Expectation of Manager-Subordinate Communication: A Comparison between Chinese, Korean and American Students

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Abstract
Purpose - This research aims to compare the expectations of Chinese, Korean and American college students for their manager-subordinate communication patterns.
Design/methodology/approach - A total of 300 participants from Chinese, Korean and American cultures were recruited and each culture with 100 participants. All of them were required to complete a survey in their native language.
Findings - Results revealed that Korean was the most interdependent, followed by Chinese, and American was the most independent. In a highly interdependent culture, managers are perceived by students as less likely to accept the differing opinions of a subordinate, while subordinates tend to be more reliant on their superiors and are expected to have less of a tendency to voice personal feelings or claims on work.
Research Limitation – The data observed was on the job candidates (students), not on the employee worked. A larger study with employees on job is needed in the future to further examine the manager-subordinate communication in different cultures.
Originality/value – This study examined the expectation of manager-subordinate communication in cross-cultural perspective, which do helpful for cultural competency education, specifically for American and Korean students developing their careers in a fast-growing China.
Keywords: Manager-subordinate communication, cross-cultural communication, cultural competency, self-construal, expatriate

Introduction

With the development of globalization, intercultural business activities are significantly prevalent; therefore, accepting and understanding the value and behaviors of different cultures has also become increasingly significant, as is communication between foreign managers and employees. Manager-subordinate communication is a noteworthy challenge for international companies who hire local employees and attempt to adapt to the local managerial culture. Corporate leaders who have expatriated to another culture need to understand the expectations of their subordinates and learn effective communication methods in order to achieve success. Therefore, organizations are researching and preparing cross-cultural management strategies to maximize performance in terms of an intercultural sense for achieving the best results in the local country.

Previous studies have examined cross-cultural management from a national level (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 1997), which may not specifically account for the behaviors of individuals. The present study investigates different cultural behaviors of manager-subordinate interactions by self-construal theory, considered to predict a person's cultural behavior much more accurately than national level factors (Gudykunst et al., 1996).

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Self-construal

Self-construal theory, developed by Markus and Kitayama (1991), has been acknowledged as an important individual level factor of culture. They categorize self into interdependent self-construal and independent self-construal. Interdependent self-construal place emphasis on external relationships, belonging, and promoting others' goals. People with interdependent construal tend to view 'self' as a whole, adjust one's behavior according to environment, adopt an indirect communication and pursue harmony with other people (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yates & de Oliveira, 2016). They consider themselves as one of members of a specific social group and value the achievement of their group not themselves. Thus they prone to avoid any mistakes (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000), negative outcomes and undesired end states, do not want to take risk, seek security and safety (Chernev, 2009; Hamilton & Biehal, 2005; Su, 2016), and the drive to accomplish tasks may reflect a desire to fit into the group or to meet its expectations (Cheng & Lam, 2013). Chinese culture is a typical sample for interdependent self-constual (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

Independent 'self' embraces specific morals, shapes, skills, and other ideals that uphold self-esteem (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). The thoughts and actions of independent people are aimed to enhance one's own ability to stand apart from others. Independent 'self' bestow greater autonomy and each person is considered as a discrete entity, independent of others. These individuals have open boundaries between themselves and others. People with this 'self' value personal goal more than others' goals and they place emphasis on internal ability, exceptionality, self-expression, and being direct in communication (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yates & de Oliveira, 2016). They are always promotion oriented, focus on positive outcomes, value gains rather than losses, and display risk-taking behavior (Chernev, 2009; Hamilton & Biehal, 2005; Su, 2016). American culture is the typical sample for independent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

It is well known that Asian and American cultures are different, but differences also exist in Asian internal culture, such as between Chinese and Korean cultures. Previous studies have reported that Americans display a stronger "individualistic self" and a weaker "collective self" than do Koreans and Japanese (Kashima et al., 1995), and it has also been reported that Asian students were more

interdependent than American students (Cross, 1995). Americans often lean toward direct and independent communication styles to navigate conflict and to be singled out from the general populous. Both Chinese and Korean have relatively high levels of a need for self-abasement, socially-oriented accomplishment, persistency, order, moderate levels of autonomy, esteem, dominance, dependency and low levels of individually oriented accomplishment, connection, passion, exhibition, heterosexuality, and power (Bond and Hwang, 1986). However, it has also been reported that the Chinese culture is more independent than other Asian cultures (Li et al., 2006). When compared to Koreans, who are highly interdependent, Chinese also lean toward more direct and independent communication styles and are more likely to stand out from the community in order to accomplish goals.

Manager-Subordinate Communication in Different Cultures

People in different cultures may differ in ways of thinking, behaving, and engaging with the world (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Previous studies have performed various cross-cultural studies in management field, but less attention is paid on the degree of perceived opinion acceptance, appeal and reliance from subordinate's perspective in manager-subordinate communication. The present study wanted to examine the three aspects from self-construal level.

Opinion acceptance refers to the degree of subordinates' opinion accepted by their superior. People in collectivistic cultures are more likely to endorse interdependent self, which place much importance on group harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Uchida & Ogihara, 2012). Different opinion came from subordinates may suggest conflict with superior, which has a destructive effect on harmonious relationships. In addition, previous study has also revealed that decisions are always made by the superiors without the subordinates' participation and the subordinates just need to execute the decisions in high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 2000). It may considered to challenge superior's authority when subordinate propose their personal discrepant opinions, especially in public occasions. Thus, people in collectivistic culture and/or with high power distance may perceived less probability for their opinion to be accepted by their superiors. Nevertheless, in individualistic cultures, independent self is endorsed more and people always heavily weigh uniqueness in group and seek the achievement of one's personal goal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Uchida & Ogihara, 2012). Divergent thoughts, opinions are advocated in independent self-construal culture and subordinates do not worry about the probable bad relationships due to the inconsistent opinions with their superiors. Often, countries in this culture have relatively low power distance, in which employees consider that they have rights to participate in making decisions that concern them (Sagie and Aycan, 2003). Thus, subordinates in independent culture may consider that their opinions are more likely to be accepted by their superiors than people in interdependent culture. Both China and Korea are collectivist countries with high power distance, but the individualism trend in China is stronger than Korea (Hofstede, 2011), America is a typically individualistic country. Based on this background, it is expected that American subordinates may consider their opinions to be accepted by their superiors much easier than Chinese and Korean subordinates, and Korean subordinates may consider their opinion to be accepted least by their superiors when compared with the other two countries.

Subordinate appeal refers to the level of subordinates appealing for personal feelings and claims on their work to their superior. Conflicts are unavoidable in manager-subordinates relationship, but how to deal with it may be associated with particular cultural context (Liu and Chen, 2002). China is a country in the influence of Confucianism for a long time, which is in favor of yielding

and compromising principle. Chinese worker's behavior are also affected by Confucianism as it is helpful to promote group harmony and social order (Leung et al., 2002). Further, interdependent self is proved to be high context-sensitivity, prefer socially engaging emotions, and indirect communication (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011; Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001), and they are also more likely to take conflict personally (Kim, Yamaguchi, Kim, & Miyahara, 2015). Nguyen and Yang (2012) found that when a Chinese subordinates in conflict with their supervisor, they often chose indirect, harmony-preserving strategies, particularly when they were older and more interaction adept. In addition, keeping a good subordinate-manager relationship is proved to increase employee's job satisfaction and further leads to increased productive work behaviors (Zhang & Deng, 2016), which may improve the impression of an excellent employee in their superior to acquire career promotion. Thus, Chinese subordinates may be inclined to avoid voicing their appeal and claims to their superiors. However, it is different in Western culture which is in favor of the values of individualism. Jehn and Weldon (1997) reported that Chinese managers tended to handle conflict in a more passive way, such as avoiding, whereas American managers preferred direct or solution-driven styles. These results were further confirmed by Yuan (2010), who found that American employees were more likely to confront a conflict in general than Chinese employees. Kim et al. (2007) found this difference also existed in Asian cultures internal. They compared how Chinese, Japanese, and Korean employees resolved a conflict with their supervisors and the results revealed that Koreans were more likely to use a compromise style compared with Chinese and Japanese. Thus, we speculate that subordinates who treat conflict in a passive and compromise way may be less likely to appeal for their feeling and claims to their superiors.

Subordinate reliance refers to the degree of subordinates' reliance on their superior. Previous studies have found that individuals, who are in a collectivist cultures, are generally interdependent within their groups, such as family, tribe, nation and so on. In contrast, people are usually autonomous and independent from their in-groups in individualist cultures (Triandis, 2001). Wang and Gagne (2012) also found that employees in China (which is always considered as a collectivist culture) had lower average autonomous work motivation than employees in Canada (which is always considered as an individualist culture). As people with interdependent self-construal always avoid mistakes, negative outcomes and undesired end states, and do not want to take risk (Chernev, 2009; Hamilton & Biehal, 2005; Su, 2016), even there is an interrogations, they are more vulnerable to comply compared to people with independent self-construal (Oeberst & Wu, 2015). It reasonable for us to believe subordinates with interdependent self-construal are more likely to rely on their superiors in contrast to those with independent self-construal.

College students are the upcoming human resources in any job market and it is expected that most will be employed in the near future. Intercultural management is a more significant challenge for them than for experienced employees. Before new employees gain experience on how to interact and collaborate with their superiors, they often act according to their own expectations which are usually affected by cultural context. Therefore, it is important to compare the differing expectations of cross-cultural college students with regard to manager-subordinate communication and to determine how to aid them in understanding managers from other cultures in order to be more prepared for the globalized job market. America is a typical sample of independent self-construal and China and Korea are typical samples for interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1994), but with the reform and open policy, Chinese society has changed a lot in recent decades and its culture may also change. Thus, college students in these three cultures were choose

to examine the cultural differences in expectation of manager-subordinate communication in self-construal perspective. Based on the above, the following hypotheses were formed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): For 'self-construal dependency', Americans are less interdependent than Chinese in construing relationships between self and others (H1a); Chinese are less interdependent than Koreans (H1b).

Hypothesis 2 (H2): For 'perceived opinion acceptance', American subordinate' opinion are perceived as more likely to be accepted by their managers than that of Chinese subordinates (H2a); Chinese subordinates' opinion are expected to be accepted more readily by their superiors than that of Korean subordinate personnel (H2b).

Hypothesis 3 (H3): For 'the expectation of subordinate appeal toward managers', American subordinates will more likely voice personal feelings and claim on their work to superiors than Chinese subordinates (H3a); Chinese subordinates will more likely appeal and claim to their superiors than Korean subordinates (H3b).

Hypothesis 4 (H4): For 'reliance', American subordinates will less likely rely on their managers in work and emotion perspectives than Chinese subordinates (H4a); Chinese will less likely to rely on their superiors than Korean subordinates (H4b).

Method

Survey Construction

In total there were four parts to the questionnaire, which included 1) the interdependent self-construal, 2) opinion acceptance, 3) subordinate appeal, and 4) subordinate reliance. The first part of the self-construal included 6 items generated from Singelis' Self-construal Scale (Singelis, 1994). The remaining three sections were developed by the researchers. The original survey was developed in English, and thereafter translated into Chinese and Korean. Back-translation processes were conducted to ensure the validity of the translations. All the constructs showed acceptable reliability: interdependent self-construal ($N = 6$), Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.64$; subordinate perceived opinion acceptance ($N = 8$), Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.56$; subordinate appeal ($N = 6$), Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.67$; subordinate reliance ($N = 6$), Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.56$.

The questionnaires were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. All constructs were scored by summing the values of each item. The questionnaires were written from the point of view of lower level subordinates who generally did not have much authority in an organization.

Respondent

A total of 100 Chinese (male 70, female 30; mean age = 21.6), 100 Koreans (male 53, female 47; mean age = 23.0) and 100 Americans (male 73, female 27; mean age = 23.5) were recruited to complete the questionnaire. All were junior level or higher college students since these students were considered to be closer candidates to being entry-level subordinates in an organization, and their expectations for manager-subordinate communication would be representative of new employees in their culture.

Results

The descriptive statistics of each dependent variable were shown in Table 1. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test the four hypotheses and the results supported our

hypotheses. Culture had significant univariate effect on all the dependent variables (see Table 2). The Waller-Duncan tests showed that Koreans (M = 3.48) had a higher score of interdependent self-construal than Chinese (M = 3.26) which in turn was higher than American (M = 2.80). For opinion acceptance, Koreans (M = 2.65) had the lowest score, Americans scored the highest (M = 3.53) and Chinese (M = 3.17) achieved a score in between. On the scale of subordinate appeal, there was a gradually increasing trend, Koreans (M = 2.13) were the least likely to appeal, followed by Chinese (M = 2.50) and American (M = 2.89). However, for subordinate reliance, Koreans scored the highest (M = 3.65), then the Chinese (M = 3.00), and Americans scored the lowest (M = 2.77).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Variables

Culture	N	Cultural Interdependency		Opinion acceptance		Subordinate appeal		Subordinate reliance	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
American	100	2.80	0.48	3.53	0.42	2.89	0.51	2.77	0.36
Chinese	100	3.26	0.51	3.17	0.36	2.50	0.51	3.00	0.31
Korean	100	3.48	0.56	2.65	0.41	2.13	0.61	3.65	0.54

Table 2: MANOVA Testing Results for Variables according to Culture

Dependent Variable	F (2, 299)	p
Interdependency	45.26	<0.001**
Opinion acceptance	126.64	<0.001**
Subordinate appeal	48.30	<0.001**
Subordinate reliance	69.59	<0.001**

*** Result is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

In addition, Pearson bivariate correlations were conducted between interdependency and the other variables. Interdependency is negatively correlated with opinion acceptance (r = - 0.42, p < 0.001) and subordinate appeal (r = - 0.42, p < 0.001), and positively correlated with subordinate reliance (r = 0.40, p < 0.001).

Discussion

The present study found that American endorsed an independent self-construal most, while Korean endorsed interdependent self-construal most, and Chinese were between them. In manager-subordinates interaction, America thought their opinions could be easily accepted by their superiors, appealed toward superior most and relied on superior least. However, Korean were contrary to American, who considered their opinions would be accepted by their superior least, appealed to superior least and relied on their superior most. Chinese fell in between. This findings has important theoretical implications for cross-cultural studies. First, our study is the first to examine subordinate's perceived opinion acceptance, appeal and reliance simultaneously from self-construal level, which enriches cross-cultural studies in management field. Second, the study not only compares Asian cultures (e.g. Chinese and Korean) and non-Asian cultures (e.g., American), from the perspective of qualitative difference, but also compares the cultural differences within Asian cultures (e.g. Chinese vs Korean), from the perspective of qualitative difference. The most important significance of the study is its practical implications for cultural competency education. As China has become one of the most influential markets in the world,

many foreign companies have established offices and have expatriate employees working in China. Based on our findings, suggestions were made to help American and Korean students develop better culture competency and be more prepared to work in China.

First, for American students who are going to be expatriated to develop their career in China, we offer the following three suggestions:

Refrain from standing out. The results that Chinese were more interdependent than Americans confirmed our H1a. Chinese society is relatively collective and places priority on the benefit of the organization over individual objectives. One important manifestation of collectivism and an interdependent concept of self is that Chinese put more attention on the 'face' or the public image and reputation of someone and harmony with others (Graham and Lam, 2003). Whereas, Americans are more individualistic (Hofstede, 2011) and more concerned with their own performance. That is, America is more task-based while China is more relationship-based (Chong et al., 2015; Hooker, 2003). Thus, it is much better for American expatriates dispatching to China to change their work style, for example, change their focus from emphasizing individuality and uniqueness to paying more attention to good relationships with others.

Rephrase the way you communicate to a superior. Based on the results of H2a, the level of opinion acceptance for Americans from a subordinate to his superior was much higher than for Chinese employee. This means that American subordinates comparatively are more accustomed to sharing their opinions in a free atmosphere without worrying that their opinion will be criticized by a superior. However, the situation is different in Chinese society. Chinese highly regard their reputation and to lose face is considered very serious (Graham and Lam, 2003) and building a good subordinate-manager relationship is important for work career (Zhang, Deng, & Wang, 2014; Zhang, Deng, Zhang, & Hu, 2016). Therefore, Americans dispatched to work in China should be careful to raise differing opinions in a courteous, euphemistic and devoted manner. With regard to constructive criticism, one would want to take into consideration the other's efforts to save face and have this conversation privately, discreetly and tactfully. Refrain from proving someone wrong or criticizing them in public. This is considered losing face for Chinese and may result in an outcome contrary to what you had hoped for.

Respect the hierarchical position officially and personally. The result that American employees were more likely to voice their feelings or claims to managers than Chinese employees were was consistent with H3a. American employees often consider their supervisors as close working colleagues and they feel they can express their concerns about unfair treatment or complaints without worrying about potential future repercussions or disadvantages. However, China is a country with high level of power distance (Hofstede, 2011) and the hierarchical structure of authority is more clearly seen in the Chinese organizational culture. If an individual is a lower level of the hierarchy, there is an expectation of proper manner and respectful treatment of superiors at all times, regardless of whether you are in the workplace or a private settings. Therefore, Americans working in China need to understand and adapt to this system. Our recommendation is to choose appropriate times and occasions (i.e., when your supervisor is in a good mood) to express your needs and desires in a relatively indirect way.

For Korean students planning to work in China, we recommend the following:

Respect the rights of others to contribute. The results revealed that Koreans were the most interdependent when compared with Chinese and Americans (H1b). Koreans working in China should cultivate their independence to adapt more to the Chinese culture. And Korean expatriate managers dispatched to China should refrain from forcing or insisting that Chinese employees

follow as did employees in Korea, because Chinese employees have a stronger tendency to pursue individual will or express their opinions. Therefore, it is recommended that Korean managers in China assist their Chinese subordinates to trust them but at the same time leave a certain degree of autonomy to the individual.

Be assertive and involved during meetings. According to the result of H2b, it is proved that the Korean subordinate's opinion acceptance level is much lower than that in the organizational culture of the Chinese. Korean subordinates often unconsciously refrain from offering ideas during work meetings due to their expectation of rejection. This might account for the higher degree of tolerance in Koreans over the Chinese (Hofstede, 2011), which indicated that Koreans were more likely to try to control their desires and impulses. However, the Chinese organizational atmosphere is relatively more easygoing than is the Korean. Therefore, Korean expatriates need to develop a more assertive and participatory style when attending work meetings rather than just displaying a wait-and-see attitude as they would in the Korean workplace. This could be adversely interpreted by Chinese managers as not being serious or a lack of sincerity. Still, it is not recommended to challenge authority in a direct way since saving face remains an important element for Chinese managers.

State your case confidently when necessary. Based on the result of H3b, the Koreans had more difficulty in voicing their opinions and freely making claims with regard to their feelings than did the Chinese and the Americans, which was consistent with previous studies (Yoon and Jepsen, 2008; Hofstede, 2011). This result may be ascribed to the polarity of distance between directive leadership and individual performance as compared to Chinese workers (Lee *et al.*, 2011). The correlation results, being that the more interdependent the culture, the less expected acceptance level of managers to subordinates' opinions is, are also confirmed. As the Korean culture is highly interdependent, superiors are more likely to be considered an authority and are not to be challenged by Korean subordinates. Thus, it is almost a tacit rule in Korean organizational society that employees do not leave the workplace until all work a superior has assigned has been completed even though this may require many extra work hours to finish and happens frequently. However, Chinese may be more likely to appeal to their superiors when they are confronted with a similar situation as they know their opinion will be probably be considered if they offer valid reasons. Therefore, Koreans working in China should express themselves more confidently and boldly without worrying overmuch as they would have in Korea.

Pursue more independency on individual work rather than focusing mainly on relationships. The results showed that Korean employees were more reliant on their superiors than were Chinese employees. That is to say, the Koreans focus more on the relationship with the superior than individual achievement when compared with Chinese employees; whereas a Chinese manager may expect an employee to take more initiative and to be more independent when dealing with work issues. Consequently, Korean expatriates in China should take more care with regard to individual performance and not rely on their superiors for every insignificant matter. Yet, it is still very important to build good relationships with superiors in the Chinese organizational culture in order to foster smooth working environments.

There were also some shortages in this study. First of all, only student population were included in our study whose expectation may not represent the expectation of employee who were on-job completely. Future studies with employees on-job is needed to examine this question in depth. Second, we compared the expectation of subordinate-manager in different cultures only in self-construal perspective, and whether the predictive effect of self-construal level is stronger than

national-level is still unknown. Further studies are needed to compare the two levels simultaneously.

Conclusion

This study compared Chinese, Korean and American cultures from self-construal perspective, and investigated the influence of self-construal on manager-subordinate communication as perceived by college students. Results found that Korean culture was the most interdependent, American culture was the most independent, and Chinese culture was between the two. In addition, the more interdependent the culture is, the less expected acceptance level of managers to subordinates' opinions and appealing tendency of subordinates for personal feelings and claims is, and the more reliant subordinates are on their managers.

Conflicts of interest

No conflicts of interest are declared.

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