EXAMINING KOREAN COLLEGE STUDENTS’ SEXUAL HARASSMENT REPORTING BEHAVIOR: DO SELF-CONSTRUAL AND GENDER AFFECT?

Dr. Cheong Yi Park
Inha University
Korea

Dr. Sun Young Lee
Kyung Hee University
Korea

Dr. Hyun Soon Park
Sungkyunkwan University
Seoul, Korea

Abstract

This study focused on the effects of self-construal and gender on people’s behavior such as the behavior of expressing their offended feelings to the offender and reporting their feelings in public. For this purpose, the survey was conducted from the 298 college students in Korea from March 7th to 14th, 2006. The result showed: 1) types of self-construal had different influence on Korean college students’ reporting of sexual harassment whereas gender didn’t have; 2) subjective norms were not related to types of self-construal in the way that we expected and the relationship between gender and self-construals also was not proved.

Sexual harassment is no longer limited to the work place. It is taking place at higher education settings with an increasing and considerable rate. Almost one third of female college students have been victims of sexual harassment by their fellow male students (Lee, 1999). Interestingly in Korean culture, male college students are found also to be victims of sexual harassment conducted by colleagues that are female students. While sexual harassment on campus seems to be prevalent with both male and female students, the reporting rate to university officers is substantially low allowing sexual harassment offenders to get away from having any penalty. If offenders are not penalized, they continue harassing other female or male students. Moreover, the victims’ behavior of not reporting hinders statistics of sexual harassment at campus leading to difficulty in
rising sexual harassment as a social issue on campus. Only when sexual harassment on campus becomes high on the social agenda can legislation preventing its further occurrence be made and then enacted.

Therefore, facilitating and motivating college students to express their offended feelings to the offenders and to report their sexual harassment experience to the university counseling center are important. Prior to promoting a campaign for reporting sexual harassment at campus to the university counseling center, it is necessary to find out what makes victims hesitate to report sexual harassment events. Self-construal, an individual’s sense of self in relation to others, and gender are important factors for understanding victims’ behaviors, especially in conjunction with subjective norms.

People are said to have both interdependent and independent self-construal. First of all, a collectivistic culture, such as that of Korea, values relations and harmony with others. In a collectivistic culture, people tend to follow subjective norms. These people have concerns about normative beliefs of the significant social network members and have motivation to comply with them. Concern about future interactions with sexual harassment offenders at campus would influence victims’ behavior to that of having no expression of their feelings and no reporting to the university counseling center. Subjective norms in a collective culture can be related to interdependent self-construals. Secondly, males are brought up to be independent, regardless of their cultural orientation. They are less concerned about subjective norms than females. As a consequence, there might be gender difference in reporting behaviors regarding sexual harassment.

Thus, this study examines the effects of self-construal and gender on people’s behavior such as the behavior of expressing their offended feelings to the offender and reporting their feelings in public. For this purpose, the survey data was collected from three universities in Korea from March 7th to 14th, 2006. The sample consisted of 298 college students who took one communication course in the spring semester of 2006.

**Literature Reviews**

**Sexual harassment in student-student relationships**

Sexual harassments are prevalent in academic settings, such as universities, in Korea. A research study, conducted in 1996, found that 34% of female university students had experienced sexual harassment and sexual violence at the universities (Lee, 1999). Also, fifty percent of male students reported to have experienced sexually harassing female students. Recently, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family
found that among 1,414 undergraduate and graduate students in 20 universities, 39.2% students had been victims of sexual harassment in their universities. Furthermore, most perpetrators were the same students as those students attending a university (2002). In the study, therefore, we are interested in sexual harassment between students on campus. Sexual harassment in student-student relationships happens mostly at parties, in singing rooms (Karaoke bars), in membership training, in club rooms, in restrooms, and libraries (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2002).

**Self-construal, Subjective Norms and Gender**

Since the seminal writings of (1991), there have been substantial efforts to figure out the roles of self-construal. According to Markus and Kitayama, self-construal reflects the extent to which individuals view themselves either as an individuated entity or in relation to others. People with independent self-construal consider themselves unique and they value characteristics distinguishing them from other members of the group. Whereas, people with interdependent self-construal see themselves part of a group. They tend to define themselves relating to other group members.

The two selves (independent and interdependent) may coexist within every individual and in any culture (Markus and Kitayama 1991). However, many researchers report that self-construals of individuals are shaped by cultural influences. Independent self-construals are representative of individualistic cultures, whereas interdependent self-construals are illustrative of collectivistic cultures (Gudykunst et al. 1996; Kim et al. 1996; Singelis and Brown, 1995). It may be true that western cultures tend to reward independence and frequently activate the independent self, making it constantly accessible. In contrast, Asian cultures frequently promote the interdependent self making it continually accessible.

**Self-construal and Subjective norms**

As already mentioned, some researchers report that independent self-construal is representative of individualistic cultures whereas interdependent self-construal is illustrative of collectivistic cultures (Gudykunst et al. 1996; Kim et al. 1996; Singelis and Brown, 1995). As classified by Hofstede (1983), a collectivistic society possesses a close-knit social structure. Collectivists (vs. individualists) tend to be more sensitive to social evaluation and, therefore, try to maintain a positive evaluation by their significant others and harmony within a relationship. In other words, a person with interdependent self-construal in collectivistic cultures is expected to look after his or her group’s interests, hold the group’s beliefs and
opinions, and cooperate with others (Triandis, 1994). In collectivistic cultures, peoples' behaviors are regulated largely by social norms. Social norms are more important determinants of social behavior in a collectivistic society than in an individualistic society (Chiou, 2000). The behaviors of those with interdependent self-construal in collectivistic cultures seem to be affected by their perceived social norms.

These perceived social norms are working as subjective norms.

The subjective norm is defined in the context of relationships as 1) the perceived normative beliefs of a social network member regarding a given relationship weighted by 2) the motivation to comply with that network member (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). It represents the overall degree and direction of social influence felt by people when making a decision about what action to enact. It is a function of beliefs about the expectations of important referent others on their behaviors and their motivation to comply with these referents.

The subjective norm is one of the main variables of the theory of reasoned action and planned behavior. The theory of reasoned action and planned behavior proposes that behavior is influenced by behavioral intention which, in turn, is affected by one’s attitude toward the act, by subjective norms, and by perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1985, 1988, 1991; Fishbein, 1968; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

According to a meta-analysis of the theory of reasoned action and planned behavior, even with its important role in the theory, the subjective norms-behavioral intentions correlation is significantly weaker than the attitudes-behavioral intentions or the perceived behavioral control-behavioral intentions relationships (Armitage & Conner, 2001).

However, it should be noted that the theory of reasoned action and planned behavior is based on and has been investigated in an individualistic society such as the U.S. The role of the subjective norm should be assessed in the cross-cultural context. In an individualistic society, social networks are looser than in a collectivistic society. People are more likely to be motivated by self-interest. People believe that they are separated from the social context so they want to be unique and express themselves (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, the subjective norm is found to be a weak predictor for behavioral intention. On the contrary, in a collectivistic society, people are more likely to identify themselves as a component of social networks and thus, they adapt themselves to social norms (Terry et al., 1999; Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherall, 1987). In the collectivistic society, subjective norms-behavioral intentions correlations may be
stronger than in an individualistic society. In line with this reasoning, it is suggested that interdependent self-construals that are a hallmark of a collectivistic culture are more likely to perceive stronger subjective norms than independent self-construals that are a trait of an individualistic culture.

Several studies reported on relatively strong associations between the interdependent self-construals and the subjective norms-intention relation, reflecting subjective norms to be a more important predictor of intention among those who score comparatively higher on the collective-self (e.g., Fekadu & Kraft, 2002; Trafimow & Finlay, 1996; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). In collectivistic cultures, several studies revealed that the subjective norm was the most important predictor of behavioral intentions (e.g., contraceptive intentions in Ethiopia, product purchase in Taiwan, voting intention in Spain, etc.) (Chatzisarantis & Biddle, 1998; Chiou, 2000; DeBono & Omoto, 1993; Dunn, et. al. 2001; Echabe & Valencia Garate, 1994; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Fekadu & Kraft, 2002; Finlay, Trafimow, & Moroi, 1999; Giles & Bydawell, 2005; Jemmott III et. al., 2001; Johnston & White, 2003; Latimer & Martin Ginis, 2005).

Self-construal and Gender

The class of social psychological theories posits that men and women differ in ways directly relevant to relationship functioning such as the content and structure of how the self is construed (Cross & Madson, 1997), personality traits (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001), and socialized roles (Eagly, 1987). Men and women are regarded as being different in the way they define the self. Actually, they tend to differ in their conceptions of the self (Cross and Madson, 1997; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Kashima & Hardie, 2000).

Cross and Madson (1997) have suggested that many observed gender differences are a result of women’s and men’s different self-construal. According to them, the tendency for women to be more interdependent and men to be more independent could explain gender differences across several areas of social psychology, including aggression, emotional expression, and self-esteem. Gabriel and Gardner (1999) found that women describe themselves as more relational, have higher scores on relational self-construal, and pay more attention to information about relationships; whereas, Olver, Aries, & Batgos(1989) found that men have more separate and differentiated selves with more clear boundaries with others than women do.

That is, men are more likely to develop a separated self-schema or independent self-construal whereas women, in contrast, are more likely to develop a connected self-schema or interdependent self-construal (Markus & Oyserman, 1989; Cross & Madson, 1997). Thus, relationship-threatening behaviors are more annoying to women than to men and autonomy threatening behaviors are more annoying to men than to
women (Ter Laak, Olthof, and Aleva, 2003). Also, relatedness is a more important determinant of life satisfaction in women than in men, regardless of marital status (Cheng & Chan, 2006).

Along with this line of thinking, gender difference in self-construal can lead to a difference in self-expression and communication style. The research regarding self-construal has been documented in communication styles (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Hackman, Staley, & Johnson, 1997; Hackman, Ellis, Johnson, and Stately; 1999), embarrassment (Singelis & Sharkey, 1995), and emotional expression (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Kim, Sharkey, and Singelis (1994) examined the relationship between self-construal and the perceived importance of Kim's (1993, 1994) interactive constraints. They found that participants with a strong interdependent construal were most concerned with the importance of not hurting the listener's feelings. They also found that the strength of independent self-construal is highly correlated with a concern for clarity as an interactive constraint. "Clarity" in conversations concerns the likelihood that the speaker's intentions are clearly and directly stated (Kim, 1994). For those who are more independent, there is an emphasis on communicating in a clear and explicit manner (Kim et al., 1994). The concept of self-construal has the potential to explain a variety of communicative behaviors.

The greater the level of independent self-construal the greater could be the expectation that this concept would have an influence on people’s preference for and behavior for self-expression. Also males who have strong independent self-construal may be willing to express their own uncomfortable feeling when facing sexual harassment whereas female who have strong interdependent self-construal may react with silence regarding how uncomfortable they feel when facing sexual harassment.

**Hypotheses**

H1: People with independent self-construal are more likely to directly express their own feelings to offenders than those with interdependent self-construal.

H2: People with independent self-construal are more likely to report to the university counseling center than those with interdependent self-construal.

H3: Interdependent self-construal is more likely to be related to subjective norms than independent self-construal.

H3a: Interdependent self-construal is more likely to be related to normative beliefs than independent self-construal.

H3b: Interdependent self-construal is more likely to be related to the motivation to comply with
significant social network members than independent self-construal.

H4: Females and males are different when directly expressing their own feelings to offenders in a sexual harassment situation.

H5: Females and males are different when reporting their experience of sexual harassment to the university counseling center.

H6: Females are likely to have interdependent self-construal whereas males are likely to have independent self-construal.

Methods

Overview

Surveys were conducted to test the proposed hypotheses. One scenario regarding a sexual harassment episode was designed. After being exposed to this scenario, subjects were asked about self-construal, normative beliefs, motivation to comply with several social network members, and behavioral intention to express their discomfort feelings to the offender and the university counseling center.

Sampling and Respondents

A convenient sampling method was employed. Subjects of this study (n=298) were undergraduate students at three major universities in Seoul and In-Chon, South Korea. Subjects were recruited from advertising, communication, and journalism courses for which they received extra credit.

The sample ranged in age from 19 to 34 years with an average age of 23. Forty-nine percent of the respondents were male and 51% female. Thirty-six percent of the respondents were sophomores, 34% juniors, and 30% seniors. Eighty-one percent of them had experienced a romantic relationship with their boy/girl friend. Among them, 34% had current romantic partners.

Procedure

Surveys were conducted in classrooms on two campuses of major universities in Seoul and one campus of major university in In-Chon for a week from March 7 to March 14, 2006. Subjects were given a consent form to sign. Only those who agreed to participate in the study were instructed to sign the form. Once
signed, they, then, continued to the survey. Subjects were asked to read the message carefully and then fill out self-administered questionnaires.

**Stimulus Materials**

A scenario was developed and designed into two versions, one for male and the other for female students. The scenario reads:

One fine Friday night, we had a party. Many classmates were having a great night. The hilarious mood resulted in our going to a singing room (e.g., Karaoke bar). The super hero of our department, Chul-Soo (Young-Hee), sang a song and enchanted our classmates with his/her fascinating melodies. After singing a song, he/she sat beside me and touched my thigh without the notice of other classmates. It was my turn, so I sang a song and returned to my place. He/She praised my song and touched my arms and put his/her arm around my shoulder. And then, he/she groped my body.

**Measures**

**Self-construal.** Gudykunst’s self-construal scale was used to measure independent and interdependent self-construals of the respondents. Fourteen independent self-construal items were aggregated to make an independent self-construal index. Cronbach’s alphas were .77 ($M = 5.25; SD = .58$). Fourteen interdependent self-construal items were aggregated to make an interdependent self-construal index. Cronbach’s alphas was .79 ($M = 4.75; SD = .61$).

**Subjective norm.** The subjective norm was formed by normative beliefs weighted by the motivation to comply with the referents. Three referents suggested in this study were the family, a closest friend, and the others. Normative beliefs were defined as a person’s belief that a social referent feels the person should or should not perform some action. Normative beliefs were estimated with two items, “[My family/my closest friend/the others] think that I should tell that I am offended deeply by him/her” and “[My family/my closest friend/the others] think that I should report him/her to the university counseling center.” These were scored on a 7-point scale from 1 to 7 (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely). Reliability coefficients for the two normative beliefs items, for all three social network members, were acceptably high (ranging from .80 to .81), so composite measures were created for use in the analyses.
Motivation to comply is defined as the general tendency to yield to the perceived wishes or opinions of a particular social referent. Motivation to comply was measured by the item, “I would like to comply with my family/the closest friend/the others if they want me to do,” on a 7-point scale from 1 to 7 (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely). Reliability coefficients for the two motivation to comply items, for all three social network members, were acceptably high (ranging from .89 to .91), so composite measures were created for use in the analyses.

**Behavioral Intention.** Behavioral intention was measured as fitting into two versions, verbal expression and reports to the university counseling center. Behavioral intention to express verbally his/her discomfort feeling to the offender was measured by two items, “I will express my discomfort feeling to the offender” and “I will ask the offender to stop sexual harassment,” on a 7-point scale from 1 to 7 (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely). Another behavioral intention was measured by the item, “I will report the offender to the university counseling center for sexual harassment,” on a 7-point scale from 1 to 7 (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely).

**Control variables.** We wished to control for several variables known to be significantly associated with behavioral intention to report to the university counseling center in order to rule out plausible alternative explanations for any observed effects of self-construal and subjective norms. Specifically, self-efficacy, sexual harassment experiences, and having past and current romantic partners were included as control variables in all relevant analyses. Self-efficacy was measured by 8 items. Its reliability coefficient was 66.

**Results**

**Hypothesis 1 and 2.** H1 and H2 proposed that people with independent self-construal are more likely to directly express their own feelings to offenders and to report to the university counseling center than those with interdependent self-construal. Results indicated that people with independent self-construal are more likely to directly express their own feelings to offenders (“I will express my discomfort feeling to the offender,” r = .12, p<.05; “I will ask the offender to stop sexual harassment,” r = .12, p<.05). In addition, people with interdependent self-construal are less likely to report the offender to the university counseling center than those with independent self-construal (r = -.14, p<.05).

**Hypothesis 3.** H3a suggested that people having interdependent self-construal would be more likely to consider normative beliefs than would people having independent self-construal. As shown in <Table1>.
H1a was not supported. Interdependent self-construal was shown not to be related to normative beliefs, while people having independent self-construal tended to consider that their family and friends think subjects should report the offender to the university counseling center.

Table 1  About Here

H3b posited that people having interdependent self-construal would be more likely to comply with their significant others in expressing and reporting sexual harassment than would people having independent self-construal. H3b was partly supported. According to Table 2, people with interdependent self-construal were more likely to comply with their friends and others in expressing to the offender and with their family and friends in reporting to the university counseling center.

This unexpected result could be explained by the two ways: 1) people with interdependent self-construal consider ‘speaking out’ something about sex as socially unacceptable and 2) people with independent self-construal might be more sensitized by the wording of ‘telling and reporting’ in the scale so that they might more response than we expected.

Table 2  About Here

**Hypothesis 4.** H4 was proposed to test a gender difference in terms of verbal expression in a sexual harassment situation. It was expected that males and females would respond differently to sexual harassment. The hypothesis was supported (t=-13.197(296), p<.05). Females ($M$=12.9, $SD$=1.8) directly expressed their own uncomfortable feelings to offenders more than males ($M$=8.7, $SD$=3.5). It was not exactly what we expected. We predicted that males who might have strong independent self-construal would be more likely to directly express their own feelings to the offenders than females who might have strong interdependent self-construal. Given that there was no significant gender difference between females and males in terms of self-construal (the finding of hypothesis 4), the result was not problematic. This result may represent that 1) females would be more aware of sexual harassment than males; 2) males would think that their experience of sexual harassment could not be socially accepted, which leads into hesitation to express their own experience; and 3) males would not think of touching "just" body parts as serious.
Hypothesis 5. H5 expected a gender difference in terms of the reporting intention of sexual harassment to the university counseling center. This hypothesis was supported ($t(296) = -12.3, p < .001$). Again, females ($M = 6.47, SD = .94$) seemed to have a stronger intention of reporting their own experience of sexual harassment than males ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.82$).

Hypothesis 6. H6 proposed that there would be a gender difference in terms of self-construal. This hypothesis was not supported. There was no gender difference in the independent self-construal score ($t = -1.27(296), p > .05$) and the interdependent self-construal score ($t = 1.32(295), p > .05$). Males ($M = 5.20, SD = .62$) and females ($M = 5.28, SD = .53$) got almost the same scores on the interdependent scale. Also, they did not show any difference on the interdependent scale ($M = 4.8, SD = .62$ for males and $M = 4.7, SD = .58$ for females).

Discussion and Implications

This study contributed to our understanding of how some people actively report or express their own experiences of sexual harassment while others do not. Grounded on the theoretical framework of self-construal, people, with independent self-construal, were found to express their discomfort feelings and to report to the university counseling center whereas people with interdependent self-construal did not. These findings were consistent with the characteristics of independent self-construal. That is, people with strong independent self-construal were likely to be unique. They tended to deliver clear messages at any situations (see Kim et al., 1994).

On the other hand, the influence of subjective norms, which consisted of two components: normative belief and motivation to comply on expressing sexual harassment was inconsistent in conjunction with types of self-construal. People with interdependent self-construal were found to have more motivation to comply with their significant others than people with independent self-construal; whereas, people with independent self-construal better recognized normative beliefs that is what their significant others think that they have to do, than those with interdependent self-construal. So, motivation to comply had an influence on the expression of sexual harassment in the case of people with interdependent self-construal and normative belief in the case of people with independent self-construal. The results might be in part due to the wording of the items measuring normative beliefs. The items read, “[My family/my closest friend/the others] think that I should tell that I am offended deeply by him/her” and “[My family/my closest friend/the others] think that I should report him/her to the university counseling center.” When they read those items people with independent
self-construal might be more sensitive to behaviors such as telling and reporting than to people around them. Since independent self-construal values own right and independent behaviors people with this self-concept might focus on a behavior, itself, resulting in agreement with the items.

An interesting finding in the study is that we expected that females were likely to have interdependent self-construal and males were likely to have independent self-construal. However, we did not find any gender difference in self-construal. Males and females had both independent and interdependent self-construal. Furthermore, we found that females were more likely to directly express their opinions and report to the university counseling center about sexual harassment than males. We conjectured that females were less likely to express their opinions; however, the results were found in the reverse direction. Based on these findings, we suspect that males might feel ashamed if they were victims of sexual harassment, especially in a male-oriented collectivistic culture. Thus, they would have difficulty in directly expressing and reporting their sexual harassment experience. However, female students might be well-informed of what they need to do when they experience sexual harassments because women are frequent victims of sexual harassment. Examining perceptions of being victims of sexual harassment among males and females would give more information about this plausible explanation.

The fact that gender was not related to self-construal and that independent self-construal promotes direct verbal expression and a reporting behavior to an official organization provide important implications for designing sexual harassment prevention education. This education needs to focus on developing male’s and female’s self-concept to be independent especially for sexual harassment. That is, this education should involve educating and encouraging both male and female students to cultivate independent self concepts.
References


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Gabriel, S., & Gardner, W. L. (1999). Are there "his" and "her" types of interdependence?


norms and subjective norm-behavior consistency. Social Behavior and Personality, 22(1), 31-40.


Table 1. Self-Construal and Normative Beliefs: Correlations

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Table 2. Self-Construal and Motivation to Comply with the Referents: Correlations

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Note.  * p<.05  ** p<.01