In Response to Cultural Threat: Cultural Self-awareness on Collective Movement

Participation

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of cultural self-awareness, an individual's awareness of culture's influence on the self, on collective movement participation. We posited that individuals who were highly aware of their culture's influence on them would more likely perceive self-relevance of cultural circumstances. In the context of a cultural threat, such perception of self-relevance would lead to psychological and behavioral reactions that affirm one's collective identity. We tested our predictions during a collective political movement in Hong Kong. Results showed that among Hong Kong university students, the higher the cultural self-awareness, the more they participated in the collective movement. The relationship was mediated by increased pride in Hong Kong and a more exclusive Hong Kong identity. The findings highlighted the importance of metacognitive reflection of the self in collective processes.

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Cultural self-awareness, as individuals' metacognitive awareness of culture's influence on the self (Lu & Wan, 2018), allows individuals to reflect upon the relation between their cultural experience and their self. Individuals' metacognitive understanding of how their personalities and culture have shaped who they are has been shown to contribute to intrapersonal psychological outcomes such as self-concept clarity (Adam, Obodaru, Lu, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2018) and well-being (Lu & Wan, 2018). In this paper, we aimed to extend research on the metacognitive understanding of self, moving beyond the intrapersonal realm to examine the collective implication of such self-understanding. Specifically, we tested the effect of cultural self-awareness on collective movement participation. In the context of a cultural threat, we expected cultural self-awareness to strengthen individuals' collective pride and identity, resulting in more collective movement participation.

Cultural self-awareness involves individuals' reflection of their cultural experiences in the understanding of the self. As individuals make sense of their cultural experience, they become aware of how their cultural experiences have shaped various aspects of their self. Such awareness could increase the importance of membership in the collective that shares the culture and strengthen individuals' sense of belonging to the cultural collective (Lu & Wan, 2018). Importantly, it could heighten the self-relevance of cultural circumstances. Since self-relevant information is crucial in guiding psychological responses (Clement & Krueger, 2000), perceiving cultural circumstances as more relevant to the self would likely elicit stronger psychological and behavioral reactions.

The cultural circumstance that sets the stage of the present study is cultural threat to a collective. The source of a cultural threat can be from both within (e.g., social change threatens the survival of cultural traditions) and outside of the collective (e.g., contact with an

outgroup culture that conflicts with or threatens to dominate the ingroup culture).  A cultural threat posed by an outgroup often comes from intergroup cultural differences and conflicts that threaten multiple aspects of the ingroup's culture, from beliefs and values to daily practices.

A cultural threat poses a threat to the collective that shares the culture.  As membership in a collective serves multiple identity motives such as self-esteem, self-continuity, and distinctiveness (Vignoles, 2011), a threat to the collective could threaten the fulfillment of these motives.  In response to such threat, individuals have been shown to engage in identity responses that affirm the collective identity (Fischer, Haslam, & Smith, 2010; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2013).  For example, faced with realistic and symbolic threats, individuals tend to endorse stronger and more exclusive collective identity (Wright, 2011).  Faced with perceived cultural threat from immigration, South Koreans showed a more exclusive definition of the Korean identity (Ha & Jang, 2015).  As an affective expression of individuals' identification with a collective, collective pride also serves to affirm collective identity (Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001).  A strengthened collective identity could form the basis of collective actions (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008).  As individuals affirm their collective identity, they become more supportive of collective actions that protect the collective from the source of threat (Ufkes, Dovidio, & Tel, 2015).

We have reasoned that individuals with higher cultural self-awareness would find a cultural threat more relevant to the self.  This self-relevance, combined with the literature on collective identity affirmation, led us to hypothesize that in the context of a cultural threat, individuals with higher cultural self-awareness would (a) be more likely to affirm their collective identity, and (b) in turn show higher likelihood of collective movement participation that affirms the collective identity.  We tested our hypotheses during Hong Kong's *Umbrella Movement* in 2014.  The movement started as a protest against electoral

reform in Hong Kong that threatened the ideals of democracy and autonomy of governance. More important, the collective protest foregrounded the mounting concern that China's tightening rule over Hong Kong would result in the loss of Hong Kong's local culture. Since Hong Kong's return to China, Hong Kong has seen an increasing presence of Mainland Chinese tourists and new immigrants, and an increasing prevalence of Mandarin Chinese as the medium of daily spoken communication, as opposed to the Cantonese that the locals speak. With the perceived incompatibility between Mainland Chinese culture and Hong Kong culture in core values and practices, the increasing presence of Mainland Chinese cultural influence in Hong Kong was often perceived as a threat to local Hong Kong culture. In the decade leading up to the *Umbrella Movement*, collective protests were often fueled by this perceived cultural threat and the increasing need to preserve the continued existence of local Hong Kong culture (Chen & Szeto, 2015; Suner, 2017). The salience of cultural threat to Hong Kong from China's rule made the *Umbrella Movement* an appropriate context for testing our hypotheses.

## Method

### Participants

We recruited 213 Hong Kong university students through the research participation system of a public university in Hong Kong. The participants were seated at individual cubicles in a laboratory and completed a 30-minute online anonymous survey in exchange for HKD 20. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the study, the survey was anonymous. The study received ethical clearance from the university where the data were collected. We excluded 5 participants who chose not to respond to the collective movement participation items and 19 participants who either did not report length of stay in Hong Kong or had lived in Hong Kong for less than 10 years. The final sample of 189 (56 males, $M_{age} = 21.26$, $SD_{age} = 2.56$, five did not indicate their age) had extensive experience with Hong Kong culture

(86.2% born in Hong Kong; mean length of stay in Hong Kong = 20.52 years, $SD$ = 3.25). The sample size was sufficient for detecting a medium effect size of correlation coefficient (Cohen, 1992) and indirect effect (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007).

**Procedure and Materials**

All materials were administered in Chinese. The measures included in this paper were part of a larger study unrelated to this paper's purpose. The larger study started with a manipulation of participants' perception of the Umbrella Movement. Participants were randomly assigned to read that the movement supporters' behaviors were either consistent or in violation of Hong Kong's core values. The manipulation did not affect the variables included in this paper, nor did it moderate the effects tested. Therefore, we did not include the manipulation in the analyses reported below.

**Cultural self-awareness.** The 7-item cultural self-awareness scale (Lu & Wan, 2018) measured participants' awareness of how Hong Kong culture has influenced different aspects of their self (e.g., "*I know how Hong Kong culture affects what I value*"). Participants rated their agreement to the items (1 – *strongly disagree*; 7 – *strongly agree*) ($\alpha$ = .91).

**Collective pride.** We adapted seven items from Kosterman and Feshbach's (1989) patriotism scale to measure participants' pride in Hong Kong (e.g., "*I am proud of Hong Kong*", "*In general, I do not respect Hong Kong people*" (reverse item)) (1 – *strongly disagree*; 7 – *strongly agree*) ($\alpha$ = .77).

**Exclusive collective identity.** Participants used a 101-point scale to indicate whether an exclusive Hong Konger or an exclusive Chinese identity best described them (0 – *a Hong Konger*; 50 – *both a Hong Konger and a Chinese*; 100 – *a Chinese*). This measure has been used in past research to indicate the extent to which Hong Kong participants endorsed the local Hong Kong or superordinate Chinese identity while simultaneously embraced/rejected the other identity (Lam, Chiu, & Lau, 2007). Seventeen participants did not respond to this

measure. All who responded chose a score of 50 or below, effectively making the score an indicator of Hong Kong identity that excluded the Chinese identity. As we reported unstandardized coefficients in our mediation analysis, for ease of comparison, we transformed the responses to a 7-point scale (1 – exclusively Chinese; 4 – both a Hong Konger and a Chinese; 7 – exclusively Hong Konger) to be consistent with the response scale of collective pride.

**Collective movement participation.** Participants reported whether they had engaged in four activities in the Umbrella Movement: sit-in, providing assistance to the movement such as resources or services, forwarding information of the movement to others, and other actions (specified by the participants). Examples of "other actions" were participating in a student strike, communicating the purpose of the movement to one's parents, and saving information of the movement as record. At the time of data collection, within the university setting, students' participation in the Umbrella Movement was rather public, with students openly boycotting classes, and wearing t-shirts and carrying symbols (e.g., yellow ribbon) in support of the movement. Nonetheless, given the potentially sensitive nature of this measure, we ensured both anonymity and confidentiality in our data collection to encourage honest responding. Greater number of activities engaged in indicated higher collective movement participation (range from 0 to 4).

**Cultural threat.** As an indicator of the perceived threat to Hong Kong culture, we measured the participants' perception of cultural conflict and difference between Hong Kong and Mainland China with four items (e.g., "*There are many conflicts between the cultures of Mainland China and Hong Kong*"; "*Mainland China and Hong Kong have major differences*") (1 – *strongly disagree*; 7 – *strongly agree*) ($\alpha = .75$). Although not a direct measure of cultural threat, we considered these items on cultural conflict as a meaningful proxy of cultural threat in Hong Kong's context. As explained in the Introduction, the

increasing prevalence of Mainland Chinese influence in Hong Kong has created a threat to

the local Hong Kong culture due to the cultural differences and conflicts in core values and

practices between Mainland China and Hong Kong.  We reasoned that Hong Kong

participants who perceived Mainland Chinese culture as highly different from and

incompatible with Hong Kong culture would perceive a strong cultural threat to Hong Kong.

**Results**

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Measures*

|  | Mean (SD) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Cultural self-awareness | 5.30 (0.86) | — | | | | |
| 2. Collective pride | 5.56 (0.77) | .44** | — | | | |
| 3. Exclusive collective identity | 5.80 (1.01) | .18* | -.001 | — | | |
| 4. Collective movement participation | 1.85 (1.14) | .19** | .29** | .40** | — | |
| 5. Cultural threat | 6.01 (0.75) | .35** | .20** | .39** | .33** | — |

*\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01*

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.  Our research premise rested on the

presence of a strong perceived cultural threat at the time of the Umbrella Movement.  Indeed,

consistent with our premise, our participants on average perceived a high level of cultural

threat ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 0.75$), with all participants scoring above the midpoint of the 7-point

scale.  The congregation of responses above the response scale midpoint and close to the high

end of the response scale showed that our participants perceived considerable cultural threat

from Mainland Chinese culture.

Collective pride and exclusive collective identity did not correlate with each other,

$r(170) = -.001$, $p = .99$, suggesting that the two measures tapped different aspects of Hong

Kong identity.  Whereas collective pride was based on one's positive feeling toward Hong

Kong, exclusive collective identity involved an explicit rejection of the Chinese identity – the

identity that was the source of threat to the local Hong Kong culture.

As predicted, cultural self-awareness was positively related to collective pride, $r(187)$ = .44, $p < .001$, exclusive collective identity, $r(170)$ = .18, $p$ = .02, and collective movement participation, $r(187)$ = .19, $p$ = .008. The higher the participants' cultural self-awareness, the more they were proud of Hong Kong, endorsed a Hong Kong identity that excluded the Chinese identity, and participated in the Umbrella Movement.

We tested the indirect effect of cultural self-awareness on collective movement participation, with collective pride and exclusive collective identity as simultaneous mediators using Hayes' (2013) bootstrapping method (Model 4 with 10000 bootstrapped samples). Supporting our hypothesis, both collective pride (*indirect effect* = .14, bias-corrected 95% Confidence Interval (CI) = [.06, .26]) and exclusive collective identity (*indirect effect* = .09, bias-corrected 95% CI = [.03, .19]) mediated the effect of cultural self-awareness on collective movement participation. As shown in Figure 1, the higher the participants' cultural self-awareness, the more they felt proud of Hong Kong ($b$ = .38, *SE* = .06, 95% CI = [.26, .51], $t(170)$ = 6.08, $p < .001$) and the more they described themselves by an exclusive Hong Kong identity ($b$ = .21, *SE* = .09, 95% CI = [.03, .38], $t(170)$ = 2.33, $p$ = .02), and in turn, the more they participated in the Umbrella Movement (collective pride: $b$ = .37, *SE* = .11, 95% CI = [.16, .59], $t(168)$ = 3.45, $p < .001$; exclusive collective identity: $b$ = .44, *SE* = .08, 95% CI = [.29, .59], $t(168)$ = 5.75, $p < .001$). [1]
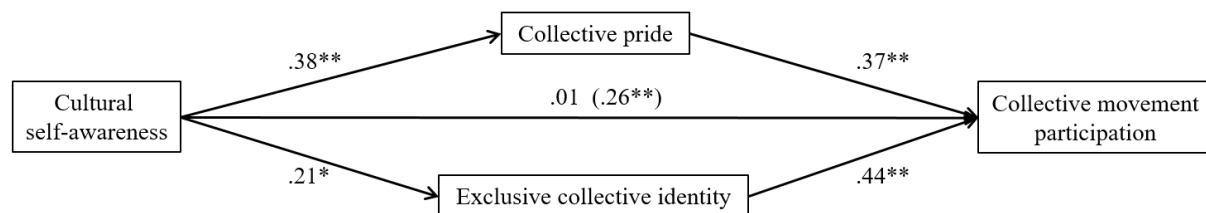


*Figure 1.* Indirect effects of cultural self-awareness on collective movement participation via collective pride and exclusive collective identity. Coefficients shown are unstandardized.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

## Discussion

In this research, we have utilized a political movement in the context of a cultural threat to test our hypothesis.  The naturalistic setting allowed us to examine actual collective movement participation rather than the measure of attitudes and behavioral intention.  We have demonstrated that cultural self-awareness was positively related to individuals' participation in the collective movement, via increased collective pride and exclusive collective identity.  Past research suggests that cultural self-awareness connects individuals to culture by providing the mental resource for individuals' sense-making of cultural experiences and adaptation to cultural demands (Lu & Wan, 2018).  The present study suggests another way for cultural self-awareness to connect individuals to their culture.  Specifically, cultural self-awareness could heighten the perceived self-relevance of cultural circumstance.  In the context of a cultural threat, individuals with higher cultural self-awareness could be more likely to see the cultural threat as a threat to the self.  They could also be more motivated to affirm their collective identity, both psychologically through a stronger collective pride and more exclusive collective identity, and behaviorally through collective movement participation.  The Hong Kong Umbrella Movement was an opportune event for us to test our specific predictions.  We do not consider the effect to be limited to this movement *per se*.  Rather, we would expect a similar role of cultural self-awareness in situations where the cultural circumstance draws individuals to respond as a member of the cultural collective.  It would be especially meaningful for future research to examine the effect of cultural self-awareness on individuals' responses to cultural circumstances that generate collective pride and shame.

Extant literature has documented the psychological processes of collective action in response to threats to one's collective (Thomas et al., 2012; van Zomeren et al., 2008).  Consistent with previous studies, we have found that identification with one's collective contributed to participation in collective movement in the context of a threat (van Zomeren et

al., 2008). More important, we have highlighted the possible role of metacognitive self-understanding in identity-affirming collective action. We have examined the effect of cultural self-awareness in a context where cultural threat was salient. Theoretically, cultural self-awareness is specific to awareness of culture's influence on the self. Therefore, we would not expect cultural self-awareness to exert the same effect when the collective is under a different kind of threat unrelated to the culture of the collective (e.g., realistic threat). We also would not expect the same effect when cultural threat is not salient. It would be important for future research to examine how the effect of cultural self-awareness found in the present study might be bounded by type of threat and salience of cultural threat.

Capitalizing on a developing real-life event did not allow us to include an appropriate comparison group where the culture was not under threat. However, the real-life event provided an apt initial test of the collective implication of cultural self-awareness. Cultural self-awareness, as individuals' metacognition of the cultural self, is not simply an intrapersonal affair. The intrapersonal awareness of culture's role in shaping oneself allows individuals to see connections between cultural circumstances and the self, providing a possible psychological basis for collective action.

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Footnote

[1] One might expect cultural threat to moderate the indirect effects that we have found.

Given that our argument rested on the premise of the presence of cultural threat, it would be

reasonable to expect the indirect effects to hold for high perceived cultural threat but not for

low perceived cultural threat.  Empirically, the high cultural threat ratings in our data meant

the absence of responses where the perceived cultural threat was low.  This restriction in

range would limit our ability to test cultural threat's moderating effect.  Nonetheless, we

conducted moderated mediation analysis with cultural threat as the moderator.  Given the

non-normal, negatively skewed distribution of cultural threat (skewness = -0.57, $SE$ = 0.18;

kurtosis = -0.38, $SE$ = 0.35; Shapiro-Wilk Statistic = .94, $p < .001$), we reflected the cultural

threat scores and then took the square-root of the reflected scores to normalize the

distribution.  The transformed variable showed improvement in skewness but did not pass the

normality test (skewness = 0.24, $SE$ = 0.18; kurtosis of -0.79, $SE$ = 0.35; Shapiro-Wilk

Statistic = .96, $p < .001$).  We ran the moderated mediation analysis with the transformed

cultural threat variable as the moderator (Model 8 with 10000 bootstrapped samples).  All

predictors were mean-centered.  The moderated mediation was not significant for collective

pride as mediator (*index* =.02, bias-corrected 95% CI = [-.13, .18]) and exclusive collective

identity as mediator (*index* = -.11, bias-corrected 95% CI = [-.31, .06]).