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# Psychological Experience of Attitudinal Ambivalence as a Function of Manipulated Source of Conflict and Individual Difference in Self-Construal

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## Abstract

Much research has emerged recently examining attitudinal ambivalence. One recent finding suggests that feelings of attitudinal ambivalence can come about either because of an individual's own feelings of positivity and negativity or because of interpersonal attitudinal discrepancy. The present research examines the question of whether differences in self-construal moderate the impact of an intrapersonal (vs. interpersonal) source of conflict on attitudinal ambivalence. We have found that individuals who possess interdependent self-construals reveal greater attitudinal ambivalence when the source of conflict is interpersonal than intrapersonal, whereas individuals who possess more independent self-construals are influenced in the opposite manner.

Keywords: attitudinal ambivalence, self-construal, conflict

## INTRODUCTION

Attitudes are generally viewed as global evaluations of objects, issues, or persons that are represented in long-term memory (e.g. Ajzen 1987; Cooper and Croyle 1984; Fazio 1986; Petty and Wegener 1998). However, attitudes can be viewed as summaries of two distinct components, rather than considered as single

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evaluations of objects. The degree of conflict between the two distinct components (i.e., or positive and negative evaluations) is called attitudinal ambivalence. For example, when people decide to go to a graduate school, they often take into account both merits and demerits of graduate education. To the extent that individuals have both positive and negative thoughts or feelings regarding graduate education and such reactions are equally strong, they may feel ambivalent. Consequently, ambivalent attitudes are evaluations that contain both positive and negative feelings about objects (Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995; Priester and Petty 1996, 2001).

Recent research has identified two major sources of attitudinal ambivalence. Priester and Petty (2001) have proposed and found that while one's own positive and negative feelings are important bases of attitudinal ambivalence, one's significant others may have influences on attitudinal ambivalence. Take a graduate school as an example. Some students may feel greater ambivalence either because their own thoughts or feelings regarding graduate education are conflicting with each other or because they perceive their own attitudes highly discrepant from their parents' or friends' attitudes.

Although two primary antecedents of attitudinal ambivalence have been identified, little research has been conducted to investigate which of the two has greater influence on the psychological experience of attitudinal ambivalence. What factors determine the relative influence of the two antecedents of attitudinal ambivalence? In the present research, we propose that individual difference in self-construal plays a moderating role in determining attitudinal ambivalence. Therefore, this research attempts to (1) confirm in the experimental setting the previous finding that attitudinal ambivalence is determined by an interpersonal source of conflict as well as an intrapersonal source of conflict, and also (2) extends the previous finding by determining individual difference in self-construal as a moderating variable that plays in the relationship between attitudinal ambivalence and its two antecedents.

## THEORETICAL BASIS AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

### Two Antecedents of Attitudinal Ambivalence

One source of attitudinal ambivalence reflects a person's own positive and negative feelings toward an attitude object. Attitudinal ambivalence has been commonly measured by asking individuals to separately rate their own positive and negative feelings. For example, a traditional bipolar scale, ranging from -X to +*X*, can be split into two scales, where one is designed to assess positivity (that measured on the scale ranging from 0 to +*X*) and the other is to assess negativity (that measured on the scale ranging from -*X* to 0) (e.g., Kaplan 1972). These positive and negative feelings, in turn, are combined based on some mathematical models to induce an (objective or inferred) ambivalence index (e.g., for a review, see Priester and Petty 1996). Attempting to connect this ambivalence index to (subjective) attitudinal ambivalence based on an individual's positive and negative reactions, this approach shows that a primary source of (subjective) attitudinal ambivalence comes from within an individual. In this research we refer to this objective or inferred measure an *intrapersonal* source of conflict. We will manipulate, instead of calculating based on positivity and negativity, the intrapersonal source of conflict in the current research.

On the other hand, Priester and Petty (1996) examined the relationship between the intrapersonal source of conflict and (subjective) attitudinal ambivalence assessed meta-cognitively (i.e., in a direct way). They found that the correlation between these two measures ranged from .36 to .52. Subsequently, Priester and Petty (2001) proposed and found that in addition to the variances accounted for by the intrapersonal source of conflict an interpersonal factor may contribute to the explanation of the variance associate with (subjective) attitudinal ambivalence. This interpersonal factor refers to the discrepancy between one's own attitude and one's perception of significant others' attitudes. Their findings supported the proposition that interpersonal attitudinal discrepancy determines attitudinal

ambivalence beyond the influence of the intrapersonal source of conflict. The interpersonal attitudinal discrepancy emerged as a significant antecedent of attitudinal ambivalence and we call this interpersonal factor an *interpersonal* source of conflict.

**Role of Individual Difference in Self-Construal**

Self-construal is one of the most important features that distinguish different cultural areas. According to the independent self-construal, an individual is understood as being composed of a set of 'internal', 'personal' attributes such as abilities, thoughts, subjective feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. These attributes mainly come from one's within and characterize the person regardless of the situation (e.g., Fiske et al. 1998; Kitayama and Markus 1994; Triandis 1995). A human being is considered a coherent, stable, autonomous, free entity, and, therefore, distinguishable from others on the basis of such internal attributes. In contrast, according to the interdependent self-construal, an individual is inherently connected to others, and more broadly to social context. Empathy, reciprocity, belongingness, respect, and social obligations are important tasks of the self. People experience themselves as mutually interdependent with others. A human being is perceived as a connected, fluid, flexible, and committed being who is bound to others.

Independent vs. interdependent construals of the self are conceptualized as part of a set of self-relevant schemata used to evaluate, organize, and regulate one's experience and action (Markus & Kitayama 1991). These schemata will serve as an important basis on which many self-relevant processes and their outcomes are rooted. Individuals with more independent self-construals tend to emphasize differentiation and uniqueness, while those with more interdependent self-construals tend to hold more favorable attitudes toward connectedness or building relationships. As a result, attitudinal and behavioral differences between the two different self-construals exist (e.g., Aaker and Maheswaran 1997). Table 1 summarizes differences between self-construals in terms of attitudinal and behavioral consequences. These findings suggest that self-construal influences cognition, attitudes, and behaviors of the people

**Table 1. Key Differences Between an Independent and an Interdependent Self-Construal***

| Feature | Independent self-construal | Interdependent self-construal |
|---|---|---|
| Definition | • Separate from social context<br>• Defined by internal, personal attributes (such as abilities, thoughts, feelings) | • Connected with social context<br>• Defined by external, public factors (such as statuses, roles, relationships) |
| Structure | • Bounded, unitary, stable | • Flexible, variable |
| Tasks | • Be unique<br>• Express self<br>• Realize internal attributes<br>• Promote own goals<br>• Be direct; "say what's on your mind" | • Belong, fit-in<br>• Occupy one's proper place<br>• Engage in appropriated action<br>• Promote others' goals<br>• Be indirect; "read other's mind" |
| Role of others | • Self-evaluation: others important for social comparison, reflected appraisal | • Self-definition: relationships with others in specific contexts define the self |
| Values | • Emphasis on separatedness | • Emphasis on connectedness |
| Motivation | • Focus on differentiation | • Focus on similarity |
| Behavior | • Reflective of personal preferences and needs | • Influenced by preferences, needs of close others |

*adapted from Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 230.

across or even within a culture.

The most significant difference between independent and interdependent self-construals lies in the role that is assigned to others in self-definition (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 245). Significant others are included *within* the self in the interdependent self-construal. Thus, an interdependent self is influenced by external factors such as relationships and social roles as well as by one's own internal attributes. Although social contexts are important for both independent and interdependent construals, an interdependent self is likely to be more susceptible to interpersonal influence. Consequently, we hypothesize that the influence of intrapersonal (vs. interpersonal)

source of conflict on attitudinal ambivalence will be influenced by the extent to which individuals chronically have either the independent or interdependent self-construal.

H1: The influence of intrapersonal (vs. interpersonal) source of conflict on attitudinal ambivalence will be greater for individuals with independent self-construals than for individuals with interdependent self-construals.

## METHOD

### Procedure & Manipulation

A total of 172 undergraduate students in a mid-western university participated in return for course credit. Participants were given a set of four scenarios to read and evaluate. They were asked to imagine in each of the scenarios that they were offered a job offer which was described in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal sources of conflict. That is, four different job offers in the scenarios were described with a combination of either high or low intrapersonal source of conflict and either high or low interpersonal source of conflict. In a high intrapersonal source of conflict condition, the job offer was described that had both appealing and unappealing aspects. In a low intrapersonal source of conflict condition, the job offer was described that had many appealing but no unappealing aspects.

The interpersonal source of conflict was manipulated by varying the perception of significant others' attitudes toward the same job offers described. In a high interpersonal source of conflict condition, participants read that although they thought they liked the job offer and told so their family and close friends, their family and friends suggested that it was a not desirable offer. In a low interpersonal source of conflict condition, participants read that they thought they liked the offer and their family and close friends suggested that it was a desirable one. Each participant was asked to respond to six measures of attitudinal ambivalence about all four job offers. The order of four scenarios was randomized to counterbalance potential order effects.[1]

Next, participants completed a scale of individual difference in self-construal (The Self-Construal Scale; Singelis 1994). The scale consists of 24 items to assess two different self-construals: independent and interdependent. Participants marked each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Two composite self-construal scores were generated for each subject by averaging 12 items for each type. Then all the participants were median-split into four groups, based on these composite scores. Only two groups were selected for subsequent analyses. A new categorical variable was created such that participants scored high on independence and low on interdependence were classified as independent and those scored low on independence and high on interdependence were classified as interdependent.

**Measures**

After reading each scenario, all participants were asked to provide their attitudinal ambivalence. They completed each of six scales designed to assess the extent to which their reactions were conflicted, mixed, and indecisive and the extent to which they felt tension, stress, and ambivalence. These six scales were anchored with 0 (*feel no conflict, not at all mixed, feel no indecision, feel no tension, feel no stress, and feel no ambivalence*) and 10 (*feel maximum conflict, extremely mixed, feel maximum indecision, feel maximum tension, feel maximum stress, and feel maximum ambivalence*).

**Analysis**

Among four different scenarios was the main focus placed on the two scenarios (i.e., high intrapersonal-low interpersonal conflict condition and low intrapersonal-high interpersonal conflict. To minimize the influence of the fact that two different groups of participants possessed differential baseline of attitudinal ambivalence, we used the incremental changes in attitudinal ambivalence as the final dependent variable. That is,

1 The effect of order was not significant nor interacted with any other variables. All the data regardless the order were collapsed in the subsequent analysis.

attitudinal ambivalence in low intrapersonal-low interpersonal conflict condition served as a baseline and the actual dependent variable represented how much attitudinal ambivalence changed from that condition to the other two conditions.[2] Thus, the design of the experiment was a 2 (source of conflict: high intrapersonal-low interpersonal vs. low intrapersonal-high interpersonal) X2 (self-construal: independent vs. interdependent) mixed factorial in which the first factor were within-participant and the second factor was between-participant.

**Results**

The six measures for attitudinal ambivalence revealed a high reliability ($\alpha$ = 0.95). The changes in all the six measures for attitudinal ambivalence were subjected to a mixed ANOVA analysis. The result for attitudinal ambivalence revealed the predicted two-way interaction of Source of Conflict X Self-Construal ($F$ (1, 74) = 4.86, $p$ < .05). The results for the attitudinal ambivalence measure revealed that individuals who possessed interdependent self-construals had greater attitudinal ambivalence when the source of conflict was interpersonal ($M$ = 4.35) than intrapersonal ($M$= 3.25), whereas individuals who possessed independent self-construals were influenced in the opposite way that individuals with independent self-construal revealed greater attitudinal ambivalence when the source of the conflict was intrapersonal ($M$ = 2.84) than interpersonal ($M$ = 2.52) (See figure 1). Tests for simple effects showed that the mean scores of change in attitudinal ambivalence revealed significant difference between the two sources of conflict conditions only for individuals with interdependent self-construals ($F$ (1, 74) = 4.86, $p$ < .05), but not for individuals with independent self-construals ($F$ (1, 33) = 0.90, $p$ > .30). The mean scores of the change in attitudinal ambivalence as a function of manipulated source of conflict and self-construal were presented in table 3.

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2 Because the main interest was in testing whether the relative influences of two manipulated sources of conflict are moderated by individual difference in self-construal, the high intrapersonal-high interpersonal condition was omitted from the main analysis. When the condition was included, the results were identical.

**Table 2. Mean Scores of Change in Attitudinal Ambivalence Across Cells**

| | Independent Self-Construal (n = 34) | Interdependent Self-Construal (n = 42) |
|---|---|---|
| High Intra-Low Inter | 2.84 (2.30) | 3.25 (2.12) |
| Low Intra-High Inter | 2.52 (2.10) | 4.35 (2.29) |

* Standard deviations are in parentheses.

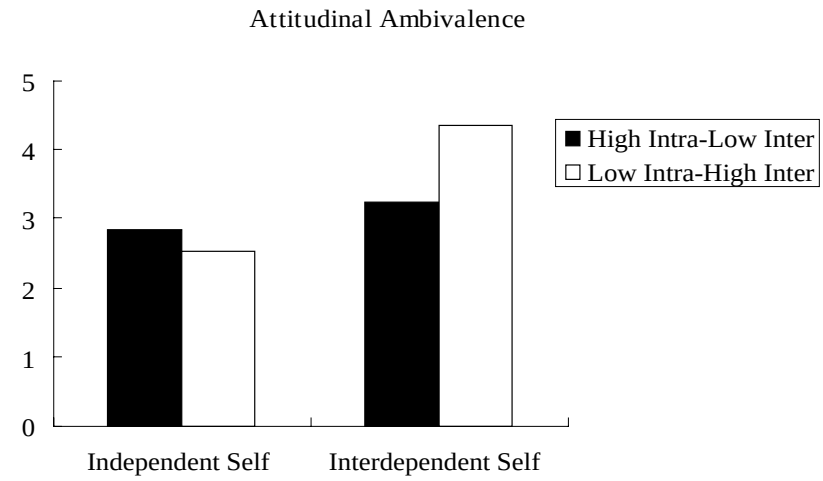


**Figure 1. Attitudinal Ambivalence as a Function of Manipulated Sources of Conflict and Self-Construal**

## DISCUSSION

The present research provides support for the notion that individual difference in self-construal is important in understanding the psychological mechanism that underlies attitudinal ambivalence. Interestingly, this research also suggests how the sources of conflict influence attitudinal ambivalence is moderated by self-construal: individuals with

independent self-construals reveal the influence of interpersonal conflict, whereas individuals with interdependent self-construal reveal the influence of intrapersonal conflict. By focusing on self-construal, this research shows that people even within an identical cultural area may go through different psychological mechanisms underlying attitudinal ambivalence.

Inspection of the results reveals several intriguing patterns. First, the overall changes in attitudinal ambivalence are much higher for individuals with more interdependent self-construals than for individuals with more independent self-construals. In other words, the main effect of self-construal on attitudinal ambivalence is significant. Future research will be needed to address these issues. Second, the changes in attitudinal ambivalence produced by manipulating the sources of conflict seem to be more pronounced for individuals with interdependent (vs. independent) self-construals. It should be mentioned that the current study was conducted among American participants. Consequently, the independent group of participants in this study seem to be too much based on independent self-construals, thereby not being affected by the interpersonal source of conflict. It may also be possible that the manipulation of the intrapersonal source was not so adequate as to produce appropriate amount of attitudinal ambivalence among this group of participants.

Despite the contributions, this research has some limitations that highlight areas for future research. First, some would argue that the findings could be confounded with other variables because self-construal was a measured independent variable. Given that this research focuses on the effect of chronic self-construal, the adopted approach is a reasonable one. However, further studies can manipulate self-construal by priming it. Such an approach would warrant a more sound theoretical ground when we attempt to investigate the role of situational self-construal. A similar procedure was adopted in previous research (e.g., Ybarra and Trafimow 1998). Second, although this research focuses on self-construal, other constructs from cultural psychology will be fruitful to examine. For example, dialectic thinking has been pointed out to have potential effect on attitudinal ambivalence (Peng and Nisbett 1999; Priester and Petty 2001). Finally, this study uses only Singelis' measure to

assess self-construal. It would be better to use other measures to more validly assess the construct of self-construal.

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