



The relationship between self-construal and creativity – Regulatory focus as moderator[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to examine the influence of self-construal and regulatory focus on individuals' creativity (Experiment 1 focused on chronic regulatory focus, while Experiment 2 focused on situational regulatory focus). In Experiment 1, participants completed a Self-Construal Scale (SCS), a Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) and a Williams Creativity Assessment Packet (WCAP). In Experiment 2, participants initially completed the SCS and then were placed in a promotion or prevention focus group through the use of a paper-and-pen maze task, and they finally completed a task from the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. Both experiments suggested the following: 1) independent self-construal is more beneficial to creativity than is interdependent self-construal; 2) promotion focus is more beneficial to creativity than is prevention focus; and 3) regulatory focus has a moderator effect between self-construal and creativity. Most notably, creativity may be enhanced by a match between self-construal and regulatory focus (i.e., interdependent self-construal matches with prevention focus, and independent self-construal matches with promotion focus) and may be decreased by a mismatch between self-construal and regulatory focus.

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1. Introduction

Creativity can be defined as the ability to produce ideas that are both original (new, unusual, novel, unexpected) and effective (valuable, useful, good, adaptive, appropriate) (Dietrich, 2004; Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Among the factors that have been shown to affect creativity, culture has received considerable attention (Chiu & Kwan, 2010; Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008; Niu & Sternberg, 2001). Moreover, as a psychological construct related to culture, self-construal and its effect on creativity were probed in previous culture studies (Ng, 2003).

Self-construal refers to individuals' awareness of the relationship between the self and the surrounding environment and can be divided into independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that individualistic cultures induce the independent form of self-construal, and collectivistic cultures induce the interdependent form of self-construal. Construal can influence the very nature of individual experience, including cognition (Gardner & Seeley, 2001), emotion (Kitayama, Karasawa, & Mesquita, 2004), motivation (Wiekens & Stapel, 2008), and

behavior (Van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert, & van Knippenberg, 2003). The relationship between self-construal and creativity is of interest to researchers. For example, Ng (2003) conducted a cross-cultural study of this relationship. Participants from Australia (an individualistic culture) and Singapore (a collectivistic culture) were asked to complete scales measuring self-construal and creativity. Structural equation modeling (SEM) showed that the individualistic culture led to independent self-construal, which in turn led to creative behavior; in contrast, the collectivistic culture led to interdependent self-construal, which in turn led to conforming behavior. Wiekens and Stapel (2008) investigated the relationship between situational self-construal and creativity. In their research, independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal were induced by the personal level "I" and social level "we", respectively, and creativity was measured using figural and word tasks. The results suggested that independent self-construal resulted in more diversity, whereas interdependent self-construal resulted in less diversity. However, some researchers hold opposite opinions (Hannover, 2006; Jing & Dan-Ni, 2009). For example, Hannover (2006) argued that interdependent self-construal might also be beneficial to creativity because individuals with interdependent self-construal have harmonious relationships and high status, which in turn contribute to creativity. Similarly, Jing and Dan-Ni (2009) argued that the person–environment fit should be considered, that is, the effects of individual variables partially rely on environmental factors.

Higgins (1997) identified regulatory focus as a motivational principle; promotion focus and prevention focus are two qualitatively

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different motivational orientations. Specifically, promotion focus is related to nurturance and ideals, which underlie higher-level concerns about accomplishments and aspirations. Prevention focus is related to security and obligation, which underlie higher-level concerns about safety and responsibility (Higgins, 1997). In terms of strategy, promotion-focused individuals are eager to attain advancement and gains, whereas prevention-focused individuals are vigilant to ensure safety and non-losses (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). Regulatory focus includes chronic regulatory focus and situational regulatory focus; the former reflects a stable personality trait, whereas the latter is a temporary tendency induced by situational factors (Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2006). A few studies have probed the effect of regulatory focus on creativity. Although Baas, De Dreu, and Nijstad (2011) found that prevention focus could result in the same amount of creativity as promotion focus, most studies have reported that promotion focus is more conducive to creativity (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Bittner & Heidemeier, 2013; Lam & Chiu, 2002; Sacramento, Fay, & West, 2013). Lam and Chiu (2002) argued that promotion focus encourages participants to formulate more strategies such that fluency is increased during idea generation and that this assertion is true for both trait regulatory focus and situational regulatory focus.

Some studies focused on the relationship between self-construal and regulatory focus. Cross, Hardin, and Gercek-Swing (2011) proposed that self-construal and regulatory focus are closely related; independent self-construal supports the development of promotion focus, whereas interdependent self-construal supports the development of prevention focus. Lee, Aaker, and Gardner (2000) found that participants with independent self-construal pay more attention to promotion-focused information, and participants with interdependent self-construal pay more attention to prevention-focused information. Moreover, Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, and Nisbett (1998) determined that individuals with independent self-construal tend to be promotion oriented, focusing on gains rather than losses; in contrast, individuals with interdependent self-construal tend to be prevention oriented, focusing on losses rather than gains.

In general, the literature shows that independent self-construal is helpful to creativity and interdependent self-construal is harmful to creativity (Ng, 2003; Wiekens & Stapel, 2008). However, questions remain. For example, does this link still exist when considering other variables? Conversely, regulatory focus has been shown to have an important effect on creativity, i.e., promotion focus is more conducive to creativity than is prevention focus (Lam & Chiu, 2002). Thus, it would be helpful to examine the relationship between self-construal and creativity in combination with regulatory focus.

2. The present study

The current study investigated the combined effect of self-construal and regulatory focus on individuals' creativity. Study 1 investigated the effects of self-construal and trait regulatory focus on creative personality, whereas Study 2 aimed to examine the effects of self-construal and situational regulatory focus on creative thinking.

Research on regulatory focus has shown that individuals with a predominant promotion focus have stronger motivation and perform better when facing promotion-oriented goals or using active, eager strategies. In contrast, individuals with a predominant prevention focus have a stronger motivation and perform better when facing prevention-oriented goals or using strategies involving vigilance (Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003; Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2004). Moreover, individuals with independent self-construal will feel more "right" in a promotion-focused situation, whereas individuals with interdependent self-construal will feel more "right" in a situation with a prevention focus, which will in turn lead to higher creativity (Sternberg & Lubart, 1993). Thus, the fit between self-construal and regulatory focus (independent self-

construal matches with promotion focus; interdependent self-construal matches with prevention focus) may increase motivation, which in turn results in higher-creativity performance.

Based on the aforementioned studies, the following hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 1. Independent self-construal positively relates to promotion regulatory focus, whereas interdependent self-construal is positively related to prevention regulatory focus.

Hypothesis 2. Independent self-construal is more beneficial to creativity than is interdependent self-construal.

Hypothesis 3. Promotion focus is of more benefit to creativity than is prevention focus.

Hypothesis 4. Trait regulatory focus plays a moderating role between self-construal and creative personality.

Hypothesis 5. Situational regulatory focus plays a moderating role between self-construal and creative thinking.

Specifically, the regulatory matching effect of regulatory focus is as follows: when promotion focus matches with independent self-construal or prevention focus matches with interdependent self-construal, creativity will be enhanced.

2.1. Experiment 1

2.1.1. Method

2.1.1.1. Sample and procedures. Two hundred seventy students at a senior high school in Beijing, China took part in this study ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.38$, $SD = .753$; 56% females). The participants were asked to complete the Self-Construal Scale (SCS), the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) and the Williams Creativity Assessment Packet (WCAP) successively in the classroom during class time. The three instruments were administered in a fixed order. It took approximately 20 min for the students to complete all the scales. The participants were volunteers and received a gift after completing the measures.

2.1.2. Measures

2.1.2.1. Self-Construal Scale (Chinese version, Wang, Yuan & Xu, 2008). The SCS consists of a 12-item independent subscale ($\alpha = .81$) and a 12-item interdependent subscale ($\alpha = .76$). An example of an independent self-construal item is "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects". An example of an interdependent self-construal item is "It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group." The participants indicated their agreement or disagreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

2.1.2.2. Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (Chinese version, Wang, Lin, & Pang, 2011). The RFQ contains two subscales, namely, the promotion subscale (6 items; $\alpha = .66$) and the prevention subscale (5 items; $\alpha = .79$). A sample item in the promotion subscale is "How often have you accomplished things that got you 'psyched' to work even harder?" A sample item in the prevention subscale is "Not being careful enough has gotten me into trouble at times" (reverse scored). The participants answered each item along a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

2.1.2.3. Williams Creativity Assessment Packet (Chinese version, Lin & Wang, 1997). The WCAP comprises four subscales, namely, a risk-taking subscale (11 items), a curiosity subscale (14 items), an imagination subscale (13 items) and a complexity subscale (12 items). The Cronbach α s are between .801 and .809. A sample item is "I like to imagine something I want to know or want to do". The participants answered

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