Culture and Repressive Coping:

Analysis of a Possible Difference between Collectivistic Cultures and Individualistic Cultures

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Abstract

Repressive coping or repression had been well studied for its relationship with autobiographical memory and attention. Repression is also related with positive psychological adjustment outcome, negative physical health outcome, and negative narrative identity growth outcome. However, previous studies in this field of repression only included individualistic individuals such as Western Europeans or North Americans as their participants, though collectivistic East Asian individuals might differ from the former on how they repress negative memories and the following outcomes from their repression. Surprisingly, various cross-cultural researches in emotion regulation and autobiographical memory report than East Asian individuals exhibit similar characteristics with those of Western European repressors. This article questions the possible role of culture in framing the individual’s repression and ask if repressive coping is more prevalent in collectivistic than in individualistic cultures.

Key words: repression, suppression, East Asian, North America, Western European, autobiographical memory, attention, emotion regulation
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Introduction

When a midlife woman was asked to describe her most difficult and identity-challenging experience of adulthood, she responded in the following way (Pals, 2006):

“I can’t believe this, but I really have nothing to write... maybe the difficult times are just shadows. . .”

The two notable characteristics of this woman’s life narrative are that first, she does not simply remember her negative life memory (“I really have nothing to write. . .”), and second, she refuses her connectedness to her negative experiences of the past, or distances herself from those moments (“difficult times are just shadows . . .”). This way of self-protective thinking by forgetting and distancing oneself from the negative life-challenging moments reflects the repressive coping style.

The repressive coping style, which involves systematically avoiding self-threatening information, has received a lot of empirical attention over the past two decades. Stemming out from the Freud’s theory of repression which defines repression as “pushing the pathogenetic experiences in question out of consciousness” (“Psychological repression,” 2012), repressive coping was the topic on hot debate as scholars anticipated it to nullify the adverse psychological effects, therefore ultimately promising the positive psychological and physical health outcomes.

On the other hand, cross-cultural research comparing East Asian and European American cultures is the also a topic that has received a lot of attention of the past twenty years and has been found to relate to differences in many psychology mechanisms, notably emotion regulation (Kitayama et al., 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), self-concept (English & Chen, 2011), and
autobiographical memories (Wang & Conway, 2004). Despite similar themes of emotion, memory and self, it is rare to find studies connecting the culture and the repression in the psychological field. Thus, this paper examines the possibility of cultural differences in the repressive coping style. Specifically, this paper introduces the hypothesis that collectivistic culture will promote higher levels of repressive coping than individualistic culture. This hypothesis will be explained extensively in the last section of this article “Culture and Repressive Coping: Is There a Connection?”

However, before drawing the connection between these two, the first section, entitled “Repressive Coping”, reviews and introduces the general concepts about repressive coping, including defining the repressive coping style and the researches describing how repressive coping affects autobiographical memories and attention. Then I also introduce the several outcomes of repressive coping in psychological health, physical health, and in narrative identity development.

In the following second section entitled "Culture: Individualism vs. Collectivism”, the distinction between individualism and collectivism is described. Several outcomes or effects of this cultural distinction on emotion regulation, self-concept, and autobiographical memories will be introduced as examples of the difference between these two cultures. I also review the cognitive neuroscience findings that trace the affected brain origins to argue that the effect from culture on individual has actual biological implications.

Finally in the last section, the two topics are integrated and I theorize how collectivism might promote repressive coping thorough the mechanism of emotional suppression pathway, and through self-concept and autobiographical memories based on previous research findings.
Then, I will make a prediction on how individualistic culture and collectivistic culture might have different consequences from the same repressive coping mechanism.

**Repressive Coping**

**Definition of repressive coping style**

There are many definitions of repressive coping style, repression, or repressor (i.e., individual who uses a repressive coping style) in the field of psychology. For example, Ashley and Holtgraves (2003) state that “individuals who avoid focusing on ego-threatening material are termed repressors” (p. 285) and Baumeister and Cairns (1992) state that “repression can be defined as the avoidance of threatening information” (p. 853). The common theme between these two definitions is the idea of preventing one’s positive self-image from being threatened. In this essay, the terms “repression” and “repressive coping style” will be used interchangeably as they denote the same concept while the term repressor signifies an individual who employs “repression” or “repressive coping style”.

How is the repressive coping style measured? The most common measure, developed by Weinberger (1979, as introduced in Geraerts et al., 2006) involves the combination of high defensiveness, as measured by high scores the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability scale, and low self-reported anxiety. Another measure is the affective autonomic response discrepancy, or AARD. In this measure, repression can be “represented by relatively low levels of negative affect coupled with relatively high levels of autonomic responding (SCR rate) observed while participants discussed a potentially threatening topic” (Coifman et al., 2007). In other words, higher repression is indicated by a greater disconnect between physiological arousal and conscious arousal. According to Coifman et al., this AARD is the best measurement for a repressor since it considers the autonomic response biases while the other measurements are
based exclusively on self-report measures. Finally, another self-report scale measure is the Repressive Defensiveness scale of the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory, which measures “the avoidance of negative affect and a positive self-presentation, independent of actual levels of distress” (Weinberger & Davidson, 1994, as quoted in Blagov & Singer, 2004).

What general qualities characterize repressive copers or repressors? Is repressive coping beneficial or detrimental? In the sections that follow, I will first report the basic psychological processes involved in repressive coping and then consider the long-term effects of repressive coping on physical health, psychological health, and narrative identity.

How Repressive Coping Affects Autobiographical Memories

First, what is autobiographical memory? Autobiographical memory is a recollection of memories in an individual’s life (life memory) which is the mixture of episodic memory (personal experience) of that incidence and semantic memory (general fact) of the same incidence (Williams & Conway, 2008). The episodic part of autobiographical memory is of particular interest since negative memories might lead to the development of maladaptive conditions such as depression (Watkins et al., 1996). Since the role of repressive coping is to prevent one’s positive self-image from being threatened, one can then easily predict that repressors will not remember or forget about their negative autobiographical memories.

Davis (1987) investigated this possible prediction of repression resulting in inaccessibility of negatively affective memories. In this study, participants were presented with emotion stimulus words (e.g., happy, guilt) and given a short period of time to recall or list autobiographical memories associated with each word. The result showed that repressors had limited accessibility to personal, real-life experiences about the feelings of fear and self-
consciousness. For example, repressors took longer to retrieve and recalled fewer fear and self-consciousness experiences (Davis, 1987). This study demonstrates that repressive coping affects autobiographical memories by eliminating the individual’s negative episodic memory in order to keep him mentally healthy.

However, there is an alternative explanation for Davis’s results; repressors may simply be less able than other people to utilize emotion labels as retrieval cues. Newman and Hedberg address this possibility and expand the past findings of Davis’s study to rule out this alternative explanation (Newman & Hedberg, 1999). In their two studies, Newman and Hedberg replicated Davis’s study using a life event checklist method. In study 1, participants were provided with 40 subjective-interpretive life event checklist’s rich descriptive cues in the form of general descriptions that were half positive (e.g. “was supportive of someone who cared for me and needed me”) and half negative (e.g. “received an unfairly low grade in a college course”) categories. Repressors tended to report fewer negative-subjective events and more positive-subjective events, which replicated Davis’s previous finding. In contrast, Study 2 used the objective-interpretive life event checklist and found that repressors did not recall fewer concrete (objective-interpretive) negative or more concrete positive life events. The reason is that since concrete positive or negative life events (e.g. “pet died”) are not controllable through self-regulation, repressors did not differ from others in recalling these types of experiences or life events. This result supports the idea that “repressors may possess a biased interpretive mechanism that leads them to interpret ambiguous (subjective-interpretive) events and behaviors more positively than do other people” (Newman & Hedberg, 1999); in other words, repressors remember fewer ambiguous negative memories since the repressive coping mechanism does erase most of those memories.
These two studies from Davis and from Newman and Hedberg show that repressive coping affects autobiographical memory, as repressors recall fewer negative subjective autobiographical memories than others. The latter research also invalidates the alternative explanation of the former’s research results; the latter showed that repressors did not utilize emotional labels as retrieval cues of their autobiographical memories but they rather utilized repressive coping mechanism to guide their retrieval cues. Therefore, these two studies prove that repressive coping does affect autobiographical memory. If this is the case, then how do repressors process negative autobiographical memory differently from others in terms of memory encoding process?

As an answer for the preceding question, Study 1 of Schimmack and Hartmann’s research on individual differences in the memory representation of emotional episodes (1997) suggests that repressors have different encoding time periods for these negative autobiographical memories from the non-repressors. In this study, participants rated the scenarios of emotion-eliciting situations (scenario rating task; SRT) in a 7-point intensity scale which are labeled from “complete absence of emotion” or 0 to “extreme” or 6. In this same study, participants were also asked to estimate the frequency of emotions in the scenarios they rated before. For the convenience of analysis, the emotions were assigned to five scales of similar types of emotions such as bad-other emotions (anger, hate, jealousy, envy), bad-self emotions (embarrassment, guilt), separation emotions (depression, loneliness), threat emotions (anxiety, helplessness), and pleasant emotions (joy, gratitude, pride).

Interestingly, the SRT result showed that repressors already experience unpleasant emotions less frequently even at the time of encoding. Researchers ran path analysis where repressors were coded as 1 and non-repressors as 0, to distinguish a direct and an indirect effect of repression on
the retrieval of emotion memories. The indirect effect or negative path coefficient value indicated that repressors already experience unpleasant emotions less frequently at the time of encoding, while the direct effect or positive coefficient value indicated that repressors’ retrospective frequency judgments were lower than the same judgments they already made at the time of encoding. The results showed that the indirect path coefficients for all four groups of unpleasant emotions (threat, bad-other, separation, bad self) were significant, which supports the idea of an indirect effect of repression on memories; repressors, compared to non-repressors, already minimize their emotional experience even at the time of encoding.

**How Repressive Coping Affects Attention**

Although people unintentionally direct their attention to threatening stimuli, repressors are found to selectively avoid attending to threat-related stimuli (Newman & McKinney, 2002). In Newman and McKinney’s two studies, participants were presented with ideographically modified emotional stroop procedures, which involved participants being presented with the personally threatening words in different colors and were asked to name the color of those words correctly. Differently from the past emotional stroop studies in which threatening stimuli was of questionable relevance to the participants (social threat words), these two stroop studies identified threat words with an ideographical approach (defining each participant’s personally unwanted traits) and represented personal characteristics that participants were motivated not to have or perceive in themselves (self-concept threats).

In study 1, researchers ran this ideographic stroop task on repressor and non-repressor participants and successfully showed that repressors did not show the stroop effect (slower response time in naming the words that do not match the font color they are written in) in color-
naming the self-concept threatening words and non-threatening control words (traits that were threatening to other participants in the study). In other words, repressors were not slowed down in color-naming the self-concept threatening words relative to the non-threatening control words while non-repressors were slowed down; repressors were the only group of participants to remain immune from the distracting effects of such self-threatening stimuli. This suggests that, “repressors are especially efficient when it comes to inhibiting attention to threat-related information” (p. 419; Newman & McKinney, 2002).

Study 2 differentiated non-repressors into anxious and non-anxious participants against repressors. This was to make a clear distinction between repressors and high anxious individuals who are also shown to be automatically direct their attention toward threatening stimuli in some cases (Williams et al., 1996). Study 2 also included a traditional version of stroop task to examine if repressors simply outperform non-repressors in color-naming for any kind of words. Result from this study showed that only repressors (not low anxious and high anxious participants) remained immune to the stroop effect of self-concept threatening and non-threatening words. However, “repressors were no better than other participants at avoiding the interfering effects of color words in a more traditional version of the stroop test” (Newman & McKinney, 2002). These two antiparallel results from the repressors in study 2 imply that repressors selectively attend to the self-concept threatening stimuli.

Newman and McKinney’s research on repressor’s attention bias is remarkable in showing repressors not only remain immune from (or do not attend to) the stroop effects of social threatening words (Myers & McKenna, 1996), but also from the stroop effects of ideographically threatening words. In other words, while past researches from Myers and McKenna had shown that repressors do not attend to social threatening words selectively, Newman and McKinney
also found that repressors even do not attend to their ideographical threatening words; how do repressors inhibit their attention to both threats?

One possible explanation is that “repressors appear to use an avoidant cognitive style that allows them to direct attention away from negative affect or threatening stimuli” (Bonanno & Singer, 1990, as quoted in Coifman et al., 2007). In other words, although repressors report that they are not distressed by stressful past events, their physiological signs such as sweat and heartbeat would show high arousal states; repressors can manipulate their minds to protect their egos by forgetting self-relevant derogative memories. Another possible explanation is vigilance-avoidance theory; repressors have an initial rapid vigilant reaction that triggers a following late avoidant physiological response (i.e. sweat) to threat stimuli (Derakshan et al., 2007). This theory explains the unmatched physiological signs with repressive coping such as faster heartbeat although repressors report the calm emotion (Coifman et al., 2007). However, these theories still do not specify what facet of the negative autobiographical memory that repressors inhibit their attention away from. To be more specific, do repressors repress the magnitude (intensity) of the self-concept threatening memories or reduce the occurrences (frequency) of those same negative memories?

In addition to showing that repression already inhibits repressor’s attention on negative autobiographical memory from the time of encoding, study 1 from Schimmack & Hartmann (1997) introduced in the previous section also showed that repressors repress the frequency of the self-concept threatening memory, not the intensity of it. For example, Schimmack and Hartmann’s SRT finding that repressors already experience unpleasant emotions less frequently at the time of encoding supports the frequency hypothesis which suggests that repressive coping does not inhibit emotions less intensely but less frequently. This result ultimately supports the
idea that “differences in the frequency of emotions lead to differences in the availability of memories associated with this emotion while differences in the intensity of emotional experiences lead to differences in the accessibility of emotional memories” (p. 1066; Schimmack & Hartmann, 1997). Negative autobiographical memories are simply less available to repressors.

In sum, repressors attended away from self-threatening concepts by inhibiting the frequency of negative memories, therefore showing no difference in recalling non-self-related threatening concepts or positive self-concepts from non-repressors. Then what outcomes would this self-protecting repressive coping mechanism bring about?

Outcomes of Repressive Coping

Is repressive coping harmful or beneficial to the individual? Research has shown that repressive coping relates to important outcomes, including physical health and psychological health. Additionally, although less research has been conducted, it is also possible to consider the implications of repressive coping style for narrative identity development, which constitutes an important part of adult personality. As described below, repressive coping may benefit psychological health under certain circumstances while it can also debilitate physical health and narrative identity.

Psychological Health

Coifman et al. (2007) found that repression identified through AARD score will promote positive psychological health outcomes. In their study, researchers examined the impact of repressive coping in a sample of bereaved individuals and non-bereaved married people; they analyzed the mail-in self-report questionnaire data from every participant and also interviewed
only the bereaved participants at approximately 18 months post-loss. The result demonstrated the 
generalized salubrious effect of repressive coping as it predicted fewer symptoms of 
psychopathology (depression, anxiety, and PTSD) in both bereaved and non-bereaved 
participants. Also the positive association was shown between grief processing (i.e., think and 
talk about the loss) and AARD score and this association was predictive of better longitudinal 
adjustment among bereaved participants. These data from Coifman et al. show that repressive 
coping promotes resilience or positive psychological health outcomes.

However, repressive coping’s benefit in better longitudinal adjustment of positive 
psychological outcome is controversial. For example, Geraerts et al. found that repressive coping 
might be adaptive in short run, but counterproductive in the long run (2006). In Geraerts et al.’s 
study, participants were asked to imagine the most positive or the most anxious autobiographical 
memory they had experienced during the past years. They were then asked to either suppress 
(repress) that previous autobiographical memory (target thought) or express anything including 
the target thought. Lastly, participants were asked to rate the levels of distress and anxiety in 
their diaries when they have intrusions of anxious and positive autobiographical target thoughts 
for 7 days.

The result showed that repressors reported the lowest number of target thoughts during the 
suppression period but they had the highest frequency of intrusive thoughts about anxious events 
over a period of 7 days. This result clearly shows that repressors have tendency to prematurely 
inhibit processing of the traumatic event (even earlier than 7 days), which fits to explain how 
repressive coping might lead to PTSD symptoms in long run (Geraerts et al., 2006).

**Physical health outcomes**
Many studies suggest that repressive coping contributes to poor health. For instance, Gies-Davis et al. (2008) found that higher repression was associated with higher DBP (diastolic blood pressure) among breast cancer patients, which could be ultimately associated with greater cardiovascular resting activity. This relatedness between repression and disease might be due to repression’s cognitive adjustment ability; repressors simply are unable to remember or be cognitively aware of disturbing experiences (Gies-Davis et al., 2008).

Barger et al. (2000) also reported that repressors experience increased disease risk. In this study, researchers measured both repressors’ and non-repressors’ baseline blood pressure (BP) readings and electrocardiogram (EEG) as their cardiovascular measures, serum lipid concentrations for total cholesterol determination (HDL cholesterol level and LDL cholesterol level), levels of epinephrine (stimulates insulin) and norepinephrine (inhibits insulin), and measured immune function by assessing circulating populations of T-cell subtypes (T-helper), B cells, and natural killer (NK) cells in whole blood samples of participants; among these health variables, cholesterol and insulin are well known to be risk factors of coronary heart disease (CHD) while T-helper and NK cells play a critical role in host defense against immune-related diseases such as HIV. Participants also performed the Stroop Color-Word conflict test to assess acute physiological responses. The result showed that at baseline, repressors had fewer numbers of circulating CD4 (T-helper) cells and greater numbers of natural killer (NK) cells which suggests that repression degrades repressor’s immunity toward diseases. Also, repressors showed lower high-density lipoprotein (HDL) with higher total/HDL cholesterol ratio (elevated risk factor for CHD), and higher fasting insulin levels compared to non-repressors suggesting that repressors are more prone to acquire CHD. Stroop Color-Word conflict test showed that
repressors had weak increase in the number of NK cells, which also contributes to repressor’s deteriorated immunity.

These two findings suggest that repression can relate to negative health outcomes. One could have assumed that repressive coping relates to positive health outcomes as repressors will not ponder on negative thoughts which can hurt their self-images. This damage to one’s self-images can arouse adverse physical symptoms (Barger et al., 2000). However, repressors’ AARD score from Coifman et al.’s study (2007) had shown that although repressors reported their mental calmness in pondering back to their traumatic memories, they showed elevated physiological measures (higher temperature, sweating, etc.). Eventually, this repressors’ disregard of their physical signs could eventually lead to actual physical disorders. Thus, I articulate that repression will cause positive psychological outcomes but negative physical outcomes.

**Narrative identity Development**

Narrative identity is one’s identity formed through his internalized and integrative life story that provides him a sense of unity and a purpose of life (Mcadams, 2001). This narrative identity is concerned with and influenced by individual’s autobiographical memories. Thus, an important question to ask is how does repressive coping affect narrative identity?

According to Blagov and Singer’s study (2004), participants with high repressive defensiveness (repressive coping) recalled fewer specific self-defining memories; specificity was operationalized as the number of specific self-defining memories coded from “The Classification System and Scoring Manual for Self-defining Memories (p. 491). In Blagov and Singer’s experiment, the researchers collected each participant’s Weinberger Adjustment Inventory-Short Form (WAI-SF) that comprises the dimensions of distress, self-restraint, and repressive
defensiveness. Through the statistical analysis, researchers found that repressive coping significantly correlates with fewer specific autobiographical memories. This might be due to the fact that repressors simply had written shorter memories that lacked imagery and detail due to their brevity; as a result, repressors had troubles in retrieving their autobiographical memories. This Blagov and Singer’s finding demonstrates that repressors form less emotionally vivid and detailed life-event memories than non-repressors perhaps in part because former are trying to protect their images or narrative identities from the negative emotion experienced during the past. Then what is the possible result of repressing the emotionally negative and self-threatening memories on one’s narrative identity development?

As answer to the previous question, Pals (2006) argues that “experiencing negative emotion and making a positive meaning out of it” (transformational processing) will be beneficial for one’s positive self-development as one can learn a valuable lesson from that negative experience (Pals, 2006). According to Pals, in order to go through this transformational processing, one has to firstly engage in exploratory narrative processing or actively engage in examining how negative emotional impact of a difficult experience challenges one’s self with openness so that one can open up the new ways of thinking. Secondly, one has to construct a coherent positive resolution of that difficult experience which ends positively and conveys a sense of emotional resolution or closure to narrate. These two-step orders comprise “transformational processing”, an optimal development pathway of one’s narrative identity.

As evidence, Pals found that among the sample of middle-class, college-educated and predominantly White women, “women who narrated their difficult experiences with transformational processing were more mature, happier, and physically healthier than women who narrated their experiences in other ways” (Pals, 2006). This research result demonstrates
that an individual fully grows from “transformational processing.” However, this study also showed that women who scored lower on coping openness (i.e., were more defensive/repressive) in young adulthood showed less exploratory processing and subsequent growth in their difficult event narratives. Thus repressive coping could be detrimental as people will miss an opportunity to grow from these experiences and achieve optimal levels of health and development since it keeps people away from engaging in exploration of negative memories to learning life-lessons from those memories.

**Culture: Individualism vs. Collectivism**

**Defining Culture: The distinction Between Individualism and Collectivism**

Numerous types of cultures define and shape certain populations. These pervasive cultures exert influence on an individual’s basic psychological processes by providing the physical and social environments that each individual needs to adapt to and learn about. This enforced learning of culture has enduring consequences on individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Lehman et al., 2004). Therefore, the cross-cultural differences in individual’s psychological process were expected; among the various cultures, individualism and collectivism contrasted each other most significantly.

According to Park (2012), individualism is the norm in North American culture and in Western European culture. In these cultures, the independence of self is highly valued; individuals are likely to define themselves in terms of internal attributes such as preferences, attitudes, and goals. The self is thus affirmed when these internal attributes are realized and evaluated positively. The major cultural task in here is to discover, actualize, and confirm these
internal attributes of the self which is called the independent view of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

On the other hand, collectivism is the norm in non-Western European culture and especially in East Asian culture. In these cultures, the interdependence of the self with others is highly valued; individuals are likely to define themselves in terms of relational attributes such as social roles, status, and rank. The self is affirmed when people are assured that they are meeting social roles, norms, and expectations of others (Park, 2012). Since the self is made meaningful in reference to the relationship which the self is part of, the major cultural task in here is to fit in, adjust to the relationship, and to become a member, while constraining, taming, or otherwise conditioning internal desires or wishes to facilitate the ever-important interpersonal harmony and unity. This alternative view of the self is referred to as the interdependent view of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Additionally, Nisbett et al. (2001) had argued that “East Asians are holistic, attend to the entire field and assign causality to it, and make relatively little use of categories and formal logic by relying on ‘dialectical reasoning’. On the other hand, Western Europeans are analytic, pay attention primarily to the object and the categories to which it belongs and use rules, including formal logic, to understand its behavior” (p. 291).

Effects of Culture

How does the contrast between individualism and collectivism affect individuals’ psychological processes differently? Three important domains of influence, all of which will be relevant for repressive coping, are 1) emotion regulation, 2) Self-concept consistency and autobiographical memories, 3) cognitive neuroscience findings.

Emotion regulation (suppression vs. repression)
In the literature of cross-cultural psychology, it is well known that emotion regulation is influenced by individualism and collectivism differently (Kitayama et al., 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, the research articles about the cross-cultural differences in emotion regulation tend to use suppression and repression interchangeably without clearly differentiating these two. Thus, before introducing the studies seeking the role of culture in emotion regulation, I highlight how the repression differs from the suppression.

In Gies-Davis et al.’s study on the relationship between the repression and the negative physical health outcomes (2008), researchers defined the repression as a defense mechanism in which a person is unable to remember or is cognitively unaware of disturbing wishes, feelings, thoughts, or experiences; “repressive individuals are hypothesized to be persons who often believe that they are not upset despite objective evidence to the contrary.” (Weinberger, 1990, as quoted in Gies-Davis et al., 2008). On the other hand, Gies-Davis et al. state that suppression differs from repression in that a person is aware of negative affect, but does not express it; “a suppressed individual holds all components of a conflict in mind, but postpones action, affective response, or ideational worry associated with that conflict” (Vaillant & Vaillant, 1990, as quoted in Gies-Davis et al., 2008). On the same line with Gies-Davis et al., Coifman et al. who researched the relationship between repression and positive psychological health also argued that “the repressive coping behaviors emerge in a relatively automatic and self-deceptive manner and are therefore qualitatively distinct from deliberate avoidant behaviors associated with emotion or thought suppression” (2007). These two articles both argue that repression happens automatically or without the individual’s intention and cognition, while suppression happens under individual’s purposeful intention and cognition. Bear these two different definitions in mind when reading Butler et al.’s (2007) research on the relationship between emotion regulation and culture.
In Butler et al.’s research, researchers recruited only the culturally diverse women from the Stanford university community as participants to avoid the gender-biased emotional expressions. This research was comprised of the two sub-studies, part 1 and part 2, which analyzed the cultural differences in habitual emotional suppression and the cultural differences in emotion suppression during face-to-face interaction, respectively.

In part 1, participants were asked to report on their cultural background, cultural values, habitual suppression, interpersonal goals, and how much they typically experienced negative emotions. Result showed that women with predominantly European values reported lower levels of habitual suppression or reported suppressing emotions less frequently in their daily lives than women with bicultural European-Asian values (women possessing more Asian values than the women possessing only European values) did. In addition, suppression was associated with more self-protective goals and higher levels of negative emotion in women with high European values. These two findings support the idea that the different cultures, European values and European-Asian values in this case, affect individuals’ habitual emotional suppression differently.

In part 2, participants were randomly assigned to pairs of either a suppression group or a control group and discussed an upsetting documentary war film. Then the participants self-reported on how much they had suppressed their emotions during the conversation. The participants’ expressive behaviors from videotapes were also rated. As a result, when participants discussed the upsetting movie in pairs, suppressors with more bicultural Asian-European values were seen as less hostile and withdrawn than suppressors with predominantly European values. In addition, regardless of cultural values, socially rewarding behaviors such as emotional disclosure, smiling, and laughing were found to be reduced universally in both European and Asian-European participants when their partners suppressed; that is, partners of suppressors
reported an unwillingness to pursue a friendship. These two findings suggest that “although holding bicultural European-Asian values reduced the hostility from suppression, it could not off-set the lack of socially rewarding behaviors that accompanied it” (Butler et al., 2007).

The important point to note in this research is that when women with more Asian values (bicultural European-Asian values) used suppression more frequently and became less likely to be distressed when doing so (part 1), their suppression became more “automatized” and thus “required fewer cognitive resources to execute” (Butler et al., 2007). Thus, they would be able to remain responsive to a conversational partner while suppressing (part 2), unlike women with high Western European values who were distracted by their suppressing effort.

I had previously defined the emotion “repression” occurs autonomic without individual’s intention and cognition (Gies-Davis et al., 2008; Coifman et al., 2007). Note that Butler et al.’s “automatized” emotion “suppression” that requires “fewer cognitive resources to execute” falls in same line with this definition of emotion “repression”. Thus, I can argue that Butler et al.’s study successfully demonstrated how East Asians (collectivism) and North Americans (individualism) regulated or repressed their negative emotion differently. To explain, after seeing the upsetting film, the former individuals regulated their negative emotion through more intense repression while the latter individuals regulated their negative emotion through more mild repression or revealed their negative emotion to others rather than repressing it within themselves.

**Self-concept consistency and autobiographical memories**

Another psychological domain that affects culture is the self-concept and its related autobiographical memory. Self-concept is defined as "the individual's belief about himself or
herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is” (Baumeister, 1999, as quoted in simplypsychology.org). Similarly, Wang (2004) also explains self-concept as “self-description that indexes an individual’s conceptual representations of himself or herself”. These two definitions of the self-concept suggest that culture is expected to affect self-concept formation as the former shapes how the individuals would represent themselves, either individualistically or collectivistically. For example, In Western Europe, self-concept consistency is highly valued as it bolsters authenticity and confidence among the individuals; individuals act in accord with their “true selves”. On the other hand, in East Asia, self-concept consistency is generally less valued as “East Asians are encouraged to flexibly adjust to changes in social environment for the sake of maintaining interpersonal harmony” (Markus & Kitayama, 1994, as quoted in English & Chen, 2011). Following the same logic addressed above, English and Chen (2011) found that self-concept consistency depends on both the cultural background of the individual (East Asian culture or Western European culture) and the type of consistency (self-concept across various relationship contexts or self-concept within specific relationship context) involved.

As a result, English and Chen’s study found that European individuals were adversely affected by inconsistency both across various relationship contexts and within specific relationship context. In other words, Europeans had shown to maintain a global, cross-culturally consistent self-concept across diverse relationship contexts such as self with friend, self with mother, and self with romantic partner. In contrast, East Asian individuals were only adversely affected by inconsistency within specific relationship contexts or had shown to maintain “if-then” self-concepts (self-views differed across relationship contexts but they were highly stabilized within the same relationship context) permanent in East Asian culture. This study
supports the idea that culture affects self-concept in relationship context differently between East Asians and Western Europeans.

Then how is the self-concept related to autobiographical memory? Autobiographical memory is defined as “distinct, long-lasting memory of significant personal experiences from an individual’s life” (Wang, 2004). Klein et al. claim that this “autobiographical memory cannot avoid reference to a self-concept” (2004). Their supporting reason is that to form an autobiographical self-knowledge memory, one needs to have three self-concept forming capabilities; a capacity for self-reflection (the ability to reflect on my own mental states to know about my own knowing), a sense of personal agency-personal ownership (the belief that I am the cause of my thoughts and actions and the feeling that my thoughts and acts belong to me), and the ability to think about time as an unfolding of personal happenings centered about the self (p. 463). Thus, self-concepts form the autobiographical memories.

This Klein’s idea that autobiographical memory is based on self-concept is validated as Libby and Eibach’s research on “affection of self-concept change in visual perspective of autobiographical memory” demonstrates this relationship between self-concept and autobiographical memory. In their study, Libby and Elibach found that participants tend to adopt the third-person perspective in memory when recalling behaviors that are discrepant with their present self or comment that the old self is “not me” (2002). This finding shows that self-concept forms the autobiographical memory in a way that will present one’s self-congruency on one’s experience of thinking about a past self or about the past autobiographical memory. Now recall that English and Chen (2011) showed that culture affects self-concept consistency; then would culture not also affect the individual’s autobiographical memory?
Research by Wang (2004) and by Wang and Conway (2004) report the cultural differences in autobiographical memories of different life period individuals; children and adults, respectively. In Wang’s study, researcher compared autobiographical memory and self-description among 93 European American children and 87 Chinese Children in preschool through 2nd grade. Children responded to the interview asking 4 open-ended questions which concern autobiographical memory in their lives and 2 open-ended questions eliciting their self-descriptions about themselves.

The result showed that American children provided autobiographical memory accounts that were focused on detailed, one-moment-in-time events, and contained rich spontaneous references to emotions with comments on personal predilections and opinions; on the other hand, Chinese children provided relatively skeletal accounts of past experiences that tended to center on daily routines, had fewer emotional expressions, talked more frequently about social interactions and group activities, and made more references to the other people. This finding clarifies that there is an autobiographical memory difference among the children from the two different cultures.

In providing one’s self-description or self-concept, American children described themselves in terms of personal attributes and beliefs, gave more positive self-evaluation, and described more dispositional traits and inner states such as emotions and thoughts. Whereas, Chinese children evaluated themselves in a neutral tone, and referred to more situation-bound characteristics and overt age. This finding suggests that there is also self-concept difference between Chinese children and American children.

This Wang’s report (2004) on cultural differences in both autobiographical memory and self-concept supports the argument that culture affects “autobiographical memory” as well as
“self-concepts”. This finding of culture’s effect on autobiographical memory explains why East Asian individuals and Western European individuals grow differently: these two individuals have their autobiographical memory and self-concept affected differently by different cultures during their developments. But is this early cultural influence on individual’s autobiographical during his childhood maintained throughout his adulthood?

Wang and Conway’s study on autobiographical memory in European American and Chinese middle-aged adults (2004) reports that the early cultural influence still remains among the middle-aged adults. In this study, 54 European Americans and 54 Chinese aged between 38 and 60 took the questionnaire that asked 20 memories from any period of their lives. European Americans focused on the autobiographical memories of personal and one-moment-in-time memory events unique to individual, and also emphasized their feelings and personal roles in those memory events (independent view of self). Contrastively, Chinese focused on the autobiographical memories of social and historical experiences, on the social interactions considering the roles of the other people, and provided generically routine experiences (interdependent view of self). This result demonstrates that individuals encode different aspects of the autobiographical memory, depending in cultural context.

These two researches from Wang (2004) and Wang and Conway (2004) both powerfully support the opinion that the culture affects individual’s autobiographical memory. That is, culture shapes its individuals developmental path and remain affective up to their middle-age.

**Cognitive neuroscience findings**

In the field of the cognitive neuroscience, there are a few studies reporting the brain’s neural activation differences across the culture. In general, fMRI studies used in this field successfully
show that the brain activation differences exist between the individuals from more individualistic
and from collectivistic cultures. In here, I introduce two studies that found cultural differences in
object processing and in self-representation, respectively.

Nisbett et al. (2001) had speculated that Americans attend more to individual objects
(analytic) while East Asians attend more to the entire structure to look at the relationships and
the contexts. The result from Gutchess et al.’s fMRI neuroimaging study examining cultural
differences in object processing supports this idea.

In Gutchess et al.’s study (2006), event-related fMRI was run while East Asians and
Americans were encoding the pictures that differed in the amount of object and context
information, namely object-only picture, background-only picture, and object and background
combined picture. As a result, researchers found that when processing the complicated pictures,
Americans activated more areas of left middle temporal gyrus involved in retrieval of semantic
knowledge about objects, angular gyrus involved in processing cross-modal information of
accessing semantic knowledge from the pictures, and right superior temporal/supramarginal
along with superior parietal gyrus involved in encoding of object locations than East Asians.
These data suggest that “Americans are more analytic about object features, attending more to
the semantic and spatial properties of the focal object than East Asians” (Gutchess et al., 2006).

On the other hand, East Asians activated only a single region left occipital/fusiform gyrus
more than Americans. This brain region is involved in the abstraction of semantic knowledge at
the categorical level. Thus, although limited in extent, this data can suggest that East Asians are
more holistic in processing the object or “consider an item beyond the specific presented
exemplar in terms of its relation to other items or extraction of gist, rather than specific
perceptual details” (Gutchess et al., 2006). These findings from Gutchess et al.’s fMRI study support Nisbett et al.’s argument that East Asian is holistic while Western European is analytic.

Meanwhile, Park (2012) had reviewed that Western Europeans form their self-concepts independently or from their internal attributes of their selves while East Asians form theirs interdependently or from their relationship of their selves with their collectivistic culture. The result from Zhu et al.’s neuroimaging study examining cultural influence on self-representation supports this idea.

In Zhu et al.’s study, researchers ran fMRI data analysis to examine the MPFC activity of Chinese college students and Western European college students when they were judging if an adjective shown to them properly describes the self, mother, or the other (2007). The previous researches had found that MPFC is engaged in the representation of self-knowledge such as one’s own personality traits (Craik et al., 1999; Kelley et al., 2002; Lieberman et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2006, as quoted in Zhu et al., 2007). Thus, researchers aimed to see this MPFC difference between Chinese and Western European.

Zhu et al.’s neural image result clarified that the stronger medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) activity was shown for self-judgments relative to mother-judgments and other-judgments in Western European subjects, suggesting that MPFC activity is specific to the self in Western Europeans. This result supports Park’s argument that Western Europeans independently form their self-concepts. On the other hand, fMRI result from Chinese subjects also showed that the heightened MPFC activity was linked to self-judgments relative to other-judgments. However, unique to Chinese subjects, both mother-judgments and self-judgments enhanced MPFC activity so similarly that these two were indistinguishable. Thus, it seems that “Chinese
individuals use MPFC to represent both mother and self” (p. 1314; Zhu et al., 2007). This result suggests that Chinese individuals interdependently form their self-concepts. As illustrated, both fMRI studies from Zhu et al. (2007) and Gutchess et al. (2006) successfully support the social psychologist’s opinion that self-concepts differ across the culture as their neural images had shown the different brain region activations between Western Europeans and East Asians.

Culture and Repressive Coping: Is There a Connection?

Throughout this article, I had introduced that the repression affects individuals; repressors do not remember their negative autobiographical memories and will not attend to the threatening stimuli. In turn, repression may lead to the repressor’s positive psychological health outcome (emotional adjustment) particularly during times of extreme stress, but also may result in negative physical health outcomes and negative affects on narrative identity development as repressor misses a chance to grow from his forgotten (repressed) negative memory. I also had explained that East Asian culture and Western European culture show differences in emotion regulation and autobiographical memory or self-concept, which all are affected from repressive coping. Then taking these findings together suggest a possible link between repression and culture. To be more specific, does collectivistic culture show more repressive coping compared to individualistic culture?

Surprisingly little research has addressed this issue directly. However, one study by Varela et al. (2007) successfully showed a connection between the traditional values of collectivism and repressive adaptive style (RAS) in their study of Mexican (M), Mexican American (MA), and European American children (EA). In this study, researchers handed out the survey with diverse measures of socio-economic status, anxiety symptoms, repressive adaptive style, collectivism,
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and simpatica. The result showed that there is significantly higher proportion of repressors in M culture relative to the MA and EA cultures and the measure of collectivism uniquely predicted the use of the repressive adaptive style. These two findings in Varela et al.’s study support the opinion that repressive coping may be more common in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures. In other words, these studies demonstrate that collectivistic cultures show more repressive coping than individualistic cultures. However, one question remains to be addressed: what may be the mechanisms involved in making repressive coping more common in collectivistic cultures?

**How Collectivism May Promote Repressive Coping**

*Suppression.* Cross-cultural studies have shown that East Asians show more suppression than European Americans; suppression is so common among East Asians that they suppress negative emotions automatically as a way of regulating their negative emotions (Butler et al., 2007). In other words, if culture promotes suppression, then that culture eventually promotes repressive coping.

For example, collectivistic East Asian culture more intensely suppresses individuals to attain the group’s common goal; the group is more highly valued than the individuals themselves. On the other hand, individualism in Western European culture minimally suppresses individuals to guarantee their freedom for each of them to attain his self-reflective goals; the individuals themselves are more highly valued than the group. In both cases, each culture imposes its normative intensity of the suppression onto the individuals and determines the number of repressors. To explain, collectivistic culture’s intense level of suppression is apt to promote repressive coping or increase the number of repressors as individuals would sacrifice themselves
to achieve the group’s goal; non-repressor collectivists are required to cognitively suppress their negative emotions if they cannot automatically repress them. This is how collectivism may promote the repressive coping through suppression.

*Self-concept and autobiographical memories.* Previous studies showed that the repressors recalled fewer negative autobiographical memories (Davis, 1987), fewer specific memories or more generalized memories (Blagov & Singer, 2004), and interpreted ambiguous events and behaviors more positively than other people did (Newman & Hedberg, 1999). Similarly, collectivistic individuals recalled less specific, more generalized daily routine-based, and fewer emotional experiences (Wang, 2004; Wang & Conway, 2004). These findings altogether demonstrate that both repressors and collectivistic individuals form more general and less emotional autobiographical memories.

This similarity between collectivists and repressors suggests a different way of constructing the self among the collectivistic individuals. For example, Wang’s study (2004) reported that Chinese children evaluated themselves in a neutral tone, and referred to more situation-bound characteristics and overt age (interdependent view of self). Perhaps, Chinese children formed their self-concepts this less emotion-expressing way since expressing their emotions, especially negative emotions, are disruptive to relational harmony intact to accomplish a group goal. In other words, collectivistic individuals would form more general and less emotional autobiographical memories due to their interdependent cultural values. Then why do repressors and collectivists have the similar memory recall bias (more general and less emotional memory recalls)? Rephrasing the question, how did repressive coping socialize and develop in collectivistic culture?
Parental education seems as a key factor in both socializing and developing the repressive coping in collectivistic East Asian culture. For instance, Wang (2011) highlights the role of mother-child conversation about their shared emotional experiences. In her study comparing the American mothers’ conversation style with their children and with Chinese mothers’ conversation style with their children, Wang notes that American mothers’ emotion-explaining style employing both mothers’ and children’s active engagement in providing shared memory details associated with the emotional events. However, Chinese mothers’ emotion-criticizing style employs mothers’ teaching of their children reinforcing the children proper behavioral conduct and a sense of connectedness. Overall, this study hints that repressive coping may be socialized and be developed in the collectivistic culture through the emotion-criticizing style parental education.

These Chinese mothers’ emotion-criticizing education seems strong enough to maintain the intense level of repressive coping in collectivistic culture. To explain, recall that Chinese preferred the self-concept consistency within specific relationship context (English & Chan, 2011) and consistently recalled their autobiographical memories that emphasize their independent views of themselves during their childhood and their mid-year (Wang, 2004; Wang & Conway, 2004). These two studies altogether suggest that relatively early parental education of emotion-criticizing style is important in shaping and maintaining the collectivist’s use of repressive coping.

Cultural Differences in the Consequences of Repressive Coping

Most of the studies in previous repressive coping literature posit the Western European culture as the universal norm since they only include Western Europeans as their research
participants (predominantly White individuals) or did not consider the cultural differences in repressive coping when selecting the participant samples (Ashley & Holtgraves, 2003; Baumeister & Cairns, 1992; Blagov & Singer, 2004; Coifman et al., 2007; Geraerts et al., 2006; Newman & McKinney, 2002; Davis, 1987; Newman & Hedberg, 1999; Seidtitz & Diener, 1993; Schimmack & Hartmann, 1997; Watkins et al., 1996; Williams & Conway, 2008; Derakshan et al., 2007; Myers & McKenna, 1996; Williams et al., 1996; Barger et al., 2000; Bonanno et al., 1995; Giese-Davis et al., 2008; McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006). However, since East Asian culture and Western European culture is shown to affect individuals differently from each other, negative outcomes from repressive coping in Western European culture might not hold same in East Asian culture.

For example, Western European repressors are found to be related with the promotion of positive psychological health (Coifman et al., 2007), poor physical health (Barger et al., 2000; Gies-Davis et al., 2008), and poor narrative identity growth (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Pals, 2006). However, would East Asian repressors have similar outcomes with their Western European counterparts?

Firstly, in the domain of psychological health outcome, East Asian repressors might also produce positive psychological health by repressing their “within specific relationship context” (English & Chen, 2011) memory. To explain, East Asian culture or collectivism attaches a great importance in maintaining the positive relationship with the other members to achieve a group’s common goal. As a consequence, East Asians will be happy to repress their negative autobiographical memories so as not to bother others. Therefore, repressive coping on negative “within specific relationship context” memories might also achieve positive psychological health among East Asian repressors. However, a future research question still remains: is this
achievement of positive psychological health through repressive coping among East Asian repressors specific only to the memories involving “within specific relationship context” or does it also include the memories involving “across relationship contexts”?

Secondly, in the domain of narrative identity growth outcomes, opposite to their Western European repressors, collectivistic East Asians repressors might not gain positive narrative identity growth through transformational processing by repressing their previous mistakes they made. To explain, exploring a negative event and creating a positive resolution of that event is not the only issue that collectivistic individuals need to consider. Rather, for the collectivist individual to grow his self-concept, he needs to ensure that other individuals also confirm his “coherent positive resolution of that difficult experience” (Pals, 2006) as his self-concept is defined interdependently with the agreement of others. Therefore, East Asian repressors might find happiness by completely repressing his negative memory, making it hard to explore an event and resolve through formulating an understanding of growth. Sometimes, it just makes collectivist individual’s life simple not to ponder on how he should reach a coherent ending from numerous different individuals he knows. Thus, the loss of transformational processing negative events may not be as detrimental for individuals in collectivistic cultures as in individualistic cultures, where personal growth is highly valued.

Thirdly, in the domain of physical health, it is difficult to argue for any relationship between the physical health and either individualistic or collectivistic repressor individuals. The main reason for this irresolution is that there are too many health variables to consider, even the unknown health variables to be found yet in medical field. This is the reason that studies examining the relationship between repressive coping and physical health outcome all argue the association between the two, not the causation between the two. Therefore, addressing the
causation of repressive coping to physical health outcome should wait for the scientist’s better understanding of the pathway between the mind and the body.

In conclusion, repressive coping affects Western individuals in various ways, such as forming autobiographical memory by eliminating self-concept threatening ones and selectively avoiding attending to threat-related stimuli. These modified autobiographical memory and attention construct his narrative identity. Although the recent cross-cultural studies report the different emotion regulation and self-concept related autobiographical memory between East Asian culture and Western European culture, there is yet no study that directly studied the relationship between the repressive coping and the culture. However, there is already a fruitful amount of resources to argue that “the collectivistic culture will promote repressive coping culture in their members more than the individualistic culture does”. Although I supported this argument with my review that (a) collectivistic culture’s intense suppression would automatically promote repressive coping on the individuals and (b) the collectivistic parent’s teaching style which prioritizes forming more generalized and less emotional memories in their children would socialize and develop the repressive coping within the collectivistic culture, future studies should be run to test this argued hypothesis more systemically through the experiment focused on cross-cultural differences in repressive coping.

References


