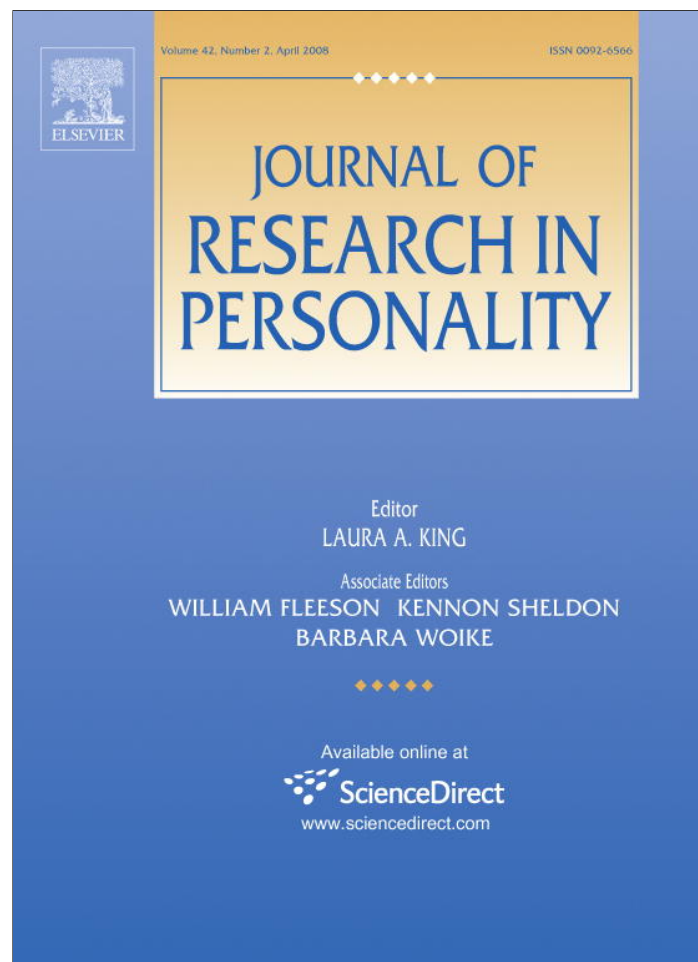


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Brief Report

Cultural variations in achievement  
motivation despite equivalent motivational  
strength: Motivational concerns among Indian  
and American corporate professionals

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**Abstract**

We explored the possibility that persons from two cultures, Indian and American, might be similar in overall levels of motivational strength yet differ significantly in their experience and expression of achievement motivation. We anticipated that Indian, more than American, corporate professionals would incorporate not only self-based but also other-oriented concerns (e.g., for the welfare of co-workers and community members) into their experience of achievement motivation in the workplace. American and Indian corporate professionals responded to an online survey that included a novel measure tapping interpersonal concerns in achievement motivation. Despite the groups being equivalent on multiple demographic indicators and on traditional indices of both motivational strength and motivational orientation, Americans and Indians differed substantially in motivational concerns, with Indians grounding their sense of achievement motivation more strongly in concerns for extended family, co-workers and community. Implications for the study of cultural variations in personality processes are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Culture; Achievement motivation; Personality

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## 1. Introduction

Much contemporary research on psychology and culture explores culture and personality. In some respects this area of study is diverse. Investigators explore cultural variability in average levels of diverse personal qualities such as self-esteem (Schmitt & Allik, 2005), subjective well-being (Deiner, Diener, & Diener, 1995), and global personality traits (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). Yet in another respect the scope of work is limited. The limitation is that a key assumption often receives little scrutiny. To ask whether average levels of a given personality quality differ across cultures is to presuppose that the nature of that quality—its experience and expression for individuals residing in alternative cultural contexts—is cross-culturally consistent. We do not, for example, ask if religious beliefs vary in “level” across cultures because we know they vary in type; the qualitative variations militate against analyses which presume that religious beliefs are fixed in form, varying merely parametrically. Might personality attributes also differ qualitatively from one cultural context to the next (cf. Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, 1989)?

We explored this possibility by examining a personality quality of historical interest to students of personality and culture: achievement motivation. Mid-20th century theories posited a common set of universal motives (Murray, 1938) and explored possible cultural variation in their magnitude (e.g., McClelland, 1961). Subsequent findings questioned this approach. For example, Blacks and Mexican Americans scored in the low range on traditional achievement motivation measures but in the high range when motivation was operationalized in terms of family-oriented achievement goals (Ramirez & Price-Williams, 1976). Sri Lankans, compared to Australians, reported more achievement goals that highlighted family and social responsibility (Niles, 1998). Yu and Yang (1994), employing an indigenous achievement scale, reported that the dominant achievement motivation of Chinese is socially rather than individually oriented. Such findings suggest that the nature of—not merely the level of—achievement motivation may vary across social groups and cultures. Extant empirical evidence lends support to the idea that achievement motivation is not a singularity that exists in fixed form across all cultures, but instead is a multifaceted, culturally constituted phenomenon for which some elements may exhibit universal qualities whereas others may vary cross-culturally.

This possibility poses methodological challenges not adequately addressed in prior research on culture and achievement motivation. Three are of particular importance: (1) One needs a measure of achievement motivation that is sensitive to potential cultural universality and variability in different aspects of achievement needs. A possibility of particular interest involves the role in achievement concerns of interpersonal domains beyond the boundary of the self. Who are the people that comprise the locus of achievement motivation? Only the self and one's immediate family, or others such as community members and peers? The second and third requirements are that one needs populations from different cultures who are similar in (2) demographics, so that cultural variation is not confounded with demographic variables, and in (3) mean levels of motivation as traditionally measured, so that variations on one's culturally sensitive measure are not confounded with potential cultural variations in traditional achievement constructs.

We sought to meet these requirements while studying achievement motivation among corporate professionals from India and the United States. It has been suggested that

the need for achievement among Indian professionals incorporates feelings of care and concern for others (Sinha, 1993; also see Agarwal & Misra, 1986; Fyans, Salili, Maehr, & Desai, 1983). In the US, by contrast, achievement is seen to entail competition with others; items on a popular index of achievement motivation (Spence & Helmreich, 1978), for example, highlight competition against co-workers and the prospect that their success will be emotionally disturbing to oneself. Corporate professionals in the US and India, then constitute an ideal contrast case for exploring the possibility that groups who may be similar on multiple demographics indicators, and on traditional measures of level of motivation, nonetheless will not be the same in the domain of achievement motivation. We predicted that Indians, but not Americans, would incorporate not only self-based but also other-oriented concerns involving the welfare of co-workers and community members into their experience of achievement motivation in the workplace.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Corporate professionals,  $n = 228$ , 114 Indian nationals (37 men, 77 women) and 114 US citizens (33 men, 81 women), responded to an online survey during August–September, 2006. The purposive sample was obtained via chain-referral, with an initial set of corporate professionals contacted via e-mail and asked to distribute the online survey to other corporate professionals. The Indian and American subsamples were closely matched on numerous demographic variables (Table 1). Of note is that nearly half of the Indian nationals resided in the US at their time of participation.

Table 1  
Demographic characteristics of participants (% within country)

Demographic variable	Nationality	
	American ( $N = 114$ ) (%)	Indian ( $N = 114$ ) (%)
Age (years)		
20–25	24.60	22.80
26–30	22.80	23.70
31–35	28.10	25.40
36–40	21.10	26.30
>40	3.50	1.80
Education		
Bachelors	33.30	32.50
Masters	34.20	36.80
PhD	32.50	30.70
Marital status		
Married	64.90	69.30
Unmarried	35.10	30.70
Resident		
India	0.90	44.70
USA	99.10	55.30
Professional level		
Entry	44.74	43.86
Mid	46.49	45.61
Executive	7.02	8.77

## 2.2. Procedure and measures

An emailed cover letter contained a description of the study, consent form, and URL (hyperlink) connecting to the study website, where instructions requested participants to complete the following measures.

### 2.2.1. *Self-other concerns in workplace achievement motivation*

Participants completed a survey of work-related achievement concerns. Items asked whether a given type of achievement-related concern was experienced with respect to a given type of person. We crossed five types of persons (self, immediate family, extended family, community members, and co-workers) with eight classes of achievement-related concerns (happiness, pride, guilt, anxiety, expectations for career growth, competence, overall welfare, and financial well-being), yielding 40 items. Sample items included “I want to excel in my job because it makes (me feel a sense of pride in myself), (my immediate family members feel proud of me), (my extended family members feel proud of me), (my co-workers feel proud of me), (members of my community feel proud of me)” and “I aspire for professional growth in my career because I am concerned about the financial well-being of (my own self), (my immediate family members), (my extended family members), (my community), (my company).” Items were rated on seven-point Likert-scales ranging from “not at all true of me” to “entirely true of me.” Item order was randomized for each participant. A reliability analysis indicated that responses in four of the five domains were highly reliable,  $\alpha$ 's  $> .80$ . The internal reliability of co-worker ratings was lower,  $\alpha = .64$ ; but since a lenient cut-off of  $.60$  is common in exploratory research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) the co-worker items were retained.

### 2.2.2. *Motivational strength and orientation*

We predicted that Indian and American nationals would differ in their conceptions of work motivation, with Indian professional displaying a more collectivist conception. In principle, such cultural comparisons may be confounded by cultural variations in either overall achievement motivation strength or achievement orientation. To examine this, participants completed two additional measures.

The multi-motive grid (MMG) questionnaire (Sokolowski, Schmalt, Langens, & Puca, 2000) was used to assess strength of achievement motivation. It taps two components of the achievement motive, hope of success and fear of failure, in each of three achievement domains, success/failure, affiliation/rejection, and power. Each of fourteen pictures (e.g., rope climber, person in jail) is followed by statements representing each of six motives (hope for success, fear of failure, hope for affiliation, etc.). MMG, thus, combines the features of self-report with an implicit measure of achievement motivation, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Participants are asked to put themselves in the position of the persons depicted and to indicate (yes/no) whether they would experience each motive in the depicted circumstance. Scores for the six motives are obtained by aggregating across the 14 situations.

The regulatory focus questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001) was used to assess global motivational orientations. The RFQ assesses self-reported frequency of regulating one's actions with regard either to the acquisition or loss of positive outcomes (i.e., promotion focus, tapped via a promotion subscale) or the avoidance or presence of negative outcomes (i.e., prevention focus, tapped by a prevention subscale). Participants respond to

promotion items (e.g., ‘How often have you accomplished things that got you “psyched” to work even harder?’) and prevention items (e.g., ‘How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?’) on five-point scales indicating varying degrees of experienced frequency of the given event. Responses are summed to yield promotion and prevention scores.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Preliminary analyses

We first explored whether Indian and US nationals differed in global motivational strength or orientation, as assessed by the MMG and RFQ, since any such differences would confound our analyses of cultural differences in self-other motivational concerns. No significant cultural differences in global motivation strength or orientation were observed. A MANOVA testing cultural variations on the six motives tapped by the MMG indicated that Indian and US nationals did not differ,  $F(6,221) = 1.57$ , ns. Simple  $t$ -tests indicated that, on the RFQ, Americans and Indians did not differ in prevention focus,  $t(225) = .791$ , or promotion focus,  $t(225) = -.206$ , ns.

We also determined whether the primary dependent measures, the indices of self-other concerns in work motivation, varied as a function of demographic factors other than nationality. No significant differences were observed as a function of age, gender, organizational level, marital status, or years employed in the current organization.

#### 3.2. Self-other concerns in workplace achievement motivation

To explore our central question, whether Indian and American corporate professionals differ in self- and other-orientation in professional achievement, we analyzed cultural differences within each interpersonal domain: immediate family, extended family, co-workers, and community, and self (see Fig. 1). A  $5 \times 2$  (domains  $\times$  nationality) repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a highly significant effect of domain,

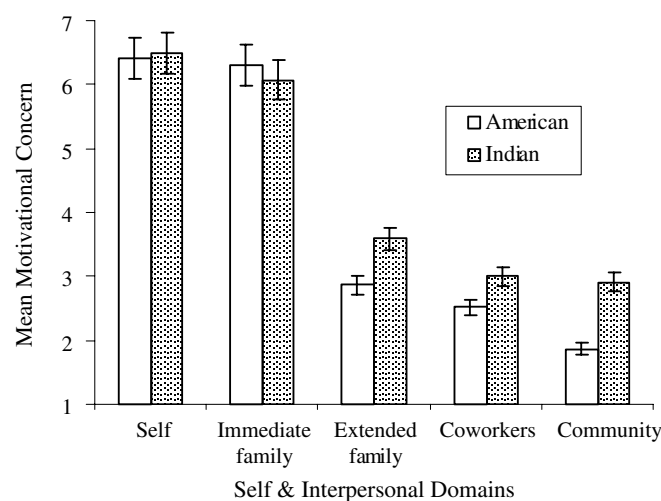


Fig. 1. Mean levels of motivational concern in each of five self-based and interpersonal domains among Indian ( $n = 114$ ) and American ( $n = 114$ ) corporate professionals. Error bars show 95% confidence interval.

$F(4,223) = 2669.2, p < .001$ ; unsurprisingly, both Indian and US nationals expressed greater concern with self and immediate family than other domains. However, there also was a highly significant domain  $\times$  nationality interaction,  $F(4,223) = 33.4, p < .001$ . Turning to the domains one at a time, the groups did not differ in ratings of concerns for self,  $t(226) = -1.51$ . Americans reported significantly higher degree of concern for the immediate family than did Indians,  $t(226) = 2.46, p = .015$ . However, in the remaining domains it was Indian nationals who reported greater motivational concerns. As predicted, Indians reported a significantly higher degree of concern for extended family,  $t(226) = -6.36, p = .001$ ; co-workers,  $t(226) = -4.85, p = .001$ , and community,  $t(226) = -8.51, p = .001$ . Thus we observed large, highly significant differences in interpersonal domain specific motivational concerns, despite the fact that our groups were similar in overall levels of motivational strength and orientation and multiple demographic indicators.

Similar results were obtained when each of the eight achievement-related concerns was analyzed separately. Indians consistently reported greater achievement-related concerns in domains other than self and immediate family. For 23 of 24 relevant comparisons—the eight motivation concerns in each of the three domains where cultural variations were predicted (extended family, co-workers and community)—Indian and US nationals differed significantly (all  $t$  values  $> 2.1$ , median  $t = 4.2$ ), with Indians reporting higher motivational concern. Fig. 2, for example, illustrates the results for the emotional concern of pride. The nationalities did not differ in ratings of pride in oneself. Americans more strongly ( $t(226) = 2.26, p < .05$ ) felt that they wished to excel at work because excellence makes immediate family members proud. Indians, however, more strongly indicated that they “want to excel in my job” because excellence makes extended family members ( $t(226) = -4.77, p < .001$ ), co-workers ( $t(226) = -2.14, p < .05$ ), and members of the community ( $t(226) = -4.08, p < .001$ ) “feel proud of me.”

As noted, nearly half of the Indian nationals resided in the US. This enabled us to test an alternative hypothesis. Rather than reflecting cultural differences in conceptions of self, others, and work motivation, Indians may have more concern for extended family

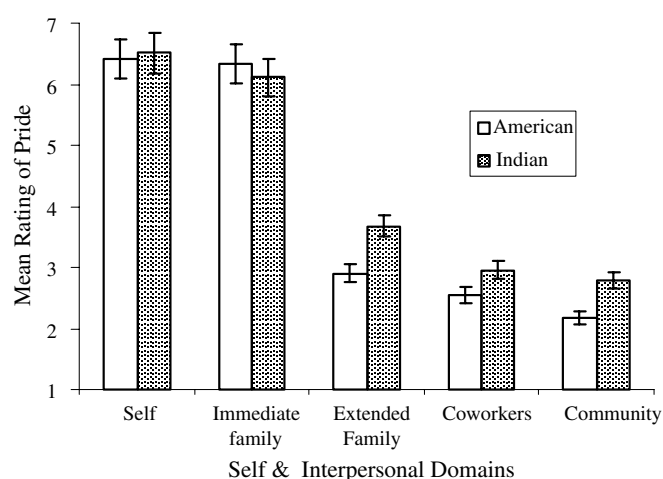


Fig. 2. Pride in oneself (self) or anticipated experience of pride by others (immediate family, extended family, co-workers, community members) toward oneself in work-related achievement, among Indians and Americans. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.



members because they more frequently come into contact with such persons in day-to-day life. If so, ratings of concern for extended family would be expected to differ between Indians in India and those in the US, since US residents would not experience daily contact with such persons. However, a MANOVA comparing resident and non-resident Indian responses on the set of eight motivational concerns within the domain of extended family revealed that the subgroups did not differ,  $F(8,103) = 0.89$ , ns.

#### 4. Discussion

The present results suggest that people from Indian and American cultures construe achievement differently. We found that Indian corporate professionals were significantly more likely than Americans to include concerns for the emotional and financial well-being of extended family, co-workers, and community members in their motivation for achievement at work. Indians' experience of achievement motivation at the workplace, then, appeared to differ qualitatively from Americans. Rather than, for example, seeing co-workers as persons with whom they were in competition (cf. Spence & Helmreich, 1978), Indians saw themselves as being motivated by the prospect of making co-workers happy and proud.

Of critical importance is that Indians and Americans differed on our novel measure of motivational concerns while *not* differing on traditional indices of motivational strength or orientation. Our measure of the interpersonal contexts within which persons experience motivational concerns, then, revealed highly significant cultural differences that would have been masked had one asked merely whether the cultures differed in overall level or strength of achievement motives. A critical methodological point to be taken note of is that the implicit measure, the MMG, failed to reveal differences while the self-report measures yielded meaningful cross-cultural variations in achievement motivation. The self-report measure, hence, was an optimal device to assess if Indians and American construe the same achievement situation differently. Indians and Americans also were similar on multiple demographic indicators. Thus, unlike previous studies of which we are aware, we found variations in motivational concerns among cultural groups that did not differ on demographic indicators or traditional motivation indices.

The findings suggest that the need to achieve is a socially and culturally constructed variable that reflects people's implicit conception of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Indians live in a culture that highlights the social embeddedness of the individual. Conceptions of self, then, are saturated with concerns about others (cf. Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990; Roland, 1998). The Indian interdependent self defines itself beyond the boundaries of self and immediate family, such that a seemingly personal motive, such as "my success or failure in my work" contains concerns for co-workers, extended family, and community. The concern for the self co-exists with the concern for others among Indian professionals, highlighting the holistic manner with which they construe personal achievement. As a result, Indians, more than Americans, endorse achievement items emphasizing the connection of the self with others. It is striking that these cross-cultural differences emerged despite a large percentage of Indians in our sample residing in the US. The influence of culture of origin was an enduring feature among Indians. Future research would benefit more from investigating the role of acculturation in achievement motivation among Indian immigrants, and from exploring if the findings can be generalized to incumbents in different occupational settings. Further, multi-method inquiry, such as interviewing, naturalistic



observation, would help in answering such questions such as: What aspects of the two cultures explain these findings? Is there is a developmental pattern to these findings? Might cultural artifacts reflect the social-psychological differences we found in our research?

Our findings strongly suggest that cultural variations in achievement motivation cannot be adequately characterized merely by ranking persons on a high-low continuum representing global strength of achievement needs (McClelland, 1961). Indians and Americans in our study were not *more or less motivated* in work. They experienced motivation at the workplace differently. In general, persons of different cultures may vary in socio-cognitive beliefs and feelings about achievement, with these differences revealing themselves when persons contemplate different interpersonal contexts. We urge investigators who are interested in cultural variability in achievement motivation, then, to explore possible qualitative variations in achievement concerns in context prior to assuming that achievement motivation merely varies quantitatively from one cultural context to another.

That final point may hold in multiple domains beyond achievement motivation. Generalized constructs—overall happiness (Deiner, Diener, & Diener, 1995), generalized dispositions (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004), etc.—may be insufficient for describing personality functioning across cultures. Measures of such constructs may inadvertently equate cultures that differ. Conversely, they may fail to reveal specific contexts in which persons from different cultures are particularly similar; we found, for example, that Indians and Americans were highly similar in motivational concerns regarding the self and immediate family despite differing in other interpersonal domains. Understanding the complexities of personality, context, and culture may require assessments of greater complexity than those employed commonly in the past.

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