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The culture of authenticity: an empirical study of La Trobe University students from diverse cultural backgrounds

Introduction

This paper is focused on how social factors can impact the way individuals think about themselves. Particularly, I am interested in investigating the influence of culture on how individuals think about their authentic selves. I explore the relationship between individuals' cultural backgrounds and where they locate their sense of authenticity. Due to a lack of agreement on the definition of authenticity (Franzese 2009: 87), sociologists have shown only recent interest in the empirical study of the topic (Erickson 1991, 1995; Franzese 2007, 2009; Vannini 2006; Vannini & Williams 2009). Aligned with this body of knowledge, I define authenticity in broad terms, as "an individual's subjective sense that their behavior, appearance, self, reflects their sense of core being. One's sense of core being is composed of their values, beliefs, feelings, identities, self-meanings, etc." (Franzese 2009: 87). Vannini (2006: 236-237) emphasizes this broad sense, arguing that for sociology there is not an authentic self *per se,* but a definition of authenticity that varies depending on individuals' experiences of authenticity . Within sociology, there has not been any research that

explores how individuals from different cultural backgrounds understand authenticity in relation to themselves, which is how my study tries to contribute to this field.

Research has shown many differences in values between Eastern and Western societies (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005). Two of them are most relevant for the construction of my hypotheses. The first difference has to do with survival and self-expression values. The political scientist Ronald Inglehart (Inglehart & Welzel 2005) has shown empirical evidence based on his post-materialism index that Eastern societies emphasize survival values; while Western societies emphasize self-expression values.

The second difference has to do with collective and individual values. Research has also shown that Eastern societies are more collectivistic than Western societies, which are more individualistic (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005). These differences in values also affect individuals' various ideas of the self. A Western sense of self is more independent; whereas an Eastern sense of self is more relational or interdependent (Markus & Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1989).

The sociologist Ralph Turner used two categories to organize individuals' discourses about their "true selves": institutional and impulsive (1976). For my purposes, I take the "true self" as a synonym of the "authentic self". Impulsives identify their authentic selves through the sense of self they feel they are; while institutionals identify their authentic selves with the sense of self they aim at (Vannini & Franzese 2008: 1633). Impulsives have a sense of inner-self. They think their authentic selves should be discovered through self-release and expressed through spontaneity. For

them, inauthenticity means abiding by social expectations from others or conforming to society's rules. On the other hand, institutionals have a sense of outer-self. They think they must achieve their authentic selves through self-control and express it through hard work. Inauthenticity means failing to live up to the expectations of society's roles—i.e., familial or professional roles.

Combining Inglehart's and Turner's theoretical frameworks, I argue that differences in terms of values can affect how individuals think of authenticity in relation to themselves. I propose that individuals from Eastern societies—Easterners—who are more focused on survival and collective values, have a more institutional idea of authenticity than individuals from Western societies—Westerners—who emphasize self-expression and individual values, having a more impulsive idea of authenticity.

The contribution of my findings to cultural theory is mainly related to the authors whose work I directly address in this paper: Ralph Turner and Ronald Inglehart. In addition, my work has also implications for what Jeffrey Alexander (2003: 13-14) has called the "strong program" in cultural sociology, as related to the autonomy of the variable culture, which in my research has been taken as the independent variable.

Methodology

My research is a partial replication of another study that Turner (1975) did at La Trobe University—among other universities of the English speaking world, and a sample of the general population in LA, US—in 1973. Turner argued that different variables could affect individuals' orientations to the self. For example, he found that

women, university students, singles, and non-religious individuals have a more impulsive orientation to the self than men, the general population, married, and religious individuals (Turner 1975: 160; Turner and Schutte 1981: 16). However, Turner did not find any relationship between the variable country of birth or parents' country of birth and his impulsive/institutional categories in the university student samples (1975: 158). He still suggested some differences in relation to the variable ethnic background of the respondent (1975: 152), but he did not provide any empirical evidence for it. More recently, Franzese (2009) has explored the impact of ethnicity in relation to authentic behaviour among Whites and African-Americans, but she has not paid attention to the influence of cultural background on perceptions of authenticity.

La Trobe University's student body is more culturally diverse nowadays than forty years ago, at the time Turner conducted his study. Due to the process of Asian immigration that Australia has experienced in recent years, the cultural background of its immigration has shifted from Western societies or European and English Speaking countries, such as Italy, Greece, England or Ireland, to Eastern societies or Asian countries, such as China, Malaysia, India or Vietnam (ABS 2011). Therefore, using a La Trobe University student's sample, I compare discourses around being authentic of Westerners to those of Easterners.

My sample is composed of 138 respondents, being representative of La Trobe's student body in terms of the variables: *gender*, *faculty*, *undergraduate/post-graduate*, *domestic/international*, *campus location,* and *country of birth*. Initially, 1136 students were selected by using a stratified random sampling method and were invited to fill in

a web-based questionnaire during the months of April and May 2013. I aimed for a sample of 1% (n=345) of the student population (34,492[1]). However, my response rate turned out to be low, 12% (n=138); a small sample that constitutes .42% of the total student population. 65.9% (n=91) of this sample are female and 34.1% (n=47) are male. The average age is 26.9 years old, with a range from 18 to 62. 71.3% (n=99) are born in Australia and 28.3% (n=39) are overseas-born students--41% (n=16) of these overseas-born students are also domestic students. Considering overseas-born students' country of birth, the highest percentages are from Eastern societies: China, 5.8% (n=8), India, 3.6% (n=5), and Malaysia, 2.2% (n=3). Turner (1975: 150, 152) obtained higher response rates—i.e., 44% at UCLA or 64% at La Trobe University— and sample sizes—i.e., at UCLA (n=355) than me. Even though my sample is still representative in terms of the variables mentioned above, the limitation of its size makes it difficult to infer my results from my sample to the whole student population.

I measure respondents' notions of authenticity through Turner's True-Self Method (Turner & Schutte 1981). This method consists of two open-ended questions about the situations where the respondent has felt authentic or inauthentic. For this paper, I only report my findings on the moments the respondent has felt authentic. The method is based on the premise that the reason why individuals report one kind of experience as a significant moment of their authentic self is because that experience is meaningful to their sense of self; the question is as follows:

> "On some occasions my actions or feelings seem to express my true self much
> better than at other times. On these occasions the person that I really am shows

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[1]This is La Trobe University's total number of enrolments in 2011.

clearly. I feel genuine and authentic, I feel that I know who I am. Try to recall one such occasion when your true self was expressed. Please describe the occasion and what you did or felt in detail" (Turner & Schutte 1981: 6).

I use this question to analyse individuals' subjective sense of authenticity and I code their answers in terms of Turner's impulsive and institutional categories. I code these responses based on Turner's specific directions on how to do it in his article about the True-Self Method (Turner & Schutte 1981:11-15).

Responses are coded as *institutional* when "the individual recognizes his true self in demonstrated achievement of accepted institutionalized values, e.g., hard work, high attainment, self-control" (Turner 1975: 154); here is an example from my data of an institutional response:

"When I am given a responsible task to complete. I believe that at that time I give my best effort to complete the work given to me. Whether it is a small thing like taking household responsibility or taking other responsibilities outside the school" (Indian-born student, female, 30 years old).

Responses are coded as *impulsive* when individuals see "institutional goals or norms as artificial constraints that must be sundered if one would find himself" (Turner 1975: 154), here is an example from my data of an impulsive response:

"When I travel and experience life away from daily routine I am completely occupying myself truthfully. When I travel life is understood through more

basic needs and values, and I am constantly reminded of how lucky I am.
When I stay still, constantly bound to institutional direction (like uni), I lose
sight of who I am and my 'self' stagnates without new experiences, attempts to
connect to new culture and language and living with a little risk. When I travel
I also get to meet more people and interact with them 'from scratch'--they have
no knowledge of who I was before and through them I can further discover my
public and personal self"(Australian-born student, female, 20 years old).

As Turner did in his previous study, I use a combination of quantitative and
qualitative methods to analyse my data. I code responses for my open questions
according to Turner's categories. I then use quantitative analysis, to compare
frequency of responses between the groups of interest to my hypotheses.

Hypotheses and Operationalization

Hypothesis 1: *Individuals from Western societies—English Speaking, Protestant
Europe, Catholic Europe or Latin American countries—tend to have an impulsive
notion of authenticity.*

Hypothesis 2: *Individuals from Eastern societies—Confucian, South Asian, African,
Orthodox, or Islamic countries—tend to have an institutional notion of authenticity.*

To answer my research question, "do differences in cultural background influence
individuals' meaning of authenticity?", two concepts must be operationalized:
"cultural background" and "meaning of authenticity". The indicator that I use to

determine the respondent's cultural background is the variable *country of birth,* which is my independent variable. This variable divides my sample between two groups of individuals that were designed according to Inglehart's cultural map (WVS 2012): those born in Western societies—English Speaking, Protestant European, Catholic European, Latin American countries; and those born in Eastern societies—Confucian, South Asian, African, Islamic, Orthodox countries. Thus, 75.4% (n=104) of individuals in my sample were born in Western societies—the majority of them are Australians (n=99); while 24.6% (n=34) were born in Eastern societies.

This division between Eastern and Western societies can sometimes be problematic, as in where to draw the line that divides them or whether the characteristics of the countries within each group are similar or not. Since an individual can be born in one country, but be socialized in the values of another country, ascription of individuals to each of these groups can also be difficult; for example, this is the case of domestic students from Eastern societies or those whose parents are from Eastern societies. Thus, the variable *country of birth* may have some limitations for being an indicator of the concept "cultural background". However, only 11.9% (n=8) of individuals in my sample of valid cases fall into any of those two examples that are difficult to classify, so their number is extremely low to present any significant differences.

However, the variable *country birth* is related in the majority of cases to the respondent's family cultural background. In the Western societies group, 85.5% (n=89) of individuals have both parents born in a Western society; while 9.6% (n=10) have one or both parents born in an Eastern society--4.8% (n=5) are missing cases. In the Eastern societies group, 55.8% (n=19) of individuals have both parents born in an

Eastern society; whereas 17.6% (n=6) have one or two parents born in a Western society—26.5% (n=9) are missing cases. Therefore, in my sample, this variable constitutes an appropriate indicator of individuals' cultural background, because in the majority of cases it is related to their family's cultural background.

For the concept "meaning of authenticity", I consider the different responses to Turner's True-Self Method in a variable called *authentic self experience,* which is my dependent variable. This variable divides individuals' responses into institutional and impulsive, coded as described above. The fact that most, 77% (n=67), of the valid responses could be classified using Turner's True-Self Method suggests the appropriateness of this method for the study of authenticity. However, there was a high percentage of individuals who completed the survey, but did not answer Turner's True Self Method question; presumably because it is based on an open question and it takes time and energy to complete it. Therefore, 37% (n=51) of responses were missing cases. In addition, 23% (n=20) of responses were "uncodable"—responses that could not be associated with any of Turner's codes. Thus, only half of the total responses, 48.6% (n=67), could be included for the analysis. The sample of valid cases is composed by 77.5% (n=52) Westerners and 22.3% (n=15) Easterners. For the Western societies group, the majority are born in Australia (n=51) and there is only one student born in another Western society (n=1), Canada. For the Eastern societies group, two thirds (n=10) are domestic and one third (n=5) are international students, born in different countries of the Eastern societies group, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burma, Hong Kong, India, Lebanon, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, China, and Bulgaria.

Results

51% (n=27) of Westerners reported an institutional experience; while 48.15% (n=25) of them reported an impulsive experience. Westerners have an almost equal distribution between institutional and impulsive experiences. In fact, they slightly report more institutional experiences than impulsive ones. Therefore, *hypothesis 1* should be rejected. Westerners don't clearly show an impulsive meaning of authenticity; they seem to be divided between institutional and impulsive experiences.

80% (n=12) of Easterners reported an institutional experience; whereas 20% (n=3) of them reported an impulsive experience. Easterners are polarized, reporting more institutional experiences of authenticity than impulsive ones (80% and 20%). Thus, *hypothesis* 2 should be confirmed. Easterners seem to have an institutional meaning of authenticity. Differences in relation to students being domestic or international were not found.

A correlation analysis to determine the relationship between the variables *country of birth* and *authentic self experience* tested my two hypotheses at once. The direction of the relationship is as predicted in my hypotheses; Westerners are more likely to report impulsive experiences than Easterners, who report more institutional experiences. However, the relationship is low to moderate (r= .237), falling short of statistical significance (p< .1). The reason why this relationship is low to moderate is because of the rejection of *hypothesis 1*. Even though Westerners report more impulsive experiences than Easterners, they are not as clearly "impulsive" as Easterners are "institutional".

Conclusion

My findings point to the relative importance of cultural background as related to primary socialization agents such as respondents' country of birth or their family's country of birth when it comes to influencing their meanings of authenticity. Differences between Westerners and Easterners in the way they experience authenticity were found; particularly in the Easterners group, where institutional experiences of authenticity were more frequently reported. However, I recommend caution with the generalization of my findings, because my sample of valid cases is small (n=67). Nevertheless, my results still point to significant trends that could be worth exploring in further studies. Other within-culture or cross-cultural studies, using bigger sample sizes or international comparison, could delve into this relationship between cultural background and meaning of authenticity. As a part of my research, I have undertaken a qualitative study to understand more fully how and why individuals' meanings of authenticity can be related to their cultural background.

Finally, if we compare my results for the whole sample with Turner's results 40 years ago, in my sample institutional experiences were more frequently reported, 58.2% (n=39), than impulsive experiences, 41.8% (n=28). This is not consistent with what Turner found in his samples of students 40 years ago. On the contrary, he found more impulsive experiences, 60.5%, than institutional ones, 39.5% (Turner & Gordon 1981: 44); more concretely, among all universities, La Trobe University was where most individuals had an impulsive self-conception (Turner 1975: 158). Again, it should be acknowledged that the problems with my sample size can skew this comparison.

At the time Turner conducted his study at La Trobe in 1973, youth seemed to be more concerned with self-expression and critical of institutions (Yankelovich 1974). This phenomenon, coupled with the fact that the majority of students were from Western backgrounds, might have influenced individuals' perceptions of authenticity in the direction of being more impulsive. However, La Trobe students nowadays appear to have a more institutional meaning of authenticity than back in the 70's; they are more concerned with work and how to adapt to society's demands than with satisfying self-expressive needs. Besides, there are more Easterners, who report even more institutional experiences of authenticity than Westerners. These two trends combined may explain the differences between Turner's and my results.

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