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The effects of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction among Thais: The moderating role of relational self-esteem

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Article Info

Abstract

Perspective-taking has successfully been used to reduce prejudice, especially when perspective takers have high self-esteem. However, only a few studies have been conducted to explore the effects of perspective-taking on reducing prejudice in Asian countries. This study investigated the moderating role of relational self-esteem on the effects of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction. In this study, high or low relational self-esteem was activated, and participants were either allocated in the perspective-taking manipulation group or the control group. The results showed that using perspective-taking techniques when individuals have high relational self-esteem increased, instead of decreased, prejudice toward homosexuality. This study showed that manipulating perspective-taking may present different results in different cultures.

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Introduction

In Thailand, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) group is not fully accepted (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014). Individuals in Thai society do not explicitly attack or defend the LGBT community; however, these individuals may have negative attitudes or may be closed-minded towards the LGBT community. In addition, people in Thai society may expect LGBT people to conform to social constraints. Therefore, it is important to examine strategies to reduce prejudice in Thai people so that they are more open minded towards the LGBT community. One widely used intervention to reduce prejudice is perspective-taking. Perspective-taking involves contemplating another person's thoughts, feelings, intentions, and other mental states. This intervention has been found to be effective among Westerner targets (Sturmer, Snyder, Davis, & Maitner, 2009). However, the

effectiveness of using the perspective-taking technique has not been proved among Easterners, on whom such a technique has been expected to work even better due to the adoption of collectivistic cultures. In such cultures, people have more "other-focus" emotion than in individualistic cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This suggests that Asians are better at perspective-taking than Westerners because it is a habit that is practiced regularly. To our knowledge, the current study is the first to investigate the effects of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction among Thais.

Literature Review

Perspective-taking

Perspective-taking is a cognitive process where an individual considers situations from another person's point of view. It is when individuals puts themselves in someone else's shoes. Previous studies suggest that perspective-taking allows individuals to build positive interaction with others. In intergroup relationships, perspective-taking

affects an individual's feelings or thoughts, which can lead to a positive relationship with out-group members; for example, perspective-taking reduces explicit prejudice (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003; Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky & Ku, 2004), reduces implicit prejudice (Todd, Bodenhausen, & Galinsky, 2012; Todd & Burgmer, 2013), promotes out-group helping behavior (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997a; Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002), and reduces social discrimination (Todd et al., 2012). However, other studies have shown that perspective-taking can yield a variety of negative inter-personal outcomes, such as stereotypes (Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008; Tarrant, Calitri, & Weston, 2012; Skorinko & Sinclair, 2013). Therefore, for these positive outcomes to emerge, self-other merging is necessary for perspective-taking to be effective.

Self-other merging is a cognitive process where an individual connects to some characteristic of the target prejudice by taking their perspective (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996). Davis et al. (1996) suggested that participants that received perspective-taking intervention were more likely to use their own characteristics to describe the target's characteristics, compared to the control group. In addition to self-other merging at an individual level, Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) suggested that perspective-taking can lead to connection at a group level, known as self-outgroup merging. Their results showed that participants in the perspective-taking intervention group had fewer stereotypical evaluations than the other groups. This study showed that perspective-taking allowed an individual to connect to the target at both an individual level and a group level. These findings on the concept of self-other merging showed that the individual's self-concept plays a role in the effectiveness of using perspective-taking on reducing prejudice.

Perspective-taking and Self-evaluation

Self-other merging offers insight into why perspective-taking may decrease stereotyping regardless of target valence. During perspective-taking, the self is applied to the target, making the target become more "self-like" (Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Todd & Burgmer, 2013). Perspective-taking allows individuals to connect to the target group by using thoughts they have about themselves to explain the target of prejudice. In doing so, individuals may identify similar characteristics to the target. Therefore, this shows how self-evaluation may play a role in moderating the effect of perspective-taking on reducing group prejudice (Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Todd & Burgmer, 2013). Galinsky and Ku (2004) showed that perspective-takers who had high self-esteem reported lower level of prejudice toward elders compared to perspective-takers who had low self-esteem. This indicates that perspective-taking can reduce group prejudice more effectively when individuals have a positive self-perception due to the process of self-other association. This aspect of self-evaluation has also been investigated and is consistent at an unconscious level (Todd & Burgmer, 2013).

Culture and Self-evaluation

Previous studies suggest that perspective-taking can lower group prejudice in people who have high self-esteem or positive self-evaluation (Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Todd & Burgmer, 2013). However, these studies were conducted in individualistic cultures where people place greater value on their success and goals. They identify themselves as self-reliant, as importance is placed on the individual's identity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). People that identify as being individualistic are perceived to have unique personality, skills, values, and goals. In addition, they see themselves as independent from others. This may be different from collectivistic culture, which is represented in Thai society. People in collectivistic cultures identify themselves based on cultural groups or relationships that they have with others, especially with people they are close to (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). They are dependent upon each other and they view themselves as interdependent. They place greater importance on their families' or groups' goals than their own goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, feeling connected to others is very important for people in collectivistic culture.

Brewer and Gardner (1996) indicated that individuals with independent self-construal are more likely to place greater value on their personal self. In contrast, individuals with interdependent self-construal would place greater value to their relational self. In terms of measuring self-worth, personal self and relational self are comparable to personal self-esteem and relational self-esteem, respectively. Therefore, this shows that Thai people may find relational self-esteem to be more important because Thai people have an interdependent self-construal. We believe that the topic of self-assessment or self-worth, in relation to perspective-taking, should be further investigated in Thailand. Previous research suggest that people in a collectivistic society will evaluate their self-worth based on social values and their relationships with significant others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Tafarodi & Milne, 2002; Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Du, King, & Chi, 2012). Additionally, Kim, Chiu, Au, and Kwak (2014) found that people in collectivistic cultures will use their significant others' perspectives as a reference in evaluating themselves when they are in stimulating situations or situations that make them think of others. Therefore, we investigated the role of relational self-esteem, defined as an individual's perception of their own self-worth in association with significant others (such as family and friends), in moderating the effects of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction.

Methods

Participants

One hundred fifty-seven undergraduates were surveyed individually. They received credit for participation as part of a course requirement. We excluded data from 35 participants who were not heterosexual, 9 participants who did not pass the relational self-esteem manipulation check criteria, and 1 participant who completed less than 50

percent of the questionnaires, leaving a final sample of 112 participants (M_{age} = 20.40), 35 (31.25%) were males, 76 (67.86%) were females, and 1 (0.89%) was unidentified.

Data Collection

The experiment was a 2 (narrative essay instructions:-positive relational self-esteem versus negative relational self-esteem) × 2 (reading instructions:perspective-taking versus control) between groups design. Participants were asked to answer questionnaires and to complete the explicit prejudice assessment on the topic of homosexuality (all measures were in the Thai language). Two weeks later, participants were randomly allocated into four groups and received relational self-esteem and perspective taking manipulations, according to the condition they were in.

Measures

Relational Self-esteem Manipulation

The relational self-esteem manipulation was adapted from Fein and Spencer (1997). Participants were asked to recall their experiences of expressing emotion toward significant others, such as family members or friends. Then, they were asked to describe those situations as part of the relational self-esteem manipulation. Participants in the positive relational self-esteem condition were asked to describe "a time where you received admiration and acceptance from helping or being supportive to your family or friends." On the other hand, participants in the negative relational self-esteem condition were asked to describe "an experience where you received admonition and unacceptance from your family or friends."

Perspective-taking Manipulation

After taking part in the relational self-esteem manipulation, participants were required to read a hypothetical story of a first-year college student who was homosexual. The story described how the student developed problems with his parents after they learned that the student was homosexual. In addition, the story described the student's experience of prejudice and isolation; how he was rejected from participating in activities that involved children; and how he was bullied by his classmates due to his sexual orientation. These experiences made him feel uncomfortable and stressed (Batson et al., 1997b). Participants in the perspective-taking condition received the following instruction: "Please imagine that you are the person in this story. Imagine how you would think or feel if you were him and how you would react to the same situations." However, participants in the control group, were told: "Be objective. Try not to involve your personal feelings or think about what you would do if you were the person in the story".

Prejudice Toward Homosexuality

Prejudice was measured using a 10-item scale adapted from the Homosexuality Attitude Scale (Kite & Deaux, 1986) and Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men: ATLG (Herek, 1988). The researchers of these two scales granted permission for academic use of these two scales. Examples of the items are "Homosexuality is a mental illness", "Homosexuality is a perversion", "I would not mind being employed by a homosexual". Participants responded on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*;α $_{pretest}$ = .90, α $_{posttest}$ = .90). Reduction of explicit prejudice toward a homosexuality score was obtained by deducting the pretest score from the posttest score.

Manipulation Check

Relational Self-esteem

Two judges read and independently scored the content based on how consistent the participants' stories were with the instructions that they received. The scores ranged from 1 (*not at all consistent*) to 10 (*highly consistent*). Only participants who received a score equal to or above 6 were included in the data analysis. If participants wrote more details than instructed, only the content that was consistent with the instructions was analyzed. When the two judges disagreed, the first author made a final decision on whether that participant was included in the data analysis. In addition, Galinsky and Ku's (2004) manipulation check was adapted and used. Here, two other judges evaluated the content that the participants wrote to identify the level of positive or negative feeling. Scores ranged from 1 (*extremely negative*) to 9 (*extremely positive*). Participants in the positive relational self-esteem condition should show a higher level of positive feelings than participants in the negative relational self-esteem condition.

Perspective-taking

A three-item questionnaire on how participants reacted while reading the story was provided. The questions included: (1) "While reading the story, to what extent did you concentrate on imagining the first-year college student's feelings?", (2) "While reading the text, to what extent did you concentrate on imagining how you would have felt if you were in the first-year college student's position?", (3) "While reading the text, to what extent did you remain objective and detached?". The scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Results

Manipulation Check

Relational Self-esteem

Nine participants were excluded from the study because their stories were inconsistent with the instructions; therefore, the final sample consisted of 112 participants. Scoring between the judges indicated a good level of inter-rater reliability ($r = .74$). For the level of positive or negative feeling manipulation check, the two judges showed a high level of inter-rater reliability ($r = .88$). As expected, participants in the positive relational self-esteem condition showed greater level of positive feelings ($M = 8.03$, $SD = 0.41$, $n = 60$) than participants in the negative relational self-esteem condition ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 0.37$, $n = 52$), $t(110) = 83.26$, $p < .001$.

Perspective-taking

Participants in the perspective-taking condition showed a greater level of concentration toward the homosexual student's feelings in the story while reading the story ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.66$, $n = 56$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.94$, $n = 56$), $t(110) = 5.46$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypotheses about the moderating role of relational self-esteem on the effects of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction, a multi-group SEM (MSEM) analysis was conducted. This analysis consisted of two steps. The first step tested the model and the parameter estimations for each relational self-esteem group separately. The second step involved re-estimating the effect of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction, which had to be equal between groups to show the moderating role of relational self-esteem on the effects of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction.

Regarding the first step, results of the path analysis revealed that the effect of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction model had a good fit with the data. Both positive relational self-esteem and negative relational self-esteem conditions shared the same basic model (Table 1).

In the positive relational self-esteem condition, perspective-taking had a marginally significant negative effect on prejudice reduction ($\beta = -.25$, $t = -1.95$). However, in the negative relational self-esteem condition, perspective-taking had no significant effect on prejudice reduction ($\beta = .18$, $t = 1.32$).

Next, the multi-group invariance was analyzed to determine whether relational self-esteem moderates the effect of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction. The results showed a significant improvement of the x^2 value, from 3.48 to 9.29 ($p < .05$). Therefore, relational self-esteem moderated the effect of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction such that perspective-takers with positive relational self-esteem were less likely to show prejudice reduction than perspective-takers with negative relational self-esteem. This result was in contrast with our hypothesis (see Table 2).

Discussion

We found that relational self-esteem moderated the effects of perspective-taking in prejudice reduction toward homosexuality. However, the nature of the effects was in

Table 1
Goodness-of-fit statistic for the effect of perspective-taking on prejudice reduction model

Condition	Measure of model fit				
	x^2	df	p	RMSEA	SRMR
Positive relational self-esteem ($n = 52$)	1.28	1	.258	.069	.113
Negative relational self-esteem ($n = 60$)	2.20	1	.138	.155	.164

Table 2
Moderation test

	x^2	df	p	RMSEA	Δx^2	Δdf	p
1. Testing of equality of path model	3.48	2	.176	.116			
2. Testing of invariance	9.29	3	.026	.196	5.81	1	<.05

Critical x^2 ($df = 1$, $p < .05$) = 3.841

contrast with our hypothesis; in our study, perspective-takers with positive relational self-esteem showed increased prejudice, instead of decreased prejudice, toward homosexuality when compared to perspective-takers with negative relational self-esteem. These findings contradicted research by Galinsky and Ku (2004) and Todd and Burgmer (2013), which documented that perspective-taking led to lower group prejudice in people who have higher self-esteem or positive self-evaluation compared to people with lower self-esteem scores. Two possible explanations for our findings are social identification and conformity to norms.

The first explanation involves the social identification theory. This suggests that activating positive relational self-esteem prompts participants to think about their significant others or people around them, in their group. This is like increasing social identification. On the other hand, activating negative relational self-esteem may make participants feel that they are not accepted by the group or may decrease social identification with their group. Tarrant et al.'s (2012) research suggest that perspective-taking has a negative effect when individuals have high social identification. They explained that high social identification inhibits the perspective-taking process that allows individuals to use positive feelings they have about themselves to connect with the target; therefore, prejudice is not reduced. This may explain why using the perspective-taking technique with individuals with positive relational self-esteem may not successfully reduce prejudice in Thai people.

Another explanation for our finding is conformity to norms. Activating positive relational self-esteem may stimulate individuals to think about the expectations and norms of their groups or significant others, which may inhibit the perspective-taking process. Kim et al. (2014) suggested that when collectivists are in stimulating situations or in situations that make them think of their parents, they will adjust their self-perceptions to match their assumption of their parents' perspective or expectation of them. The relational self-esteem manipulation may cause individuals to think about the expectations of their groups or significant others, which may prevent individuals from reducing their prejudice toward the out-group. Detenber, Ho, Neo, Malik, and Cenite (2013) suggested that conformity to norms is a major variable that predicts attitudes towards homosexuals and acceptance toward homosexuals. This may explain how conformity to norms impacts the decisions or evaluations made by people in collectivistic societies. Therefore, conformity to norms can potentially explain the cultural difference in results when using the perspective-taking technique to reduce prejudice.

The findings from our study suggest that perspective-taking may not be an effective technique in prejudice reduction in collectivistic culture or at least among Thais. However, this research suggests that perspective-takers with negative relational self-esteem showed greater prejudice reduction toward homosexuality compared to perspective-takers with positive relational self-esteem. These findings may be used in developing methods to reduce prejudice. In addition, the topic of prejudice reduction should be a focus in future research. Because Thailand has recently joined the ASEAN Economic Community, future research should focus on prejudice toward other cultures and/or nationalities.

As the findings in this research contrast with past studies, it is important to further investigate the role of perspective-taking in prejudice reduction. If the findings in this study are supported by further research, researchers should consider studying social identification and conformity to norm as influencing factors. This would increase understanding of using the perspective-taking technique in prejudice reduction. Therefore, further research on this topic will shed light on an effective strategy to reduce prejudice in collectivistic cultures.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings in this study showed that relational self-esteem moderated perspective-taking in prejudice reduction toward homosexuality but in a negative direction. Perspective-takers with positive relational self-esteem showed increased prejudice, instead of decreased prejudice, toward homosexuality compared to perspective-takers with negative relational self-esteem. These results demonstrated that using the perspective-taking technique with those who have positive self-esteem did not always produce positive results. Therefore, when using the perspective-taking technique to reduce prejudice, the cultural context should be taken into consideration.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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