When Conflict is Less Costly: Interdependence as a Buffer in Romantic Relationships

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Past research has demonstrated that individuals with an interdependent self-construal are buffered against relationship difficulties across several domains. We tested whether an interdependent self-construal can buffer individuals from experiencing some of the negative effects of daily conflict in romantic relationships. We conducted a 14-day daily experience study with 166 individuals in romantic relationships. Results of the multilevel moderation analyses demonstrated that on days when people experienced more conflict with their romantic partner than they typically did in their relationships, individuals with a less interdependent construal style experienced a significant decline in relationship satisfaction. In contrast, this effect was somewhat attenuated for individuals with a more interdependent self-construal style. These findings identify a group of individuals for whom relationship satisfaction is not as negatively impacted by daily relationship conflict and have important implications for couples therapy.

Keywords: romantic relationships, self-construal, relationship conflict, relationship satisfaction, daily experience methods

Les études passées ont démontrées que les individus ayant un concept de soi interdépendant sont protégés contre des difficultés relationnelles dans de nombreux domaines. Nous avons testé si un concept de soi interdépendant peut protéger les individus de certains aspects négatifs des conflits quotidiens dans les relations amoureuses. Nous avons effectué une étude de 14 jours avec 166 individus vivant une relation amoureuse. Les résultats ont démontré que, les participants ayant un concept de soi moins interdépendant éprouvaient une baisse significative de satisfaction conjugale les jours où ces derniers vivaient davantage de conflits avec leur partenaire amoureux que d'habitude. À l'inverse, cet effet était atténué chez les individus ayant un concept de soi plus interdépendant. Ces découvertes identifient un groupe d'individus pour qui les conflits conjugaux quotidiens ont un moins grand impact négatif sur leur niveau de satisfaction conjugale et ont d'importantes implications pour la thérapie de couple.

Mots-clés : relation amoureuse, concept de soi, conflits conjugaux, satisfaction conjugale, mesures de l'expérience quotidienne

Interpersonal conflict is an unpleasant and inevitable experience in all close relationships, including relationships among romantic partners. A large body of research on conflict in romantic relationships has documented their costs. More specifically, relationships characterized by conflict have decreased relationship satisfaction (Cramer & Jowett, 2010), are associated with poorer physical health outcomes (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005), and do not tend to last as long as relationships in which romantic partners experience lower levels of conflict (for a review, see Booth, Crouter, & Clements, 2001). However, recent research in relationship science suggests that conflict does not inevitably detract from the qualities of romantic relationships, as engaging actively and constructively with a partner when discussing relationship issues has the potential to actually benefit relationships (Gordon & Chen, 2015; McNulty & Russell, 2010). In this paper, we suggest that individual differences in *interdependent self-construal*, that is, the extent to which people value social relationships and connections with others

(Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994) will buffer individuals from experiencing some costs of interpersonal conflict in their romantic relationships.

Interdependence Self-Construal in Relationship

A great deal of psychological research has shown variations of self-construal in individuals. Those who are high in interdependent self-construal see themselves as fundamentally interconnected with others, and value conformity to group norms, others' expectations and group-related goals. Alternatively, those who are high in independent self-construal see themselves as being unique and autonomous, and tend to value personal achievements over group harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Cross-cultural research typically emphasizes differences in self-construal between Eastern and Western cultures: individuals in Eastern cultures typically have an interdependent self-construal and individuals in Western cultures typically have an independent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, a great deal of variability in self-construal also occurs within a given culture (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). In fact, interdependent and independent self-construals can coexist within the same individual (Singelis, 1994). This means that, although there are broad cultural differences in construal style, there is also a great deal of individual variation. Although independent self-construal continues to be an important construct, in this paper, we will focus on individual variation in interdependent self-construal or interdependence.

Interdependence affects the way individuals behave in romantic relationships. Emerging literature has demonstrated that interdependence buffers against relationship difficulties across several domains. For instance, a recent study examined the link between relationship costs or negative outcomes and avoidance goals, defined as goals to avoid disappointing one's partner (Impett, Le, Asyabi-Eshghi, Day, & Kogan, 2013). Results indicated that when making a sacrifice for avoidance goals, individuals high in interdependence were buffered against experiencing some of the emotional and relationship costs that were more typically experienced by people low in interdependence. The researchers conducted a 14-day daily experience study, which is a type of study in which participants completed short quantitative surveys for 14 consecutive days. The results demonstrated that individuals who were lower in interdependence felt inauthentic when they sacrificed for avoidance goals. This, in turn, has a negative impact on their emotional well-being and on the quality of their relationship. On the other hand, individuals high in interdependence feel authentic when sacrificing for avoidance goals. Thus, these individuals are buffered against the emotional and relational difficulties experienced by people low in interdependence (Impett et al., 2013).

In addition to being buffered against the negative consequences of sacrificing for avoidance goals, highly interdependent individuals are also buffered against negative consequences of suppressing negative emotions during sacrifice. The same study (Le & Impett, 2013) demonstrated that suppression of negative emotions during sacrifice was related to lower well-being and relationship quality in individuals with low interdependence, but was related to higher well-being and relationship quality in highly interdependent individuals. Furthermore, feelings of authenticity towards the sacrifice that is, feeling that the sacrifice was a genuine expression of one's "true" self, mediated the associations. Therefore, it was concluded that for individuals high in interdependence, the suppression of negative emotions can actually be beneficial.

Although, several studies have shown that interdependence buffers against negative aspects of relationships, no existing research has examined the role of interdependence in buffering against one of the most significant difficulties couples can face: relationship conflict. Relationship conflict can interfere with human's basic need for close, intimate relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and can lead to several adverse effects such as decline in relationship satisfaction (Cramer, 2002), well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and an increase in depressive symptoms (Mackinnon et al., 2012). Given that there will inevitably be times when couples need to navigate relationship conflicts, and since conflict in romantic relationships can have several adverse effects, it is important to investigate potential factors that might buffer people against experiencing drops in satisfaction in the face of conflict.

Past research has investigated cross-cultural differences in how couples deal with relationship conflict. Specifically, Yum (2004) examined individuals from three different cultures (US mainland, Hawaii, and South Korea) to explore the importance of culture and culturally constructed individual characteristics when romantic partners have conflicting needs. Yum demonstrated that during

conflict, individuals who are highly interdependent, regardless of their levels of independence, engage in more relationship maintaining behaviors and are also more willing to inhibit behaviors that may harm their relationship. Specifically, he found that individuals who were high in both interdependence and independence were most likely to display such relationship maintaining behaviors, and individuals who were high in interdependence but low in independence had the second greatest likelihood of engaging in these behaviors. However, Yum's study relies entirely on hypothetical scenarios, and does not focus on real conflicts in romantic relationships. Moreover, this study also does not provide any information about how self-construal, relationship maintaining behaviors, or relationship conflict may be related to relationship satisfaction (Yum, 2004).

Overview of Current Hypotheses

In light of these past studies, the current study examined whether an interdependent self-construal style buffers individuals against experiencing declines in relationship satisfaction when experiencing daily conflict in their romantic relationships. To our knowledge, no existing research has examined the relationship between interdependent self-construal, conflict and satisfaction in romantic relationships. We expected that the association between daily relationship difficulties operationalized in the current investigation as daily conflict between romantic partners and daily relationship satisfaction would be moderated by the extent to which individuals construe the self as interdependent with significant others. More specifically, we hypothesized that on days when people experience conflict with their romantic partner, individuals low in interdependence will experience a steep decline in relationship satisfaction. In contrast, we expected that this effect would be attenuated for people high in interdependence.

Method

Participants

We tested our hypothesis with data from a 14-day daily-experience study of individuals in romantic relationships. The sample consisted of 166 undergraduates who completed at least two daily experience surveys from a large public university in Ontario, Canada (89 female, 74 male, 3 other or preferred not to disclose). It should be noted that eight individuals were excluded from the dataset because they only completed one daily survey. Participants

received two course credits in exchange for their participation in the study. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 43 ($M = 19.28$, $SD = 3.13$). Although all the participants had been in their romantic relationship for at least three months, the length of the romantic relationship ranged from 3 months to 10 years ($M = 21$ months, $SD = 19$ months). Participants comprised a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds: 26% were European, 5% were African American, 33% were Asian, 7% were Latino or Mexican, 1% were Native American, 9% were Middle Eastern, and 19% were multi-ethnic or self-identified as "other".

Procedure

The first portion of the study was a background survey which was conducted in the lab. Students signed up for an individual one-hour session during which they completed a number of individual difference measures on the lab computer. After the completion of the background survey, the participants were emailed a link to the daily experience surveys. Each daily survey, which the participants were instructed to complete every night before bed, took 5-10 minutes to complete.

The participants were emailed reminders to complete the daily survey every night for 14 consecutive nights. After the 14 days were completed, the participants were sent an email which asked them to stop taking the daily surveys. All participants who completed at least two daily surveys were included in our final analyses ($N = 166$). Participants completed between two and 17 daily surveys ($M = 11.70$, $SD = 2.90$), as some participants continued to participate in the study even after receiving the email instructing them to discontinue their participation after completing all 14 surveys. Due to the fact that we have less than perfect compliance, there were a total of 835 days that people could have completed, but did not.

Measures

Self-construal was measured with 24 items developed by Singelis (1994) assessing interdependent self-construal ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.68$, 12 items, $\alpha = .72$) and independent self-construal ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 0.67$, 12 items, $\alpha = .65$). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Relationship commitment was measured using a 7-item measure that included items such as "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner". Participants rated their

agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 0.94$, $\alpha = .87$). Daily relationship satisfaction and daily conflict were both measured with a single item in order to minimize participant fatigue and reduce attrition (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). Daily relationship satisfaction was assessed with the item: "I felt satisfied with my relationship with my partner today" ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.52$), and daily conflict was measured with the item: "There was a great deal of conflict in my relationship today" ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.64$), both rated on a 7-point Likert scale.

Data Analytic Strategy

We analyzed the data with multi-level modeling using mixed models in SPSS 20.0 (IBM SPSS, 2011). We tested a two-level model where daily surveys are tested within people in order to avoid confounding within and between person effects (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The level 1 predictor (daily conflict) was partitioned into within and between person variance components, which were person-mean centered and aggregated, respectively. Both components were then included as main effects and interactions in the models.

Our hypothesis concerned the cross-level interaction between interdependent self-construal (level 2) and daily conflict (level 1), that is, the within person effect of daily conflict for people of varying levels of interdependence. We also controlled for this interaction at the between-person level in the analysis, as well as the main effect of independent self-construal, since independence can coexist with interdependence within a person (Singelis, 1994).

Furthermore, we tested simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the mean of interdependence.

Results

Preliminary statistical analyses revealed that the relationship satisfaction and relationship conflict variables had non-normal distributions. Relationship conflict had a positive skew of 1.52 ($SE = 0.06$) and a kurtosis of 1.31 ($SE = 0.12$). Relationship satisfaction had a negative skew of 1.19 ($SE = 0.06$) and a kurtosis of 0.95 ($SE = 0.12$). However, we conducted bootstrapping analyses which indicate that our results are consistent even when accounting for the skewness in the data.

Our hypothesis concerned a predicted interaction between interdependence and daily conflict in predicting relationship satisfaction. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. As expected, we found a significant interaction between daily conflict and interdependence predicting relationship satisfaction, ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$; 95% CI: [0.03, 0.23]). As expected, people lower in interdependence (those one standard deviation below the mean see Figure 1) experienced a steep decline in relationship satisfaction on days when they experienced more conflict than they typically did in their relationship ($b = -0.48$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$; 95% CI: [-0.54, -0.42]).

However, this effect was significantly attenuated for highly interdependent people ($b = -0.29$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$; 95% CI: [-0.35, -0.24]) as you can see in Figure 1. Importantly, the confidence intervals of the slopes do not overlap, indicating that they are

Table 1

Estimates of fixed effects

Parameters	b	SE	df	t	p	95% CI	
						LL	UL
Intercept	5.51	0.06	152.59	88.93	< .001	5.39	5.63
Daily Conflict (person-centered)	- 0.39	0.02	1474.70	- 19.08	< .001	- 0.43	- 0.35
Daily Conflict (aggregate)	- 0.53	0.07	180.62	- 7.78	< .001	- 0.66	- 0.39
Interdependence	0.09	0.09	152.73	1.02	.309	- 0.09	0.27
Independence	0.11	0.09	154.39	1.16	.250	- 0.08	0.29
Daily Conflict (person-centered) X Interdependence	0.14	0.03	1473.96	4.64	< .001	0.08	0.19
Daily Conflict (aggregate) X Interdependence	- 0.03	0.11	171.25	- 0.30	.766	- 0.25	0.18

Note. SE = standard error; df = degrees of freedom; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.
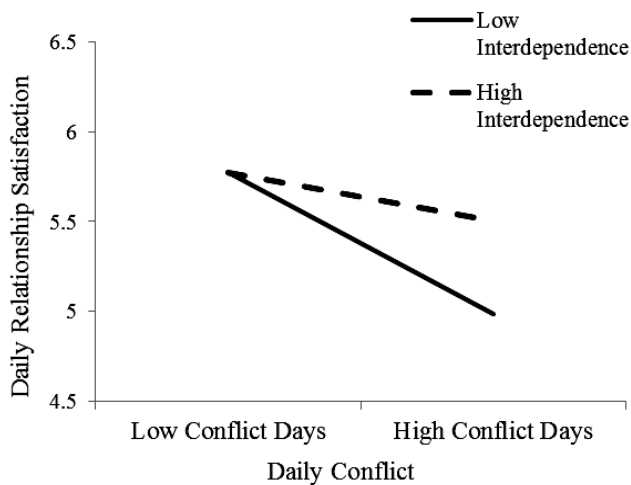
Figure 1. Interdependent self-construal moderates the link between daily conflict and daily relationship satisfaction.

significantly different from one another. Stated differently, on days when conflict was low, low interdependent individuals were just as satisfied as individuals higher in interdependence ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .33$; 95% CI: [-0.30, 0.10]). On the other hand, on days when conflict was high, highly interdependent individuals were more satisfied than individuals lower in interdependence ($b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .006$; 95% CI: [0.08, 0.48]). The results remained similar even after controlling for age, gender, relationship length and overall relationship commitment, showing that the effects observed are not being driven by these variables, nor by the result of highly committed and interdependent people.

Discussion

The results of this 14-day daily experience study of individuals in romantic relationships supported our hypothesis that construing the self as interdependent buffers against experiencing some of the daily costs of romantic relationship conflict. More specifically, whereas individuals with a less interdependent sense of self experienced dramatically lower relationship satisfaction when experiencing conflict with a romantic partner, this effect was somewhat attenuated for highly interdependent individuals. Interpreted differently, on days when couples experienced low levels of conflict in their relationship, individuals low as well as high in interdependence were equally satisfied. In contrast, on days when they experienced more conflict than they typically experienced in their romantic relationship, individuals higher in

interdependence experienced greater relationship satisfaction compared to individuals with lower interdependence.

Theoretical Contributions

The current investigation contributes to the developing literature in several key ways. First, this research contributes to a developing literature on the role of self-construal in shaping relationship processes. Previous research has focused on the specific relationship behavior of sacrifice, examining personal and interpersonal consequences of sacrifices undertaken in pursuit of avoidance goals (Impett et al., 2013) and the suppression of emotions in relationships (Le & Impett, 2013). This study extends these ideas to the broader domain of conflict in the context of romantic relationships. Second, this research adds to the existing literature on cross-cultural differences in relationship styles (e.g., Chopik & Edelstein, 2014; You & Malley-Morrison, 2000) by suggesting that one reason for these cultural differences might be due to individual differences in the extent to which people construe themselves as interdependent with others.

Social and Therapeutic Contributions

The present findings are important because they identify a group of individuals for whom relationship satisfaction is not as negatively impacted by the experience of daily relationship conflict. Given that at least some conflict is inevitable in long-term relationships, these results offer insights onto how relationship satisfaction might be maintained over the long-term, at least for individuals who are highly interdependent in their relationships. As such, the current findings have important implications for couples' therapy. It would be beneficial for a therapist to know that individuals who construe the self differently *vis-à-vis* others—that is, in more interdependent vs. independent terms—are not affected by conflict in the same way. This knowledge could help therapists tailor therapy for couples based on each partner's self-construal. Indeed, knowing that individuals high in interdependence are not as negatively affected by daily conflict in their relationship, or knowing that avoiding conflict can help interdependent individuals meet their superordinate goal of maintaining harmony, could be beneficial for both the couple and the therapist in many ways. For instance, these observations could help the therapist's understanding of their clients, in

turn allowing to tailor therapy towards their client's specific relationship needs, and thus resulting in better therapy outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

In the current research, we found that highly interdependent people are able to maintain higher levels of relationship satisfaction even on days they experienced more conflict in their relationship. This study employed a daily experience method, which allowed us to gain a more ecologically valid picture of the way these processes play out in individuals' day-to-day relationships. However, a limitation of this type of method is that it relies on self-report data, which could have introduced biases into the study. Another limitation of the methodology is that it relies solely on correlational data, preventing us from making any definitive claims on causality. We can conclude from the pattern of findings in this study that interdependent self-construal changes the daily association between conflict and satisfaction, but we do not know whether any of these variables are causally related to one another. It will be important for future work in this area to use self-construal prim-ing (e. g., Oyserman & Lee, 2008) to more definitely establish the causal direction of these findings. More specifically, future research could use self-construal primes to temporarily promote interdependence, and then observe how participants respond to different hypothetical situations involving relationship conflict.

In addition to using ecologically valid research methods, we recruited an ethnically diverse sample, which likely produced a great deal of natural variation in interdependent construal. However, our sample consisted of undergraduate students living in Western culture, making it difficult to generalize our findings to a cross-cultural sample. Therefore, future studies should extend our findings to a cross-cultural sample. It is possible that individuals from Eastern cultures may also be buffered against some of the costs of conflict, similar to the buffering effect we observed for the highly interdependent people in our sample. In addition, it is important to point out that the participants in our sample were primarily dating their romantic partner. Thus, it is critical to investigate these questions with couples in long-term relationships to see if similar results would be found. The results could potentially differ, as dating relationships differ in important ways from married relationships (Dush & Amato, 2005). For instance, married couples usually live together, have been

together for a longer period of time, and have structural barriers to leaving the relationship such as children or shared finances. Because of these reasons, it is possible that married individuals are more interdependent than unmarried individuals, and thus may be more buffered against daily conflict than unmarried couples.

In conclusion, individuals low in interdependence experience steep declines in satisfaction on days when they experience a great deal of conflict in their relationship. On the other hand, individuals with a more interdependent construal style are buffered to a certain extent from experiencing such steep declines in satisfaction on high-conflict days. As such, this study identifies a group of individuals for whom relationship satisfaction is not as negatively impacted by the experience of daily conflict. The identification of such a group of individuals constitutes a theoretical contribution to the study of romantic relationships and has important implications for couple therapy.

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