Men as Cultural Ideals: How Culture Shapes Gender Stereotypes

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Abstract

Four studies explore how culture shapes the contents of gender stereotypes, demonstrating that men serve as “cultural ideals,” such that they are perceived as possessing more of *whatever* traits are culturally valued. In Studies 1 & 2, using different measures, Americans rated men as less interdependent than women; Koreans, however, showed the opposite pattern, rating men as more interdependent than women, deviating from the “universal” gender stereotype of male independence. In Study 3, bi-cultural Korean American participants rated men as less interdependent if they completed a survey in English, but as more interdependent if they completed the survey in Korean, demonstrating how cultural frames influence the contents of gender stereotypes. In Study 4, American college students rated a male student as higher (and a female student as lower) on whichever trait – ambitiousness or sociability – they were told was the most important cultural value at their university, establishing that cultural values causally impact the contents of gender stereotypes.
Men are independent; women are interdependent. Westerners are independent; East Asians are interdependent. Both of these statements have overwhelming empirical support, yet taken together they raise a potential paradox: are East Asian males seen as independent—reflecting the universal male stereotype—or as interdependent—reflecting the values of their culture? One prediction is two main effects: East Asians are seen as more interdependent than Westerners, and within each culture, men are seen as more independent than women. Instead, we suggest—and the studies below demonstrate—a counterintuitive interaction: men are seen as embodying those traits that are most culturally valued, such that while American men are seen as more independent than American women, Korean men are actually seen as more interdependent than Korean women.

More broadly, the goal of the current research is to demonstrate that men are seen as possessing more of any trait that is highly valued in the given culture—whether chronically or temporarily—such that men serve as cultural ideals. Thus, although we begin with an investigation of how men and women are viewed on independence versus interdependence in two cultures that differentially value those traits, the final study demonstrates that the men as cultural ideals phenomenon clearly extends beyond that context—to other cultures and traits.

Gender Stereotypes and Cultural Values

The contents of gender stereotypes—the traits that are perceived as uniquely characteristic of women versus men—turn on the dimension of independence-interdependence. Men are stereotyped as independent, agentic, and goal oriented; women are stereotyped as interdependent, communal, and oriented toward others (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). These stereotypes affect important life outcomes such as hiring and promotion (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Gorman, 2005; Heilman, 2001), job performance evaluations
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(Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), allocation of resources in organizations (Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005), academic performance (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000), and even sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007). The contents of gender stereotypes are accepted as pervasive and universal (Heilman, 2001), and are endorsed by both men and women (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Wood & Eagly, 2010) and across cultures (Williams & Best, 1990).

A parallel distinction that also hinges on the independence-interdependence dimension sorts cultures and their core values – the defining values that are strongly endorsed by the members of a culture (Wan, Chiu, Tam, Lee, Lau & Peng, 2007). Cultures can be characterized as individualistic versus collectivistic/communal (Triandis, 1989), or independent versus interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), based on the degrees to which individuals versus relationships are emphasized, respectively. Individualistic/independent societies, such as the United States, emphasize autonomy, individual goals, and self-reliance; collectivistic/interdependent societies such as South Korea, in contrast, emphasize social embeddedness, communal goals, and social duties and obligations (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 1994; Triandis, 1989). Cultural differences in independence-interdependence manifest in domains such as communication (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, & Ting-Toomey, 1996), creativity (Schwartz, 1999), and even basic cognitive processing (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001).

Conflicting Stereotypes

Given that men as a group possess higher status in virtually every nation in the world (United Nations, 2009), and that higher status groups tend to be viewed as possessing more of whatever skills their society most values (Ridgeway, 2001), cultural values and gender
situations align. In cultures that value independence such as the United States, for example, men are seen as possessing more of the most culturally valued trait – independence. In those cultures where independence is not highly valued, however, a mismatch arises: If stereotypes of men do indeed reflect cultural values, then how should we expect Asian men to be stereotyped relative to Asian women – as more independent, consistent with the “universal” male gender stereotype, or as more interdependent, consistent with Asian cultural values?

We propose that men are seen as embodying cultural ideals – they are perceived as possessing more of whatever traits are most highly valued in a given culture. For example, and as we test in the first three studies, where independence is valued (such as in the United States), men will be seen as more independent than women; where interdependence is valued (such as in South Korea), men will be perceived as more interdependent than women. In short, we suggest that gender stereotypes are not universal, but rather are moderated by culture: Given their dominance in virtually all cultures, men are believed to possess more of the characteristics that are most culturally valued, whatever those characteristics are. In addition, this prediction is not limited only to stereotypes of independence and interdependence – we suggest that when any trait is culturally valued, that trait becomes linked to males.

Overview

In the four studies below, we present evidence that culture shapes the contents of gender stereotypes. In Study 1, we examine the extent to which people from individualistic/independent (the United States) versus collectivistic/communal (Korea) cultures rate men and women within their cultures on independence/interdependence. In Study 2, we use a more develop and use a more sophisticated measure of independence/interdependence, asking Americans and Koreans to
rate men and women on behaviors reflecting the two traits, such as the closeness of their friendship ties. In Study 3, using the Study 2 measures, we explore whether bi-cultural individuals – Korean-Americans – perceive men or women as more independent-interdependent depending on which culture they are considering, the United States or South Korea; this provides a test of the effects of temporary (as opposed to chronic) cultural framing on gender stereotypes. Finally, in Study 4 we experimentally manipulate which traits are culturally valued within a given population; we inform American college students that either sociability or ambitiousness is the key cultural value at their university, and then ask them to rate a male or female student at their university on those two traits. This final experiment allows for a true causal test of the impact of cultural values on gender stereotypes, and for us to generalize our findings beyond the West-independent/East Asia-interdependent culture-trait context.

Study 1

In Study 1 we simply asked Korean and American participants to rate the extent to which society viewed two traits – communal and individualistic – as more typical of women or of men.

Method

Participants

Korea sample. One hundred-three students (62% female, Mean age = 21.8) at the Seoul National University in South Korea completed the questionnaire in exchange for course credit.

United States Sample. A national sample of seventy-eight undergraduate and graduate students (59% female, Mean age = 26.5) completed the questionnaire online, along with several unrelated ones, for payment. Three non-US residents were dropped from the sample, bringing the final N to 75.

Materials and Procedure
All participants read the following instructions in their respective language: “To what extent is each of the following traits viewed by society as more true of women or more true of men? Using the scale below, please rate the extent to which each trait generally applies to women or men. There are no right or wrong answers. We are simply asking for your impressions.” They were then asked to rate the two traits – communal and individualistic – on a 7-point scale (-3: much more true of women to +3: much more true of men). The Korean version of the questionnaire was translated and back-translated by two bilingual translators.

**Results and Discussion**

We conducted a 2 (culture: Korea versus US) × 2 (trait: communal versus individualistic) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor. As predicted, the interaction was significant, $F(1,175) = 120.41, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .41$. Means fell in the predicted directions for both samples: Koreans rated “communal” as significantly more descriptive of men ($M = .79$), one-sample $t(102) = 6.12, p < .001$, and “individualistic” as significantly more descriptive of women ($M = -.76$), one-sample $t(102) = 6.20, p < .001$; whereas Americans rated “communal” as significantly more descriptive of women ($M = -1.13$), one-sample $t(74) = 7.33, p < .001$, and “individualistic” as significantly more descriptive of men ($M = .77$), one-sample $t(102) = 4.80, p < .001$ (Figure 1).

These results provide strong initial support that men are viewed as possessing relatively more of the culturally valued trait – communion in Korea and individualism in the United States, and, conversely, that women are perceived as possessing more of the opposing – and less culturally valued – trait.

**Study 2: A Cross-Cultural Test**
Study 1 provided support for our hypothesis at the level of trait judgments; in Study 2, we move beyond traits to measure perceptions of men and women on behaviors reflecting those traits of interest – independence and interdependence. American and Korean participants were presented with segments of social networks and then asked to predict the social closeness among members of the network. For instance, they were told that “Katie and Linda are friends” and that “Linda and Mary are friends”; our measure of perceived interdependence was participants’ perceptions of (a) whether Katie and Mary – one node removed in the network – were also friends, and (b) how close their friendship was. Participants rated either members of all-male networks or members of all-female networks. We predicted that Americans would perceive men to be more independent (i.e., as having less close friendships) than women, but that Koreans would perceive men to be more interdependent (i.e., as having closer friendships) than women.

Method

Participants

Korea sample. One hundred undergraduate students (52% female, M_age = 22.0) at the Korea University in Seoul, South Korea completed the questionnaire in exchange for course credit.

United States sample. One hundred undergraduate students (56% female, M_age = 20.1) at Rutgers University in New Jersey completed the questionnaire, along with several unrelated ones, in exchange for course credit. One incomplete questionnaire was dropped from the analyses.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to complete a questionnaire that measured perceived interdependence among male or female targets. They read a vignette about a fictitious American
(in the US sample) or South Korean (in the Korean sample) town whose residents had
purportedly completed a questionnaire that assessed their social networks by measuring their
reports of who their friends were, and were told they would view segments of this social
network. Participants were presented with five segments, each of which listed two pairs of
friends. To make the task more interesting, some networks included three people with a shared
friend (e.g., “Matt and George are friends. George and John are friends”) and some included four
people without a shared friend (e.g., “Adam and Sam are friends. Joe and Tom are friends.”).²

For each of the segments, participants were asked to estimate the interdependence
between the first and last person listed (Matt and John, or Adam and Tom, respectively). On a
10-point scale ranging from “0-10%” to “91-100%,” they answered the question, “What’s the
probability that [the first person] and [the last person] also are friends?” Next, they were asked to
“circle the picture below that best describes the relationship between [the first person] and [the
last person]” followed by a 5-point scale depicting the relationship between two circles, ranging
from two distant, non-overlapping circles to two almost entirely-overlapping circles (adapted
from Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; see Appendix A). We converted responses on the circles
measure from a 5-point to a 10-point scale, and then created a composite measure of perceived
interdependence by averaging the ten responses (S. Korea $\alpha = .85$, U.S. $\alpha = .78$).

The questionnaire was originally written in English. The Korean version was translated to
Korean by a bilingual translator, and then back-translated by a second bilingual translator. No
discrepancies were identified in the back-translation.

Results and Discussion

We entered the perceived interdependence ratings into a 2 (culture: South Korea, United
States) $\times$ 2 (sex of target: male, female) between-subjects ANOVA.² The culture $\times$ sex of target
interaction was significant, $F(1,198) = 9.27, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$ (Figure 2). As we predicted, American participants rated the male targets as significantly less interdependent (i.e., more independent, $M = 4.14, SD = 1.16$) than the female targets ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.28$), $F(1, 98) = 4.34, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Most importantly, Korean participants showed the predicted opposite pattern, rating the male targets ($M = 4.95, SD = 1.75$) as significantly more interdependent than the female targets ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.51$), $F(1,99) = 5.06, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. There were no main effects, $Fs < 1, ps > .35$.

Consistent with Study 1, these results support our hypothesis that men are perceived as possessing more of the characteristic that reflects a fundamental value in their culture: interdependence in South Korea and independence in the United States. These data offer our first evidence that gender stereotypes of independence and interdependence are not universal, but are moderated by cultural values: In cultures where interdependence is valued, men – and not women – were seen as having greater social closeness.

**Study 3: A Bi-Cultural Test**

Studies 1 and 2 revealed that Americans and Koreans differed in their ratings of the independence-interdependence of men and women, thus suggesting the presence of cultural differences in the way men and women are perceived. However, given that we could not randomly assign participants to cultures, which differ in ways that go beyond independence-interdependence, Study 2 does not allow us to make any claims about the causality of the relationship between cultural values and the contents of gender stereotypes. Taking a step closer toward establishing a causal link, we manipulated the cultural frame of Korean-American participants, randomly assigning half of them to complete a survey in English and rate American social networks, and the other half to complete the same survey in Korean and rate Korean
networks. For bicultural people (e.g., Chinese Americans), language (e.g., Mandarin versus English, respectively) cues the associated culture (e.g., Chinese versus American, respectively), thus priming that culture’s norms and values (e.g., collectivism versus individualism, respectively; Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002).

We expected that completing the questionnaire in Korean would prime a Korean cultural frame making salient Korean values (i.e., interdependence), while completing the questionnaire in English would prime an American cultural frame making salient American values (i.e., independence). We predicted that results from Korean-American participants who completed the survey in English would resemble those of our American participants from Study 2 – rating women as more interdependent than men – while results from those who completed the survey in Korean would resemble those of our Korean participants from Study 2 – rating men as more interdependent than women.

**Method**

**Participants**

Sixty Korean-American Rutgers University undergraduate and graduate students (47% female, $M_{age} = 20.0$) volunteered to complete the questionnaire. Four incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analyses. Participants were recruited at meetings of extra-curricular organizations and via acquaintances. 73% of the participants were born in the US, while 27% were born in S. Korea. For 95% of participants, both parents were born in S. Korea. 81% reported that Korean was the primary language spoken in their childhood households; only these participants ($n = 47$), who we expected to have equal access to both cultural frames, were included in the analyses.

**Materials and Procedure**
We used the same materials as in Study 2. Half of the participants completed the survey in English – about Americans in a town in the United States – and half completed the survey in Korean – about Koreans in a South Korean town.

As in Study 2, we collapsed across all ten items to create a composite closeness measure (S. Korea $\alpha = .67$, U.S. $\alpha = .88$).

Results and Discussion

In the 2 (language: English, Korean) $\times$ 2 (sex of target: male, female) between-subjects ANOVA, there was no main effect of language ($F < 1, p > .30$), and a main effect of sex of target, with male networks receiving overall lower closeness ratings than female targets, $F(1, 47) = 7.74, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$.

Most importantly, this main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 47) = 23.31, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .35$ (Figure 3). Participants completing the English version of the questionnaire rated male targets as significantly less interdependent (i.e., more independent, $M = 3.31, SD = 1.10$) than female targets ($M = 5.88, SD = 1.78$), $F(1,21) = 17.12, p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .46$. Participants completing the Korean version of the questionnaire, on the other hand, rated male targets as significantly more interdependent ($M = 5.26, SD = .83$) than female targets ($M = 4.58, SD = .75$), $F(1,24) = 4.62, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$.

These results extend our results from Study 2 by demonstrating that a shift in cultural frame can change people’s perceptions of the extent to which men versus women are interdependent-independent, such that bi-cultural Korean-Americans who were primed with a Korean frame perceived men as more interdependent than women, while bi-cultural Korean-Americans who were primed with an American cultural frame perceived women as more interdependent than men.
Study 4: An Experimental Manipulation of Cultural Values

The first three studies demonstrate that men are seen as more representative of cultural values than women; when interdependence is either chronically (Studies 1 and 2) or situationally (Study 3) most salient as a cultural value, participants rated men as being more interdependent than women; the reverse was true when independence was the salient value. Study 4 tests the causality of this link between cultural values and the contents of gender stereotypes by experimentally manipulating the values of the participants’ culture. In addition, Study 4 aims to generalize the findings beyond the specific cultures and traits used in the first two studies, to support our more general contention that males are seen as possessing whatever traits are culturally valued. To do this, we instructed college students that the most culturally valued trait at their university was either ambitiousness or sociability. We predicted that a fictitious male student would be rated as more ambitious when ambitiousness was valued, and as more sociable when sociability was valued.

Method

Participants

Participants were 205 Northwestern students (59% female, $M_{age} = 20.7$) who completed the study for $8.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were presented with a summary of a survey of Northwestern students who had, in an open-ended format, reported the most valued cultural traits of Northwestern students.$^3$ Some participants were informed that this trait was ambitiousness, and read the following paragraph:

In a survey of 523 Northwestern University undergraduate students, we found that “ambitiousness” was the most valued cultural trait or characteristic for a Northwestern
University student to possess. Ambitiousness included associated traits such as *driven, diligent, and hardworking*. Students overwhelmingly listed ambitiousness as the most important trait for a Northwestern student.

Other participants were told that the most valued trait was *sociability*, and read:

In a survey of 523 Northwestern University undergraduate students, we found that “*sociability*” was the most valued cultural trait or characteristic for a Northwestern University student to possess. Sociability included associated traits such as *fun-loving, outgoing, and friendly*. Students overwhelmingly listed sociability as the most important trait for a Northwestern student.

After reading the description of the cultural values survey, participants read a paragraph about either a male or female Northwestern student, which described the student as ambiguous on both ambitiousness and sociability, modeled after the classic “Donald” paradigm (Srull & Wyer, 1979):

Matt [or Sarah] is a sophomore at Northwestern University majoring in political science. He [She] generally works hard in his [her] classes, but sometimes he [she] skips reading assignments to go out with friends. He [She] is friendly and outgoing and goes to parties, but only once or twice a week and never on weekdays. Matt [or Sarah] wants to do well in school and usually studies very hard for tests, but in some classes he [she] tries harder than others. He [She] got an “A” in the most difficult history course at Northwestern last quarter. Matt [Sarah] has a lot of friends at Northwestern and he [she] belongs to several clubs, but he [she] does not participate in as many activities as some people who live in his [her] dorm.

Finally, participants rated this student on three items related to ambitiousness (ambitious, hardworking, and driven) and four items related to sociability (sociable, fun-loving, and life of the party), all on 7-point scales (1: *not at all descriptive* to 7: *perfectly descriptive*). We created composite measures for both ambitiousness (α = .79) and sociability (α = .70).

**Results and Discussion**

We conducted a 2 (cultural value: ambitiousness, sociability) × 2 (sex of target) × 2 (trait: ambitiousness, sociability) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the final factor. The predicted three-way way interaction was significant, $F(1,197) = 11.44, p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .055$. 
There was also a main effect of trait type, such that ambitiousness ratings ($M = 5.50$) were higher than sociability ratings ($M = 4.99$) across conditions, $F(1,197) = 4.79, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .030$. There were no other significant effects, $Fs < 1, ns$.

To unpack the three-way interaction, we conducted separate 2 (cultural value: ambitiousness, sociability) × 2 (trait: ambitiousness, sociability) mixed ANOVAs for male versus female targets. For male targets, the cultural value × trait interaction was significant, $F(1,98) = 5.30, p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .051$: men were rated as higher on sociability in the sociability condition ($M = 5.08$) than in the ambitiousness condition ($M = 4.86$), and as higher on ambitiousness in the ambitiousness condition ($M = 5.56$) than in the sociability condition ($M = 5.26$) (Figure 4). For female targets, the cultural value × trait interaction was also significant, $F(1,98) = 6.07, p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .058$, but the means took on the opposite pattern: women were rated as lower on sociability in the sociability condition ($M = 4.87$) than in the ambitiousness condition ($M = 5.17$), and as lower on ambitiousness in the ambitiousness condition ($M = 5.47$) than in the sociability condition ($M = 5.71$) (Figure 5).

We hypothesized that participants would rate the male student as possessing more of whichever trait – ambitiousness or sociability – was culturally valued. As predicted, the male student was perceived as more ambitious when ambitiousness was the salient cultural value, and as more sociable when sociability was the salient cultural value. The female student, on the other hand, was perceived as possessing less of whichever trait was culturally valued.

Importantly, this study allows us to (1) infer the hypothesized causal relationship between the traits that are most valued in a given culture and the contents of gender stereotypes, and (2) generalize our findings beyond the specific cultural context of Westerners versus East Asians, and beyond the specific traits of independence versus interdependence. Although the concepts of
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ambitiousness and sociability share some commonalities with independence and interdependence, respectively, they also differ from them in some fundamental ways (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Just as people shift beliefs about their own traits based on the perceived desirability of those traits (Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989), these results suggest that people shift their perceptions of gender stereotypes using a similar process.

General Discussion

We began by exploring a paradox created by two rich research streams in psychology; one suggests that men are universally stereotyped as independent, and another suggests that independence is valued in only some cultures, while interdependence is more highly valued in others. How can men – the dominant, higher status group compared to women in nearly every culture – be perceived as independent in cultures that value the opposite? Our studies demonstrate that the commonly-endorsed “independent-man” and “interdependent-women” stereotypes are not actually universal, but are moderated by cultural values. People perceive men as independent in cultures where individualism is valued – with Americans perceiving men as having less close social networks – but perceive men as more interdependent in cultures where connectedness is valued – with Koreans rating men as having closer networks (Study 2). These differences appear even when the same individuals reflect on the social networks of men and women with either an independence or interdependence frame, with Korean-Americans seeing men as less interdependent when considering American social networks, but women as less interdependent when considering Korean social networks (Study 3).

The first three studies focused on the well documented cultural values of independence and interdependence, showing that members of an interdependent culture, South Korea, perceived men as more interdependent than women, deviating from the “universal” stereotype of
male independence. Study 4 moved beyond these specific traits and cultures, however, demonstrating that American participants rated a male member of their community as possessing more of whatever trait they were told was most valued in their culture – ambitiousness or sociability, and, most importantly, establishing a causal relationship between cultural values and the contents of gender stereotypes.

In sum, this paper presents the first evidence of a causal relationship between core cultural values and the contents of gender stereotypes: men in general are seen as possessing more – and women less – of whatever characteristics are most culturally valued. These findings suggest that gender stereotypes are actually flexible, dynamic, and cross-culturally varied – deviating from the widely-held belief that they are rigid, static, and universal. Thus, across different cultures and different traits, men are seen as cultural ideals, possessing whatever traits are chronically or temporarily valued.
References


Footnotes

1. Sex of participant had no main or interaction effects in any of the studies presented in this paper.

2. All names used in the US version of the questionnaire were among the 50 most popular names in the United States for at least one decade of the 20th century, according to US Census Bureau data. Although we were not able to identify a similar resource in South Korea, popular names were also selected for the Korean version of the questionnaire.

3. To generate organic cultural values for the main study, we administered an open ended questionnaire to twenty Northwestern undergraduates that instructed them to “Please think about the undergraduate culture of Northwestern and list the five characteristics you think are most valued by Northwestern students in general.” The two most common categories of characteristics were ambitiousness (e.g., diligence, being driven, being hard-working) and sociability (e.g., being fun-loving, being outgoing, and being the life of the party), which were selected for the main experiment.

4. At the end of the study, the first 120 Study 4 participants were also asked “How important is this cultural value [i.e., ambitiousness OR sociability] to Northwestern students?” which they answered on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = extremely). There was no difference between the ambitiousness ($M = 5.55$) and sociability ($M = 5.58$) conditions, $F(1,119) < 1, p > .70$. 
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Figure 1. Study 1. Ratings of the extent to which “communal” and “individualistic” are more typical of women (< 0) or men (>0) as a function of participants’ culture (Korea or United States).
Figure 2. Study 2: Interdependence ratings for male and female targets as a function of participants’ culture (Korea or United States).
Figure 3. Study 3: Interdependence ratings for male and female targets as a function of language condition (Korean or English).
Figure 4. Study 4: Ambitiousness and sociability ratings for the male target ('Matt') as a function of cultural value condition (ambitiousness or sociability).
Figure 5. Study 4: Ambitiousness and sociability ratings for the female target (‘Sarah’) as a function of cultural value condition (ambitiousness or sociability).
Appendix A: Sample of Closeness Measure, Studies 2 & 3

Please circle the picture below that best describes the relationship between [Adam] and [Tom].