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Relationship of Self-construal to Perceived Availability and Seeking of Social Support by
International Students Studying Abroad in the United States

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Abstract

This study was created to examine the relationship between different self-construals and the behavior of seeking social support or the perceived availability of social support. We recruited 84 international students who currently study abroad in the United States. Participants completed the Singelis Self-construal Scale (SCS; Singelis,1994) and a Social Support Scale created for the current study. The SCS measured the degree to which participants' self-construals are Independent (IND) or Interdependent (INT). The Social Support Scale presented five different scenarios and asked participants to rate activities responding to two types of social support (tangible support and emotional support). I predicted that those with higher levels of interdependent self-construal will have a greater level of perceived availability of social support, but a lower level of social support seeking, and those with a higher level of independent self-construal would have a greater level of social support seeking, but a lower level of perceived availability of social support. These hypotheses were not confirmed in this research; IND had significant positive correlations with both emotional and tangible support in the Perceived Availability condition but had no significant correlations with support in the Seeking condition. INT and IND were positively correlated with each other in both social support conditions.

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Relationship of Self-Constraint to Perceived Availability and Seeking of Social Support by
International Students Studying Abroad in the United States

International students play a significant role in the U.S. higher education system. During the 2017-2018 academic year, there were 891,330 international students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education. These students represented more than 180 countries of origin, bringing together a wide array of ethnic heritages, linguistic backgrounds, and cultural worldviews (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2018).

College is a time of high stress for many college students, and international students are no exception (Scharp & Hall, 2017). Social support is generally an effective coping method for negative life events (Seeman, 1996). However, people's cultural background impacts how they view themselves and the meaning of using social support (Kim, Sherman & Taylor, 2008).

Social Support

Social support is defined as the perception or experience that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligation (Wills, 1991). It is well known that social support helps people cope with the stress, reduces the negative effects of health disorders, helps people recover faster from illness and increases positive attitudes (Seeman, 1996). Research on social support seeking centers around the tendency of people seeking social support, the types of social supports people are seeking, or the sources of social support they prefer to seek from (Scharp & Hall, 2017).

Social support is a protective factor which facilitates positive outcomes and weakens the negative impact of stress on individuals and support seeking is one of the major skills students need to cope with stress (Li, Eschenauer & Persaud, 2018). Moreover, research indicates that perceived social support is a stronger predictor of adjustment to stressful life events than actual received support (Bolger, Zuckerman & Kessler, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004; Wethington & Kessler, 1989). It may be helpful or comforting to know that there are others who care about you and would help you with stressful situations. It is also beneficial for people to know that they would not face stressful situations alone.

Cross-Cultural Differences in Social Support

Bolger et al. (2000) suggest that the actual receipt of social support may have negative emotional consequences because it threatens one's sense of personal competence, shows others the recipient's lack of competence, and may draw the recipient's attention to their negative mood. Cultural factors may serve to exacerbate this distress. Specifically, those with an interdependent self-construal may find the receipt of social support especially distressing.

Individualism/collectivism and self-construal. Individualism/Collectivism is the most commonly studied variable in cross-cultural psychology. The individualism-collectivism dimension characterizes the degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups (Hofstede, 2001).

One aspect of individualism/collectivism is the degree to which members of a culture hold an

interdependent or independent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Self-construal refers to the way that individuals see themselves as connected (or not) to others (Singelis, 1994). Those with an independent self-construal, generally those from individualist cultures, emphasize internal abilities, thoughts and feelings, being unique, self-expression, pursuing one's own goals and direct communication. Those with an interdependent self-construal, generally those from collectivist cultures, emphasize external features such as roles and relationships under the social hierarchy, the sense of belonging and the importance of the pursuit of group goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994; Utz, 2004; Yeh, 2002).

Because those with an interdependent self-construal value the harmony of the social group and emphasize the goals of groups, they may be more likely to suffer from receiving social support because the social support affects not only themselves, but can also affect group harmony, group goal pursuit, and their relationship with the support provider. In addition, those with an interdependent self-construal will be aware that by asking for social support, the person they ask may feel obligated to supply the support, and the recipient of support may incur a future obligation. Being aware of this possible distress, those with interdependent self-construal should be less likely to actively seek social support. Some studies have confirmed that people from collectivist cultures are more likely to seek social support, compared to those from individualist cultures.

Consideration of the perceived availability of support, however, leads to different

conclusions. Here, the sense of belonging and the sense of obligation play a different role. Those with an interdependent self-construal value the sense of belonging and obligation and this should lead to expectations that others feel the same way. This sense of belonging should cause these individuals to believe that they have the support of everyone in this group, therefore creating a high level of perceived availability of social support.

Current Study

It is these alternative perspectives on perceived availability and active seeking of social support that motivates the current study. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between independent/interdependent self-construal and perceived availability and active seeking of emotional and tangible social support.

Based on the logic above, I predicted an interaction between self-construal orientation and social support-seeking/ perceived social support availability. Those with higher levels of interdependent self-construal will have a greater level of perceived availability of social support, but a lower level of social support seeking.

Emotional and tangible support. There are multiple types of social support, which can generally be grouped into two categories: Emotional social support involves providing warmth and nurturance to another individual and reassuring the person that he or she is a valuable person who is cared about. Tangible social support involves the provision of tangible assistance such as services, financial assistance, and other specific aid or goods (Taylor et al., 2004). I will also

explore any differences in these relationships for emotional support and tangible support but am not making any specific prediction related to this variable.

Methods

Participants

All international student currently enrolled at Eastern Illinois University (N=333) were sent an invitation to participate in the study, along with a link to the survey. Participants were offered the chance to win a \$50.00 gift card as a reward for their participation.

Eighty-four students started the survey, but only forty-eight finished survey. Participants came from 61 different countries representing all continents except South America (although there were participants from Central America; there were, of course, no participants from Antarctica). Twenty-one participants did not indicate their age, and two participants chose the category “Under 18 years old”; the remaining participants ranged in age from 18 to 46 (Mdn = 24; $M = 24.33$; $SD = 4.82$). There were 32 different fields of study reported. Participants in the seeking group had 8 males (32%), 13 females (52%), 2 others (8%) and 1 prefer not to say (4%). Participants in the perceived availability group had 9 males (36%), 15 females (60%) and 1 other (5%).

Procedure

All participants completed the materials required for this survey online. Participants were

asked for their assent before the protocol was administered. They completed a brief demographic questionnaire asking for academic-level and program of study, gender, age and their home countries. They then completed the SCS followed by the Social Support scale. For the Social Support scale, participants were randomly assigned to complete either the Seeking Social Support version or the Perceived Availability version.

Materials.

Self-Constraint Scale. The Singelis Self-construal Scale (SCS; Singelis,1994) has the following directions: “These next questions measure a variety of feelings and behaviors in various situations. Listed below are a number of statements. Read each one as if it referred to you. Select the option that best matches your agreement or disagreement with the statement. Please respond to every statement.”

The scale itself is a 30-item measure of self-construal with two 15-item subscales that separately measure independent (IND) and interdependent (INT) self-construal. It has scores from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”) for each question. Example items are: “I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects (IND); “Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument.” (INT).

Social Support Scale. The Social Support scale was created for this study. It has five different scenarios based on common negative life situations among college students. For each scenario, two questions measure tangible support and two questions measure emotional support. Each

question has scores from 1 (“Definitely Not”) to 5 (“Definitely Yes”). This questionnaire has two versions; one version measures the active seeking of emotional and tangible social support in each of the five scenarios and the other measures perceived availability of emotional and tangible social support. Separate scores can be calculated for emotional and tangible support by combining the appropriate items across all five scenarios. All materials were attached in appendix.

Results

Reliability

In an initial examination of the correlation matrix for the items of each subscale of the SCS, Item 30 (“I usually go along with what others want to do, even when I would rather do something different”), part of the Interdependence subscale, had negative correlations with three other items from that subscale: Item 4 (“I have respect for the authority figures with whom I interact”) ($r = -.16$), Item 6 (“I respect people who are modest about themselves”) ($r = -.13$) and Item 19 (“I would offer my seat in a bus to my professor (or my boss)”) ($r = -.15$). Furthermore, although the alpha reliability of the subscale including Item 30 was sufficient ($\alpha = .74$ for the seeking condition; $\alpha = .90$ for the availability condition), deleting Item 30 raised alpha slightly ($\alpha = .77$ for the seeking condition; $\alpha = .91$ for the availability condition). Therefore Item 30 was not used in the calculation of the INT scores. Alpha reliabilities for the support seeking subscales were also reasonably high (see Table 1).

INT and IND subscale scores were formed by taking the mean ratings of the relevant items.

Tangible and Emotional support scores were formed by taking the sum of all the relevant support items across all scenarios. Summary statistics for all the variables are reported in Table 1.

Correlations

Correlational analysis was used to examine the relationships between SCS scores and scores on the Social Support scales. Table 2 shows the correlations among all the scales.

Table 1

Summary Statistics

	Theoretical Range	Social Support Seeking			Perceived Availability		
		Alpha	Mean	SD	Alpha	Mean	SD
Emotional Support	10-50	.80	34.96	6.64	.88	41.78	6.69
Tangible Support	10-50	.78	30.29	6.85	.89	36.52	8.66
SCS-IND	1-7	.84	4.79	.90	.91	4.78	1.18
SCS-INT	1-7	.77	4.75	.77	.91	4.74	1.15

NOTE: SCS-IND = Singelis (1994) Self-construal scale, Independent Subscale; SCS-INT =

Singelis (1994) Self-construal scale, Interdependent Subscale.

I predicted a negative correlation between INT and support seeking and a positive correlation between IND and support seeking. However, INT had marginally significant positive correlations with both types of support, while IND was not significantly correlated with support.

I predicted a positive correlation between INT and perceived availability of support and a negative relationship between IND and perceived availability. However, both INT and IND were positively correlated with both types of support.

Regression Analysis

Although the correlational analysis indicates a failure of the hypothesis, I conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to further explore the relationship among the variables. The analysis was run separately for the Tangible and Emotional support variables.

At the first step, I entered the two SCS subscales and condition; the interaction between the SCS subscales and condition were entered at the second step. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 3.

Table 2

Correlations

2.a Perceived Availability of Social Support Condition

Variables	Self-Construal Scale			
	SCS-IND	SCS-INT	Tangible support	Emotional support
SCS-IND				
SCS-INT	.79**			
Tangible support	.57**	.49*		
Emotional support	.59**	.56**	.84**	

* - $p < .05$; ** - $p < .01$,

2.b Seeking Social Support Condition

Variables	Self-Construal Scale			
	SCS-IND	SCS-INT	Tangible support	Emotional support
SCS-IND				
SCS-INT	.46*			
Tangible support	-.12	.33 ⁺		
Emotional support	.02	.41 ⁺⁺	.57**	

⁺ $p = .12$; ⁺⁺ $p = .052$; * - $p < .05$; ** - $p < .01$,

Note: SCS-IND = Self-Construal Scale Independent Subscale; SCS-INT = Self-Construal Scale Interdependent Subscale

The initial model was significant, indicating that self-construal and condition did predict support. Adding the interactions (Model 2) did not significantly improved prediction. However, the coefficient for IND X Condition was significant for predicting Tangible Support and marginally significant for Emotional Support.

Table 3
Regressions

Predictors	(a)		Predictors	(b)	
	Model 1	Model 2		Model 1	Model 2
IND	.007	-.746	IND	-.002	-1.083
INT	.420*	.842 ⁺	INT	.414	.910
C	.486**	-.032	C	.419**	-.382
INDxC		1.772 ⁺	INDxC		2.223*
INTxC		-1.082	INTxC		-1.234
F	10.71**	7.142**	F	6.944**	5.333**
df	3,41	2,39	df	3,41	2,39
R ²	.439	.478	R ²	.337	.406
Adj R ²	.398	.411	Adj R ²	.288	.330
ΔR ²		.039	ΔR ²		.069
F-change		1.45	F-change		2.27

DV=Emotional Social Support

DV= Tangible Social Support

* - p< .05; ** - p< .01, ⁺-p<.10

Note: IND = Self-Construal Scale Independent Subscale; INT = Self-Construal Scale

Interdependent Subscale; C = Condition (1=Social Support Seeking, 2= Perceived Availability of Social Support)

This confirms the results from the correlational analysis: SCS-IND has significant positive correlations with both of types of support in the Perceived Availability condition (for Tangible Support, $r = .57$; for Emotional Support, $r = .59$), but has no significant correlations with support in the Seeking condition (for Tangible Support, $r = -.12$; for Emotional Support, $r = .02$). Those with higher levels of Independent self-construal reported higher perceived support but for the supporting seeking condition, independent self-construal had little predictability of support seeking.

Discussion

The present study had two goals. The first one was to examine whether different levels of independent/interdependent self-construal have any relationship with social support seeking and perceived social support. Consistent with previous research (Ishii et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2008; Taylor, Welch, Kim., & Sherman, 2007; Taylor et al., 2004; Yeh, 2004;), I predicted that the more interdependent one's self-construal, the less one will seek for social support and the more independent one's self-construal, the lower will be their perceived availability of social support. But our data showed that the more interdependent the participants were, they were more likely to seek for social support and the more they perceived that social support was available.

Our second goal was to find out whether there would be a difference in how different social

support types (emotional social support/tangible social support) relate to social support seeking/perceived availability of social support. In our data, independent self-construal had a significant positive correlation with both support types in the perceived availability of social support condition; no other significant results were found.

There are many possible reasons why our results were different from our hypotheses. I think the first is because of the small sample size. The limited numbers of participants may not have enough representativeness from different cultural backgrounds. More data should be collected in the future. Also, we had a variety of different countries, but we did not have a large number of participants from each country. Some countries were only represented by one or two participants. One or two people may not give us enough information to understand their culture background well. The samples we need should be more general instead of letting one participant's answer based on his/herself, his/her own experience or his/her understanding about self-construal and social support represent the entire culture or country.

A second explanation is that most of the existing studies on this topic focused on East Asian cultures such as South Korean (Taylor et al., 2004), Japan (Miller et al., 2017), and China (Yeh, 2002) as the representatives of interdependent cultures; our study had participants from a more diverse set of countries. It may be that the finding that people from collectivist cultures are less likely to seek social support applies on to those from East Asian cultures. This might suggest that the difference between cultures that relates to lowered support seeking is not

collectivism/individualism, but is some other factor.

Another difference between this research and past research on this question is that our research was completed by international students who currently study abroad in the United States. There could be a chance that they tend to be more Westernized (especially those from countries with collectivist cultural backgrounds) compared to students from their countries that did not chose to study abroad. These international students may also be more open to seeking social support.

Furthermore, the social network structure of international students who study abroad in the U.S., such as the size of social groups, or relationships with people in their social group, may be different compared to students in their home countries. The international student population is far away from their home and family, so this fact could affect our results in measuring our participants' perceived availability of social support.

International Students may also have learned to seek social support. Eastern Illinois University provides extensive training to encourage international students to ask for support when they feel they need to. The University also offers different types of resources for different types of support students might need and makes sure they will have access to it.

In summary, we had many interesting discoveries through this research. For future study, a larger sample of participants could be helpful. A sample more representative from a specific culture may be helpful to the research as well. It would be an interesting study if researchers

have the resource to measure the social support seeking and perceived availability in some students in a country one or two years before they study abroad and then measure it again after they study abroad. Or a specific study could only target a few participants that their resources of them perceiving social support wouldn't change dramatically like international students'.

Furthermore, cross-cultural study has many interesting areas for us to discover in the future and our society will benefit from more social cross-cultural research results in a long-term way.

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Appendix

Singelis Self-Construal Scale (SCS)**Instructions**

This is a questionnaire that measures a variety of feelings and behaviors in various situations. Listed below are a number of statements. Read each one as if it referred to you. Beside each statement write the number that best matches your agreement or disagreement. Please respond to every statement. Thank you.

1=Strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=somewhat disagree
 4=don't agree or disagree 5=agree somewhat 6=agree
 7=strongly agree

1. I enjoy being unique and different from other in many respects.
2. I can talk openly with a person who I meet for the first time, even when this person is much older than I am.
3. Even when I strongly disagree with group members. I avoid an argument.
4. I have respect for the authority figure with whom I interact.
5. I do my own thing, regardless of what others think.
6. I respect people who are modest about themselves.
7. I feel it is important for me to act as an independent person.
8. I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in.
9. I'd rather say "no" directly, than risk being misunderstood.
10. Having a lively imagination is important to me.
11. I should take into consideration my parent's advice when making education/career plans.
12. I feel my fate is intertwined with the fate of those around me.
13. I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I've just met.
14. I feel good when I cooperate with others.
15. I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards.

16. If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible.
17. I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishment.
18. Speaking up during a class (or a meeting) is not a problem for me.
19. I would offer my seat in a bus to my professor (or my boss).
20. I act the same way no matter no I am with.
21. My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me.
22. I value being good health above everything.
23. I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I am not happy with the group.
24. I try to do what is best for me, regardless of how that might affect others.
25. Being able to take care of myself is a primary concern for me.
26. It is important to me to respect decision made by the group.
27. My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me.
28. It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group
29. I act the same way at home that I do at school (work).
30. I usually go along with what other want to do, even when I would rather do something different.

Social Support Scale

Instructions

This is a questionnaire that measures a variety of feelings and behaviors in various situations. Listed below are a number of statements. Read each one as if it referred to you. Beside each statement write the number that best matches your choices. Please respond to every statement. Thank you.

1=Definitely not 2=Probably not 3=May 4=Probably yes 5=Definitely yes

(Seeking/Availability)

Social: If you were having an argument with your roommate(s)

Would you go to someone you know (e.g., friends, family members etc.) to talk about your situation?

Do you have someone (e.g., friends, family members etc.) who would talk with you about your situation if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them to spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, go shopping together etc.)?

Do you have someone you could spend time with to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, go shopping together etc.) if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know to ask them to help you move or help you find a new roommate etc.?

Do you have someone who would help you move or help you find a new roommate etc., if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know to lend you money to get another apartment?

Do you have someone who would lend you money to get another apartment, if that is what you wanted?

Academic: If you were not doing very well in a class

Would you go to someone you know (e.g., friends, family members etc.) to talk about your situation?

Is there someone in your life (e.g., friends, family members etc.) who you could talk to about your situation if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, go shopping together etc.)?

Is there someone in your life who you could ask to spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, going shopping together, etc.) if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know to ask them to study with you or help you find a better way to study?

Is there someone in your life who you could ask to study with you or to help you find a way to study, if that was what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them to share notes or lend you money for a tutor, etc.?

Is there someone in your life who you could ask to share their notes or to help you hire a tutor, if that was what you wanted?

Financial: If you were having some financial problems (e.g., not able to pay the rent this month or needing money for car repair, etc.)

Would you go to someone you know (e.g., friends, family members etc.) to talk about your situation?

Is there someone in your life (e.g., friends, family members etc.) who you could talk to about your situation if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, go shopping together etc.)?

Is there someone in your life who you could ask to spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, going shopping together, etc.) if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them to help you find a part-time job or make a budget, etc.?

Is there someone in your life who you could ask to help you find a part-time job or make a budget, etc., if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them to lend you money to pay your bills, etc.?

Is there someone in your life who would lend you money to pay your bills if you asked them?

Homesickness: If you were having feelings of homesickness

Would you go to someone you know (e.g., friends, family members, etc.) to talk about your situation?

Is there someone in your life (e.g., friends, family members etc.) who you could talk to about your situation if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, go shopping together etc.)?

Is there someone in your life who you could ask to spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, going shopping together, etc.) if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them to help you get time off to visit your family or help you set up a way to talk to your family, etc.?

Is there someone in your life that you could ask to help you get time off to visit your family or help you set up a way to talk to your family, etc., if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know to lend you money to go back home, etc.?

Are there people in your life that you could ask to lend you money to go back home, etc., if that is what you wanted?

Physical Health: If you were not feeling well (e.g., had a cold or fever, etc.)

Would you go to someone you know (e.g., friends, family members, etc.) to talk about your situation?

Is there someone in your life (e.g., friends, family members etc.) who you could talk to about your situation if that is what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know and ask them spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, go shopping together etc.)?

Is there someone in your life who you could ask to spend time with you to help you feel better (e.g., having a meal together, going shopping together, etc.) if that is what you wanted?

Would you ask someone you know to sit with you at the hospital or doctor's office, or to take care of you at your house?

Are there people in your life who you could ask to sit with you at the hospital or doctor's office, or to take care of you at your house, if that was what you wanted?

Would you go to someone you know to lend you money to go to the doctor or to pay for your medicine, etc.?

Are there people in your life who you could ask to lend you money to go to the doctor or to pay for your medicine, etc., if that was what you needed?