

A TEST OF SHARKEY AND SINGELIS' (1995) MODEL / G. H. J. KRUGER

## A TEST OF SHARKEY AND SINGELIS' (1995) MODEL OF SELF-CONSTRUAL AND EMBARRASSABILITY: SITUATIONAL VERSUS DISPOSITIONAL FACTORS<sup>1</sup>

GERT H. J. KRUGER

*University of Johannesburg*

*Summary.*—Sharkey and Singelis (1995) tested a model of embarrassment focusing on strength of independent self-construal, sensitivity to evaluation, and strength of interdependent self-construal. Their findings indicated social anxiety and self-construal explained 28% of the variance in embarrassability. Separately, social anxiety contributed 5.8%, with independent and interdependent self-construal explaining 6.6 and 5.2%, respectively, thus supporting the model. Sharkey and Singelis used Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability Scale, which focuses on embarrassing situations. The current study repeated the analysis but measured embarrassability as a disposition on a sample of Black African (59.8%), Colored (6.1%), Asian/Indian (5.9%), and White (28.2%) first-year psychology students (139 men, 485 women) between 18 and 51 years old ( $M = 19.5$ ,  $SD = 2.9$ ). The three constructs together explained about 47% of dispositional embarrassability. Social anxiety explained 25% of the variance, when controlling for independent and interdependent self-construal. Sharkey and Singelis' model may be more applicable to the explanation of situational embarrassability than dispositional embarrassability.

Research has shown that people's emotions can be influenced by their cultural values (Nezlek, Kafetsios, & Smith, 2008). One of the earliest studies on cultural orientation and emotions was that of Sharkey and Singelis (1995), which focused on the role of self-construal in the experience of embarrassment. Whereas embarrassability has mainly been attributed to fear of negative evaluation that results in social anxiety (Miller, 2009), the results of their study led Sharkey and Singelis (1995) to propose a more comprehensive model of embarrassability, which included independent and interdependent self-construal, along with social anxiety. Sharkey and Singelis (1995) measured embarrassability with Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability Scale, which assesses embarrassment due to characteristics of the social context. It has, however, been argued that some people are more susceptible to the experience of embarrassment than others, and, thus, embarrassability can also be regarded as a personality trait (Kelly & Jones, 1997). The current study aimed at testing whether Sharkey and Singelis' (1995) model can also account for the experience of embarrassment due to dispositional factors.

### *Self-construal*

Markus and Kitayama (1991) differentiated between independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal and related these constructs to individualism and collectivism, respectively. Independent self-construal refers to construal of the self as separate and individuated from others, with a focus on internal, stable traits and, consequently, consistency of behavior across situations. Interdependent self-construal denotes a self that is defined by its social relationships, a concern for the social context, and consequently, inconsistency of behaviors across situations. Independent and interdependent self-construal co-exist in people, but one or the other will be more dominant in social interactions (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011).

Several studies (see Krieg & Xu, 2015 for a meta-analysis) have found that people with high interdependent self-construal are especially prone to social anxiety, as they are more concerned than people with high independent self-construal with keeping harmonious relationships with others and, thus, use social comparison as a means to ascertain whether they are fulfilling their obligations to the group. In so doing, they comply with their social role identity. Social role identity forms part of the self-concept and is comprised of a person's knowledge of membership within a social group, including the value and emotional meaning of this membership (Brewer & Yuki, 2007). The breakdown of one's social role identity is regarded as the trigger in the experience of embarrassment (Sharkey & Singelis, 1995).

<sup>1</sup>Address correspondence to Gert Kruger, Department of Psychology, University of Johannesburg, PO Box 524, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa or e-mail (gkruger@uj.ac.za)

## *Embarrassment*

Embarrassment is a social phenomenon that appears to stem from a person's concern with unwanted judgments from others, and one's susceptibility to embarrassment is referred to as embarrassability. Social anxiety seems to underpin the experience of embarrassment (Miller, 2009). Two competing explanations for the experience of social anxiety and its consequent embarrassment have received the most attention. The awkward interaction model explains embarrassment as occurring due to people's indecision about how to behave in a given situation. In contrast, the social evaluation model regards embarrassment as the result of perceived negative evaluations from others (Sharkey & Singelis, 1995; Kelly & Jones, 1997). A distinction can also be made between situational and dispositional embarrassability. Situational embarrassability refers to inappropriate or awkward situational behavior that leads to embarrassment, possibly due to perceived negative social evaluation. When embarrassment occurs across a wide variety of situations and individuals differ in their susceptibility to experience embarrassment, it is regarded as dispositional embarrassability (Kelly & Jones, 1997).

### *Sharkey and Singelis' (1995) Study on Self-construal and Embarrassability*

Sharkey and Singelis (1995) proposed that the social evaluation model depicts embarrassability as a weakness **which** results from social anxiety and a heightened fear of negative evaluation when **one's** social role identity is threatened. They regarded this view as ethnocentric in the sense that its primary focus is on independent self-construal and the extent to which the self as autonomous entity is resistant to the experience of embarrassment.

Sharkey and Singelis (1995) argued that a more inclusive explanation of embarrassability should include both the social evaluation, as well as awkward interaction model of embarrassability, as they are not mutually exclusive. Both focus on processes that can occur alternatively or concurrently once one's desired social role identity has been perceived to be under threat. Thus, embarrassment might result from fear of negative evaluation from the social group, or indecision about how to handle a social situation, or both simultaneously. From this viewpoint, Sharkey and Singelis (1995) reasoned that an integrated theory of embarrassment can be advanced by focusing on self-construal and social anxiety, as they function as the psychological processes that construct and protect social identity in terms of embarrassment.

In an earlier study, Singelis and Sharkey (1995) found that independent self-construal **was** negatively associated with embarrassability, while interdependent self-construal **was** positively related. They argued that the negative relationship between independent self-construal and embarrassability can be explained from a social evaluation viewpoint, as people with high independent self-construal are mainly focused on their own performance and achievement. Thus, social anxiety and poor performance or achievement would lead to the experience of embarrassment. The positive association between interdependent self-construal and embarrassability can stem from heightened sensitivity to the social context and need for harmonious relationships. From this latter viewpoint, Sharkey and Singelis (1995) argued that embarrassability can be a positive attribute, as it can contribute to a person's ability to fit into a social context where cooperation and group activity are valued. This explanation fits best with the awkward interaction model.

As both independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal co-exist in people and can contribute to the experience of embarrassment, Sharkey and Singelis (1995) argued that both self-construals should be included in an explanation of embarrassability. They hypothesized that social anxiety and independent self-construal, representing the deficit social evaluation model, would each contribute uniquely to the variance in embarrassment. Independent self-construal would be negatively correlated and social anxiety would be positively correlated with embarrassability. Interdependent self-construal would contribute uniquely to the variance in embarrassment after the effects of independent self-construal and social anxiety have been controlled, as it is associated with a generalized sensitivity to context.

To support their theory, Sharkey and Singelis (1995) presented findings based on a sample of 371 undergraduate students (170 men, 201 women) between the ages of 17 and 62 years ( $M = 20.2$ ,  $SD = 4.0$ ) and of various ethnic backgrounds: Japanese (31.6%), Chinese (17.6%), Caucasian (17.3%), Filipino (9.2%), and Hawaiian or part Hawaiian (8.9%). With data gathered with Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability

Scale, Singelis' (1994) Self-Construal Scale, and the Social Anxiety subscale from Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss' (1975) Self-Consciousness Scale, Sharkey and Singelis (1995) tested their theory with a hierarchical multiple-regression analysis, in which social anxiety was entered into the equation first, followed by independent self-construal, and lastly, interdependent self-construal. Their results indicated that the three hypothesized variables together explained 28% of the variance in embarrassability. Separately, each variable contributed uniquely to the variance in embarrassability, but social anxiety predicted only 5.8%, with independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal contributing 6.6% and 5.2%, respectively.

From their results, Sharkey and Singelis (1995) proposed a tripartite model of embarrassment which focuses on three sources as the cause of embarrassment: (1) the strength of the independent self-construal when entering an interaction, (2) sensitivity to others' evaluations as the interaction progresses, and (3) the strength of the interdependent self-construal. However, in their study, Sharkey and Singelis (1995) did not appear to distinguish between situational and dispositional embarrassability. As Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability Scale focuses on potentially embarrassing situations (Maltby & Day, 2000; Leary, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2015), Sharkey and Singelis' (1995) analysis does not appear to have controlled, or allowed for, the role of embarrassability as a personality trait. Furthermore, as people with high interdependent self-construal are more sensitive to social context, the analysis with Modigliani's (1968) scale could have been biased toward the positive correlation between interdependent self-construal and embarrassability and underestimated the positive correlation between social anxiety and embarrassability. This study, therefore, aimed at evaluating the model's applicability to dispositional embarrassability.

*Hypothesis 1.* When repeating the hierarchical regression analysis sequence employed by Sharkey and Singelis (1995), but with dispositional embarrassability as criterion variable, social anxiety will contribute more unique variance to embarrassability, compared to independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal.

*Hypothesis 2.* If social anxiety contributes the most unique variance to dispositional embarrassability, then it will also contribute the most unique variance when the effects of independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal are controlled.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participation in the study was requested during an Introductory Psychology lecture at a South African university. A group of 624 Black African (59.8%), Colored (6.1%), Asian/Indian (5.9%), and White (28.2%)<sup>2</sup> first-year psychology students (139 men, 485 women) between the ages of 18 and 51 years ( $M = 19.5$ ,  $SD = 2.9$ ) volunteered to participate in the study in return for extra course credit. The sample was ethnically diverse and included people from individualist and collectivist cultures (Eaton & Louw, 2000; Basabe & Ros, 2005).

### *Measures*

A short biographical questionnaire was used to determine participants' age, sex, and ethnic affiliation. Three measures were employed to measure the variables of interest.

*Susceptibility to Embarrassment Scale* (Kelly & Jones, 1997).—This scale consists of 25 items that measure a person's dispositional embarrassability. Examples of items are: "I feel unsure of myself," "I'm afraid that things I say will sound stupid," "I feel inadequate when talking to someone I just met," and "It is unsettling to be the center of attention." Participants must rate on a 7-point scale, with anchors 1: Not at all like me, and 7: Very much like me, to specify the extent they believe a statement applies to them. The scale correlates moderately ( $r = .60$ ) with Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability Scale (Kelly & Jones, 1997; Maltby & Day, 2000), which was used by Sharkey and Singelis (1995). Kelly and Jones (1997) found a

<sup>2</sup>These population groups are identified in accordance with the South African census categories.

Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .90 and, more recently, Maltby and Day (2000) reported an alpha of .96 and test-retest reliability of .67 over an 8-wk. interval. In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha was .91.

*Self-Construal Scale* (Singelis, 1994).—This scale consists of 24 items, 12 of which measure a person's independent self-construal and the remaining 12 items measure a person's interdependent self-construal. Examples of independent self-construal items are: "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects," "Having a lively imagination is important to me," and "I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards." Examples of interdependent self-construal items are: "I respect people who are modest about themselves," "If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible," and "My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me." For each item, participants rate on a 7-point scale the extent to which they experience their self in relation to others, with anchors 1: Strongly disagree and 7: Strongly agree. Singelis (1994) reported Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of .69 for the Independent subscale and .75 for the Interdependent subscale. Sharkey and Singelis (1995) found alphas of .72 for both subscales. In the current sample, alphas of .59 and .57 were very low for the Independent and Interdependent subscales, respectively.

*Self-Consciousness Scale* (Fenigstein, *et al.*, 1975).—This scale measures dispositional self-consciousness and consists of 23 items and three subscales, the Private self-consciousness scale (10 items), the Public self-consciousness scale (7 items) and the Social anxiety scale (6 items). Responses are measured on a 5-point scale, with anchors 0: Not at all like me, and 4: Very much like me. Only the Social anxiety subscale was utilized in this study to correspond with the measurement instrument employed by Sharkey and Singelis (1995). This scale measures the extent to which people feel ill at ease in social settings. Examples of items are: "It takes me time to overcome my shyness in new situations," "I have trouble working when someone is watching me," and "Large groups make me nervous." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for the Social Anxiety subscale has been reported as .73 (Fenigstein, *et al.*, 1975). Sharkey and Singelis (1995) reported an alpha of .60 for the Social Anxiety subscale and in the current sample, alpha was .72.

### Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaires in the form of an online survey placed in their Introductory Psychology course on the university learning management system. Participants had to log in to the system in order to participate, but responses were anonymous, and participants were encouraged to be as honest as possible. **This study was part of a larger research project which had received institutional approval.**

Commented [A1]: Was there Institutional Review Board approval of this study?

### Data Analysis

Preliminary analyses confirmed that the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were not violated. To test Hypothesis 1, the analysis procedure followed by Sharkey and Singelis (1995), was repeated to determine the unique contribution of Independent self-construal, Interdependent self-construal, and Social anxiety to dispositional Embarrassability. Social anxiety was entered in Step 1, Independent self-construal in Step 2, and Interdependent self-construal in Step 3.

Based on the results from the first regression analysis, a further hierarchical multiple-regression analysis was performed to test Hypothesis 2. In this second analysis, Independent self-construal was entered in Step 1, Interdependent self-construal in Step 2, and Social anxiety in Step 3.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for each measure. Zero-order correlations are reported in Table 2 and are similar to the results found by Sharkey and Singelis (1995). Independent self-construal was negatively correlated with Social anxiety ( $r = -.38, p < .01$ ). Embarrassability and Social anxiety were positively correlated ( $r = .64, p < .01$ ), and Embarrassability and Independent self-construal were negatively correlated ( $r = -.44, p < .01$ ).

Commented [A2]: Tables 1 & 2 about here

Regarding Hypothesis 1, similar values for the unique contributions of the self-construal dimensions were found (See Table 3). However, whereas Sharkey and Singelis' (1995) analysis explained 28% of the

variance in Embarrassability, the results in the current study explained approximately 47%. As expected, a higher unique contribution to the variance in Embarrassability was found to be explained by Social anxiety (25%), compared to 6% found by Sharkey and Singelis (1995). The current study also found that the contributions of Independent self-construal and Interdependent self-construal were small, yet statistically significant (5 and 1%, respectively) compared to Social anxiety (25%). These results support Hypothesis 1, i.e., when repeating the hierarchical regression analysis sequence employed by Sharkey and Singelis (1995), but with dispositional Embarrassability as a criterion variable, Social anxiety will contribute the most unique variance.

Commented [A3]: Table 3 about here

As Social anxiety appeared to be the largest contributor to the variance in Embarrassability, Hypothesis 2 was tested by performing a hierarchical multiple-regression analysis where Social anxiety was entered last in the analysis sequence (Table 4). Social anxiety explained an additional 25% when Independent self-construal and Interdependent self-construal were controlled for. This supports Hypothesis 2, that Social anxiety will contribute the most unique variance to dispositional Embarrassability when the effects of Independent self-construal and Interdependent self-construal are controlled.

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## DISCUSSION

Although studies have found that people with high interdependent self-construal tend to experience more social anxiety than those with high independent self-construal (Krieg & Xu, 2015), and it was expected that high interdependent self-construal would correlate positively with embarrassability, the current study did not find these relationships. The negative correlations between high independent self-construal, social anxiety, and embarrassability are, however, similar to those reported by Sharkey and Singelis (1995).

The results support Sharkey and Singelis' (1995) tripartite model in the sense that independent self-construal, interdependent self-construal, and social anxiety each contributed uniquely to dispositional embarrassability. However, in repeating the analysis procedure of the original study, this study found that social anxiety contributed substantially more to the explanation of embarrassability than either independent or interdependent self-construal. If this difference is attributed to the fact that dispositional embarrassability was the criterion variable, instead of situational embarrassability, the finding appears to emphasize the dispositional nature of social anxiety.

A subsequent hierarchical multiple-regression analysis controlling for the role of self-construal supported this result. It appears as if social anxiety might be regarded as the most influential factor in the explanation of dispositional embarrassability. The correlations and second regression analysis therefore seem to support the social evaluation model of embarrassability and call into question whether Sharkey and Singelis' (1995) tri-partite model can adequately account for embarrassability as a dispositional attribute.

Interpretation of this finding should, however, be made with caution. The results could have been unduly influenced by sample and measurement differences. Women made up almost 78% of the sample in the current study (compared to 54% in the study by Sharkey & Singelis, 1995). Several recent studies have found social anxiety to be more prevalent in women (e.g. McClean, Asnaani, Litz, & Hofmann, 2011; Xu, Schneier, Heimberg, Princisvalle, Liebowitz, Wang, *et al.*, 2012), and this could have inflated the contribution of social anxiety to embarrassability.

The concept of self-construal and its application value have also been called into question (Matsumoto, 1999), as has the validity of the Self-Construal Scale (Levine, Bresnahan, Park, Lapinski, Lee, & Lee, 2003). The current study also found low Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values for the Self-Construal Scale. Further testing of Sharkey and Singelis' (1995) model, while controlling for sex and with more attention given to both dispositional and contextual factors, is recommended.

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TABLE 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF THE SUSCEPTIBILITY TO EMBARRASSMENT SCALE, THE SUBSCALES OF THE SELF-CONSTRUAL SCALE, AND THE SOCIAL ANXIETY SUBSCALE FROM THE SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS SCALE ( $N = 624$ )

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Embarrassability	67.64	19.52
Independent self-construal	62.27	8.48
Interdependent self-construal	56.83	8.34
Social anxiety	16.00	3.95

TABLE 2

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELF-CONSTRUALS, SOCIAL ANXIETY, AND EMBARRASSABILITY (N = 624)

Variable	2			3			4		
	<i>r</i>	95%CI	S&S <i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	95%CI	S&S <i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	95%CI	S&S <i>r</i>
1. Independent self-construal	.15*	.07, .23	<b>.20*</b>	-.38*	-.45, -.31	<b>-.46*</b>	-.44*	-.52, -.36	<b>-.37*</b>
2. Interdependent self-construal				.02	-.06, .09	<b>.07</b>	.08	-.02, .18	<b>0.19*</b>
3. Social anxiety							.64*	.60, .69	<b>.44*</b>
4. Embarrassability									

Note. — Correlations displayed in bold (S&S *r*) indicate the results obtained by Sharkey and Singelis (1995). \**p* < .01.

TABLE 3

SUMMARY OF HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY, INDEPENDENT SELF-CONSTRUAL, AND INTERDEPENDENT SELF-CONSTRUAL ON EMBARRASSABILITY (N = 624)

Variable	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Social anxiety	3.16	3.29	.64	15.89‡	2.74	0.21	0.55	13.18‡	2.70	0.21	0.54	13.05‡	
Independent self-construal					-.054	0.10	-.023	-5.55‡	—	0.10	-.025	-6.01‡	
Interdependent self-construal									0.58				
									0.26	0.09	0.11	2.88†	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.41				.46				.47		
Adj <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.41				.46				.47		
<i>SE</i>			14.98				14.39				14.25		
<i>F</i>			252.56				30.82				8.30		
<i>df<sub>n</sub>, df<sub>a</sub></i>			1, 359				1, 358				1, 357		

Note. — Cohen's *f*<sup>2</sup> = 0.02. Sharkey and Singelis' (1995) results: *R*<sup>2</sup> = .19 for Step 1 (*p* < .001);  $\Delta R^2$  = .23 for Step 2 (*p* < .001);  $\Delta R^2$  = .28 for Step 3 (*p* < .001). †*p* < .01. ‡*p* < .001.

TABLE 4

SUMMARY OF HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY, INDEPENDENT SELF-CONSTRUAL AND INTERDEPENDENT SELF-CONSTRUAL ON EMBARRASSABILITY (N = 624)

Variable	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Independent self-construal	-1.02	0.11	-0.44	-9.39‡	-1.08	0.11	-0.47	-9.89‡	-0.58	0.10	-0.25	-6.01‡
Interdependent self-construal					0.36	0.11	0.15	3.23†	0.26	0.09	0.11	2.88†
Social Anxiety									2.69	0.21	0.54	13.05‡
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.20				.22				.47	
Adj <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.20				.22				.47	
<i>SE</i>			17.52				17.29				14.25	
<i>F</i>			88.18				10.42				170.24	
<i>df<sub>n</sub>, df<sub>a</sub></i>			1, 359				1, 358				1, 357	

Note. — Cohen's *f*<sup>2</sup> = 0.48. †*p* < .01. ‡*p* < .001.