Communication Studies Undergraduate
Publications, Presentations and Projects

Communication Studies

2008

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December 3, 2008

Abstract

Self-construal is an influential concept that has been used in past research to explain culturally different perceptions of individuals. This study discusses independent and interdependent self-construals as well as their relation to conflict management. The researcher's prediction that an individual's self-construal type would positively correlate with the decisions they make in a workplace conflict scenario was not significantly supported in this study. Possible limitations are discussed, and the results of the study do suggest that there is possibility for future research and improvement of research design in this theoretic area.

Using Self-Construal to Promote Intercultural Harmony in the Workplace

This study examined how self-construal affects the decisions that individuals make to resolve conflict in the workplace. Independent and interdependent self-construals have been recently and frequently recognized as a more efficient instrument of explaining individual behavior than the cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism (Oetzel, J. & Bolton-Oetzel, K., 1997; Park, H. & Guan, X., 2007). The validity of self-construal theory has been questioned due to the fact that past research has not always supported the effectiveness of self-construal scales as a predictor of cultural differences (Lim, T., Allen, M., Burrell, N. & Kim, S., 2008). This study presumed the validity of Gudykunst et. al's (1996) self-construal scale with a focus on how self-construal affects workplace decision-making in managing conflict. By understanding how an individual's self-construal affects how he or she handles conflict, managers and employees in the workplace will be able to not only manage cultural diversity, but also to utilize the opportunities that come with it.

With the increase in economic globalization and growth of women and minorities in America, many challenges have resulted due to cultural differences and misunderstandings among individuals and groups. The workforce in the U.S. is rapidly increasing in diversity and American businesses and organizations are also expanding internationally and interacting with other organizations and people from other countries. Managers and business owners have realized that understanding and utilizing cultural diversity will help lead to more harmony in the workplace, better decision-making, and increased profit. Oetzel and Bolton-Oetzel (1997) point out that values are a significant component of diversity that often "result in communication differences between and among individuals in the workplace." These communication differences can then "create tension, conflict, and even hostility among workers" (Oetzel, J. & Bolton-

Oetzel, K., 1997). Although there has been research on the effectiveness of self-construal scales on understanding and predicting cultural differences and individual actions, only a modest amount of research has been conducted on the use of self-construal in the workplace; more specifically on decision-making to resolve conflict in the workplace.

Before pursuing this study, research will be devoted to the description and implications of self-construal theory. This study will include both scholarly information supporting and opposing the usefulness of self-construal scales. Research will also be gathered on interpersonal conflict and the role self-construal plays in the conflict process. If the results of this study support self-construal theory, then workplace efficiency may be increased.

Literature Review

This literature review explains why self-construal was used as a predictor in behavior instead of the traditional individualism-collectivism value dimensions. The validity of self-construal scales are discussed and a comprehensive definition of independent and interdependent self-construal types is given which explains how these dimensions help people understand their own culturally shaped perceptions and behaviors as well as those of others. Following that, this literature review discusses conflict, primarily focusing on how self-construal types affect conflict management styles. The literature introduces the possibility of using an individual's self-construal as a predictor of one's decision-making in resolving workplace conflict.

Self-Construal Theory

For years, researchers have used the value tendencies of Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism to explain how humans culturally shape their sense of self. Individualistic cultures place importance on the rights of the individual, status and autonomy while those in collectivistic cultures emphasize community, connectedness and the importance of the group over the individual (Gardner, W., Reithel, B., Foley, R., Cogliser, C. & Walumbwa, F., 2008). Markus and Kitayama's (1991) self-construal theory first emerged as an arguably better variable for explaining how culture influences behavior because individualism and collectivism as cultural dimensions assumes that members of a culture are for the most part, homogeneous. Using cultural-level individualism-collectivism as predictors is thought to not be as effective because "it is unclear what aspect of culture influences an individual's communication" (Oetzel, J., 1995). Self-construal more efficiently takes into account the intricate steps involved in creating each individual's behavior because it accommodates the fact that people within the same cultures are still individuals with different nuances in personality. Self-construal relies on cultural communication, norms, values and self-image to describe how culture influences an individual's behavior (Oetzel, J., Bolton-Oetzel, K, 1997). Therefore, self-construal is part of the influence of individualism and collectivism on an individual's behavior.

Kim and Sharkey (1995) write that the two types of self-construals, independent and dependent, refer to the extent "to which people conceive of themselves as separate or connected to others." Independent self-construal is consistently linked to individualistic cultures while interdependent self-construal is linked to collectivist cultures (Park & Guan, 2007). Rather than looking at independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal as two separate entities, it would be more accurate to describe them as two interrelated dimensions on different points of a

spectrum. This study will utilize the concept of independent and interdependent self-construals to better understand how culture influences behavior on an individual level.

Despite the expansive amount of research supporting the use of self-construal scales, there are a few studies that question its validity. Another common critique of self-construal scales suggest that the two dimensions of independent and interdependent self-construals do not encompass thoroughly enough the full nature of self-construal (Cross, E., Bacon, L., & Morris, M., 2000). Overall, the debate about the use of self-construal scales as an alternative to the wider scale dimensions of Hofstede's (1991) individualism and collectivism dimensions is about the validity of the scales and more conceptual problems about the nature of the scales. One prominent study testing multiple self-construal scales, found them to be lacking in convergent and discriminant construct validity (Bresnahan, M., Levine, T., Shearman, S., Lee, S., Park, C., & Kiyomiya, T., 2005). This same study, however, did acknowledge that Gudykunst et. al's (1996) self-construal scale had shown over positive correlations in over 50 studies in the past. This evidence points to this particular self-construal scale as being a possible valid and reliable measure of independent and interdependent self-construal. The methods section of this research will discuss the Gudykunst scale that will be used in this study in further detail.

Independent self-construal. Individuals with independent self-construals see themselves as self-sufficient and distinctly separate from other people and from background context (Leung, T. & Kim, M., (2007). Leung and Kim (2007) further note that independent self-construals tend to have a positive correlation with directness in communication. This correlation is backed up by Oetzel and Bolton-Oetzel (1997) who also agreed with research that indicated independent self-construal relates to communicative clarity and effectiveness. These people place value in individualism, accomplishment, competition, and self-indulgence (Oetzel, J., & Bolton-Oetzel,

K., 1997). Independent self-construal individuals pursue self-actualization over relational harmony while interdependent self-construal individuals engage in the reverse (Tae-Seop, L., Allen, M., Burrel, N., & Sang-Yeon, K., 2008).

Interdependent self-construal. Those with interdependent self-construals believe that their connections and relationships with others are more important than focusing on the individual self. They aim to create harmonious relationships by fitting in and helping others, following social rules, and cooperating (Oetzel, J., & Bolton-Oetzel, K., 1997). Individuals with interdependent self-construals are most concerned with relational effectiveness; that is avoiding negative evaluation from others, imposing on others and harming others in any way (Oetzel, J., & Bolton-Oetzel, K., 1997). Although there are distinct differences between independent and interdependent self-construal, an individual may have both self-construals but employ one over the other in certain situations (Leung, T. & Kim, M., 2007).

Intercultural Conflict Management

Although various definitions of conflict are offered in the research literature, this study defines conflict as "the interaction of independent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who sees the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals" (Ting-Toomey, S., Oetzel, J. & Yee-Jung, K., 2001). This study focused on internal, informal conflict management in a work setting, which involves short-term as well as long-term managing of disagreements about resources, goals, and values between employees, managers, and other members of that particular organization. Lee (2008) provides a compelling justification for studying intercultural conflict management in organizations. He argues that there is not enough research done in intercultural conflict management as the focus in the past has been on

cross-cultural conflict management. He also points out that most studies of cultural conflict management has been through formal, mediated encounters; thus, justifying the need for more research in intercultural conflict management between individuals (Lee, 2008).

There are a myriad of lens that can be used to analyze intercultural conflict. These include observing differences in semantics, in-group versus out-group attitudes, and various other cultural dimensions. Past studies provide strong evidence that individuals see themselves as independent from others prefer making decisions on their own rather than obtaining input from others, while those who see themselves as interdependent and connected to others base their actions on influences from others (Kim, M., Smith, D., Yueguo, G., 1999). This strongly points to self-construal as being influential in conflict management and will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Self-Construal as a Predictor in Conflict Management

Researchers commonly use conflict handling styles and face management styles as individual variables rather than using a broader cultural approach. Self-construal is calculated on an individual level as well, which makes sense for self-construal rather than broader cultural dimensions such as Hofstede's (1991) individualism and collectivism to be linked to conflict style (Kim, M., Lee, H., Kim, I., & Hunter, J., 2004).

Previous research has not yet conducted a study that focuses on self-construal as an independent variable on conflict resolution in the workplace. There is, however, some research that indicates how self-construal may affect the behaviors of individuals in a workplace setting. Because an individual's self-construal influences his cognitive, emotional and motivational processes, individuals with interdependent self-construal's will more likely be intuitive toward

the feelings of other people (Rucker, M. & Gendrin, D., 2007). They most likely would

"suppress their individual abilities, opinions, emotions, or goals for the good of the group"

(Oetzel, J., & Bolton-Oetzel, K., 1997). It may then be inferred that individuals with

interdependent self-constructs will keep awareness of their peer and employee relationships in

mind when making decisions to solve conflicts.

A study by Oetzel and Bolton-Oetzel (1997) revealed that an independent self-construal

is the best predictor of task effectiveness because this type of self-construal leads individuals to

see themselves separately from others, and thus, be more concerned with task related outcome.

This study also found that although each type of self-construal emphasized a different

effectiveness, neither was a better predictor of personal effectiveness; both self-construals place

importance in personal achievement but are predisposed to different ways of attaining it.

Although independent and interdependent self-construals both aim for personal effectiveness, in

the workplace individuals with differing self-construals may conflict in the ways that they

approach work. Miscommunication which could then lead to conflict may occur because those

with independent self-construals will likely want to tackle the project or problem immediately

while the people with independent self-construals will probably prefer to devote time to creating

relationships with their coworkers and group members first (Oetzel, J., & Bolton-Oetzel, K.,

1997).

Past studies have used self-construal scales to determine the relationship between how an

individual perceives himself and how this perception affects how he manages conflict, interacts

with others, and makes decisions. The previous research has often been successful in detecting

positive correlations between independent self-construal and a tendency for an individual to be

more self-oriented, self-reliant, and competitive. Research has also produced positive

correlations between interdependent self-construal and individuals who are concerned with group harmony, cooperation, and interpersonal relationships (Oetzel, J. & Bolton-Oetzel, K., 1997).

This study used the type of self-construal that an individual perceives himself or herself of having as the independent variable. The decisions that individual would make in the workplace to solve conflicts served as the dependent variable. Based on the limited amount of research available on self-construal on decision-making, this study hypothesized that:

H1: An individual with an independent self-construal will make conflict-related decisions that place importance on the individual over others.

H2: An individual with an interdependent self-construal will make conflict-related decisions that place importance on others over the individual.

Method

Data Collection

To test the proposed hypotheses, participants were chosen at the University of Portland through a convenience sample. This population consisted of voluntary undergraduate students in two different business classes. Because these courses aim to gear students toward careers in the business field, they were relevant to this research's survey scenarios. The researcher informed the participants about the general nature of the study and instructed them to fill out a multiple choice survey containing two workplace scenarios followed by a self-construal assessment scale. Subjects completed the self-construal scale after the scenarios so that they would not catch on to the nature of the experiment and alter their answers on the scenario survey. 41 completed surveys were obtained for analysis.

Measures

A 28-item self-construal scale adapted from Gudykunst et. al (1996) was used to measure each participant's self-construal type by having them rank on a seven-point Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a given statement (1=strongly agree…7=strongly disagree). Scores were added up accordingly and a high self-construal score indicated an independent construal while a low self-construal score indicated a high interdependent construal. To measure an independent self-construal, participants indicated their level of agreement with scale items that contained independent thinking statements such as, "I am a unique person separate from others," and interdependent statements such as, "I maintain harmony in the groups of which I am a member." The scale survey had a cross-sectional design, which indicated the perceived self-construal of each individual participant at a single point in time (Hocking, J., Stacks, D. & McDermott, S., 2003, p. 242). A reliability test was run on the validity of Gudykunst et. al's (1996) self-construal scale in this experiment and each item yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of at least .85 and above which indicates a high reliability. The cross-sectional design helped to show the relationship between the individual's self-construal and the type of decision he or she would make in a workplace setting. A sample of the instrument scale items is located in Appendix A of this document.

The scenario surveys used in this study were modeled after a workplace scenario survey. These surveys used a cross-sectional design that indicated the action the respondent would be most likely to take in a certain situation at a specific time. Both scenarios illustrated a common workplace conflict and included four possible decisions. The respondents were asked to choose the one response that they would most likely use. In each scenario, there were two independent self-construal choices such as, "I would do all the work myself; if I want something done right,

I'll do it myself," and two-interdependent self-construal choices such as, "I would explain to my coworkers how important this project is and how much I need their help." The workplace decision-making scale items are attached as Appendix B.

Results

Hypothesis one proposed that an individual with an independent self-construal would make conflict management decisions that reflect his independent perception of himself. Hypothesis two predicted that an individual with an interdependent self-construal would make decisions that reflected his or her perception of being interconnected with others. A frequency test was run on the scenario question's responses which were nominal data to measure its dispersion. Tests on both scenarios revealed that no data was missing and that majority of the responses for Scenario 1 fell into an independent self-construal category and most of the responses for Scenario 2 fell into an interdependent self-construal category.

To analyze the data, an independent t-test which compared the means of two independent groups (the mean of each individual's scenario scores and their self-construal scores) was utilized. The t-test was the most appropriate and simple test for evaluating the data because the dependent variable (the self-construal type of the individual) consisted of interval data, it only had two nominal levels, and there were less than a 100 responses (Hocking et. al, 2003, p. 378). The t-test results of Scenario 1 reported a mean of 129.41 and standard deviation of 17.12 for an independent self-construal decision and a mean of 115.50 and standard deviation of 6.36 for an interdependent self-construal decision. This indicates a considerably smaller dispersion of data around the mean for the interdependent self-construal. The t-test for Equality of Means was 1.22,

p= 0.28 p>0.05 indicating no significant difference between the means of the two variables. The results were not significant enough to support either hypothesis one or two.

The t-test of Scenario 2 reported a mean of 132.00 and standard deviation of 20.91 for an independent self-construal decision and a mean of 121.22 and standard deviation of 17.05 for an interdependent self-construal decision. The range of data dispersion around the mean is only slightly lower for interdependent self-construal types. The t-test for Equality of Means was 1.14, p=0.28, p>0.05. The results were also too high to significantly support either hypothesis one or two.

Discussion

Past research strongly points to self-construal as being a more accurate and effective way of describing and predicting behavior than the broader cultural dimensions of Hofstede's individualism and collectivism (Oetzel, J. & Bolton-Oetzel, K., 1997; Park, H. & Guan, X., 2007). The majority of the research conducted in the literature review of this study on independent and interdependent self-construal point to this concept as an effective way to examine and understand the behavior of individuals on an intercultural level. Some research, however, did reveal a critique of the validity of self-construal scales (Bresnahan, M., Levine, T., Shearman, S., Lee, S., Park, C., Kiyomiya, T., 2005). The hypotheses posed in this study aimed to test the validity of one of these self-construal scales in question.

The results of this study supported Gudykunst et. al's (1996) self-construal scale as having internal validity, but did not support either of the proposed hypothesis as a significant predictor of conflict management decisions. The results did indicate, although not significant, a positive correlation between the two variables of self-construal and decision making. These

results suggest that further research with improvements such as a revamping of the self-construal scale and overall research design, selection of respondents and overall research method may yield more significant results.

The scenarios used in Scenario 1 and 2 as well as the choices listed for respondents to select may not have been designed well enough for the purposes of this study. For example, in both scenarios, there was a large difference in the number of people who chose the most popular option in comparison to the other options. This indicates that respondents may have chosen the answer that they felt was technically the "correct" answer, based on what they thought they *should* do, rather than relying on their own personal feelings. Another suggestion is that the four answer options given on the surveys were not equally or fairly distributed in appeal. In other words, the wording behind the given statements may not have been effective in obtaining a true answer from the respondent. Future studies using a similar design should take this into account and be more careful in the design of their surveys.

Leung and Kim (2007) asserted that an individual is likely to have independent and interdependent self-construals but to have one override the other in certain situations. This presumption is highly probable but makes it difficult to construct a self-construal scale that will be able to facilitate prediction of an individual's behavior due to the many different situations an individual may find himself in.

Another limitation to this study may have been its unrepresentative sampling. This researcher did not have access to a population large enough to obtain a true random sample, and instead had to rely on undergraduate participants at a college university with low diversity. Respondents may have not answered the scenario surveys or self-construal scales thoroughly and

truthfully due to time constraints or other personal reasons. Future research on a larger scale

should recruit participants that are more representative of the population it is trying to study.

Although this study was not able to conclude with any significant results, it is a starting

point for future research in testing the use of self-construal as an indicator or predictor of conflict

management. The results of this study pose a few questions: How do we construct a self-

construal scale that will work on every individual and be accepted as valid in all situations? Is

such a scale even possible? Further modification and testing of intercultural self-construal scales

will hopefully lead to a universally valid and reliable scale. Future research should focus on

creating a more effective research design and taking into account the limitations of respondent

error.

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Appendix A

Gudykunst et. al's (1996) Independent and Interdependent Self Construal Scale

1. I should be judged on my own merit. (ind)
2. Being able to take care of myself is a primary concern for me. (ind)
3. My personal identity is important to me. (ind)*
4. I consult others before making important decisions. (inter)
5. I consult with co-workers on work-related matters. (inter)
6. I prefer to be self-reliant rather than depend on others. (ind)*
7. I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of my group. (inter)*
8. I stick with my group even through difficulties. (inter)*
9. I respect decisions made by my group. (inter)*
10. I will stay in a group if it needs me, even if I am not happy with it. (inter)
11. I maintain harmony in the groups of which I am a member. (inter)*
12. I respect the majority's wishes in groups of which I am a member. (inter)*
13. I remain in the groups of which I am a member if they need me, even though I am dissatisfied with them. (inter)
14. I am a unique person separate from others. (ind)
15. If there is a conflict between my values and values of groups of which I am a member, I follow my values. (ind)
16. I try to abide by customs and conventions at work. (inter)
17. I try not to depend on others. (ind)
18. I take responsibility for my own actions. (ind)*
19. I give special consideration to others' personal situations so I can be efficient at work. (inter)
20. It is better to consult others and get their opinions before doing anything. (inter)
21. It is important to consult close friends and get their ideas before making a decision. (inter)*
22. It is important for me to act as an independent person. (ind)*
23. I should decide my future on my own. (ind)*
24. What happens to me is my own doing. (ind)
25. My relationships with others are more important to me than my accomplishments. (inter)
26. I enjoy being unique and different from others. (ind)*
27. I am comfortable being singled out for praise and rewards. (ind)
28. I don't support a group decision when it is wrong. (ind)
    *Note: (ind) indicates an independent self-construal statement
    (inter) indicates an interdependent self-construal statement
    The (ind) and (inter) coding will not be included on the actual surveys given to the participants
    *Source: Gudykunst, W., Matsumoto, Y., Ting-Toomey, S., Nishida, T., Kim, K., & Heyman, S. (1996). The influence of cultural individualism-collectivism, self construals, and individual values on communication styles across cultures. *Human Communication Research, 22*, 510-543.

Appendix B

Conflict-Management in Workplace Scenarios Scale

Scenario 1: Imagine that you are an assistant manager in an office job. Your boss often gives you a lot of free-reign in decision-making and responsibility over the workers under you. However, one of your coworkers, Mary, who is also a good friend of yours, has been exhibiting deviant behavior by constantly coming in late to work, questioning your decisions, and shirking his responsibilities. You need to do something soon about Mary because her behavior also puts your job in jeopardy. Please choose from the following four options the choice that most closely aligns to what you would do in this situation.

1. I would confront Mary and tell her that she needs to change her attitude and behavior. (ind)
2. I would not say anything to Mary and cover for her lack of work. (inter)
3. I would tell my boss about Mary's behavior and let him deal with the situation. (ind)
4. I would try to figure out why Mary is behaving in this manner and then try to help her. (inter)

Scenario 2: You are working on an important research proposal project with several other coworkers. Your coworkers rarely show up to planned group meetings, answer their phone or e-mails, and do not contribute any ideas to the project. This research proposal is due in a week and you really need them to do their share because it is such an important and extensive project. Please choose from the following four options the choice that most closely aligns to what you would do in this situation.

1. I would do all the work myself; if I want something done right, I'll do it myself. (ind)
2. I would not confront them because they are probably preoccupied with other problems and I would not want to add to their burdens. (inter)
3. I would explain to my coworkers how important this project is and how much I need their help. (inter)
4. I would be harsh with my coworkers and order them to stop slacking and do their part. (ind)