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**Self-Construal, Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction, and Communication Style:  
Engendering Differences**

Mary L. Rucker  
Wright State University

Dominique M. Gendrin  
Xavier University of Louisiana

Mary L. Rucker, (Ph.D., Purdue University, 2000), Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, Wright State University, Dayton, OH 45435  
Phone: (937) 775-2631. Email: [mary.rucker@wright.edu](mailto:mary.rucker@wright.edu). Dominique M. Gendrin, (Ph.D., Louisiana State University, 1988), Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Communications, Bellsouth Endowed Chair, Xavier University of Louisiana.

All correspondence regarding this study should be addressed to Dr. Rucker:  
[mary.rucker@wright.edu](mailto:mary.rucker@wright.edu).

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**Abstract**

This study extends the literature on self-construal by examining its influence on male and female interpersonal communication satisfaction and communication styles in the U.S. The self-construal construct has been typically used to examine intercultural differences in self-definitions, but has not been used to study gender differences in the dominant culture of the U.S. The independent-samples *t* test revealed no significant difference between male and female independent and interdependent self-construals and direct communication style. However, there was a significant difference found between the two groups' indirect communication style, with the male sample having a significantly higher mean. For the male sample, the regression analyses indicated that independent and interdependent self-construals are not predictive of their interpersonal communication satisfaction. For the female sample, the corresponding standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients indicated that their interdependent self-construal is more predictive of their interpersonal communication satisfaction than their independent self-construal.

### **Self-Construal, Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction, and Communication Style: Engendering Differences**

This study extends the literature on self-construal by examining its influence on male and female interpersonal communication satisfaction and communication styles in the U.S. Research on gender differences has proliferated in the communication (Clair, 1993a, 1993b; Putnam, 1982) and psychological literature for over four decades, providing us with new ways to conceptualize gender differences as social, cultural, psychological, and communication constructions (Levine, 1991; Putnam 1982). The self-construal construct has been typically used to examine individual level cultural differences among collectivistic and individualistic societies, but has not been used to study gender differences in the dominant culture of the U.S.

#### **Gender as Difference**

Gender, a theoretical concept, is assumed to involve power and the politics of knowledge (Bruni & Gherardi, 2002). Studies on gender differences in communication abilities have proceeded on the assumption that women are from Venus and men are from Mars (Burton & Hammermeister, 2004; Gray, 1992; Peterson, 2000). Even if a reliable [gender] difference is identified using clearly defined measures, its meaning is not socially neutral. Rather, the meaning of [gender] difference is the product of social negotiation. In other words, the meaning of the difference is culturally produced. Caplan, Crawford, Hyde, and Richard (1997) contend that the production of gender can be found in the context of a pre-existing system of meaning in which [gender] difference is both polarized and hierarchically ordered. Even though the assumptions in research may indicate that men and women are polarized because of biological and cognitive distinctions, “gender marks a socio-cultural distinction between men and women” (Richardson, 1997, p. 7).

Psychology scholars have investigated gender differences and have found that men and women may differ from one another psychologically in ways they function (Richardson, 1997). On the other hand, communication scholars have studied differences between men and women with respect to communication, power (Mumby, 1988), and sexual harassment through institutional discourse (Clair, 1993a).

Current studies suggest that independent and interdependent construals mirror different ideals, which are applied as a comparison standard when evaluating the self (Bresnahan, Levine, Shearman, Lee, & Kiomiya, 2005; Hannover, Birkner, and Pohlmann, 2006).

#### **Independent and Interdependent Self-construals**

Gender as a socially constructed phenomenon is linked to men’s and women’s self-construal. Self-construal could also include individuals’ self-perception which can link them to a collective identity, such as ability, gender, sexual orientation, and social class, binding them through common characteristics, interests, and goals (Caldwell, 2005). Markus and Kytayama (1991) use self-construal as an individual construct as opposed to a cultural construct. For example, Markus and Kytayama introduced the concept of self-construal to address individual differences in definition of self. Self-construal “involves linking different aspects of the self-concept with specific cultural differences, especially individualism and collectivism” (Bresnahan, et al., 2005, p. 33). Bresnahan et al. write that scholars such as Cross, Bacon, and Morris (2000) explain three types of self-construal: “[individualistic] independent self-construal is based on personal autonomy and uniqueness from others; collective interdependent self-construal describes one’s position in the group and the maintenance of group harmony; and relational interdependent self construal is defined by connection to others in close committed relationships” (p. 33). However, it is implied that collective interdependence is associated with a

specific “type of self-construal associated with cultural-level collectivism, whereas a relationship-centered type of interdependent self-construal is common in the United States” (Bresnahan et al., 2005, p. 38).

Furthermore, individual self-construal is derived from self-interpretation in terms of a complex set or configuration of different self-aspects (Bernd, 2004). Bresnahan et al. (2005) and Cross et al. (2000) explain that a collectivist construal is expected to emerge when self-interpretation centers on a single, socially shared aspect. On the other hand, Hannover, Birkner, and Pohlmann (2006) argue that the ideal independent self-construal differs in two respects from the interdependent self-construal in relation to its contents (autonomous versus social self-knowledge and nature versus nurture) and in connection to the degree of context-dependency of the encoded knowledge (context-independent versus context-dependent self-knowledge).

Communication scholars have examined the self concept and assert that it derives not only from the complete configuration of self construal that is the product of gender, race, religion, social class, and the individual’s particular social and developmental history, but it also derives from cultural self construal (Bresnahan et al., 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Some scholars refer to the independent construction of self “as an individual whose behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one’s own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others” (Markus & Kitayama, 1994, p 226). In this study, the authors examine the individual (independent) and collective (interdependent) self-construals to investigate the construction of gendered selves among male and female college students.

Furthermore, the type of self-construal a person has also affects his or her cognitions, emotions, and motivations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, in the U.S. culture, males have been taught to suppress their emotions because men do not cry, while women have been encouraged to show their emotions because they are perceived to be the weaker sex (Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Baron-Cohen, 2004). In the cognitive domain, individuals with “interdependent selves may be more attentive and sensitive to others than those with independent selves” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 231). Consequently, conventional wisdom tells us that women are perceived to be more attentive and sensitive to others’ needs. This attentiveness and sensitivity to others, characterizing the interdependent selves, will result in “a relatively greater cognitive elaboration of the other or of the self-in-relation-to-others” (Markus & Kitayama, p. 231). Moreover, psychology scholars have investigated gender differences in the areas of cognitive functioning, such as math and verbal abilities and found that women tend to outperform men (Richardson, 1997).

Research suggests that these differences in self-construals may also affect the emotional domain. For example, Markus and Kitayama (1991) believe that people with interdependent self-construals may experience a third affective dimension, “one representing the extent to which the individual is engaged or disengaged from an interpersonal relationship” (p. 238). For instance, men are perceived to be more disengaged from interpersonal relationships than women (McCabe, 1999).

### **Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction**

Interpersonal communication has been “conceptualized . . . as the positive reinforcement provided by a communication event that fulfills positive expectations” (Hecht, 1978, p. 217). Hecht also argues that interpersonal satisfaction is a communication outcome. For example, one study suggested that male students indicated having a more satisfying informal interpersonal relationship with immediate instructors, out of class, regardless of sex when they have personal

problems (Jaasma & Koper, 2005). Other scholars suggest that the “old boy” network has functioned to serve males, particularly white males (Aldefer, 1982). Graham (2004) contributes to this line of thinking and suggests that male privilege may positively correlate with interpersonal communication satisfaction and classroom learning. For example, in learning contexts “Instructors who help students feel good about themselves...contribute to the communication satisfaction of their students” (Graham, p. 217). Last, interpersonal communication satisfaction provides the landscape for predetermining positive independent and independent self-construal.

Positive construal of self is implicit in behaviors that engage satisfying communication. Consistent with this view, Hecht (1978) devised the Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory to assess individuals’ communication satisfaction in actual and recalled conversations. While the Com-Sat Inventory ascertains the verbal behavioral perspective of communication satisfaction, Proctor and Wilcox (1993) explain that we express our awareness of meanings in messages and assert that communication satisfaction is reflected in our thoughts and statements. Consequently, it is important that we understand the meanings in messages.

Overall, Hecht (1978) developed an important point connecting the circumstances surrounding communication satisfaction that attends to the continuum of communication behavior and meanings in messages. Hecht notes that communication satisfaction is embedded in the “communication event.” Hence, effective interpersonal communication satisfaction suggests that social interactions between males and females facilitate relationship development in personal and professional relationships.

### **Direct and Indirect Communication Style**

Communication style is conceptualized as the way individuals perceive themselves when they interact with others. Using the direct and indirect communication Inventory scales, two predominant communication styles are discussed as a function of individuals’ gender and self-perception. In Western cultures, “differences between the communication styles of males and females are often viewed as so divergent they are considered cross-cultural” (Kirtley & Weaver, 1999, p. 190). Tannen (1990), for example, contends that “instead of different dialects, males and females speak different genderlects” (cited in Kirtley and Weaver, 1999, p. 190). Indeed, some scholars argue that it is “as if males and females have been raised on two different planets or, at least in, two different cultures, with two unique patterns of communicating” (Gray, 1992, cited in Kirtley and Weaver, 1999, p. 190).

Mulac (1998) found that men tend to use a more direct communication style while women tend to use a more indirect communication style. However, Mulac contends that women’s use of an affective communication style facilitates relationship development. Females are more likely to achieve their goals by communicating more indirectly in a polite manner (Paludi, 2004). Paludi also writes that direct communication is different from indirect communication “by the degree to which the speaker uses an assertive or declarative mode versus a more mitigated or qualified one” (p. 134). Moreover, Paludi asserts that males tend to use more commands while females tend to use more directives that involve suggestive messages for future action and reasons why an action should be undertaken. Direct styles may not always increase women’s effectiveness, even in professional contexts, as they are more likely to adopt a democratic participatory style than an autocratic one (Paludi, 2004). While this may seem likely true, Gray (1992) provides relationship repair advice by explaining that males and females use different communication styles. He argues that females use indirect approaches to communication by generalizing events, whereas men use direct approaches, confronting a

situation using supporting evidence, facts, and figures. He also informs us that females usually express their feelings and thoughts in conversation compared to males who withdraw themselves from a situation until they have had time to think about solutions to any given problem.

Although Gray contends that females use more indirect communication, he also encourages that females should continue to use indirect approaches when criticizing the males.

Furthermore, some scholars believe that women tend to be more socially oriented than men and communicate more indirectly due in part to the nurturing role that requires them to be sensible, imaginative, and caring (Fowers & Applegate, 1996). Like other scholars, Fowers and Applegate believe that men assume more instrumental roles because they are able to develop a more individual level and exhume solidarity and practicality. "Direct and indirect communication styles are used as additional constructs because directness of communication has been both theoretically and empirically linked with self-construals in previous research" (Bresnahan et al., 2005, p. 36; *c.f.*, Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996; Singelis, 1994).

Thus far extant literature has examined the influence of independent and interdependent self-construals on direct and indirect communication styles to examine intercultural differences in self-definition, the influence of independent and interdependent self-construal on male and female college students' interpersonal communication satisfaction remains to be examined. Therefore, this study extends the self-construal literature by examining its influence on male and female college students' interpersonal communication satisfaction and communication styles. Thus, the following research questions constitute this study:

- RQ<sub>1</sub>: Do males and females differ in their perceptions of their independent and interdependent self-construals and communication styles?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>: What is the relationship between independent and interdependent self-construal and interpersonal communication satisfaction for males and females?

## Method

**Participants.** Participants for this study were 203 (102 males; 101 females) college students attending two predominantly white Midwestern universities. The participants' class rank consisted of 46 freshmen, 42 sophomores, 53 juniors, and 62 seniors. Ages ranged from 17 to 29 ( $m = 20.19$ ,  $sd = 2.88$ ).

**Data Collection.** Data was collected in two phases. Data was collected during Spring 2006 and Summer Session B 2006 to ensure a large enough sample. The sample was a convenient sample in that the researcher received permission from colleagues to have their students complete a questionnaire. Completing the questionnaire was a way students received extra credit from their instructors for participating in this study.

**Data Analysis.** Independent-samples *t* test was used to answer the first research question. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to answer the second research question.

### Procedure and Scale Measures

**Independent and Interdependent Self-Construal Measures.** Measures of independent and interdependent self-construals were based on values that promote the welfare of the individual (independent) and group (interdependent) goals (*c.f.*, Gudykunst, et al., 1996), and is based on Singelis (1994) *Self-Construal scale*. These items are based on cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism. Students were asked to circle the number to the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), which best described the degree of their cultural experience. Twelve items comprised the independent self-

construal scale. Examples of independent self-construal items are “*One should live one’s life independently*” and “*When faced with difficult personal problems it is better to decide by yourself rather than follow the advice of others.*” Twelve items comprised the interdependent self-construal scale. Examples of interdependent scale items are “*It is important to me to maintain harmony within my group*” and “*I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in.*” The reliability estimates for the independent and interdependent scales, as determined by Cronbach’s alpha, are  $\alpha = 0.95$  and  $0.94$ , respectively.

**Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Scale:** Communication satisfaction was measured using Hecht’s (1978) 16-item measure of interpersonal communication satisfaction such as “*The other person let me know that I was communicating effectively*” and “*I was very satisfied with the conversation.*” Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = disagree to 7 = agree. The reliability estimate for the interpersonal communication satisfaction scale was:  $\alpha = .87$ .

**Direct and Indirect Communication Measures.** Since the literature indicates that males and females tend to differ in their communication styles, we chose these scales “because directness and indirectness of communication styles have been linked theoretically and empirically with self-construals in previous research” (Bresnahan et al., 2005, p 36). While there are a number of advantages in communicating directly and sometimes indirectly, many times one’s real opinion can be hurtful to others and create unanticipated interpersonal communication problems. Students were asked to circle their response on seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) to the statements that best explains how they feel. The direct communication scale comprises thirteen items, and the indirect communication scale comprises twelve items. Examples of direct communication scale items are “*I believe that it is important to say exactly what you mean in most situations*” and “*Problems with others should be addressed directly through talk.*” Examples of indirect communication scale items are “*It is generally better to let the other person figure out what you are saying*” and “*Subtle messages are better than those which are very frank.*” The reliability estimates for the direct communication and indirect communication scales, as determined by Cronbach’s alpha, were  $\alpha = 0.91$  and  $0.96$ , respectively.

## Results

Table 1 presents the independent-samples *t* test. An independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of male participants who perceived themselves as having an independent self-construal to the mean scores of female participants who perceived themselves as having an independent self-construal. No significant difference was found ( $t(201) = -1.158, p > .05$ ).

An independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of male participants who perceived themselves as having an interdependent self-construal to the mean scores of female participants who perceived themselves as having an interdependent self-construal. No significant difference was found ( $t(201) = 0.580, p > .05$ ).

An independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of male participants who perceived themselves as using a direct communication style to the mean scores of female participants who perceived themselves as using a direct communication style. No significant difference was found ( $t(201) = -0.183, p > .05$ ).

An independent-samples *t* test, comparing the mean scores of male and female participants who perceived themselves as using an indirect communication style, found a

significant difference between the two groups ( $t(201) = 3.490, p < .01$ ). The mean score of the male sample was significantly higher ( $m = 3.22, sd = 1.29$ ) than the female sample ( $m = 2.62, sd = 1.18$ ).

**Table 1** Male and Female Perceptions of Their Self-construal and Communication Style

	Males			Females		
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n
Independent Self-construal	5.65	.71	102	5.80	1.19	101
Interdependent Self-construal	4.76	.95	102	4.68	1.12	101
Direct Communication	5.69	.77	102	5.70	.64	101
Indirect Communication*	3.22	1.29	102	2.62	1.18	101

\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .001$ , \*\*\* $p < .0001$

### Regression Analyses

To explore the relative influence of independent and interdependent self-construals on interpersonal communication satisfaction for both male and female college student samples, a simple regression analysis was conducted. In this analysis, independent and interdependent self-construals are the predictor or explanatory variables and interpersonal communication satisfaction is the response or criterion variable. The results of these analyses for the male sample are presented in Table 2. The results for the female sample are presented in Table 3.

For the male sample, results indicated that both independent and interdependent self-construals are not predictive of their interpersonal communication satisfaction,

$$R = .10, R^2 = .01, F(2,99) = 0.480, p > .05.$$

**Table 2:** Regression Analysis with Male Sample

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	t	P
Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction					
Independent Self-construal	-.118	.130	-.092	-.909	.365
Interdependent Self-construal	-.019	.098	-.020	-.199	.843

Model Statistics:  $R = .10, R^2 = .01, F(2,99) = 1.178, p > .05$ .

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 3:** Regression Analysis with Female Sample

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	t	P
Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction					
Independent Self-construal	-.094	.065	-.140	-1.432	.155
Interdependent Self-construal	.247	.069	.348	3.565	.001***

Model Statistics:  $R = .34, R^2 = .118, F(2,98) = 6.544, p < .001$ .

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

For the female sample, results indicated that the independent and interdependent self-construals model was predictive of their interpersonal communication satisfaction,  $R = .34$ ,  $R^2 = .12$ ,  $F(2,98) = 6.544$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, the corresponding standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients indicated that interdependent self-construal is more predictive of the females' interpersonal communication satisfaction than their independent self-construal.

### Discussion

This study compared the relationship between male and female college students' independent and interdependent self-construals and their direct and indirect communication styles and investigated whether their independent and interdependent self-construals influenced their interpersonal communication satisfaction.

The *first research question* examined whether males and females differed in their independent and interdependent self-construals and communication styles. The t-test results indicated no significant results for independent and interdependent self-construal and direct communication. That is, both college women and men define themselves in independent and interdependent ways. This result supports the notion that both constructs can co-exist in individuals (Singelis, 1994). This co-existence may be the mark of a healthy self-concept in an individualistic society (i.e., the United States) that values direct communication. Additionally, the interdependent dimension of self among Americans is viewed as a sign of a relationship-centered type of self (Bresnahan et al., 2005). However, the results also indicated a significant difference in indirect communication. Contrary to the literature that suggests women to be more indirect in their communication style than men, the men of the study reported greater use of indirect communication than their female counterparts.

There is a possible explanation for these results. Cook and Isgro (2005) argue that in this technological age, the "communication process [is no longer] limited to a one- or two-way model; now it is imagined as a multidimensional and horizontal flow of communication and information" (p. 71). Servaes (2005) points out that alternative models of communication tend to focus on individuals' linguistic development, self-reliance, and participatory democracy. The author goes on to suggest that feminist communication scholars are calling for more communication and policies that affect women and gender issues. Now that information is all around us and more women are moving towards higher education, their communication style reflects a definition of self that reference an independent cognition that manifests itself in an assertive and unambiguous way. This sample of college women has been socialized to talk the talk and walk the walk; that is, they have adopted a style of communication that makes them self-reliant and equal participants in a democratic system in which women have come to play an increasing role. Women's growing participation in the labor force has led to the transformation of nontraditional attitudes about gender roles. With increasing higher educational attainment and women's ability to occupy prestigious jobs, they are likely to hold a more egalitarian view about gender roles in the home and workplace (Firestone & Harris, 1998). According to the results of this study, college men and women have also developed a more egalitarian perspective on gender roles as they fare through higher education.

The *second research question* was answered using regression analyses. The results indicated that males' independent and interdependent self-construals were not predictive of their interpersonal communication satisfaction. However, the results indicated significant results for females. That is, their definition of self in interdependent ways predicted their interpersonal communication style.

This last result supports the attentive and sensitive dimension of women's cognition. Markus and Kitayama (1991) remind us that women are likely to be at an advantage over men in their ability to elaborate cognitively about themselves and others. This greater cognitive understanding of self and others adds to their ability to engage in satisfying interpersonal relationships. Fowers and Applegate (1996) suggest that women are more socially oriented than men due in part to the nurturing role that requires them to be sensible, imaginative, and caring. Because men often assume more instrumental roles, they are able to develop on the individual level and exume solidarity and practicality, a line of thinking which alludes to gender differences. Fowers and Applegate also explain that women's moral problems stem not from conflicting rights or principles but rather from conflicting responsibilities that require resolution through contextual and narrative thinking. Therefore, this may account for women being satisfied with their interpersonal communication.

Since U.S. society still emphasizes male domination and power, the relationship between independent and interdependent self-construal, communication styles, and interpersonal communication for the male sample was not significant because males are at the center of institutions and are expected to demonstrate their maleness, dominance, power, and control.

This study used a small sample of students from two predominantly white universities; therefore, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution. A number of studies have reported mixed results on gender differences on Rosenberg's self-concept scale (Hensley, 1977; Reynolds, 1988; Rosenberg, 1965), the direct and indirect communication scales (Bresnahan et al., 2005; Gendrin, 2004), and the independent and interdependent self-construal scales (Bresnahan et al., 2005; Cross et al., 2000). Consequently, there is a need to extend future research in this promising area.

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