My Nation, My Self: Divergent Framings of America Influence American Selves

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Abstract
Current public discourse calls for America to act more interdependently in the world or act more like a conjoint agent. America and American selves, however, are typically associated acting independently or disjoint agency. Since nation is a significant sociocultural source of self, the authors examine what happens to American selves if America is instead associated with conjoint agency. Study 1 surveyed participants in America and nine nations (N = 610) about America’s role in the world and found that although people currently associate America with disjoint agency, they overwhelmingly prefer America to be a conjoint agent. Studies 2–4 demonstrated that framing America’s role in the world with conjoint agency led Americans to see themselves more positively (Studies 2 and 3) and be less individualistic in their self-descriptions and actions (Study 4). The results reveal how changes in the sociocultural context can catalyze a corresponding change in the selves that inhabit that context.

Keywords
self, nation, America, disjoint agency, conjoint agency

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In an ongoing cycle of mutual constitution, cultures and selves make each other up, and when cultures change, so do the selves that constitute them (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Shweder, 1991; Taylor, 1989). One significant sociocultural source of self is nation of origin, and in these studies, we examine what happens to the self when the prevalent view of one’s nation undergoes change. Both America as a nation and selves in American contexts are characterized by acting independently and exerting influence—leading the world, as former president Bill Clinton puts it. In contemporary world opinion, however, this very self and nation defining feature—what previous research has called disjoint agency (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003)—has been viewed as problematic or even undesirable. Many politicians, academics, and social commentators claim that America would fare better if it behaved more interdependently with and responsively toward other nations in the global community—what previous research has called conjoint agency (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003). In fact, as in the quote above, many of President Obama’s speeches contain a call for America to act more like a conjoint agent, emphasizing the importance of listening to, seeking common ground with, and working cooperatively with other nations.

In four studies we examine what can happen to American selves if America becomes prevalently associated with conjoint agency instead of disjoint agency. Specifically, we ask whether Americans and people around the world would like America to behave more like a conjoint agent and how framing America with conjoint agency versus disjoint agency influences Americans’ perceptions and evaluations of themselves.

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In doing so, we extend understanding of how ideas and practices prevalent in the sociocultural context can dynamically influence individual selves (cf. Chiu & Hong, 2006; Heine, 2008; Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, & Ramaswamy, 2006; Oyserman & Lee, 2007).

**America and Me: Disjoint Agents**

Although the definition of America as a nation has varied across time and place, numerous analyses cite independence as America’s persistent signature (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Hochschild, 1995; Lipset, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Quinn & Crocker, 1999; Sampson, 1988; Tocqueville, 1969; Triandis, 1989). Historically, America has been powerfully and positively depicted as a beacon of liberty endowed with the responsibility of spreading independence and freedom across the continent (e.g., Manifest Destiny) and the globe (e.g., the Cold War; Coles, 2002; Lipset, 1996; Schlesinger, 1986; Turner, 1920). As a consequence, disjoint agency (Markus & Kitayama, 2003)—or acting as an independent agent that shapes its own destiny as well as influences the environment and others in that environment—has become normatively and positively associated with America as a nation.

Disjoint agency is also associated with how to be a good, normatively successful self in mainstream American contexts (Heine, 2001; Leung & Cohen, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002; Triandis, 1989). Many prevalent ideas, practices, institutions, and products in American contexts—including ideas about America as nation—foster the notion that people should individuate themselves, express their thoughts, emotions, and preferences, and exert control over their social environments and relations with others (Kim & Markus, 1999; Kitayama et al., 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Morling et al., 2002). In fact, European Americans perform better, and are happier and healthier, when they act as disjoint agents (Brim, Ryff, & Kessler, 2004; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Ji, Peng, & Nisbett, 2000; Morling et al., 2002; Oishi & Diener, 2001). In sum, being a good nation and being a good self in American contexts are both associated with the same defining feature: disjoint agency.

**America and Changing Associations**

Despite the traditional, positive association between America and disjoint agency, this association has currently fallen on hard times. Emblematic of this change, the “cowboy,” traditionally invoked to symbolize America’s robust connection to disjoint agency (e.g., Hochschild, 1995), has been used to disparage America’s way of interacting with other nations in the world during recent years (e.g., Hertsgaard, 2002). Indeed, extensive survey research assessing public opinion around the globe indicates that much of the world dislikes America’s penchant for unilateral action, fears its unrivaled power, and believes that it seeks to control the international community (Kohut & Stokes, 2006; Zogby, 2002). As encapsulated by Kohut and Stokes (2006), in their comprehensive review of years of polling research conducted by the Pew Research Center, people “from nearby Canada to the far reaches of Africa and Asia . . . believe that there is too much America in their world” (p. 18). Moreover, this perception of America’s disjoint agency is not simply the result of recent American foreign policy initiatives: It has been steadily increasing since America emerged from the Cold War as the world’s hyperpower (Buruma & Margalit, 2004; Friedman, 2000; Hertsgaard, 2002; Kohut & Stokes, 2006; Sardar & Davies, 2002; Sweig, 2006).

Given that disjoint agency has been so pervasively associated with what it means to be America and what it means to be a good self in American contexts, we anticipate that when disjoint agency is criticized at the national level, the reverberations will affect how Americans actually perceive themselves. Due to the increased prevalence of messages promoting America’s interdependence and responsiveness to others, as reflected in the opening quote from President Obama, will conjoint agency become a valued way of being for America and change how Americans perceive and evaluate themselves? Or, given the enduring links with disjoint agency, will Americans maintain their preference for disjoint agency? To begin to examine these questions, we frame America as either a disjoint agent (i.e., a global leader) or a conjoint agent (i.e., a global partner) and test how framing America as a nation influences how individual Americans see themselves and America.

In Study 1 we ask whether people want America to become interdependent and behave like a conjoint agent, as implied by current polls and public discourse. Specifically, we ask samples of Americans and people from other nations to choose among a variety of representations of America’s role in the world, indicating their view of America’s actual role as well as their view of America’s ideal role. We anticipate a divergence between the actual and the ideal. With respect to America’s actual role, we hypothesize that people will associate America with disjoint agency. With respect to America’s ideal role, we predict that people will associate America with conjoint agency.

Given the hypothesized link between nation and self, we anticipate that if the desired role for America as a nation shifts from being a disjoint agent to a conjoint agent, this shift will also occasion changes in how individual Americans actually perceive themselves. In Studies 2–4, we examine how framing America as a disjoint agent or conjoint agent influences Americans’ self-evaluations and self-perceptions. Since nation is a significant sociocultural source of self, we anticipate that as conjoint agency becomes increasingly valued for America as a nation, American selves will, in turn, reflect this cultural shift toward conjoint agency. In Studies 2 and 3, we predict that Americans will evaluate themselves more positively when America is framed as a conjoint agent. In Study 4, we
predict that Americans will behave less individualistically when America is framed as a conjoint agent.

### Study 1

#### Overview

In Study 1 we examine the extent to which people associate America with disjoint or conjoint agency. We created three schematic models that vary in terms of how much they emphasize America’s role as a conjoint or disjoint agent in the world. These models were derived from theorizing about international relations and globalization (Brecher & Costello, 1994; Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999; Tomlinson, 1999; Wallerstein, 1979). To quickly and vividly convey these differences in America’s role in the world, we used the American flag—an extremely pervasive cultural product that symbolizes America—and positioned it relative to other nations in the world (see Figure 1).

We asked participants from America and nine other nations to choose which model actually represents America’s role in the world. The models depicted America as (a) a global leader or disjoint agent, (b) a global co-leader or modified disjoint agent, or (c) a global partner or conjoint agent. The models were pretested to ensure that people interpreted them as intended.

#### Hypotheses

We anticipate that participants’ judgments will differ depending on whether they rate America’s actual or ideal role in the world. With respect to America’s actual role, we hypothesize that, overall, participants in America as well as in other nations will be more likely to associate America with disjoint agency (the Leader model), rather than conjoint agency (the Partner model). This pattern is consistent with the prevalent association between America and disjoint agency. With respect to America’s ideal role, we anticipate that participants in America as well as other nations will be more likely to associate America with conjoint agency (the Partner model) than disjoint agency (the Leader model), reflecting the current preference for America to be more interdependent and behave like a conjoint agent.

#### Method

**Participants.** Participants were 610 adults aged 20 to 60 years from the following nations: United States = 145, Bermuda = 35,
England = 76, France = 36, Germany = 49, Hong Kong = 33, India = 49, Japan = 52, Singapore = 88, South Africa = 47. Our goal was to draw a wide range of community samples from countries around the world that vary in international status, and our final set of participants reflected the sites of current collaborators. England, France, Germany, and Japan were classified as relatively high status nations (n = 213), whereas the remainder of international countries sampled were classified as relatively low status nations (n = 252). We operationalized high status nations as those that are relatively more influential in the global community—for example, leading members of prominent international organizations such as the United Nations who have possessed, in recent history, significant economic and political clout in the world. Likewise, we operationalized low status nations as those that did not fit these criteria. Participants were approached in common, public urban spaces, such as transit stations and shopping centers, and asked to complete the survey. They were given a small gift as compensation. Recruiters were instructed to avoid American-owned businesses (e.g., Starbucks in Japan).

Materials. Participants from France, Germany, India, and Japan all completed the survey translated into French, German, Hindi, and Japanese, respectively. Participants from Bermuda, England, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Africa completed the survey in English, which was the most common language in those contexts. Translations were conducted by a professional translation service, and all surveys were translated and back-translated according to standard procedures (e.g., Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973).

Procedure. Participants viewed the three models simultaneously and without labels. They were then asked (a) “Which model best represents how the world actually is today?” and (b) “Which model best represents how you would ideally like the world to be in the future?” After making their selection, participants were asked to briefly explain their choices.

Results

Actual model. A chi-square analysis, \( \chi^2(4, N = 610) = 20.24, p < .001, \phi_c = .13 \), revealed that, overall, when rating America’s actual role in the world, participants across nations were very unlikely to select the Partner model and were decidedly more likely to select one of the Leader models (see Figure 2). In addition, nation status affected model choice. Specifically, high status nation participants were most likely to choose the Leader model (61.3%), whereas American participants were equally likely to select the Leader (46.2%) and Co-Leader (42.8%) models. Low status nation participants were also equally likely to choose the Leader (42.9%) and Co-Leader (46.8%) models. Of the few who chose the Partner model to represent America’s actual role, 11.0% were American participants, 10.3% were low status nation participants, and 3.8% were high status nation participants. Overall, these results confirm that the current prevalent meaning of America is that of a disjoint agent and not a conjoint agent.

Ideal model. When rating America’s ideal role in the world, participants across nations were highly likely to select the Partner model and very unlikely to select one of the Leader models, \( \chi^2(4, N = 610) = 26.26, p < .001, \phi_c = .15 \) (see Figure 3). In particular, American participants (57.6%), as well as high status nation participants (75.0%) and low status nation participants (67.7%), associated America with the Partner model. Of those who chose one of the Leader models to represent America’s ideal role in the world, 10.3% were low status nation participants, and 3.8% were high status nation participants. Overall, these results confirm that the current prevalent meaning of America is that of a disjoint agent and not a conjoint agent.

Figure 2. Actual model: Percentage of participants by nation choosing which model actually represents America’s role in the world.
Discussion

Although Americans and people around the world associate America with being a global leader, they overwhelmingly prefer America to be a global partner, confirming widespread public opinion. Overall, these results are consistent with the idea that many prefer America to be a conjoint agent and not a disjoint agent. Furthermore, international status moderated how people from high status and low status nations view America’s actual role in the world. Participants from high status nations were likely to associate America with the Leader model, whereas participants from low status nations were equally likely to associate America with the Leader and Co-Leader models. Since high status nations confront and compete with America’s independence and influence in the international community more directly than low status nations, people engaging in such contexts may have a stronger association between America and disjoint agency. American participants, however, were also equally likely to associate America’s actual role with both the Leader and Co-Leader models. These results may reflect Americans’ current concern with America’s role as an influencing and dominating leader, and desire for America to become more of a partner with the rest of the world. In the subsequent studies, we directly manipulate exposure to positive Leader and Partner framings of America to test whether a change in how America should act in the world influences how Americans actually perceive themselves.

Pilot Study: Two Framings of America’s Role in the World for Studies 2–4

Overview

In Studies 2–4 we examine how framing America as either a disjoint or conjoint agent influences Americans’ self-evaluations and self-perceptions. Instead of using the schematics from Study 1, we created two speeches that outlined a general, guiding vision for America’s role in the world for these priming studies. Speeches are powerful vehicles for making meaning, and political leaders and policy makers frequently use them to communicate and disseminate ideas about national identity and America’s role in the world.

Inspired by Quinn and Crocker (1999), who developed primes that drew on actual speeches of former presidents, we used phrases from speeches given by American presidents and United Nations secretaries-general. Our goal was to construct two equally engaging and positive framings of America’s role in the world: one speech described America as an independent, influential disjoint agent (i.e., the Leader framing) and one speech described America as an interdependent, adjusting conjoint agent (i.e., the Partner framing; see Figure 4). The speeches were matched in terms of the number of words and sentences as well as the number of inclusive words and phrases (e.g., we, us, our, my fellow Americans).

Method

Participants. A diverse group of 26 participants from Stanford University rated the speeches on a variety of attributes assessing speech likability and effectiveness. Using a second diverse group of 125 participants from the same university, we evaluated how memorable participants found each speech, which type of role in the world for America was communicated in each speech, and how positively participants identified with being American following each speech. Participants received course credit for their participation.

Materials. The first group of 26 participants rated the speeches for how likable, positive, powerful, and compelling they were, as well as how much rhetorical skill they exhibited. Participants rated these items using 7-point Likert-type scales.
For the second group of 125 participants, we created a brief memory test to see if participants found the Partner and Leader framings of America communicated in each speech to be comparably memorable. The test consisted of eight phrases that could have been in the speech—half of which were correct—and participants selected the phrases that they thought were present in the speech.

Participants’ level of identification with being American was measured using three items from Davies, Steele, and Markus (2008). These items assessed the extent to which participants identified with being American, how important being American was to them, and how much they thought of themselves as American. Participants rated these items using 7-point Likert-type scales. Since these items were highly intercorrelated (α = .86), we collapsed them into one scale by summing across items.

Finally, we asked participants to rate the extent to which the speech they were exposed to communicated an interdependent, adjusting role for America in the world versus an independent, influencing role on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Role-type anchored the scale, providing a continuum from 1 (global partner) to 7 (global leader).

**Procedure.** Participants were run in small group sessions. On entering the lab, they were told that they were going to read a brief speech given by an American senator in the mid-1990s, which outlined a general, guiding vision for America’s role in the world. Participants were thereby exposed to either the Leader or the Partner framing of America. They then completed a questionnaire including the dependent measures.

**Results and Discussion**

Suggesting that we succeeded in creating two comparable speeches, participants’ ratings did not differ in terms of how likable, positive, powerful, or compelling they thought the speeches were, nor in how much rhetorical skill they exhibited (n = 26, all ts < 1.00). Participants also remembered each speech equally well (t < 1.00, items correct M = 4.12, SD = 1.34). Furthermore, no significant differences emerged by speech for the American identification measure (t < 1.50, identification score M = 15.93, SD = 3.64), indicating that the speeches did not affect participants’ level of identification with their American identity.

Notably, however, the two frames did create different impressions of America’s role in the world. Participants found the Partner frame to portray America as having more of an interdependent, adjusting role in the world and the Leader frame to portray America as having a more independent, influencing role in the world (Partner: M = 6.31, SD = 0.75; Leader: M = 2.61, SD = 1.64; Leader: M = 6.31, SD = 0.75, t(123) = 16.39, p < .001, d = 2.96. Taken together, these results reveal that we were successful in creating two positive and engaging frames that mirrored actual ways in which America’s role in the world could be communicated by politicians and policy makers.

**Study 2**

**Overview and Hypothesis**

Given the hypothesized link between nation and self, we anticipate that as the desired role for America as a nation shifts from being a disjoint agent to a conjoint agent, this shift will also influence individual Americans’ self-evaluations and self-perceptions. As an initial test of this idea we asked participants to read one of the two speeches created in the pilot study, which framed America as either an influencing global leader (the Leader frame) or an adjusting global partner (the Partner frame), and then examined how Americans feel about America as a nation can be autonomous.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>America: Global Leader</th>
<th>America: Global Partner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is America’s role in our interconnected world? In the past century America became the world’s mightiest power, saving the world from tyranny in two world wars and a long cold war. America’s obligation to be a great leader and model nation is undisputed. We must continue to lead the world we did so much to make. This path is rarely, however, easy or straightforward. Through our independence and leadership we must work to exert proper influence in order to make our world better. Our can-do spirit and American dream position us to inspire, help, and lead others to realize their dreams. My fellow Americans, we must continue to be a beacon of hope to all who long for freedom, a better life, and a better tomorrow.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is America’s role in our interconnected world? Though our world contains a diversity of nations and cultures, we are one global community with a common destiny. Our political, economic, and social challenges are interconnected, and no nation can be autonomous. We must work together to broker differences in power, culture, size, and interests among states. It is imperative that we adjust to others, and America’s interests and perspective may not always prevail. America will need to adapt to the leadership and influence of others in the international community. My fellow Americans and citizens of the world, our global community requires a new sense of interdependence and together we can create and foster inclusive solutions. America must build bridges and form partnerships to foster a global consciousness.</td>
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Figure 4. Speeches framing America’s role in the world: Global leader (disjoint agency) versus global partner (conjoint agency)
Method

Participants. A diverse group of 125 undergraduates (all U.S. citizens, 84 female, age $M = 19.87$ years) from Stanford University participated in this study.$^2$ Participants received either course credit or monetary compensation.

Materials and procedure. To assess how participants felt about themselves, we measured state affect using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), in which participants rated their current level of each emotion using 5-point Likert-type scales. Participants’ feelings about being American were measured using five items, which assessed the extent to which participants were proud, happy, and comfortable to be an American as well as how critical they were of America and how embarrassed they were by America. Since these items were highly intercorrelated ($\alpha = .83$), we collapsed them into one scale by summing across items (after reverse coding the last two items). We also included a measure of political orientation, composed of two items assessing participants’ self-reported level of political liberalism and conservatism. The global feelings about being American and political orientation items were both rated using 7-point Likert-type scales.

Participants were run in small group sessions using the same Leader and Partner frames and study setup outlined in the pilot study. After exposure to the two speeches framing America’s role in the world, participants completed a questionnaire including the dependent measures.

Results

To assess how the speeches generally made participants feel, we computed an affective balance score by subtracting participants’ standardized negative affect score from their standardized positive affect score (Watson et al., 1988). Confirming our hypothesis, participants exposed to the Partner frame ($M = 0.51, SD = 1.53$) reported more positive affect than did participants exposed to the Leader frame ($M = -0.49, SD = 1.52$), $t(123) = 3.67, p < .001, d = 0.67$. Also lending some support to our prediction, a marginal effect of speech emerged for participants’ global feelings about being American. Participants exposed to the Partner frame ($M = 23.00, SD = 5.38$) reported feeling somewhat more positively about being American than participants exposed to the Leader frame ($M = 21.28, SD = 5.23$), $t(123) = 1.78, p = .08, d = 0.32$.

To examine whether political orientation influenced how participants responded to the speeches, we summed participants’ self-reported levels of liberalism and conservativeness (the conservativeness item was reverse coded; higher overall scores indicate greater liberal political attitudes). Participants’ political orientation did not emerge as a significant covariate across these findings, indicating that the speeches affected liberals and conservatives similarly ($Fs < 1, M = 10.03, SD = 2.19$, range = 3.00–14.00).$^3$

Discussion

Coupled with the results from Study 1, these data suggest that as conjoint agency is increasingly preferred to disjoint agency at the national level, the reverberations will affect individual Americans’ own self-evaluations. Study 2 lends support to our hypothesis that participants feel more positively about themselves when America’s role in the world is framed in terms of conjoint agency (Partner) rather than disjoint agency (Leader). Participants felt good and felt better about being American when America was framed as a global partner rather than as a global leader. As the desired role for America as a nation shifts from being a disjoint agent to a conjoint agent, this shift can also influence individual Americans’ self-evaluations.

Study 3

Overview and Hypotheses

Study 2 suggests that Americans feel better about themselves when thinking about America as a global partner rather than as a global leader. In Study 3, we seek to support these findings using another measure of self-evaluation. To further test the idea that the Partner frame will lead to more positive self-evaluations than the Leader frame, in Study 3 we asked participants to describe how they feel about themselves using words from Osgood and colleagues’ three dimensions of meaning that people apply to make judgments: good/bad (Evaluation), active/passive (Activity), and strong/weak (Potency; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). We hypothesize that, lending support to our prior findings and reflecting the current desire for America to act more like a conjoint agent, framing America as a Partner will lead Americans to report feeling “good” compared to framing America as a Leader. Since the frames are comparably engaging and arousing, we do not expect participants to describe themselves differently in terms of how “strong” or “active” they feel.

Method

Participants. A diverse sample of 125 undergraduates (all U.S. citizens, 65 female, age $M = 19.79$ years) from Stanford University participated in this study. Participants received either course credit or monetary compensation.

Materials. We used the Leader and Partner frames created in the pilot study. To assess how participants feel along Osgood et al.’s (1957) dimensions of meaning (good, strong, active), we developed a “me/not-me” task (e.g., Markus, 1977) in which participants were presented with a word list (20 word trials per dimension) and asked to rate (on a 5-point Likert-type scale) how much each word “describes me right now.” All words were between five and eight letters in length.
and were pilot tested to ensure that they were comparably easy to understand. Each dimension scale was reliable: good, \( \alpha = .93 \); strong, \( \alpha = .79 \); active, \( \alpha = .86 \).

**Procedure.** Participants were approached around campus and asked to complete a brief survey. The study was introduced using the same procedures outlined in the pilot study. Participants read either the Leader or Partner speech and then completed the self-description task.

**Results**

We computed an average rating score per meaning dimension and analyzed participants’ self-description ratings using a 2 (speech: Leader vs. Partner) x 3 (dimension: good vs. strong vs. active) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the second variable. A significant speech by meaning dimension interaction emerged, \( F(2, 246) = 13.06, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .10 \). Consistent with our Study 2 results, participants described themselves as feeling more “good” after reading the Partner versus Leader speech (see Figure 5). This predicted difference was confirmed by a simple effects test: good, \( t(123) = 2.38, p < .05, d = 0.68 \). Participants did not feel divergently “strong” (Partner: \( M = 3.45, SD = 0.46 \) vs. Leader: \( M = 3.42, SD = 0.51 \); \( t < 1.00 \)) or “active” (Partner: \( M = 3.15, SD = 0.46 \) vs. Leader: \( M = 3.22, SD = 0.55 \); \( t < 1.00 \)) after exposure to the speeches.

We also ran a control condition in which participants read the same introduction to the task but completed the self-description ratings before being exposed to the speeches. There was a significant main effect of dimension for the control condition, \( F(2, 94) = 52.56, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .53 \). Participants’ mean levels per dimension were: good, \( M = 3.75, SD = 0.55 \); strong, \( M = 3.25, SD = 0.56 \); active, \( M = 3.05, SD = 0.53 \). These data suggest that the direction of the framing effects may be due to the Leader frame evoking negative self-perceptions.

**Discussion**

Supporting the results from Study 2, Study 3 further shows that participants report relatively more positive self-evaluations when America is framed as a global partner rather than as a global leader. Reflecting the current desire for America to act more like a conjoint agent, framing America as a Partner led Americans to report feeling “good” compared to framing America as a Leader. Participants did not differ in how “strong” or “active” they felt, indicating that the frames are comparably engaging and arousing.4

**Study 4**

**Overview and Hypotheses**

Studies 2 and 3 indicate that framing America as a conjoint agent (global partner) or a disjoint agent (global leader) influences Americans’ self-evaluations. These studies demonstrate that as America’s ideal role in the world shifts from that of a disjoint agent to a conjoint agent, such a change in what it means to be America will be reflected in the self. In
particular, participants evaluated themselves more positively following the Partner frame compared to the Leader frame. In Study 4, we test how the two frames influence Americans’ self-perceptions by examining the structure of the self after exposure to each frame.

In the present studies we both draw on and extend the growing body of cultural priming literature, which demonstrates how selves can be dynamically influenced by the context and can change to reflect ideas about the self or the type of self-concept that is cued in the moment (e.g., Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Oyserman & Lee, 2007; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1999). Here, we do not manipulate how people think about themselves by cuing different ideas about the self (e.g., “I” vs. “we”); instead, we see if the self can be influenced by cuing different ideas about an important sociocultural source of self—America. In particular, we investigate how American selves are affected when America—which has been pervasively and chronically associated with disjoint agency—is paired or framed with conjoint agency.

American contexts are characterized by ideas, practices, institutions, and products that promote and foster disjoint agency (Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003). As a consequence, as selves are exposed to and engage in American contexts, behaviors and actions are likely to take a particular individualistic, self-focused form (Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Triandis, 1989). Americans as a whole and European Americans in particular—compared to people in multiple other sociocultural contexts—are likely to describe themselves with a relatively high proportion of abstract, trait-like terms (Heine, 2001; Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995; Wang, 2004) and also behave according to their personal preferences (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kim & Markus, 1999; Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008). Framing America as a conjoint agent (Partner) instead of a disjoint agent (Leader) may inhibit these normatively appropriate ways of characterizing the self and activate alternative ways of understanding the self (cf. Higgins, 2005). In this study we examine whether European Americans behave less individualistically when America is framed as a conjoint agent rather than a disjoint agent. We predict that following the Partner frame, compared to the Leader frame, European American participants should be relatively less likely to (a) characterize themselves in terms of abstract personal attributes and (b) choose to behave according to their preferences.

In addition, one important factor that may moderate whether a change in America from a disjoint agent to a conjoint agent could lead to a change in self is prior exposure to sociocultural sources of self that promote conjoint agency. Using East Asian American ethnic background as a proxy for sustained exposure to East Asian ideas and practices, which frequently foster conjoint agency (Markus & Kitayama, 2003), we include Asian Americans as a comparison group. Asian Americans are likely to have been exposed not only to mainstream American contexts that foster disjoint agency but also to East Asian family and community contexts that foster conjoint agency (cf. Hong et al., 2000; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000). Because Asian American selves are frequently shaped by contexts that foster both disjoint and conjoint agency, changing the meaning of one significant source of self—that is, America—may not be as impactful. Therefore, we anticipate that—unlike European Americans—Asian Americans will be less likely to change their behavior when America is framed as a conjoint agent.

**Method**

**Participants.** A community sample of 145 adults from the San Francisco Bay Area (all U.S. citizens, 93 female, age $M = 26.48$ years) participated in this study. Of the sample, 54% were European American and 46% were East Asian American. Participants were recruited through online ads posted on craigslist.org and completed the study online. Participants received $5 gift certificates as compensation.

**Materials and procedure.** In the current study, we used the same Leader and Partner framings of America’s role in the world and study setup explained in the pilot study. To index the tendency to behave individually, we asked participants to describe how they see themselves in the near future (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Moreover, since our goal was to assess a potential change in self, we wanted to focus participants on how they see themselves in the near future (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006).

To evaluate participants’ tendency to behave according to their preferences, we designed a choice task in which participants were provided with a series of brief vignettes about everyday interpersonal situations and were asked to make a choice between acting on their personal preferences and adjusting to the preferences of others (e.g., Kim & Markus, 1999; Savani et al., 2008). For example, in one vignette, a participant could indicate that when selecting a movie to watch with a group of her friends, she would choose the movie (personal preference) or let the group decide the movie (adjust to group’s preference). These options anchored 7-point Likert-type scales, and participants rated their inclination to behave one way or the other along the scale. Higher scores indicate a greater desire to act according to one’s own personal preferences.
Results

Emphasizing personal attributes. Two independent raters coded participants’ possible selves for mentions of personal attributes (e.g., motivated, outgoing, optimistic; e.g., Cousins, 1989; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Trafimow et al., 1991) and attained a high level of reliability: \( \kappa = .95 \) (Landis & Koch, 1977). We then computed a proportion score for each participant, which was the number of possible selves described in terms of personal attributes relative to the total number of possible selves. Using a 2 (speech: Leader vs. Partner) × 2 (ethnicity: European American vs. Asian American) ANOVA, we found a significant speech by ethnicity interaction: \( F(1, 141) = 4.26, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .03 \). Confirming our hypothesis, we found that European American participants were less likely to describe themselves in terms of personal attributes after exposure to the Partner frame than the Leader frame, \( t(77) = 2.71, p < .05, d = 0.62 \), whereas Asian American participants did not change their behavior, \( t < 1.00 \) (see Figure 6).

Behaving according to personal preference. We created an average rating score for participants’ tendency to behave according to their personal preferences across the vignettes. We found a main effect by speech, \( F(1, 141) = 5.87, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .04 \), as well as another significant speech by ethnicity interaction, \( F(1, 141) = 5.56, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .04 \). Participants were overall less likely to indicate a desire to act according to their personal preferences after exposure to the Partner frame compared to the Leader frame, \( t(143) = 2.64, p < .01, d = 0.44 \); however, this effect appears to be driven by the European American participants. As hypothesized, we found that European American participants were less likely to indicate a desire to act according to their personal preferences after exposure to the Partner frame compared to the Leader frame, \( t(77) = 3.54, p < .01, d = 0.81 \), whereas Asian American participants did not change their behavior, \( t < 1.00 \) (see Figure 7).

Discussion

Study 4 revealed that the Partner framing of America inhibited several key individualistic tendencies that typically characterize selves in American contexts. That is, European American participants were less likely to emphasize their individuality or to express their preferences when exposed to the Partner frame compared to the Leader frame. Notably, Asian American participants did not reveal a change in self, suggesting that sustained prior exposure to contexts that promote and foster conjoint agency may moderate this effect. Taken together, these findings suggest that if the desired role for America as a nation shifts from being a disjoint agent to a conjoint agent, this shift could result in less individualistic American selves. Given the assumed link between “my nation” and “my self,” changes in what characterizes America as a nation could lead to changes in what it means to be a normatively appropriate, successful self in American contexts.

General Discussion

Summary of Findings

Given that nation is a significant sociocultural source of self, our results suggest that if America as a nation becomes more
interdependent, American selves will, in turn, reflect this cultural shift toward conjoint agency. In Study 1 we found that Americans and people around the world demonstrate a preference for American interdependence, confirming public discourse and polling data. Although Americans and people around the world currently see America as an independent, disjoint agent, they ideally prefer America to be more interdependent and act like a conjoint agent. Moreover, in Studies 2–4 we found that when Americans are primed with an interdependent America, self-perception and the structure of the self change. Specifically, framing America as a conjoint agent rather than a disjoint agent leads Americans to perceive themselves more positively as well as inhibit individualistic tendencies (e.g., in self-description and behavior). In Study 4 we also found that, among Americans, Asian Americans did not reveal this change in self, suggesting that the link between nation and self may depend on the nature of prior, sustained exposure to contexts that promote and foster conjoint agency.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

My nation, my self. The central question we ask in this article is whether American selves will change if America changes. Here, we investigate what can happen to American selves if a concept that has traditionally structured American sociocultural contexts—disjoint agency—becomes less preferred and valued in the public sphere than conjoint agency. Given the dynamic process by which sociocultural contexts shape individual selves, when important elements of the sociocultural context—ideas, institutions, practices, and products—change, individual selves will, in turn, reflect these changes. If alternate meanings can be pervasively built into the world, the selves inhabiting that world will change accordingly.

Previous research has examined the ways in which selves differ across sociocultural contexts (see Kitayama et al., 2007, for a recent review), how selves can change when they move from one cultural context to another (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 2004; Oishi, Lun, & Sherman, 2007), and how selves can change to reflect ideas about the self that are primed or cued in the moment (see Oyserman & Lee, 2007, for a recent review). The focus of this article, however, is on one that has been relatively unexamined in the sociocultural psychology literature—how the self can be influenced by macro-level changes within a given sociocultural context. Here, we investigate how changes in self can result from changes in the ideas associated with a powerful, but typically invisible or implicit, sociocultural source of self—for example, nation. The present studies reveal how a change in the meanings that typically structure sociocultural contexts can catalyze a corresponding change in self.

Relationship between nation and self. These studies are the first to link changes in the meanings associated with one’s nation to changes in self. They examine how changes in a significant sociocultural source of self—such as nation—can lead to changes in self-perception and self-evaluation. Future studies should examine exactly how this link between nation

![Figure 7. Mean tendency to behave according to personal preference, by ethnicity and condition](image-url)
and self operates. For example, Studies 2 and 3 suggest that the link between nation and self might involve some type of discrepancy reduction, in that people feel good about themselves following a speech that endorses a view of nation that they prefer or value. Yet Study 4 reveals that framing America as a conjoint agent does more than just induce values-congruent good feelings; it also leads participants to change themselves—that is, to inhibit individualistic tendencies.

Given that the primary goal of this article was to examine how selves can be influenced by macro-level changes in the sociocultural context, we decided to use actual cultural products—speeches about America’s role in the world—to begin to investigate this process. Notably, these studies did not manipulate nation versus non-nation in the primes. Subsequent studies should test how priming the concept of agency (e.g., conjoint and disjoint agency, independence and interdependence, leadership and partnership) in the context of nation influences the self compared to priming agency outside the context of nation. The results from Study 4, in which participants responded differently to the primes, also suggest that the relationship between self and nation can vary by exposure to and experience with disjoint and conjoint models of agency.

Future priming studies might also consider whether the manner in which America is described—for example, with patriotic speech compared to more neutral speech—changes how self can be influenced by nation. Another important direction is to investigate possible mediators that may affect the relationship between nation and self, such as attachment to American identity, constructive patriotism, endorsement of individualistic values, and beliefs about America’s ideal role in the world. Future work can also examine how other aspects of the self may be influenced by the conjoint and disjoint agency framings of America. For example, does framing America with conjoint agency lead Americans to behave like conjoint agents (e.g., adjust to others, cooperate with others, and listen more to others) compared to framing America with disjoint agency?

In addition, the tight coupling between nation and self examined here may be fairly specific to American contexts because, in America, nation may be a particularly significant sociocultural source of self. America’s historical story involves a very explicit process of defining what it means to be America and American that highlights the importance of disjoint agency. Born out of revolution, and encapsulated in the founding documents of the nation, independence, individualism, and disjoint agency have been the explicit, defining features of “Americanness” throughout much of the nation’s history (e.g., Lipset, 1996; Tocqueville, 1969; Turner, 1920). Although what it means to be a good self and nation are linked—through disjoint agency—in American contexts, such a relationship between nation and self may vary substantially across other national contexts with different historical stories. Future work should examine the relationship between nation and self across other sociocultural contexts. This line of research will expand prior work on national identity, which has primarily focused on examining how national identity functions through intragroup and intergroup processes such as identity threat and ing-group bias (for recent work, see Davies et al., 2008; Li & Brewer, 2004; Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001).

**Change the world, change the self.** Despite the powerful public discourse favoring greater interdependence, as well as the positive attitudes toward an interdependent America reported here, shifting America and American selves from disjoint agency to conjoint agency may not be quick or easy. Since disjoint agency is so foundational for America and Americans, the links among disjoint agency, America, and American selves are both pervasive and enduring. Disjoint agency is widely valued and practiced across the major institutions of American life—for example, home, school, work, media—and deeply engrained in American selves (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003). Alternatively, conjoint agency—acting interdependently and responsibly toward others—although regarded as positive and necessary, has not been equally pervasive in mainstream American contexts and has not shaped the self to the same extent as disjoint agency (e.g., Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004; Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 2003). In fact, recent studies have shown that conjoint agency can result in negative outcomes for American selves (Hamedani, Markus, & Fu, 2011). Hamedani and colleagues (2011) found that when primed with conjoint agency, European Americans’ performance and persistence lagged compared to when they were primed with disjoint agency. In addition, they found that in American contexts, acting interdependently and adjusting to others is less likely to be associated with strength, power, and success than acting independently and exerting influence.

Changing American selves in an enduring way, therefore, may occur only if more ideas, institutions, practices, and products in American contexts—that is, more important sociocultural sources of self—pervasively promote, foster, and sustain the ideas and practices of conjoint agency. Given the powerful ways in which disjoint agency structures American worlds and American psyches, heeding President Obama’s call for an interdependent America will require more than positive attitudes and associations toward interdependence, although this may be an essential first step. It will require that interdependence and conjoint agency are increasingly built into the American sociocultural context. Conjunct agency, for example, may become more pervasive as “eco-consciousness” becomes part of everyday living, universities foster “public service,” workplaces and schools award employees and students for “fitting in” and “being cooperative,” urban planners resurrect city neighborhoods to “build community,” and politicians and policy makers nurture America’s role as a “global partner.” If American ideas
and practices pervasively promote interdependence and conjoint agency, American selves will change accordingly.

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Notes
1. The speech was introduced as having taken place in the mid-1990s, to indicate that it was not from the current administration and to activate general perceptions of American identity.
2. The ethnic breakdown of our samples in Studies 2 and 3 is typical of the Stanford undergraduate community, which is as follows: approximately 10% African American, 10% Latino, 25% Asian American, and 55% European American.
3. The student sample used in Study 3 and the community sample used in Study 4 exhibited similar political attitudes; the community sample was somewhat less liberal (Study 3: M = 9.55, SD = 2.77, range = 2.00–12.00; Study 4: M = 8.63, SD = 1.64, range = 5.00–14.00). Given that political orientation also did not emerge as a significant covariate in Studies 3 and 4 (FS < 2.00), this variable is not discussed further. Although we found that political orientation did not influence how participants responded to the speeches, our student and community samples demonstrated fairly liberal political attitudes, thereby restricting the range of possible attitudes.
4. We also conducted a follow-up study using an implicit version of the self-description task. Controlling for baseline response time, we conducted a 2 (speech: Leader vs. Partner) × 3 (dimension: good vs. strong vs. active) mixed models ANCOVA on participants’ self-description response times. A significant speech by meaning dimension interaction emerged, F(2, 88) = 7.11, p < .001. Notably, participants were slower to describe themselves as “strong” after exposure to the Partner vs. Leader speech, F(2, 88) = 12.70, p < .0001, β = .04 (Partner: M = 1236 ms, SD = 547 vs. Leader: M = 1156 ms, SD = 554). Although conjoint agency is presently positively regarded in relation to America as a nation, it may also be associated with weakness. This suggestive finding, worthy of further study, may occur because conjoint agency has not been as extensively elaborated and societally inscribed for America or for individual selves in American contexts as disjoint agency.
5. Asian Americans have been found to highly identify as American as well as Asian and include both identities in the self (e.g., Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Devos, 2006).
6. We also coded participants’ tendency to describe themselves in terms of interpersonal roles and relationships, which has been used to assess whether people perceive themselves as interdependent with others (e.g., Cousins, 1989; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). Participants’ responses did not differ between conditions.
7. We tested an additional set of covariates in this study: attention to domestic media, attention to international media, and independent/interdependent self-construal. These variables did not yield any significant effects. We also asked participants to rate the extent to which others’ opinions about America affect how they feel about themselves on a 7-point Likert-type scale, to investigate whether Americans are aware of a connection between nation and self. We found that participants did not endorse this idea, M = 2.90, SD = 0.14. Speech did not affect participants’ responses.

References


