence has been repeatedly established in cross-cultural studies. As already discussed during the lecture, the Dutch participants were as expected indeed much less influenced by what 'We' means and of which persons this concept is comprised, when later

evaluating their 'I' feeling as compared to the Greek participants. Dutch participants evaluated their social self ('We') only slightly more positively than their personal 'I', although they were explicitly directed to first think of their 'We' self, before valuing their 'I' self. The mean scores for the social and personal self-evaluations were at rather similar levels, 5.70 (*S.D.* = .82) and 5.20 (*S.D.* = 1.03) respectively, and the two evaluations do not differ significantly ($t = 1.62, p = >.1$ n.s.). Whereas, the Greek participants clearly value 'We' feeling more positively than their 'I' self, and the distance in the corresponding mean scores, 6.12 (*S.D.* = .85) for the 'We' self and 4.24 (*S.D.* = 1.09) for the 'I' self, is both larger and of high reliability ($t = 5.69, p = <.001$). Figure 1 illustrates these cultural differences.

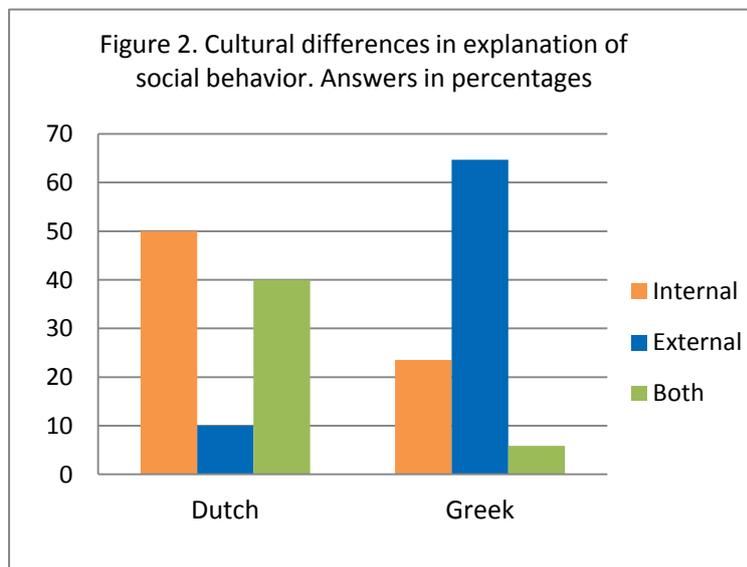
¹ To our knowledge there were also a Belgian and a German person, but answered the Dutch questionnaire. Excuses for grouping them under 'Dutch'.



These trends in how, dependent on the culture, important 'We' feeling is in relation to an 'I' one, indicate what is perceived as the 'right' self. The adoption of a rather self-focused versus the relationship-focused type of the self, schematically characterized as a Dutch culture oriented versus a Greek culture oriented one, is directed by the norms and values in which one has been enculturated. Hence, participants unconsciously pick what they believe as the 'correct' self. This is confirmed by the fact that both the Dutch and the Greeks valued their self-esteem at very similar levels: The mean scores of the

self-esteem for the Dutch is, 5.50 (*S.D.* = .97) and for the Greeks, 5.44 (*S.D.* = .81) ($p = >.1$ n.s.).

The culturally determined differences in what one considers the 'right' self, is not irrelevant to how a person will explain social behaviour or social events. This relevance, which again is unconscious, is revealed by a simple question: Why is the man in the photo² sitting apart from the others while drinking his coffee?



The answers to this question again reveal a marked cultural influence (see figure 2). Almost half (50%), of the Dutch participants think that this is simply due to some 'internal' self trait (quality) of the man: That this is just his *own* choice, because 'he wants to enjoy his coffee on his own', 'this very moment he does not need company', 'he is not in the mood to talk with other people', or even 'he is very shy and does not dare to join the others'. Only 10% of the Dutch participants reasoned that it is because of the situation or the other

people around, and thus provided a so called 'external' or situational explanation. The rest 40% of the Dutch responses make reference to both internal and external reasons. But, as figure 2 clearly shows, the majority (65%) of the Greeks provided external or situational explanations (e.g 'his own company has not yet come', 'he expects two more people', 'he does not have friends', or they comment about other elements in the photo

² Photo by Theo Meijer, HGA published in the book *Ik had een neef in Den Haag. Nieuwkomers in de twintigste eeuw*. By Annemarie Cottar, Waanders Uitgevers, 1998, Haags Gemeentearchief.



such as 'there are two more cups thus...' or about the way others are dressed). Only 25% percent of the Greeks attributed the person's behaviour to personal internal reasons, and the rest to both reasons. These differences in the explanation of the person's behaviour between the two cultural groups are again statistically significant ($p < .05$). It should be mentioned that the two groups were similar in age, sex and level of education. The majority of them have had a higher or university level background.

Thus, at the hand of this simple example, it is once again shown how culture can influence the ways in which people reason about behaviour.

The ways culture may influence how people feel, think and behave are of direct interest to psychology to the extent that these make a significant contribution to theories on the positive psychological functioning and well-being of individuals with different cultural backgrounds.

But in addition these modes of influence, being closely related to how one reasons and copes with changes in society, are also critically important, not only for our daily lives, but for the future of our societies as well. Studying and comparing impact of culture becomes even more essential considering the direct consequences people experience because of the present-day financial crisis and our globally interconnected economies.

Katerina Pouliasi obtained a PhD in Social Sciences in 2010 at the University of Utrecht on the basis of a thesis entitled 'Culture, Self-understanding and the Bicultural Mind'. For any questions please contact her at katerinapouliasi@gmail.com