



Self-construal and gender interact to cause social evaluative concerns



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ABSTRACT

Prior correlational research suggests an interaction between self-construal and gender is important for understanding social evaluative concerns. We examined if experimentally manipulating independent versus interdependent self-construals differentially caused social evaluative concerns among men and women. United States community adults recruited through the internet were randomly assigned to complete an independence ($n = 71$) or interdependence ($n = 74$) priming task. Social evaluative concerns were assessed following the manipulation using a self-report measure. Among men, priming an interdependent self-construal caused greater egocentric (i.e., fear of self-embarrassment) and allocentric (i.e., fear of discomforting others) social evaluative concerns compared to an independent self-construal. Among women, priming an independent self-construal caused greater allocentric (i.e., fear of discomforting others) social evaluative concerns and a trend for greater egocentric (i.e., fear of self-embarrassment) social evaluative concerns compared to an interdependent self-construal. Results extend prior correlational research suggesting that self-construal is important for understanding social evaluative concerns, with the impact of self-construal seeming to depend upon gender.

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1. Introduction

Social evaluative concerns are central to cognitive-behavioral models of social anxiety and the social evaluative concern labeled fear of negative evaluation is an important target of intervention within cognitive-behavioral therapy for social anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Social evaluative concerns within cognitive-behavioral models have been described as having an egocentric focus, as they represent fear of embarrassing oneself (Choy, Schneier, Heimberg, Oh, & Liebowitz, 2008). There are manifestations of social anxiety in which the social evaluative concerns are best described as having an allocentric focus, such that individuals are chiefly concerned about impacting others. Allocentric social evaluative concerns characterize a putatively culture-bound subtype of social anxiety known as Taijin Kyofusho (TKS; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). TKS is most commonly diagnosed among individuals from Eastern countries, such as Korea or Japan. Researchers, though, have questioned if TKS is culture-bound. For example, McNally, Cassiday, and Calamari (1990) presented a case study of a 34-year-old African American woman who was born and raised in the United States (U.S.) and experienced allocentric social evaluative concerns related to embarrassing others by glancing at their genitals during social interactions.

TKS overlaps with broader manifestations of social anxiety, with Choy et al. (2008) labeling fear of blushing, body trembling, making eye contact, sweating, and voice trembling as symptoms common to

social anxiety/TKS. Moreover, according to Choy et al., egocentric social evaluative concerns, such as fear of self-embarrassment, as a result of such symptoms underlie social anxiety and TKS. Choy et al. further noted that there are symptoms putatively specific to TKS, including fear of body odor, inappropriate staring, intestinal gas, physical appearance, and stiff facial expression. That said, Choy et al. found at least 75% of U.S. patients with social anxiety reported moderate-to-severe fear of at least one putatively TKS-specific symptom. Another purported difference between TKS and social anxiety relates to social evaluative concerns, as there is an absence of allocentric social evaluative concerns in diagnostic criteria for social anxiety disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Choy et al. proposed that fear of discomforting others and fear of offending others are two allocentric social evaluative concerns that underlie TKS. Of note, Choy et al. found that upwards of 39% of U.S. patients with social anxiety reported moderate-to-severe allocentric social evaluative concerns. Choy et al.'s findings support substantive overlap between social anxiety and TKS, as well as allocentric social evaluative concerns spanning across presentations of social anxiety.

Researchers propose that self-construal might be more relevant to determining social evaluative concerns than membership in or identification with a particular culture. Self-construal can be defined as the way in which an individual's self is structured (Singelis, 1994). Broadly speaking, representations of others as separate from the self are characteristic of an independent self-construal, whereas others are considered part of the self in an interdependent self-construal. Kleinknecht, Dinnel, Kleinknecht, Hiruma, and Harada (1997) noted that an individual's self is typically defined as an extension of that person's social group within

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Eastern countries (e.g., Korea, Japan). Collectivistic cultures tend to foster an interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Alternatively, Kleinknecht et al. noted that an individual's self is typically defined based on that person's own characteristics and abilities within Western countries (e.g., U.S.). Individualistic cultures tend to foster an independent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Importantly, Kleinknecht et al. stated that self-construal is not culture-bound, as individuals from either collectivistic or individualistic cultures possess varying degrees of both an interdependent and independent self-construal.

Extant research supports associations between self-construal and social anxiety/TKS among U.S. respondents (Dinnel, Kleinknecht, & Tanaka-Matsumi, 2002; Kleinknecht et al., 1997). Moscovitch, Hofmann, and Litz (2005) found data to support gender as an important variable for understanding how self-construal relates to social anxiety. In a study with U.S. college students, Moscovitch et al. found that a stronger interdependent self-construal was associated with greater social anxiety among men. Among women, a stronger independent self-construal was associated with greater social anxiety. As discussed by Moscovitch et al., self-discrepancy theories may help explain this pattern of findings. Self-discrepancy theories suggest that social evaluative concerns are likely to occur in situations where there is a discrepancy between an individual's perceived capabilities and anticipations of potential evaluators (e.g., Alden, Mellings, & Ryder, 2001).

As part of socialization in the U.S., men are often taught to generate independent self-construals and women are often taught to generate interdependent self-construals, respectively (Cross & Madson, 1997). Women in the U.S. are socialized to value relationships and closeness to others, whereas men in the U.S. are taught to be independent from others as a way of showing strength and success. In addition, women in the U.S. are more likely to define themselves through relationships with others while men in the U.S. are more likely to define themselves as separate from others. As individuals age, they learn not only how to act out social behaviors and roles that are congruent with self-construals, but they also learn that these roles are expected of them as a result of their gender (Cross & Madson, 1997). Alden et al. (2001) noted that experiences of self-discrepancies between one's current self and who one believes others think one ought to be is relevant to social anxiety, stating that "social anxiety arises when the person becomes aware of a discrepancy between the actual and ought-other self-representations" (p. 309). Therefore, if men and women are asked to think in a manner divergent from expectations delineated by gender roles, they would be likely to experience greater social evaluative concerns (Moscovitch et al., 2005).

The extant literature suggests that egocentric and allocentric social evaluative concerns are experienced by individuals in the U.S. (Choy et al., 2008; Dinnel et al., 2002; Kleinknecht et al., 1997; McNally et al., 1990). The literature maintains that self-construal (Dinnel et al., 2002; Kleinknecht et al., 1997) and gender (Moscovitch et al., 2005) may be important factors contributing to those concerns. Although informative, the correlational design of Moscovitch et al.'s (2005) study does not allow for conclusions to be drawn regarding the causal role of self-construal, and its interaction with gender, on social evaluative concerns. Moreover, Moscovitch et al.'s findings warrant an extension to allocentric social evaluative concerns. The purpose of the present study was to experimentally manipulate self-construal and to examine if self-construal differentially caused social evaluative concerns based upon gender. We predicted that men would report greater social evaluative concerns (egocentric, allocentric) following an interdependent priming manipulation and women would report greater social evaluative concerns (egocentric, allocentric) following an independent priming manipulation. We made these predictions because, as stated previously, individuals are more likely to experience social evaluative concerns if they are asked to think in a manner that contradicts the expectations of their respective gender roles (Alden et al., 2001; Moscovitch et al., 2005). We examined and controlled for any effects

of the priming task on negative affect, which is a correlate of anxiety-related constructs (e.g., Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The total sample consisted of 145 U.S. community adults recruited from the Internet. The mean age was 33.4 years ($SD = 12.8$; range: 18–71 years) and the sample had a near equal gender distribution (51.7% male). While most participants self-identified as White (73.8%), others identified themselves as Asian (9.7%), African American (9.0%), Hispanic/Latino (3.4%), bi- or multi-racial (2.8%), and "other" (1.4%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. *Taijin Kyofusho Questionnaire (TKSQ; Choy et al., 2008)*

The TKSQ is a 30-item measure that assesses the severity and orientation of social evaluative concerns on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 (*not fearful at all*) to 3 (*extremely fearful*). Choy et al. (2008) developed the TKSQ items following descriptions of social evaluative concerns in the social anxiety and TKS literature. Respondents are first presented with a symptom. The TKSQ includes five symptoms that are common to social anxiety and TKS. These symptoms include: fear of blushing, body trembling, making eye contact, sweating, and voice trembling. The TKSQ also includes five TKS specific symptoms. These symptoms include: fear of body odor, inappropriate staring, intestinal gas, physical appearance, and stiff facial expression. Considering the symptom, respondents rate how much fear they would experience in relation to three social evaluative concerns, including: (a) self-embarrassment, (b) discomforting another person, and (c) offending another person. Self-embarrassment is an egocentric social evaluative concern, whereas fear of discomforting and fear of offending others are allocentric social evaluative concerns.

The TKSQ consists of six scales, with three scales assessing social evaluative concerns (self-embarrassment, discomforting others, offending others) related to symptoms common to both social anxiety and TKS and three scales assessing social evaluative concerns (self-embarrassment, discomforting others, offending others) related to TKS-specific symptoms. Possible scores on each scale range from 0 to 15. Using a sample of patients with social anxiety disorder from the U.S., Choy et al. (2008) found that the TKSQ scales generally evidenced adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's α s ranging from 0.65 to 0.83) and shared small-to-moderate correlations with indices of social anxiety (r s ranging from 0.17 to 0.56). Given extant data indicating that differences in social evaluative concerns are best conceptualized as one of degree rather than kind (Weeks, Norton, & Heimberg, 2009), the content of the TKSQ items was expected to be relevant to participants in the present study. In the present study, each TKSQ scale evidenced adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's α s ranging from 0.75 to 0.81).

2.2.2. *Positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988)*

The PANAS is a 20-item measure that asks respondents to indicate how they have felt over a given time frame on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). State-like time instructions (i.e., "moment") were used in the present study. Half of the presented words concern negative affect (e.g., distressed) and the negative affect scale showed good internal consistency in this study ($\alpha = 0.94$).

2.3. Procedure

Participant recruitment took place using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online labor market where researchers can recruit adults from the general population to complete jobs in exchange for payment.

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