Status Effects on Attributions for Online Knowledge Sharing Failures: A Comparison Between Chinese and Korean Cultures

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Abstract. Social status and culture can affect attributions. In this study, the authors utilized a knowledge-sharing failure scenario to test the effects of status and culture on attributions with a survey conducted among 127 Chinese and 120 Koreans. The results showed that both Chinese and Koreans felt significantly more disappointed when the failure occurred because of the senior's rather than the junior's ability-related issues. Chinese participants tended to ascribe the failure significantly more to contexts than ability, while Korean participants had the opposite tendency. Although both Chinese and Korean participants gave lower ratings on motivation attribution when the one who failed to share knowledge was a peer, the gap was markedly larger for Korean participants. Further testing on self-construal revealed that Korean participants rated individualism significantly higher than their Chinese counterparts did. The results indicated that even in two similar cultures the status effects on attribution can differ. Managers of international companies should respond accordingly to group affairs regarding status issue.

Keywords: Attribution · Status hierarchy · Chinese culture · Korean culture
Self-construal

1 Introduction

Social status can affect attributions. For example, people of high status are considered to be more competitive and less warm (Fiske et al. 2002), and this stereotype can cause attribution biases. In some studies, low-status group members make in-group favoring attributions more than their high-status counterparts (Hunter et al. 1993; Stringer and Hunter 1999). Yet, sometimes high-status group members make stronger in-group favoring attributions (Hewstone and Ward 1985, Study 1). Still in other studies, both high and low status group members have shown in-group favoring attributions (Bond et al. 1985) or, neither the high nor low status group members make such attributions (Hewstone and Ward 1985, Study 2; Khan and Liu 2008, Study 1). Sometimes, low-status groups make outgroup favoring attributions (Hewstone et al. 1989), and sometimes high-status groups do so (Mann and Taylor 1974).

Social status is perceived differently among cultures. People holding an independent view towards themselves can treat social status in a very different way from those

holding an interdependent view. People holding an interdependent view emphasize more on relationships and the sense of belonging, thus they pay more attention to social status. People in East Asia usually hold an interdependent view towards themselves and East Asian cultures are regarded as collectivism. In Japanese culture, high and low status members of a group are stratified into a special hierarchical social system. High-status members often gain a higher status, level, or rank because of their age, experience or qualification. On the contrary, low-status members are those who are younger, join the organization later, or earn the qualification later. It is required to call senior members by their honorific social titles (the Senpai) instead of their names; otherwise the juniors will be judged negatively by other people (Enyo 2013; Sano 2014).

Besides social status, culture can also affect attributions. Morris and Peng (1994) provided a demonstration of cultural divergence in causal attribution for Chinese and Americans. They focused on two parallel tragedies that recently occurred in the U.S. In both events, the criminals were angry with their supervisors and killed them. Morris and Peng found that the English newspapers speculated heavily about the mental instability and other negative dispositions of the perpetrators as possible causes (e.g., "the man was mentally unstable," "darkly disturbed man who drove himself to success and destruction," and "he had a short fuse"). In contrast, the Chinese newspapers emphasized contextual, situational, and even societal factors (e.g., "did not get along with his advisor," "tragedy reflects the lack of religion in Chinese culture," and "followed the example of a recent mass slaying in Texas"). Morris and Peng showed in their study that when Chinese and American university students explained the events, they had different attributional patterns: Chinese participants preferred contextual explanations while American participants preferred dispositional ones. Choi and Markus (1998), in a conceptual replication of the Morris and Peng study, discovered a similar divergence in causal attribution between Koreans and Americans. Menon et al. (1999) conducted a series of experiments to demonstrate that North American and East Asian cultures differed in implicit theories of individuals and groups. In these experiments, participants read an event in which both individuals and groups were involved and an unusual bad outcome had occurred. Participants from both North America (the U.S.) and East Asia (Japan and Hong Kong) rated the attributions of individual, group and situation factors. It was found that North Americans were more likely to attribute causality to individuals and dispositions, while the East Asians preferred to attribute the outcome to dispositions of collective-level agents. It was consistent with the findings that East Asian culture was collectivism while American culture was individualism.

Considering the factors that influence attributions, the effects of culture and status can interact with each other. However, there existed no such experimental study. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 2004) and research (Bettencourt et al. 2001), status effects are often qualified by the perceived legitimacy of status discrimination. Collectivism culture regards status discrimination as more acceptable. Therefore, the effects of status on attribution can vary across cultures. In East Asian cultures such as China and Korea, status plays an important role, and seniors in the group are highly respected. In these cultures, attributions can highly depend on the target person's social status.

Even in the same cultural group, the status hierarchy may endow with different meanings, consequently influencing casual attributions. Previous studies compared Confucian values in East Asian cultures, and found that China placed the most emphasis on interpersonal harmony and relational hierarchy (Zhang et al. 2005). To regard all East Asian cultures as the same is too arbitrary, and cultures have been changing over time. In this study, we would like to explore the effects of status on attributions in Chinese and Korean cultures. In Hofstede's research (1983), responses in four cultural dimensions from 54 nations and regions were summarized, including data from Hong Kong and Korea. Pitifully, there was no direct comparison between mainland China and Korea in this study. However, as Hong Kong was close to mainland China from the cultural perspective, the results can still be a credible reference. Korea ranked higher than Hong Kong in the individualism dimension (Korea IDV = 25, Hong Kong IDV = 18). At the time when Hofstede's research was carried out, China had just started its reform and opening-up policies while Hong Kong was already an international city. It is reasonable to infer that China should rank even lower in individualism than Hong Kong.

Usually, a deviance was chosen as the scenario to test attribution, because negative outcomes were easier to evoke attributions. Meanwhile, the scenario should involve both individuals and groups. Knowledge-sharing failure can be a good choice. Knowledge sharing is an important issue in teamwork. Any failure in knowledge sharing on either individual or group level can do harm to the team performance. Status distinction has been a barrier to sharing knowledge. Jones et al. (2006) found that eliminating seniority and functional distinctions among team members can initially enhance knowledge sharing, but the success deteriorated to limited knowledge sharing over time. This happened when the senior team members began to resent the lower-level members so that the lower-level employees no longer felt free to provide input. As a result, knowledge sharing is a suitable scenario to study the effects of both culture and status on attributions.

Following previous attribution research and the above line of reasoning, we would use the scenario of knowledge sharing failure to test the status effects on attribution between Chinese and Korean cultures. In these two East Asian cultures, the seniors are often held in high regard, and their experience and ability greatly valued. Thus, it is reasonable to have the following hypotheses.

H1: Participants would attribute more to ability failure when the target person is a peer; While they would attribute more to motivation or context failure when the target person is a senior.

The disappointment levels of different attributions can differ. When the failure is due to the senior's ability or motivation failure, Chinese and Korean participants should be more disappointed, because these kinds of failure go against their expectations of the senior.

H2: Participants feel more disappointed when the failure is the result of the senior's motivation or ability.

Culture can also affect attributions. Inferred from previous research, Chinese participants can be more interdependent than Korean participants. Thus, Chinese participants may make more contextual attributions.

H3: Chinese participants would rate higher on relational self-construal and group self-construal; While Korean participants would rate higher on individual self-construal.

H4: Chinese participants would attribute a failure more to context, while Korean participants would attribute a failure more to ability and motivation.

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

One hundred and twenty-seven Chinese students (36 women) were recruited from six universities in Beijing. One hundred and twenty Korean students (50 women) were recruited from nine universities in Seoul. Chinese participants were from 18 to 34 years old (M = 25, SD = 2.93), and Korean participants were from 18 to 29 years old (M = 22, SD = 2.59). Each participant received a monetary reward equal to five US dollars.

2.2 Procedure

In each culture, the participants were randomly assigned to two conditions. One was a senior condition and the other was a peer condition. For the senior condition, the participants first read about an online knowledge-sharing scenario, in which a senior member failed to share knowledge with the group. Then, the participants rated different attributions for the senior member's failure. For the peer condition, the process was almost identical except that the target person changed to a peer.

The scenario was adapted from Menon et al. (1999), which described a failed collaboration between a group and one of its member. In the current study, the situation narrowed down to a member's failure of sharing knowledge with other members. In addition, in the senior member condition, the actor is a senior member in the group. In both conditions, half participants read about a male actor, and the other half a female actor.

Senior Condition
In a company, a group of coworkers from interdisciplinary backgrounds was responsible for a very important project. A key factor, which determined the success of the project, was knowledge sharing within the team. The team used many online communication tools to facilitate sharing knowledge, including email, instant messaging software, group chatting applications, online bulletin forum, and blogs.

There were not many difficulties in the project itself, but one problem constantly plagued the group. One senior team member, who we will call "Z", was consistently irresponsive to sharing his knowledge. For example, in one case a junior member, who was working in a different place, asked Z a question through email. The question was in Z's reign of expertise and he was the most senior people to ask for reference from. However, Z replied very late after 2 weeks without any answers but only with an excuse for his late reply. In another case, a newcomer asked a question another team

member tagged Z about some professional knowledge through the online forum, and said he was the best people to answer. However, Z never replied.

In the final analysis, owing to his failure to share knowledge, the group were not satisfied with Z's work, and had to burden with the responsibilities that should have been Z's. Group relations suffered, and the members of the group often lost their trust in Z and sidetracked from the project. Consequently, the final product did not meet the quality expectation.

Peer Condition

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2.3   Measures

Attributes

Modified from Menon et al. (1999)'s scenario, we asked the participants to evaluate "reasons as to why Z didn't play as successfully as he could have done." We presented a list of possibly relevant factors, including motivational and ability-related dispositions and contextual reasons. The participants were asked to rate the items on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 = very impossible 7 = very possible (see Table 1).

Disappointment

The participants were then asked to fill in another section about disappointment. The descriptions were the same as in Table 1. This time the participants evaluated "if these reasons were the fact, would you be disappointed with Z?" Participants were asked to rate how disappointed they would be, from 1 = not disappointed at all to 7 = very disappointed.

Table 1. Attribution lists in the experiment

Motivation dispositions
The success of the project was not Z's concern, and he didn't care
Z lacked teamwork spirit
Z didn't like to help juniors/other members
Z didn't care about juniors/other members' needs
Z was afraid that sharing his knowledge would make him lose his unique value in the team
Z wanted to harm juniors/other members' performance so that he could be more competitive
Ability dispositions
Z didn't have enough knowledge to answer the questions
Z didn't have the professional skills juniors/other members expected him to have
Z couldn't talk about his knowledge clearly
Z couldn't write out a meaningful answer related to his knowledge
Z didn't know how to post a message on the forum
Contextual reasons
Z didn't see the question on time
Z was too busy to answer the question
Z preferred to communicate face to face rather than answer questions online
Junior/other members were not polite enough when asking questions
The whole group was not friendly in the process of communication
Z thought that other people were more suitable for answering this question

Self-construal

This section included 13 descriptions about individual, relation and group self-construal. The participants were asked to rate how much they agree with these descriptions, from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree (see Table 2).

3   Results

3.1   Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics of how Chinese and Korean participants rated attributes and disappointment is calculated and summarized in Table 3. When considering the failure in knowledge sharing within the group, Chinese participants attribute it less to the lack of ability and more to the context than their Korean counterparts do. How Chinese and Korean participants attributed to knowledge sharing, and why they felt disappointed was dependent on status of the target person.

To compare self-construal between Chinese and Korean participants, the descriptive statistics on self- construal for the two cultures was calculated and summarized in Table 4. Korean participants gave higher ratings on individual self-construal and slightly higher ratings on relational self-construal, while Chinese participants rated group self-construal higher.

Table 2. Self-construal questionnaire

Individual self-construal
I like to be special in many aspects
I'm always doing "my own business"
I am a unique person
Relational self-construal
My happiness depends on the happiness of people around me
I always feel that the relationship between others and me is more important than my own achievements
If people who work together with me get rewards, I will feel proud
To me, happiness means spending time with others
The happiness of people who work together with me is very important
I feel good when working together with others
Group self-construal
In general, my identity as a group member has nothing to do with how I look at myself
Which social groups I belong to is an important aspect of "who I am"
In general, the social group I belong to is a very important part of my self-identity
What kind of person I regard myself as is not determined by which social group I belong to

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on attributions and disappointment

Culture	Status	Attribution	M	SD	Disappoint	M	SD
CH	Peer	Ability	3.78	0.94	Ability	3.63	1.22
		Motivation	3.92	0.96	Motivation	5.91	0.94
		Context	3.84	0.87	Context	3.73	0.94
	Senior	Ability	3.59	1.32	Ability	4.13	1.29
		Motivation	3.89	1.04	Motivation	5.86	1.27
		Context	3.84	1.94	Context	3.49	1.15
KR	Peer	Ability	4.07	1.03	Ability	3.37	1.07
		Motivation	4.16	1.07	Motivation	5.70	0.97
		Context	3.29	1.06	Context	3.41	0.89
	Senior	Ability	4.13	0.89	Ability	3.95	1.25
		Motivation	3.62	0.86	Motivation	5.56	1.22
		Context	3.44	0.80	Context	3.72	1.03

Table 4. Descriptive statistics on self-construal

Culture		Individual self-construal	Relational self-construal	Group self-construal
CH	M	4.62	4.79	5.14
	SD	0.97	0.71	0.86
KR	M	4.94	4.84	4.76
	SD	1.00	0.67	0.88

3.2 The Effects of Culture and Status

Two-way ANOVA models were established to study the effects of culture and status on three different causes of attribution and disappointment. The results were summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of two-way ANOVA

		Attribution			Disappoint		
		Ability	Motivation	Context	Ability	Motivation	Context
Culture	F(1,243)	9.28	<0.01	16.55	1.97	3.24	0.19
	P	**0.003**	0.928	**<0.001**	0.161	0.073	0.661
	Ges	0.04	<0.01	0.06	<0.01	0.01	<0.01
Status	F(1,243)	0.22	4.95	0.45	12.09	0.44	0.04
	P	0.638	**0.027**	0.505	**<0.001**	0.510	0.833
	Ges	<0.01	0.02	<0.01	0.05	<0.01	<0.01
Culture*Status	F(1,243)	0.89	4.31	0.42	0.06	0.10	4.51
	P	0.346	**0.039**	0.518	0.804	0.753	**0.035**
	Ges	<0.01	0.02	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	0.02

The effect of culture*status was significant on motivational attribution ($F(1,243)$ = 4.31, p = 0.039, ges = 0.02) and contextual disappoint ($F(1,243)$ = 4.51, p = 0.035, ges = 0.02). The effect of culture was significant on ability attribution ($F(1,243)$ = 9.28, p = 0.003, ges = 0.04) and contextual attribution ($F(1,243)$ = 16.55, $p < 0.001$, ges = 0.06). The effect of status was significant on ability disappoint ($F(1,243)$ = 12.09, $p < 0.001$, ges = 0.05).

Chinese and Korean participants attributed knowledge sharing failure to different reasons, because of the status effect. Chinese participants attributed it significantly more to lack of motivation than Korean participants when the senior caused knowledge sharing failure, while they attributed it significantly less to lack of motivation than Korean participants when the peer caused knowledge sharing failure. Chinese participants attributed it remarkably more to contextual but significantly less to lack of ability than Korean participants did.

Failure to share knowledge causes disappointment. Chinese and Korean participants felt disappointed by different reasons. Chinese participants felt a lot more disappointed with contextual issues than Korean participants did when the peer caused the failure, while they felt significantly less disappointed with contextual issues than Korean participants did when the senior caused the failure. Status also had an effect. Both Chinese and Korean participants felt significantly more disappointed with ability issues when the senior caused the failure than when the peer caused the failure.

3.3 The Influence of Self-construal

To test whether Chinese and Korean participants differed in self-construal, three t-tests were conducted. The results of cultural effect on individual self-construal, relational

self-construal, and group self-construal were summarized in Table 6. Chinese partici-
pants gave significantly higher ratings than Korean participants did on group
self-construal (t = 3.45, p < 0.001, d = 0.44). Korean participants rated individual
self-construal (t = –2.52, p = 0.012, d = 0.32) significantly higher than Chinese
participants.

Table 6. T-test result of culture effect on self-construal

Type of self-construal	T	P	Cohen's d
Individual	–2.52	**0.012**	0.32
Relational	–0.52	0.604	0.07
Group	3.45	**<0.001**	0.44

Correlation tests were conducted to study the relationship between self-construal
and attributions. Ability attribution and group self-construal was found negatively
correlated (r = –0.14, p = 0.032).

4   Discussion

The scenarios were almost the same except for the team member's status (peer or
senior), and this small change led to different levels of disappointment. When consid-
ering the team member's ability, both Chinese and Korean participants were signifi-
cantly more disappointed with the ability failure when the team member was described
as a senior in the group. It was reasonable because in these two cultures the senior or the
Senpai was highly respected for their rich knowledge and experience. It would be more
unacceptable if a senior made an ability failure rather than an unexperienced peer. As for
the disappointment to motivation failure, no significant difference was discovered
between peers and seniors. No matter it was a peer or a senior that made a mistake due to
motivation failure, the disappointment levels remained very high.

Chinese participants attributed the failure more to contextual causes, while Korean
participants attributed it more to ability-related causes. It was in accordance with the
fact that Chinese culture was more collectivism (Hofstede 1983). Data collected in this
study also supported this explanation. Korean participants rated individual
self-construal significantly higher, and group self-construal significantly lower than
Chinese participants did. Thus, in our experiment, Chinese participants ascribed the
failure more to contextual issues, while Korean participants more to individual issues
(personal ability). Negative correlation between group self-construal and ability attri-
bution also supported the results.

Hofstede (1983) also ranked Korea higher than Hong Kong in the power-distance
dimension, meaning that a higher percentage of Koreans agreed that their bosses made
decisions in an autocratic or paternalistic way, that a higher percentage of Koreans
disliked the consultative management style and were more afraid to disagree with
superiors. This can explain the interaction effects of culture and status on motivational

attribution. Although both Chinese and Korean participants rated motivational attribution lower when the team member was described as a peer, the gap was significantly larger for Korean participants. In a culture with larger power distance, people emphasize more on hierarchy and status issues, so the effect of status was larger for Korean participants.

Previous cross-cultural researches usually focused on cultures that were distinctive in geographic and historical characters. This research involved two nations, China and Korea, both belonged to the East Asian cultural group. Previous researches studied the differences among countries from different cultural groups, providing meaningful guidance for cross-cultural interaction and management and drawing valuable conclusions. In that sense, it is equally important to study the differences among countries within the same cultural group. According to our daily experience and cases, Chinese and Korean cultures have a lot in common; however, they are also different in many ways. Koreans attach more importance to status and hierarchical relationship. Korean juniors must address the seniors with honorific titles. If not, they would get blame. However, this practice is not necessary in China. Learning about these facts and differences will bring huge benefits to the international companies that wish to seek opportunities in East Asian markets.

This research also has some limitations. As there is a lack of previous empirical studies on the differences between China and Korea, we had to adopt Hofstede's analysis as the theoretical framework and made no direct comparison between China and Korea. Hong Kong is like China; however, it cannot represent China completely due to its special location and history. In fact, this research is more like an exploratory study.

This research has its contributions despite limitations. Failures are inevitable in team work. To learn how team members attribute and treat the person who makes a mistake is very useful in dealing with the consequences of a failure. The status of the person who makes a mistake influences people's attributions and levels of disappointment. Managers should learn about this fact and come up with appropriate solutions and explanations accordingly. Culture affects the way people treat status so it is related to attributions. Managers of international companies should recognize the importance of cultural diversities which exist in two similar cultural groups like China and Korea and give it their due respect.

5   Conclusion

Towards the same event each person attributed in his or her own way. Through the survey conducted among Chinese and Koreans, it concluded that culture could influence how status affected attributions. Facing a knowledge-sharing failure scenario caused by ability-related issues, both Koreans and Chinese felt more disappointed if the target person was a senior rather than a peer. Chinese participants attributed the failure more to context, while Korean participants attributed it more to ability. The status effect was more obvious in Korea than in China. Cultural context variables like collectivism-individualism and power distance can explain those findings. In addition, the findings in this study are objective facts that managers of international companies should attach importance to.

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