

The Influence of Relationship-Specific Self Construals on Relationship-Specific Communication Styles

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the interrelationship between individuals' independent and interdependent family-specific self-construal and family communication styles. Two contexts that are considered significant and important in-groups were chosen for examination (i.e., family members and work colleagues). Results show that individuals: (1) emphasize different self-construals in the family and organizational contexts, and (2) use different communication styles with family members and work colleagues.

Introduction

People have styles of communication they use when interacting with others, and they understand, encode, and decode messages according to these styles (Norton, 1977). While communication styles vary culturally and cross-culturally (Gudykunst et al., 1996), scholars have noted that it is not enough to examine communication using only the cultural-level variables of individualism and collectivism (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Singelis & Brown, 1995). Communication must also be examined using individual-level variables (e.g., Markus & Kitayama's [1991] interdependent and independent self construals). People who emphasize the interdependent self-construal see themselves as separate from others, while people who emphasize the independent self-construal see themselves as interconnected with others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that people who emphasize the independent self construal are "autonomous, unique people" (p. 527), and people who emphasize the interdependent self construal are "embedded in group relationships that affect their behavior" (p. 527). Although research includes the measurement of individual-level variables in the study of communication styles (e.g., Gudykunst et al., 1996; Kim et al., 1996; Singelis & Brown, 1995), most research still ignores the situation in which the communication occurs, or the relationship between communicators (e.g., in-group vs. out-group). Gudykunst et al. (1996) stated, "the general measure of self construal presented may not predict behavior in specific situations because individuals activate specific self construals in specific situations" (p. 539). Therefore, "the self construal measure must be adapted to the specific situation" (Gudykunst et al., 1996, p. 539). The effect that in-group relationships (e.g., family) have on individuals' communication styles has not been studied.

Just as individuals' self construals change according to communication situations, their communication style may also change as the communication situation and relationship changes. Individuals may choose to use different communication styles in different situations. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) noted that family communication styles are different from general communication styles. While people may use a specific communication style with family members, they may use different communication styles with co-workers, friends, or

supervisors (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). The purpose of this study is to investigate the linkage between individuals' independent and interdependent family-specific self-construal and family communication styles.

Self Construals and In-Group Communication Styles

Norton (1977) isolated specific communication styles: dominant, dramatic, contentious, animated, impression leaving, relaxed, attentive, open, and friendly. The various communication styles that people use differ across and within cultures (Gudykunst et al., 1996). One way of explaining these cultural differences at an individual level is through the concept of self-construals. Markus and Kitayama (1991) isolated the independent self-construal and the interdependent self-construal. They argued that the main difference between interdependent and independent self-construals is the way in which people view their relationship to others. For example, people who emphasize the interdependent self-construal try to act in an appropriate fashion and to fit in with the members of their in-groups. In order to reach this goal, they use indirect language that they feel maintains group harmony and is more polite to others.

Gudykunst et al. (1996) found both self-construals predicted all of the communication styles they studied. When the coefficients for the two self construals were compared, the independent self construal was associated positively with interpreting indirectness, being dramatic, using feelings to guide behavior, being open, being precise, and demonstrating positive perceptions of silence. The independent self-construal was associated negatively with using indirect messages, while the interdependent self-construal was associated positively with being sensitive to other behavior. Gudykunst et al. (1996) claimed that while everyone "has both an independent and interdependent self construal . . . the two self construals are activated in different situations" (p. 516). When examining self-construals and communication styles, researchers often ignore the impact of specific situations. Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee (1999) stated that "humans universally share the goals of both autonomy and belonging, all individuals may be expected to flexibly define themselves as relatively more independent or interdependent on current motive or the current situation" (p. 321). Several studies have found that individuals' self-construals may be shifted by a situational prime (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). That is, not only can individuals' self-construals shift in different situations, but also the situation itself may directly cause the self-construals to shift. For example, Cross (1995) studied the coping behavior of North American and East Asian exchange students. She found that while studying abroad, East Asian students did not emphasize their interdependent self-construals as much as they would in their native cultures. In this context, East Asians actually emphasized their independent self-construals and reported that they valued the independent self-construal more than the interdependent self-construal. Therefore, while the East Asian students retained aspects of interdependent self-construals, they emphasized independent self-construals within this specific foreign environment.

Recently, Gudykunst and Lee (2001) suggested that researchers need to consider the fact "that individuals have an overall self construal, as well as self construals specific to each of their in groups" (p. 80). Specifically, researchers should measure self-construal with a specific situation or in-group in mind. Uleman et al. (2000) contended that "current conceptions of the self include its context dependence, and an important class of contexts is significant in-groups" (pp. 2-3). Individuals have in-groups that they consider important and significant. Individuals may find important in-groups from a variety of groups ranging from

“friends, political parties, civic organizations, social classes, religious groups” (Triandis, 1995, p. 9) to groups formed based on location or language. Most individuals, however, consider the family to be an important in-group (Triandis, 1995). Family communication styles and general communication styles differ (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Family communication styles reflect the communication norms that have been established by the parents and developed within the family context. Further, many people find themselves spending more waking hours at work than they do at home. Similar to family, most individuals view their colleagues as an in-group (Triandis, 1995). Thus, the communication styles that individuals use with their colleagues is an important variable to study.

Research Questions

- RQ 1: Do individuals' family-specific self construals influence individuals' family communication styles?
- RQ 2: Do individuals' organizational-specific self construals influence individuals' organizational communication styles?
- RQ 3: Are there context specific differences in individuals' self construals, communication styles and the interrelationship between self-construals and communication styles?

Methods

Procedure

In order to study family-specific and organizational-specific self-construals and communication styles, previously created scales were modified for this study. To measure the independent and interdependent self-construals respondents emphasize, a modified version of Gudykunst et al.'s (1996) self-construal scale was used. A modified version of Norton's (1977) communication style scale was used to ask respondents about their communication styles in specific contexts (i.e., organization and family).

Respondents

A total of 207 students from a major Southern California university volunteered to participate in the study. In regards to the 207 respondents, there were 78 (38%) males and 129 (62%) females. The average age for this study was 22.9 ($sd = 4.87$). Respondents self-reported their ethnicity with a result of 4% responding with Black or African-American, 35% responding with Asian-American, 27% responding with European-American, 30% responding with Latin-American, and 4% responding with Middle Eastern.

Questionnaire

The questionnaires were designed to examine how individuals' self-construals change according to context (i.e., family and organizational). Further, the questionnaires were designed to examine how individuals' communication styles change with different in-groups (i.e., family and colleagues). Each questionnaire contained two scales measuring four variables: (1) the respondent's family-specific self construals, (2) the respondent's family-specific communication styles, (3) the respondent's organizational-specific self construals, and (4) the respondent's organizational-specific communication styles. All family-specific items were grouped together and all organizational-specific items were grouped together. There were two forms created for this study. Form A (96 completed forms were used for this study) had the organizational-specific scales first and Form B (111 completed forms were

used for this study) had the family-specific scales first. The alternating forms were created in an attempt to minimize the possibility of order affects.

Self Construals

Independent self-construals were measured by Gudykunst et al.'s (1996) self-construal orientation scale. Respondents answered each item using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree). Consistent with Gudykunst's measurement approach, the scale was modified to address specific in-group relationships (i.e., family and work colleagues). Specifically, the scale was modified so that each item addressed the specific in-group measured (i.e., family and colleagues). Cronbach Alphas for reliabilities were very high for both scales. Satisfactory reliabilities were found for the family-specific self-construal scale ($\alpha = .81$) and the organizational-specific self-construal scale ($\alpha = .83$). Given these high reliabilities, the independent self-construal scales were computed as mean summed composites, such that the higher the value the greater the independent self-construal in the specific context.

Communication Styles

Norton's (1977) communication styles scale was used to measure respondents' family-specific and organizational-specific communication styles. Only four communication styles from Norton's (1977) scale were included on the questionnaire (i.e., open, relaxed, argumentative, and dominant communication styles). These subscales were chosen because they were thought to be the most relevant for the familial and organizational contexts. Respondents answered each item using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree). The reliabilities for the scales ranged from .68 to .78, and were deemed acceptable. Since satisfactory reliabilities were found for each of the communication style subscales in both the familial and organizational contexts, mean summed scores were computed for each of the eight subscales. The subscales were computed such that the larger the value of the subscale, the greater the trait being operationalized by the subscale.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question addressed the possible influence that individuals' family-specific self-construals have on their family communication styles. First, the only significant predictor of a relaxed communication style in the family context was the interdependent family-specific self-construal scale ($\beta = .22$, $t = 3.21$, $p < .002$, $R^2 = .06$). Thus, the interdependent family-specific self construal scale is positively related to the use of relaxed communication styles used in the family context, that is, the greater the interdependence scale, the more relaxed the communication style in the family context. Second, the only significant predictor of an open communication style was the interdependent family-specific self-construal scale ($\beta = .41$, $t = 6.33$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .160$). Individuals who emphasize an interdependent self-construal with their family members are more likely to use an open communication style with their family members. Thus, the family-specific interdependent self construal influences individuals to tell their family members a lot about themselves, and to openly express their emotions and feelings to their family members. Third, the only significant predictor of a dominant communication style was the interdependent family-specific self-construal scale ($\beta = .22$, $t = 3.21$, $p < .002$, $R^2 = .071$). Those who emphasize an interdependent self-construal with their family members are more likely to use a dominant

communication style, speaking frequently with their family members and taking charge of communication situations in a dominant way. Fourth, the only significant predictor found in the argumentative communication style was the independent family-specific self-construal scale ($\beta = .159$, $t = 2.27$, $p < .024$, $R^2 = .025$). In sum, individuals who emphasize the independent self construal with their family members are quick to challenge their family members, are very argumentative with them, and have a hard time ending heated discussions with them.

Research Question 2

The second research question addressed the possible influence that individuals' organizational-specific self-construals have on their organizational communication styles. First, the only significant predictor of the relaxed communication style was the independent organizational-specific self-construal scale ($\beta = .178$, $t = 2.53$, $p < .012$, $R^2 = .036$). Specifically, individuals who emphasize an independent self-construal with their colleagues are more likely to use a relaxed communication style that excludes nervous mannerisms in their speech. Second, the only significant predictor of the organizational-specific open communication style was the organizational-specific interdependent self-construal scale ($\beta = .354$, $t = 5.26$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .120$). Individuals who emphasize an interdependent self-construal with their colleagues also use an open communication style with their colleagues. Thus, the organizational-specific interdependent self-construal influences individuals to tell their colleagues a lot about themselves, and to openly express their emotions and feelings in the organizational setting. Third, the only significant predictor of the organizational-specific dominant communication style was the organizational-specific independent self-construal scale ($\beta = .280$, $t = 4.07$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .082$). Unlike the family context where the interdependent self-construal predicted the use of the dominant communication style, the independent self-construal predicts the use of the dominant communication style within the organizational setting. Specifically, those who emphasize an independent self-construal with their colleagues are more likely to speak frequently at work and take charge of communication situations with colleagues in a dominant way. Fourth, the significant predictors argumentative communication style was the independent organizational-specific self-construal scale ($\beta = .190$, $t = 2.72$, $p < .007$, $R^2 = .046$) and the interdependent organizational-specific self-construal ($\beta = -.146$, $t = -2.08$, $p < .039$, $R^2 = .010$). While both self-construal scales are significant predictors of individuals' use of an argumentative communication style with colleagues, it should be noted that the individuals who emphasize the independent self-construal are more likely to challenge and argue with colleagues than individuals who emphasize an interdependent self-construal.

Research Question 3

The third research question focused on the differences in the self construals individuals emphasize in specific contexts, the differences in the communication styles individuals use with family members and colleagues, and the interrelationship between self construals and communication styles. There was a significant difference in the interdependent self-construal individuals emphasize in the family and organizational-specific contexts. Specifically, there was a significant difference in the independent self-construal across the two contexts (F mean = 5.41, O mean = 5.63, $t = 4.27$, $df = 206$, $p < .001$). The interdependent self-construal appeared to be emphasized more in the family than in the organizational context.

There were also differences found between the two context-specific self-construal scales. For example, the independent items from the family-specific self construal scale that scored the highest agreement are: personal identity is very important to me (mean = 5.86), am a unique person (5.57), take responsibility for my own actions (5.89), and enjoy being unique from others (5.74).

There was a significant difference in the interdependent self-construal across the two contexts (F mean = 5.52, O mean = 4.87, $t = -10.16$, $df = 206$, $p < .001$). The interdependent items from the family-specific self construal scale that scored the highest agreement are: consult with others on relationship related matters (mean = 6.04), stick to others even through difficulties (6.41), try to maintain harmony with others (6.04), help others even when it is inconvenient (5.89). It is apparent that means for the family-specific interdependent items are higher than those for the independent items. Therefore, respondents emphasize an interdependent self-construal with their family members more strongly than the independent self-construal. That is, respondents emphasize a greater independent self-construal in the organizational context than they do in the family context.

Communication Style Differences. There were significant differences in the communication styles respondents used in family and organizational-specific contexts. According to the t-test analyses, the items measuring the respondents' demonstration of a relaxed communication style in the family and organization showed a significant difference (F mean = 5.12, O mean = 4.57, $t = -5.33$, $df = 206$, $p < .001$). Respondents used a more relaxed communication style in the family context than they did in the organizational context. Second, there were significant family vs. organizational differences in the items measuring the respondents' level of openness (F mean = 4.69, O mean = 4.10, $t = -5.53$, $df = 206$, $p < .001$). From this, we find that respondents used a more open communication style in the family context than they did in the organizational context. Third, the items measuring the respondents' use of a dominant communication style showed a significant difference between family and organizational contexts (F mean = 4.72, O mean = 4.36, $t = -4.37$, $df = 206$, $p < .001$). Respondents used a more dominant communication style in the family context than they did in the organizational context. Fourth, the items measuring the respondents' use of argumentative communication style in the family and organization showed a significant difference (O = 3.71, F = 4.63, $t = -9.88$, $df = 206$, $p < .001$). From this, we find that respondents used a more open communication style in the family context than they did in the organizational context.

The Interrelationship between Self-Construals and Communication Styles. This study uncovered several significant correlations between context-specific self-construals and context-specific communication styles. First, the use of a relaxed communication style differs within the two contexts. For example, individuals who emphasize the interdependent self-construal with family members use a relaxed communication style with their family members. In the organizational context, however, the relaxed communication style is used by individuals who emphasize an independent self-construal. Results show a significant correlation between the interdependent self-construal and the use of an open communication style in both contexts. Therefore, individuals who emphasize the interdependent self-construal are more likely to reveal personal information, feelings, and emotions with family members and colleagues. Therefore, the use of the open communication style may not be merely dictated by the context, but rather the individuals' self-construals.

Interestingly, there are three significant correlations with the dominant communication style. Within the family context, the dominant communication style was significantly associated with both the independent ($r = .16, p < .05$) and interdependent ($r = .24, p < .01$) family-specific self-construal. Regardless of self-construal, respondents reported that they tend to come on strong, speak frequently, and try to take charge of communication with family members. It is interesting to note that the interdependent family-specific self-construal correlated with the dominant communication style more significantly than the independent family-specific self-construal. In the organizational context, there was a significant correlation between the independent self-construal and the use of a dominant communication style. Finally, there was a significant correlation between the family and organizational-specific independent self-construal and the use of the argumentative communication style. In other words, respondents who emphasize the independent self-construal with family and colleagues are also argumentative, quick to challenge family members and coworkers during communication, and have a hard time ending heated discussions at home and at work.

Discussion

Context-Specific Self Construals

The results indicate that individuals emphasized an interdependent self-construal with family members. We also found that individuals tend to emphasize an independent self-construal within the organization and with their colleagues. Those who emphasize an independent self-construal are concerned with their personal goals and gear their communication to meet their own goals rather than enhance the relationship. The communication style individuals with an independent self-construal use may simply be a style that they find useful in meeting their goals in that specific situation and/or relationship, a finding consistent with other scholars' claims (Gardner et al., 1999; Kim et al., 1996).

The Relaxed Communication Style

First, this study showed individuals who emphasize an interdependent self-construal with family members to employ a *relaxed communication style* with their family members. The use of the relaxed communication style may be explained by the loyalty that is felt between in-group members (Triandis, 1988). It is possible that individuals trust that their family members will stay loyal to them and support them regardless of instances of thoughtless communication. This would also explain why individuals who emphasize the independent self-construal do not use the relaxed communication style with family members as often as those with the interdependent self-construal do. The independent self-construal may provoke a feeling of insecurity within the relationship. In the organizational context, the independent self-construal was associated with relaxed communication with colleagues. Taking into consideration the explanation above, individuals with the organizational-specific interdependent self-construal may not feel the same loyalty with coworkers as they do with family members. In addition, Kim et al. (1996) found people with the interdependent self-construal to be concerned with avoiding negative evaluations from others, which in turn may make them more anxious during communication with colleagues.

Second, this study found that individuals who emphasize the interdependent self-construal in the family and organizational contexts use the *open communication style* in both contexts. This communication style is used by those with the interdependent self-construal as

a means of forming meaningful relationships with family and colleagues. Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that individuals with an interdependent self-construal communicate with their in-groups in a way that maintains connectedness. Further, those with the independent self-construal may not be primarily concerned with building relationships with family members and colleagues. They are, instead, concerned with gaining independent distinction within the family (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, it is understandable that individuals with an independent self-construal refrain from frequently using the open communication style with family members.

Third, this study showed that while both self-construals use the *dominant communication style* in the family context, those who emphasize the interdependent self-construal use this communication style more than those who emphasize the independent self-construal. The finding that people with an interdependent self-construal use the dominant communication style with family members goes against the explanations of this self-construal and the communication styles used by people with this self-construal. For example, Markus and Kitayama (1991) explained that people with an interdependent self-construal use indirect language that they feel maintains group harmony and is polite to others. The explanation to this unexpected finding regarding interdependence and dominance may be in the frequency of communication interactions. Because those with the interdependent self-construal use the open communication style with their family members, they may communicate more frequently with their family members than those with the independent self-construal. Therefore, these individuals may feel that they use a dominant communication style during communication with family members. The results for the dominant communication style used in the organization, however, were different from those used in the family. In the organizational context, the dominant communication style was used by those with the independent self-construal. The communication of those with an independent self-construal is comprised of direct language, and conscious focus on the clarity of their message, evidence that is also consistent with Kim and Sharkey's (1995) findings that the higher the level of independent self-construal, the greater the concern for clarity within the organizational context.

Fourth, this study demonstrates that while respondents who emphasize an interdependent self-construal did report using the *argumentative style*, it was used much more often in either family or organizational contexts by individuals who emphasize the independent self-construal. It is easy to understand why the independent self-construal uses the argumentative communication style. After all, the goal of individuals who emphasize the interdependent self-construal is to maintain harmony with others, and being argumentative may compromise this goal.

This study shows that (1) self-construals are flexible and change in the family and organizational contexts; (2) the self-construal emphasized in the family predicts the communication styles used with family members, and (3) the self-construal emphasized in the organization predicts the communication styles used with colleagues. Specifically, the family-specific independent self-construal predicts the use of the dominant and argumentative communication styles, while the family-specific interdependent self-construal predicts the use of the relaxed, open, and dominant communication styles. Additionally, the organizational-specific independent self-construal predicts the use of the relaxed, dominant, and argumentative communication styles, while the organizational-specific interdependent self-construal predicts the use of the open communication style. The findings of this study allow

us to understand the interrelationships between context-specific self-construals and context-specific communication styles.

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