



## Self-construal and social anxiety: Considering personality

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### ABSTRACT

Self-construal has been identified as a potential means to explain cultural differences in social anxiety. Yet, research findings suggest that self-construal is an individual difference as much as a cultural difference. We tested for mediation and moderation regarding self-construal, social anxiety, and other primary individual difference constructs. Our results indicated that the relation of extraversion and neuroticism to social anxiety was partially mediated by independent self-construal. In addition, the relationship between social anxiety and interdependent self-construal was moderated by neuroticism. These results suggest that personality traits play an important role in the relationship between social anxiety and self-construal. Clinical interventions that consider the interplay between self-construal and personality may be helpful in decreasing social anxiety.

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### 1. Introduction

Cultural norms, values, and beliefs are thought to be powerful forces that shape differences between cultures (Triandis, 1989) and may influence the development of psychopathology (Eshun & Gurung, 2009). Such factors have been of particular interest regarding problematic social anxiety (Caldwell-Harris & Ayçiçeği, 2006; Heinrichs et al., 2006; Xie, Leong, & Feng, 2008). Specifically, self-construal has emerged as a potentially important construct in explaining cultural differences (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Self-construal is conceptualized as a constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning one's relationship to others as well as one's self-identity in relation to others (Singelis, 1994). Markus and Kitayama (1991) summarize theory and research regarding two dimensions of self-construal: Independent and interdependent. We base our discussion of these constructs on Markus and Kitayama's (1991) summary of theory and research.

#### 1.1. Independent and interdependent self construal: Cultural and individual differences

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), independent self-construal is a view of the self that focuses on internal attributes and uniqueness of the self, whereas interdependent self-construal involves a focus on the social connectedness of the self. Markus and Kitayama note that independent self-construal has been de-

finer as “a bounded, unitary, and stable” (p. 226) self whereas an interdependent self-construal is a “flexible and variable” (p. 226) self. People who are higher in independent self-construal are expected to emphasize being unique, promoting one's own goals, and being direct in communication. In contrast, a person with higher interdependent self-construal is expected to see the self as intertwined with others and emphasize public status, social roles, and relationships. Interdependent self-construal has been found to be more prevalent in collectivist cultures such as those of East Asia as compared to the West, in which more emphasis is on independence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Our discussion thus far might be taken to imply that the constructs of independence and interdependence comprise one bipolar dimension, such that being high in one implies being low in the other. However, it has been argued, and shown, that high (or low) levels of both interdependent and independent self-construal can coexist within an individual (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Cross & Markus, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Thus, it seems that self-construal may be best conceptualized not just as a cultural construct, but as an important individual difference that varies both between and within cultures.

#### 1.2. Self construal and social anxiety

Most authors who have previously tested the relationship between social anxiety and self-construal report that social anxiety has a negative relationship with independent self-construal and a positive relationship with interdependent self-construal (Dinnel, Kleinknecht, & Tanaka-Matsumi, 2002; Moscovitch, Hofmann, & Litz, 2005; Norasakkunkit & Kalick, 2009; Okazaki, 1997, 2000; Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). Further, Hong and Woody (2007) found

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that cultural differences in social anxiety between Canadian East Asians and Canadian Caucasians were fully mediated by independent self-construal and partially mediated by interdependent self-construal. Norasakkunkit and Kalick (2009) manipulated independent self-construal using a priming task and found that priming independence led to decreased scores on a social anxiety measure. These results suggest a causal link between independent self-construal and social anxiety.

### 1.3. A model of personality and self-construal

Given the cultural focus of much research regarding self-construal, it would be natural to consider how these variables might help explain cultural differences regarding social anxiety. However, with a growing literature suggesting that self-construal may serve as a crucial individual difference within cultures (e.g., Paukert, Pettit, & Amacker, 2008), it seems important to examine how self-construal interacts with other salient individual differences to produce social anxiety.<sup>1</sup> We believe that personality traits, as captured by the five-factor model, are crucial individual differences that are likely to influence self-construal, as well as the relationship between self-construal and social anxiety.

Theories of the big five factors of personality have found that personality traits generalize and are expressed across cultures (e.g., Katigbak, Church, Guanzon-Lapena, Carlota, & del Pilar, 2002). Thus, we start with the assumption that the constructs of personality and self-construal have an influence on individuals from all cultures (e.g., developmentally) and further, personality is more likely to affect the development of self-construal than self-construal is the development of personality.<sup>2</sup> We make this assumption partially because it seems plausible to us that personality influences the way that cultural messages (such as self-construal) are internalized and expressed, as well as the type of message directed at an individual. For example, within the five-factor model, individuals higher in extraversion are described, in part, as sociable (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 2001). The sociability aspect of extraversion makes it plausible that extraverts would have more exposure to cultural messages conveyed through interpersonal interactions because of their increased likelihood of engaging in social interactions. Further, Mooradian and Swan (2006) found that people higher in extraversion were more likely to rely on information relayed via word of mouth. Thus, we would expect that in Western cultures the predominance of cultural messages promoting independence would lead to higher individualism in people with higher extraversion, who should have more frequent exposure to such messages.

If extraversion does influence self-construal, it is possible that factors related to extraversion might actually be a consequence of self-construal rather than extraversion alone. It is already well established that people with problematic social anxiety tend to have lower extraversion (e.g., Bienvenu et al., 2001), such that (higher) extraversion might be a protective factor for social anxiety disorder. If our analysis is correct, then independence might partially mediate a protective relationship between extraversion and social anxiety. Level of independent self-construal might even be more amenable to change than personality per se, potentially opening up a new avenue for treatment. A clear understanding of how risk and protective factors for social anxiety relate to each other should assist in identifying likely areas for intervention and individuals who are likely to benefit from such interventions.

<sup>1</sup> In the following analyses we examined direct effects for ethnicity and found none. Thus, in the reported analyses we have not included ethnicity and have chosen to focus on individual differences within the culture.

<sup>2</sup> At the same time, we accept the possibility that self-construal, having been affected by an individual's personality, might also have a reciprocal relationship with personality over time.

The available literature provides very few links between self-construal and other individual differences (other than culture of origin). However, it is well established that social anxiety is positively related to neuroticism and negatively related to extraversion (Bienvenu et al., 2001; Kotov, Watson, Robles, & Schmidt, 2007; Trull & Sher, 1994; Watson, Gamez, & Simms, 2005). Thus, we expect that independent self-construal would have the opposite relationships with those personality traits in Western cultures. However, we could only locate one paper that included any big five personality traits (and only agreeableness and extraversion) and self-construal (only interdependent self-construal): In a study that did not focus directly on the relationship of personality to self-construal, Tams (2008) found that interdependent self-construal was correlated with agreeableness. The literature is clearly in need of basic work identifying how these constructs relate to one another.

Of particular interest are potential interactions between self-construal and personality traits related to social anxiety. Specifically, given the consistently reported relationship between social anxiety and neuroticism (typically a medium-sized effect, e.g., Bienvenu et al., 2001), we expect neuroticism and interdependent self-construal to interact to predict social anxiety, such that individuals who are higher in both neuroticism and interdependent self-construal will exhibit particularly high levels of social anxiety. We expect that these individuals' tendencies to be anxious in general will be magnified by their tendency to focus on social relationships, making them particularly vulnerable to problematic social anxiety.

### 1.4. The current study

In the current study we examined the relationship between self-construal, the big five personality traits, and social anxiety. We hypothesized that (a) the relation of extraversion and neuroticism to social anxiety (i.e., because these personality traits consistently exhibit a relationship with social anxiety, Bienvenu et al., 2001), would be mediated by independent self-construal, and (b) interdependent self-construal and neuroticism would interact to predict social anxiety.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 155 individuals (53 men and 102 women) who filled out a questionnaire packet and later completed additional experimental tasks to receive 15 dollars or credit as part of their coursework. One participant was removed from data analyses because of scores three standard deviations away from the mean with an extreme responding pattern on all items such that the same response was given for all items on the same page. We judged that this participant was likely to be responding inappropriately and therefore removed her data. The sample consisted of Caucasians ( $n = 91$ , 59.1%), Asians/Asian Americans ( $n = 46$ , 29.9%), African Americans ( $n = 10$ , 6.5%), and participants who identified as Multiracial ( $n = 6$ , 0.6%); one participant reported her ethnicity was not listed. Of the Asians/Asian Americans, 11 identified themselves as Asian (23.9%) and 35 identified themselves as primarily Westerners (Asian-Americans; 76.1%). The mean age of participants was 19.82 ( $SD = 1.74$ ; Range 18–24) and most participants ( $n = 132$ , 85%) were U.S. citizens ( $n = 22$  were non-U.S. citizens or international students). Participants ranged in generational status from first to fifth or more generations with a mean generational status of 3.19 generations ( $SD = 1.52$ ). Most participants reported English as the primary language spoken in

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