WED course embraced a dialogical approach to the design, coordination, and collaboration of global, telecollaborative learning activities (Burniske, 2001). Dialogue and inquiry may prove difficult, however, for participants conditioned by hierarchical social systems reinforced through prescribed curricula and administrative hegemony. Nevertheless, a global, telecollaborative learning activity requires a departure from centralized discursive habits to a more democratic, decentralized discourse in which every participant has a voice in the discussion and an impact on the project's design, coordination, and collaboration. In this particular project, the instability of political systems, coupled with cultural respect for authority, had conditioned some participants to wait for an explicit invitation rather than make the impolite gesture of raising a question or criticizing someone else's work. Exacerbating matters was the fact that participants came from cultures steeped in oral traditions that did not embrace written communication until a relatively short time ago (Henige, 1974; White et al., 2001).

Human concerns such as these, which manifested themselves within a dynamic, adaptive and self-organizing web of complex systems, inspired this study's methodology. Quantitative measures would fail to capture the dynamic qualities and tremendous complexities of this project. If we look exclusively at the numbers, we find that 30 educators in two developing nations on opposite sides of the African continent collaborated over an 8-week period to devise learning units that integrated computer technology and the theme of sustainable development with existing curricula. However, such findings fail to describe the manner in which participants accomplished this goal, a manner best revealed through qualitative research methods. In this instance, the project and subsequent study have demonstrated the importance of fostering an online community of inquiry for educators in developing countries. Rather than waiting for national ministries to issue prescribed curricula or technology standards, this group of educators from Ghana and Uganda established an online community brave enough to ask questions, secure enough to critique nascent ideas, and free enough to engage in

the social construction of innovative methods for teaching and learning. □

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Self-Construal, Facework, and Conflict Styles Among Cultures in Online Learning Environments

by Sharon L. Walsh, Ethel Gregory, Yvonne Lake, and Charlotte N. Gunawardena

□ This exploratory study examined self-construal and conflict styles in an online learning environment by conducting face-to-face or e-mail interviews of participants from six cultural groups. Using a qualitative research design, it addressed the following questions: How do individuals of different cultures reinforce face-

work in online learning environments? Do the conflict styles of online learners differ among different cultures? Is self-construal related to conflict styles in online learning environments? In evaluating responses to the three scenarios presented in this study, we found that regardless of cultural heritage, the majority of participants showed independent self-construal in response to questions dealing with perceptions and interdependent self-construal when faced with conflict situations.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is increasingly being used to facilitate the teaching and learning process in Web-based, online courses. This format offers the advantage of time and place independence and provides for social interaction in an otherwise isolated learning environment (McDonald & Gibson, 1998). There is a dearth of research on how culture-related factors influence group interaction when individuals interact in a non face-to-face (non-F2F) communication medium.

Self-construal

Numerous studies have investigated self-construal in relation to face negotiation. *Self-construal* is defined as one's conception of oneself or one's self-image and is composed of interdependent and independent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Interdependent self-construal is the self defined by relationships with others and especially close others, such as mother or sister (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The basis of this self-construal is that the self is "connected to others" (Cross, 1997) and that relationships are integral parts of the person's very being (p. 5). Markus and Kitiyama stated that with interdependent self-construal, "behavior is determined and contingent on, and to a large extent, organized by what the actor perceives to be thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship" (p. 227). This behavior is representative of collectivist cultures described by Hofstede (1983), which are characterized by a rigid social framework with distinct in-group (close family kin) and out-group members, with in-group members conforming to group norms and working together cooperatively (Chen & Starosta, 1998). Mexico, Taiwan, Chile, India,

Hong Kong, and others represent collectivist cultures (Hofstede).

In contrast, independent self-construal is the model of self based on characteristics that are unique to oneself. With independent self-construal, "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, 1991, p. 226). This self-construal is similar to Hofstede's (1983) individualistic culture, which emphasized self-esteem, self-identity, and self-image, with personal goals superceding those of the group, and competitive interactions the norm (Chen & Starosta, 1998). The United States, Australia, Great Britain, Denmark, and Canada are examples of countries representative of these cultures (Hofstede).

Self-construal is the individual-level equivalent of the cultural variability dimension of individualism-collectivism (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Kim et al., 1996). Gudykunst et al. argued that independent self-construal is associated with people of individualistic cultures, whereas interdependent self-construal is associated predominately with people of collectivist cultures.

The recognition of self (i.e., self-construal) is a powerful regulator of human behavior (Cross, 1997). Cross believed that it "directs perceptions, memory, and inference concerning both oneself and others" (p. 6). She also believed that self-construal partially determines emotional experiences, responsibility, and self-control.

Conflict

The data from a qualitative study by Gunawardena, Walsh, Reddinger, Gregory, Lake, and Davies (2002) suggested that self-construal may differ among the cultural groups studied, and that it may be a better predictor of conflict style than cultural identity. Likewise, in a quantitative study, Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) found that conflict management is determined, in part, by interdependent and independent self-construal and that self-construal "mediates the influence of cultural individualism-collectivism on an individual's behavior" (Oetzel, 1998, p. 134).

Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, and Yee-jung (2001) explored the effects of ethnic background, gender, and self-construal or self-image on conflict styles among African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, and Latin Americans and found that self-construal is a better predictor of individual conflict style than ethnic background. Specifically, self-construal types accounted for a statistically significant amount of variance in most of the conflict styles, whereas ethnic background did not account for any statistically significant differences in conflict styles. These findings are consistent with prior research that shows that self-construal is a better explanatory variable than ethnicity or culture for individuals' communication behavior (Ting-Toomey, Yee-jung, Shapiro, Garcia, Wright, & Oetzel, 2000). Thus, the way one behaves and the way conflicts are resolved will be determined, in part, by one's self-construal.

Face and Facework

The concept of face is directly related to self-construal. Cupach and Metts (1994) defined face as the:

conception of self that each person displays in particular interactions with others. When a person interacts with another, he or she tacitly presents a conception of who he or she is in that encounter and seeks confirmation for that conception. The individual offers an identity that he or she wants to assume and wants others to accept. (p. 3)

Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, and Takai (2000) described face as the representation of an individual's claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction, and described facework as the communicative strategies one uses to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person's face. For the purpose of this paper, *face* will be defined as an individual's claimed conception of his or her positive self-image within interpersonal interactions. *Facework* will be defined as the individual's intentions to portray his or her self-image in a positive manner to others by utilizing verbal, nonverbal, and self-representation acts to support his or her conception of face.

Self-face is the concern for one's own image, other-face the concern for another's image, and mutual-face the concern for both parties' images or the relationship (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Generally, individualist cultures have high self-face concerns whereas collectivist cultures have high other-face and mutual-face concerns (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi).

In a study of conflict styles, Rahim (1992) classified conflict styles into dominating, avoiding, integrating, compromising, and obliging. Ting-Toomey (1988) incorporated these conflict styles into her face negotiation theory. *Dominating* conflict style, which was the first type described by Rahim, emphasizes the importance of asserting and defending one's face or self-interest with the use of direct tactics to threaten the other party's face in order to defeat the other person for self-gain. This behavior is seen in individuals who are aggressively trying to win the conflict and do not care about the other's face. This is equivalent to independent self-construal. The second type of conflict style, *avoiding,* emphasizes obliging or saving the face of the other party involved in the conflict in order not to embarrass the other person's face directly. This behavior is seen in individuals who do not want to deal directly with the conflict or are concerned with maintaining relational harmony, and is related to interdependent self-construal. The third conflict style, *integrating,* emphasizes a mutual concern for both self-face and other-face by compromising or discussing the conflict in private. This behavior is seen in individuals who are interested in maintaining self- and other-face while dealing directly with the conflict in a private setting, and is related to both independent and interdependent self-construal. In *compromising* conflict style, a give-and-take solution is reached that accommodates both self- and other-face (i.e., mutual-face), and would characterize independent self-construal. Lastly, with *obliging* conflict style, one's self-face is relinquished at the expense of the other's face (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000) and would characterize interdependent self-construal. Independent self-construal is more self-face oriented whereas interdependent self-construal is more other-face and mutual-face oriented (Oetzel, 1998; Oetzel et al., 2001). During conflicts, dominating conflict style should be used by those with independent self-construal to enhance self-face, whereas

avoidance and integration should be used by those with interdependent self-construal to enhance other- and mutual-face (Oetzel). Investigations of these relationships by Oetzel and Oetzel et al. (2001) indicated that independent self-construal was related to self-face and dominating conflict style, and interdependent with other- and mutual-face and avoiding and integrating conflict style.

Oetzel et al. (2000) created a typology of facework behaviors and found that cultural variation and in-group and out-group boundaries influence the use of these facework behaviors. Their typology included obliging with avoiding behavior and compromising with integrating behavior to categorize facework into dominating, avoiding, and integrating facework behavior. The three factors represent specific moves that take place during conflict (Oetzel et al., 2000).

In the above study, Japanese respondents, overall, rated avoiding facework higher (interdependent self-construal) and integrating facework (both independent and interdependent self-construal) lower than did the U.S. respondents, which is consistent with prior research supporting face-negotiation theory (Oetzel, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), but these results contradict other studies that showed that Japanese respondents rated the effectiveness of dominating facework higher than did the U.S. respondents (Oetzel et al., 2000).

In an exploratory study investigating face negotiation among cultures in online learning environments, Gunawardena et al. (2002) found that Hispanic American and Native American cultures used more integrating conflict behaviors whereas Eastern Asian and Anglo Americans used more dominating conflict styles, contrary to the expectations of the researchers. These results suggest that self-construal in online environments may differ from face-to-face interactions.

Self-Construal and Facework in
Computer-Mediated Environments

Matheson and Zanna (1988) studied the effects of CMC on self-awareness, using subjects involved in either a face-to-face or a computer-mediated discussion. The subjects were expected to discuss situations and negotiate a solution. Matheson and Zanna divided self-awareness into two distinct categories: (a) private self-awareness (i.e., independent self-construal), which covers the "aspects of self . . . [one's] personal feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs that are enhanced in situations that induce introspection, for example, when striving to reach personal goals" (p. 222) and (b) public self-awareness (i.e., interdependent self-construal), which is defined by "aspects of self which are sensitive to attention and evaluation by others" and become heightened when "performing for an audience . . . [or when one is] a minority in a group" (p. 222). Those who used CMC had higher levels of private self-awareness, but lower public self-awareness and were much less inhibited than those who did not, allowing them to change opinions without losing face. Additionally, behavior was much more guarded when the identity of a participant was known. Those in face-to-face discussions had high levels of public awareness, relied on social norms for group decisions, and had to be concerned about both other- and mutual-face as well as self-face. During CMC, without titles, gender, or other status, the participants could focus on the issue under discussion rather than on the social acceptability of others who might have a face of authority (Matheson & Zanna). Thus, the subjects using CMC were less affected by others' perceptions of them, but more attuned to their own personal perceptions.

Purpose of the Study

All of the previous research, with the exception of studies by Matheson and Zanna (1988) and Gunawardena et al. (2002), has investigated self-construal and conflict only in face-to-face interactions. There is a paucity of research relating self-construal, conflict styles, and ethnic identity in online learning environments. Possibly, this may be the first study to investigate these issues. For this reason, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How do individuals of different cultures reinforce facework in online learning environments?

2. Do the conflict styles of online learners differ among different cultures?

3. Is self-construal related to conflict styles in online learning environments?

Methods

Design

We used a qualitative research paradigm and emergent design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to answer our research questions by using both face-to-face and online interviews with students who had experience with computer conferencing. Six cultural groups were purposefully chosen: (a) Anglo American, (b) Eastern Asian, (c) Indian Subcontinent, (d) Hispanic American, (e) Middle Eastern, and (f) Native American. All of these cultural groups are identified by Hofstede (1983) as collectivist cultures except for the Anglo American group, which is an individualist culture. Participants, who were referred to us by colleagues, friends, and fellow students, were purposefully chosen for their self-reported identification with one of the six cultural groups. Each cultural group included three participants except the Middle Eastern group, which had two participants. Of the participants, 8 were graduate students and 8 were undergraduate students at a large southwestern university in the United States; 1 was a business professional living in the midwestern United States. Initially, data were analyzed only for the 16 student participants; later a separate analysis was performed for the student group as a whole, and the business professional. The 13 women and 4 men were all adults aged 19 years or older.

There were 17 interviews. Participants were given the option of being interviewed either face-to-face or online; 2 elected to do face-to-face interviews and 15 responded with online interviews. During the interviews, the participants were asked to respond to three hypothetical scenarios that asked how the participants would introduce themselves in an online course, how they would foster perceptions for the instructor and classmates about themselves in the online course, and how they would react to a demeaning, personal attack by a fellow classmate in an online discussion. The three hypothetical scenarios (see Appendix A) relate to self-disclosure (independent self-construal), perception of others (interdependent self-construal), and conflict style, respectively. The data (i.e., the participants' responses about the three hypothetical scenarios) were collected in the spring semester of 2002.

Data Analysis

Most qualitative data analyses begin by developing codes from interview transcripts; then these codes are grouped according to similar processes, patterns, or themes; and finally, a small set of generalizations are made from the consistencies uncovered in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We first examined our interview data to determine underlying themes and categories. The qualitative data were then analyzed using HyperResearch version 2.5 (2002), a qualitative data analysis software program. This program first asks the user to define codes from interview transcripts that have common themes. The user then selects text and encodes it with these user-defined codes. For example, angry, competitive, friendly, and interested were some of the codes we defined from common themes in our interview transcripts. HyperResearch was then used to determine code frequency among the cultural groups. We defined 66 codes and grouped them according to interdependent and independent self-construal based on their association with others (interdependent) or on self (independent): we considered 19 of these codes reflective of independent self-construal, and 47 reflective of interdependent self-construal.

Results and Discussion

We report and discuss Scenarios 1 and 2 together, and Scenario 3, which dealt with conflict, separately.

Scenarios 1 and 2

Scenarios 1 and 2 were associated with independent and interdependent self-construals. We expected those participants from more collectivist leaning cultures (Eastern Asian, Hispanic American, Indian Subcontinent, Middle Eastern, Native American) to respond in terms of others, and those from individualistic cultures (Anglo

American) to answer in terms of self. The results of this study did not support this expectation. Most of the participants would willingly have discussed both personal and professional aspects about themselves. They were never hesitant in describing themselves. One Indian Subcontinent participant said, "I would respond with honesty and truthfulness. To me, these questions don't seem 'dangerous'." This seemed to be a common reaction among the participants.

The questions asked in the first scenario addressed issues related to independent self-construal (self-face), because we asked for personal information. In general, most participants felt comfortable when discussing themselves. Some participants (5 of the 16) were reluctant to discuss certain personal information when introducing themselves. These concerns were voiced by 2 participants from the Indian subcontinent, 2 of the 3 Hispanic Americans, and 1 of the Native Americans. One Anglo American did not want to disclose professional information because the participant was "looking to leave the group and that might effect the way people treat me in my current group." Otherwise, all participants felt free to discuss both their professional and personal lives. Thus, when revealing personal information, all respondents acted with a high degree of independent self-construal.

Scenario 2 was related to how others view one's self and, thus, was associated with interdependent self-construal. The responses to these questions, which dealt with perceptions, were almost always in reference to that person (self) rather than to the group (others). Those participants most concerned about how others viewed them were participants from Eastern Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East. Anglo Americans and Native Americans had the fewest answers associated with interdependent self-construal. However, two of the three participants from the Indian subcontinent wanted their classmates to view them as competition for getting the highest grades. One of these participants stated that "I would want everyone in the class to know that I can get the job done" and the other said that "I would want them to view me as a threat, because I am going to head [sic], you know head on head with them as far as the class is concerned," both asserting

their self-image above the actions of others. Only one Middle Eastern participant seemed to be overly concerned about group identity, saying, "I don't want to come off as being too culturally different as I think that makes the situation complicated and hard to explain if you are carrying conversations online." Most participants wanted to put forth a good online impression for both the instructor and their fellow classmates by writing grammatically correct responses. Most felt that this was one way that this impression could be reinforced. A participant from the Indian subcontinent said that "whatever comments I post online, I would make sure they are well thought out, sound and correct academically." This theme was most prevalent for those participants from countries other than the United States. Most participants wanted the perceptions of both the instructor and their fellow classmates to be the same.

One explanation for these results may be that many of the participants from Eastern Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent had been in North America for a relatively long time (more than five years) and may have become acculturated to the United States, thus assuming more of the attitudes and perceptions of self common here. Additionally, they believe that grammatically correct written English is a very important factor in these perceptions. These participants probably have had time to perfect their written English.

We thought that respondents would feel more open and thus would discuss aspects about their personal lives more freely in a computer-mediated environment. For the most part, our supposition was supported. A computer-mediated environment has the capability to remove status, gender, and language barriers and equalize all aspects of the discussions, thus influencing public and private awareness (i.e., interdependent and independent self-construal) by increasing private self-awareness (independent self-construal), but decreasing public self-awareness (interdependent self-construal) (Matheson & Zanna, 1988). Our study did not support this assertion by Matheson and Zanna. Most participants stated that they would have answered most questions, but they would not answer the questions dealing with personal in-

terests as openly. One participant stated, "If I do not know anyone, I would actually feel more open in a way since I will not feel there are preconceived notions." However, another said, "I would feel uncomfortable answering personal questions related to my family and where I live (since it would be difficult for me to feel comfortable sharing that info with people that I can't see)." Reticence to discuss aspects of a personal nature was revealed regardless of the cultural group.

Scenario 3

This scenario focused on conflict behaviors during online discussions. The responses to these questions address the way an individual would handle conflict in this environment and can be divided into factors relating to interdependent self-construal and independent self-construal. Of the initial 66 codes, 25 were applicable to these questions. Most of them (20) were associated with interdependent self-construal in which the participants would have been more concerned with other- or mutual-face. For example, the participants would have ignored the message, asked for clarification, cleared the misunderstanding, felt that there was miscommunication, lost self-confidence, remained nonconfrontational, and so forth. Only 5 of our defined codes were related to independent self-construal, with the participants demanding an apology, being angry, being offended, and so forth. In general, most participants wanted to resolve the conflict in a nonconfrontational manner, suggesting a more interdependent self-construal in conflict situations. Several wanted to enlist outside help (i.e., the instructor) to resolve the situation. Their method of resolving the dispute, most often, was getting further clarification because of misinterpretation.

Based on our review of the literature, we thought that the collectivist (East Asian, Hispanic American, Indian subcontinent, Middle Eastern, and Native American) cultures would show a higher degree of interdependent self-construal and would enlist the group members to help mediate conflicts, whereas the individualists (Anglo American) would show more independent self-construal behaviors and

would not get the group to help. Our data suggest that this is not the case. There seemed to be no relationship between conflict behaviors, self-construal, and collectivist–individualist orientation. All participants used conflict behaviors that are more representative of interdependent self-construal.

Few responded in ways representing independent self-construal. Of those who did, a Hispanic American and a Native American would have been angry. One Hispanic American participant, one Middle Eastern participant, and two Indian subcontinent participants asserted that the "person who had sent the demeaning message had probably misunderstood them" and a Native American would have been offended.

All participants wanted the demeaning message clarified and the misunderstanding cleared up. Many participants wanted further explanation about the demeaning message. One Native American and two Anglo Americans would have ignored the demeaning message. A participant from the Indian subcontinent said, "Conflict, is something I am not very comfortable with and I would try to avoid it or minimize it at all costs." An Eastern Asian would "try to ensure that this was done in a calm fashion, as a reaction in a negative fashion, e.g., belittling the participant, or . . . with an angry tone, would only cause people to perceive an even worse image of myself."

In general, the Anglo Americans had more conflict styles associated with independent self-construal, but they also exhibited behaviors associated with interdependent self-construal. One would "attempt to undermined [sic] that individuals self-perception of grandeur, through methods just short of flaming him or her," but this same participant also might have "let it pass, ultimately eliminating my involvement" and "would try to clarify the situation," indicating that this participant used both interdependent and independent self-construal conflict behaviors.

The results of Scenario 3 support those of Sato and Cameron (1999) because the cultural group to which one belonged seemed to have little bearing on self-construal. Participants exhibited varying types of self-construal, with no

culture strictly using either independent or interdependent self-construal in relation to conflict style. We agree that conflict style probably has more to do with self-construal than with cultural identity.

An important factor for this may have been the online environment. Independent self-construal was not as important here as it would be in a face-to-face conflict. There was no need to assert one's self because the parties involved did not know each other personally. Several participants mentioned the lack of nonverbal cues as a limitation to conflict resolution in the online environment. When referring to this, one participant said, "Maybe emotions weren't there and that's why the person misunderstood what you were trying to say so I think that's the only problem because you can't form any interpersonal bonds with the people in the class."

We initially eliminated the one respondent who was a business professional. However, upon further consideration, we elected to include these responses because they showed differences from those of the student group. This participant was the only one who "would expect an apology," but "would send a clarifying, polite response," and would no longer participate if the apology was not forthcoming.

The prevalence of the conflict behaviors associated with interdependent self-construal among the students is probably related to their role as students. Students live in a world of "others" and are required to get approval for almost everything they do from an instructor, a parent, an advisor, a committee member, a dean, and so on. They write papers, take tests, and give presentations that are assessed by others. They are connected to others in almost every facet of their lives. Because of this, it is only natural that they feel a connectedness to others, especially in a conflict situation.

In contrast, the participant who was not a student had many more conflict behaviors representative of independent self-construal. This person probably leads a more independent life, without the necessary influence of so many others. Business professionals and other nonstudents are probably not as constrained by others and thus are not as influenced by them and will exhibit a more independent self-construal. We

believe that this may account, in part, for the differences observed between students and the business professional in our study.

Conclusions and Implications

A computer-mediated learning environment may enhance facework and conflict resolution. Cultural group foundations of individualism–collectivism are not necessarily influential with individuals' responses within online communication. In evaluating the three scenarios presented in this study, both expected and surprising responses were evident. Regardless of cultural heritage, the majority of individuals in this study expressed that the establishment of positive face in an online course environment is important. Similarly, most groups generally wanted to project a positive, knowledgeable image, showing that they most likely have an independent self-construal. With regards to conflict behavior, the cultural groups represented in this study varied in their responses, but most seemed to project a more interdependent self-construal than in the responses to perception questions.

As noted in the methods section, participants in this study represented six cultural groups. Although participants' origins represented a mixture of cultural differences, each individual had been living in the United States for several years. They probably had incorporated many American attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, we must be cautious about generalizations relating to cultural differences. Although the participants had different cultural backgrounds, they still exhibited similar self-construals when responding to our scenarios. There seemed to be little, if any, relationship between self-construal and cultural identity.

In the future, this study will be expanded to include more participants and to use quantitative methods, such as the use of pre-existing measures of self-construal and ethnic identity, to statistically determine relationships between variables representing self-construal. We may then elucidate the trends we observed in this study and strengthen our conclusions. Participants established in their country of origin and living within their traditional cultural en-

vironment would offer a better means of determining cultural influences related to self-construal. This type of study would alleviate acculturation toward one particular host country. Also, we would like to determine if self-construal differences exist among cultures within the United States. Such a study would probably allow for a better understanding of the results from the present study. Another recommendation for future research would be to study face negotiations in online courses outside of academia. Finally, a more gender-balanced subject group would allow the investigation of gender differences among online learning, face negotiations, and self-construal. □

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