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Bio-culturally grounded: why separation and connection may not be the same around the world

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Abstract

Central to the account of grounded procedures is the premise that mental experiences are grounded in physical actions. We complement this account by incorporating frameworks in cultural psychology and developmental neuroscience, with new predictions. Through the examples of vicarious experiences and demerit transfer, we discuss why, and how, separation and connection may operate somewhat differently across cultures.

Perspectives on grounded cognition assume the existence of mutual links between mental experiences and physical actions. The mental depends on the physical, and vice versa. Lee and Schwarz (L&S) propose an account for grounded procedures, which assumes that mental experiences of separation (e.g., desire to keep bad luck away) are grounded in physical actions of separation (e.g., washing one's hands). The account offers a parsimonious explanation for existing findings on cleansing effects. The opposite of separation was discussed, whereby mental connection is grounded in physical contact. The present commentary aims to broaden the scope of the proposed account by incorporating frameworks in cultural psychology and developmental neuroscience.

What underlies most empirical demonstrations of cleansing effects to date? Effects were triggered by an event personal to the self. For example, participants in Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) had a strong desire to cleanse after recalling their own immoral behavior. Similarly, prior to the cleansing manipulation, participants in Lee and Schwarz (2010a) were asked to make an unjustified decision for themselves. In another study (Xu, Zwick, & Schwarz, 2012), feelings of good and luck were manipulated through a game of chance, played by participants and not by others. Immorality, dissonance, luck, whatever the mental state in question (e.g., endowment, ownership, and stress), it was a result of a prior event experienced first-hand by the self, not by someone else.

However the source of mental states can be relational. People feel guilty, conflicted, unlucky for themselves, and also for others. This tendency, commonly known as vicarious experience (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005; Stipek, 1998), is widespread in Eastern cultures (e.g., China, Japan, Korea, and India) in which interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and collectivism (Bond, 1986; Triandis, 1995) permeate all ways of life. In these cultures where the group precedes the individual, the impact of a life event, good or bad, are shared among close others, even if they play no role in the event. Past research supports

this claim. Chinese, for example, are inclined to feel vicarious shame and guilt for an immoral act committed by someone close to them (e.g., best friend cheating for scholarships) as if the act were theirs (Stipek, 1998). In contrast, vicarious experiences are less pervasive in Western cultures (e.g., American, Australian, and Canadian), in line with their independent and individualistic nature (Bond & Cheung, 1983; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Cultural differences in vicarious experiences can be attributed to the patterns of early social interaction between parent and child, which gradually shape the cognitive and socio-emotional lives of the developing child brain, from how they construct the self, construe social relationships, all the way to how they interpret life experiences later in life (Esposito, Setoh, Shinohara, & Bornstein, 2017a; Esposito et al., 2017b). Interacting with other social groups (e.g., family, proximal network, and society) further reinforce the transmission of attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and values, all of which are the “cultural grammar” underneath processes in the self, social relationships, and the understanding of the world as the child matures (Esposito, Setoh, & Bornstein, 2015; see also Fig. 1).

Applying cultural and developmental frameworks to the context of grounded procedures generates new predictions. For example, given the relational nature of Easterners, effects of separation may arise from a prior event experienced not by the person, but his or her close ones. Son has committed a crime, dad feels the impact, probing the desire for mental separation through physical actions. This prediction, giving grounded procedures a cultural look, is empirically testable. Conceptually, we expect culture to operate in the same way in connection as it does in separation, assuming they both share the same structural properties (sect. 2234 5, para. 2).

Figure 1. (Lee & Esposito) Groups of social influence shaping early life interaction. Different cultural forces can act on every concentric ring of influence that shape early life interaction and, by extension, the construction of the self. This claim is supported by cross-cultural developmental studies examining the effects of socio-cultural forces on the infant brain.

Bringing grounded procedures back to the wild opens up new research directions. Consider the example of demerit transfer (Billington, 2002; Reichenbach, 1990), a religious ritual which assumes that demerit, or negative moral energy accumulated from past misdeeds, can be passed on from one person to another. Putting it into context, a filial son could choose to bear demerit (and whatever karmic punishment that follows) for his father, who has been morally corrupt all his life. Demerit transfer is practiced worldwide, though far more common in Buddhist cultures. Conceptualizing demerit transfer in terms of separation and connection generates deeper questions. For example, is demerit transfer a simple two-stage process of removing demerit from an agent (separate from dad) and applying it to a new recipient (connect

with son)? It is possible. Another possibility is that although demerit transfer is a compounded procedure of separation and connection, the underlying processes are moderated by culture-specific variables. In other words, demerit transfer may not exert impacts on everybody; it works only on people who, let say, believe that demerit is fluid, malleable, and not bound to the self like a fixed attribute. Past research on cultural lay beliefs points to this possibility (e.g., Marriott, 1989; Savani, Kumar, Naidu, & Dweck, 2011).

In sum, we hope to highlight the possible roles of cultural and developmental processes in grounded procedures. Through the examples of vicarious experiences and demerit transfer, we discuss why, and how, separation and connection may operate somewhat differently in Eastern cultures compared to Western cultures. We made several predictions. Empirical evaluations of these predictions will advance our understanding of grounded procedures.

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Conflict of interest. None.

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