



Individual and cultural variations in direct communication style[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated individual and cultural differences in preferences for direct communication style. Individualism and face needs were examined for variations across individuals and cultures. Multilevel analyses were conducted on data ($N = 929$) collected in 17 countries. The results showed that individual variations were larger than cultural variations in preferences for direct communication style. Individuals' self negative face need and other positive face need were positively related to preferences for direct communication style. Each national culture's individualism index score was not directly related to preferences for direct communication style, but instead moderated the relationship between other positive face need and preference for direct communication style. These and other findings and the implications thereof are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Cross-cultural and cross-national variations exist in communicative behaviors and preferences for communication styles. Simple generalizations about these differences, however, are most likely misleading. It is sometimes claimed, for example, that relative to peoples from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Western Europe, people from Japan, Korea, and China are less individualistic, more collectivistic, more concerned with the face needs of self and others, and – as a direct consequence – are less direct in communication. Such generalizations are problematic for a number of reasons. One of these problems is addressed here.

Within the same culture, there exists substantial individual variation. Not all people from the same culture respond in the same ways. Within-culture socialization is far from uniform, and numerous dimensions of individual differences such

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as personality ensure that even if cultural socialization was uniform, the effects of culture on the individual would not be uniform. Individual variation may be among the most intractable problems facing cross-cultural research.

The problem of individual variation makes conclusions about cross-cultural differences drawn from comparing sample means problematic. First, a focus on mean differences makes cross-cultural similarities invisible. Surely, understanding commonalities is as important as documenting differences. Second, the focus on means hides meaningful within-culture variation. A focus on mean differences assumes that any within-culture deviations from the mean are “error” and do not reflect important culture-relevant processes. Third, because within culture variation is typically substantial, the relegation of individual differences to error ensures small effect sizes and that study results underestimate the power of culture as an explanatory construct. Finally, the mean-difference approach runs the risk of “cultural lumping”, that is, of making questionable generalities about individuals within a culture. Cross-cultural mean differences get reified in the literature despite small effect sizes that often do not replicate and that do not capture many of the individuals whose scores were used to calculate the means.

This paper identifies two potential solutions to the within-culture variation problem. The first is to consider culture not only as a causal antecedent of human affect, cognition, and behavior, but also as a moderator of the processes that govern human responses. In the traditional mean difference approach, culture is expected to have a main effect on the outcome of interest. Viewing culture as a moderator, however, involves taking a process or an effect known to exist in people from one culture and re-testing it in a second culture. Thus, the focus is not just on mean differences in the variables, but also on if culture changes the relationships among the variables.

The notion of “disunity variability” (Levine, Park, & Kim, 2007, p. 212) posits that the relationship between two constructs can differ across cultures in such a way that constructs function differently in different cultures. The current research examines the disunity variability aspect of face needs and predicts that different types of face needs will be responsible for why people of one culture would prefer direct communication style more strongly than people of another culture.

The second solution to within-culture variation is a multiple-level approach to culture. A multiple-level approach statistically models both cultural variation and individual variation in a given variable of interest. Then, culture-level independent variables can be used to explain cultural variation in a dependent variable and individual-level independent variables can be used to explain individual variations in the dependent variable. By using proper levels of variables, research can avoid ecological fallacy and provide more valid findings. Use of multilevel modeling techniques is becoming more evident in cross-cultural research and the benefits of using multilevel modeling technique have been well-discussed (e.g., Eckert, Ekelund, Gentry, & Dawson, 2010; Fulmer et al., 2010; Mayer & Trommsdorff, 2010; Van de Vijver, Van Hemert, & Poortinga, 2008). Thus, by using a multiple-level approach this research specifies how the concept of face needs functions in various cultures and how a culture-level value (i.e., individualism) moderates the relationship between face needs and communication style preference.

1.1. Individualism, face needs, and direct communication style

Much research has concluded that people in different cultures have different preferences in the way they communicate with others. For example, compared to Koreans, Americans have been found to be more likely to rate direct statements as effective in making a request (Kim & Bresnahan, 1994; Kim & Wilson, 1994). Hong Kong Chinese migrants in the Australian workplace noted that Australians were more direct in communication than they were (Mak, 1998). Russians and Japanese used more indirect communication strategies than Americans did when negotiating with others (Adair et al., 2004). Indians preferred indirect communication more strongly than Americans (Kapoor, Hughes, Baldwin, & Blue, 2003).

A lack of cultural differences (i.e., cultural similarities), however, has been also noted. When Koreans were compared with Americans, no cultural differences were evident in indirect communication (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, & Kim, 1996). When making a request, both Koreans and Americans rated direct statements as the least likely strategy to use (Kim & Wilson, 1994). A study with Koreans showed that open and clear communication had a positive influence on organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Yoon & Thye, 2002). Chinese preferred direct persuasion appeals (Ma & Chuang, 2001) and a direct communication style in business communication (Beamer, 2003).

One commonly identified explanatory variable for cultural differences and similarities in communicative behaviors and preferences is the existence of a culture-level value such as individualism–collectivism. Hofstede (2001) discusses individualism–collectivism in terms of the relationship between individuals and groups. Compared to individuals in the less individualistic cultures, those in the more individualistic cultures have greater tendency to see themselves as separate from others and put emphasis on individual goals rather than group goals. Individualism–collectivism is the most popularly used cultural dimensions in cross-cultural studies and is believed by some more powerful in explaining various attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors than other cultural dimensions (Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010).

Researchers have used individualism as a cultural value dimension explaining and predicting communication behaviors. In less individualistic cultures where group harmony is more highly valued, direct and assertive inquiries can be considered potentially face-threatening acts (Merritt & Helmreich, 1996). For example, Rojjanaprapayon (1997) found that Thais employ indirectness in communication in order to maintain social harmony. Clearly asserting one’s own views, however, is an important communication skill in the US while not stating clearly what one has in mind is a sign of strength, maturity and social competence in the Asian culture (Miyahara, 2000).

A culture-level value such as individualism–collectivism, however, is probably not the sole reason for variation in direct communication style preferences. As discussed above, simply comparing cultures for their mean scores on direct communication style may not capture more intricate and complex patterns of cultural differences. Individuals within the same culture have varying reasons for direct communication style preferences. For example, differences in personality, self-esteem, and/or stresses make people use particular communication styles consistently regardless of the referent groups such as partners, friends, and coworkers (Ivanov & Werner, 2010). The relationship between individual-level independent variables and direct communication style may not be the same across different cultures. Possibly, cultures can differ in the reasons important for being direct when communicating with others. For example, politeness can be a reason for not being direct when communicating with others in one culture, but expressing relational closeness can be a reason for being direct in another culture (Pavlidou, 2000; Wierzbicka, 2003). Kim, Hearn, Hatcher, and Weber (1999) observed Australians' and Koreans' communication styles in their intercultural exchanges and found that Australians believed explicit and direct messages facilitated effective communication while Koreans thought that unconstrained and explicit communication in e-mails could threaten face and be impolite to others, thus being ineffective.

Of many individual-level variables relating to preferences for direct communication style, the current study examines how face needs are related to direct communication style across cultures. Face and facework concepts have been used to analyze communicative behaviors such as apology and thank you (Lee & Park, 2011), compliance gaining strategies (Baxter, 1984; Tracy, Craig, Smith, & Spisak, 1984), and request strategies (Holtgraves & Yang, 1990, 1992). Integrating Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive and negative faces with Ting-Toomey's (1988) notions of self and other faces generates four types of face needs. Self positive face need refers to the desire to defend and protect one's own self-image to be approved and valued. Other positive face need points to the tendency to defend and protect the other person's need to be approved and valued. Self negative face need indicates individuals wanting to protect their freedom and autonomy, and protect themselves from the infringement of others. Other negative face need refers to the desire to protect the other person's need of freedom and autonomy.

Although face is a universal construct in interpersonal communication, cultures differ in how face needs operate in each culture. Among individuals in more individualistic cultures, protecting the negative face needs of self and other may be a more important reason in how they communicate with others because autonomy is an important individualistic value. On the other hand, individuals in less individualistic cultures (i.e., collectivistic cultures) may consider protecting the positive face need of other as more important when communicating with them in order to facilitate in-group harmony. For example, Chinese indicated stronger intentions to apologize when their act posed a threat to positive face need, whereas Americans indicated stronger intentions when their act posed a threat to negative face need (Park & Guan, 2006, 2009).

In general, indirect communication patterns are considered more face-saving than direct ones (Hall, 2005). Considering that the main characteristic of individualism as a cultural dimension focused on the relationship between self and other, the positive and negative face needs of self and other may have different implications for being direct when communication with others across various cultures. Thus, research questions posed in this paper are as follows; (1) can individualism explain the cultural variation in preferences for direct communication style? and (2) does culture moderate the way each of the four face need types is related to direct communication style preference?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were collected from 929 individuals in 17 countries (Argentina, Bolivia, China, Colombia, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, Taiwan, Thailand, Uruguay, and USA). The number of participants from each country ranged from 29 (Mexico) to 112 (Germany) with an average of 55. Participants were college students (63% women) with an average age of 23 years old ($SD = 5.28$).

2.2. Procedure

The questionnaire was originally prepared in English. In countries where English was not the first language or the language commonly used to communicate, authors and their collaborators translated and/or back-translated questionnaire in the languages that were native to participants.

2.3. Measures

Appendix lists all the measurement items used in the current study. Reliabilities for measures of each variable are also indicated in Appendix. Although efforts were made to improve reliability (e.g., deleting items with lower inter-item correlations), the relatively low reliabilities were inevitable due to the small number of items for each scale. However, as explained below, confirmatory factor analyses showed an acceptable fit for the scales. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) was used for each item. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations of all the variables.

The measurement for direct communication style preference was created for this study. Item construction reflected the conceptualization of direct communication style as being explicit and clear in expressing meanings. A confirmatory factor

Table 1
Means and standard deviations of variables at national culture-level.

	Individualism index scores (IDV)	<i>n</i>	Direct communication style preferences	Other positive face (OPF)	Self positive face (SPF)	Other negative face (ONF)	Self negative face (SNF)
Argentina	46	51	4.19 (0.41)	4.00 (0.42)	4.11 (0.55)	3.64 (0.55)	4.31 (0.54)
Bolivia ^a		50	4.25 (0.33)	4.00 (0.52)	3.82 (0.55)	3.71 (0.40)	4.11 (0.52)
China	20	58	3.76 (0.44)	4.23 (0.42)	3.94 (0.42)	3.97 (0.43)	4.10 (0.42)
Colombia	13	48	4.22 (0.54)	4.34 (0.49)	4.10 (0.60)	3.92 (0.58)	4.23 (0.59)
Germany	67	112	3.87 (0.42)	4.03 (0.46)	3.78 (0.55)	3.56 (0.50)	3.76 (0.45)
Ghana ^b	20	44	4.17 (0.54)	4.32 (0.45)	4.21 (0.52)	3.91 (0.57)	3.76 (0.56)
Guatemala	6	50	4.26 (0.36)	4.17 (0.37)	3.72 (0.62)	4.00 (0.61)	3.95 (0.60)
India	48	46	4.00 (0.41)	3.98 (0.45)	4.00 (0.57)	3.70 (0.36)	3.61 (0.52)
Japan	46	51	3.63 (0.55)	3.64 (0.47)	3.50 (0.64)	3.43 (0.50)	3.33 (0.62)
Korea	18	53	3.94 (0.51)	3.92 (0.43)	3.92 (0.45)	3.49 (0.45)	3.69 (0.53)
Mexico	30	29	4.40 (0.38)	4.26 (0.41)	3.98 (0.67)	3.84 (0.51)	4.04 (0.47)
New Zealand	79	51	4.02 (0.46)	4.17 (0.49)	3.89 (0.54)	3.76 (0.43)	3.57 (0.60)
Russia	39	49	3.94 (0.47)	3.93 (0.57)	3.85 (0.60)	3.89 (0.55)	3.96 (0.53)
Taiwan	17	86	3.85 (0.42)	4.06 (0.40)	3.97 (0.50)	3.67 (0.45)	4.01 (0.48)
Thailand	20	41	3.75 (0.49)	3.89 (0.47)	3.40 (0.67)	3.79 (0.50)	4.12 (0.63)
Uruguay	36	47	4.02 (0.71)	3.79 (0.60)	3.62 (0.84)	3.56 (0.61)	4.28 (0.49)
USA	91	63	3.88 (0.42)	4.17 (0.38)	4.13 (0.48)	3.60 (0.55)	3.50 (0.62)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

IDV information (i.e., individualism index scores) was available from <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede.dimensions.php>.

^a Because IDV was not available for Bolivia, a multilevel analysis was done without Bolivia included and another multilevel analysis was done with DIV of a nearby country, Peru (16). No substantial difference was found for the overall results.

^b The estimated value for West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone) was used for IDV for Ghana.

analysis showed an acceptable fit for the unidimensional solution, $\chi^2(9) = 42.14$, $p < .01$, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .06, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .97, Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = .97, Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) = .95, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = .98.

Face needs were measured with a modified version of the scales used by Park and Guan (2006), who developed the scales based on Ting-Toomey and Oetzel's (2001) face scale and Brown and Levinson's (1987) delineation of positive and negative faces. The results of a confirmatory factor analysis showed that these face need items indeed formed four dimensions ($\chi^2(113) = 432.60$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .92, IFI = .92, NNFI = .90, GFI = .95), consisting of other positive face, self positive face, other negative face, and self negative face. The four-factor model showed a better fit than any other one-, two-, or three-factor models, $\Delta\chi^2 > 503.89$, $p < .001$, RMSEA > .09, CFI < .83, IFI < .82, NNFI < .70, GFI < .84.

Individualism (IDV) scores were assigned to each country based on individualism index shown in Hofstede's (2001) and Hofstede's web site (<http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede.dimensions.php>). For example, USA received IDV score of 91, Japan IDV of 46, Mexico IDV of 30, and Guatemala IDV of 6.

3. Results

3.1. Overview

The data were analyzed with Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) because individuals were nested in their respective country. The multilevel analysis allowed for partitioning of variance in the individual-level dependent variable, preference for direct communication style, into between-individual (i.e., individual-level, level-1) and between-country (i.e., country-level, level-2) components. The individual-level predictors were group-mean-centered for proper testing of cross-level interaction (Park, 2008; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), and country averages of self positive face need, other positive face need, self negative face need, and other negative face need were included as predictors of the individual-level intercepts and slopes.

3.2. Multilevel analysis

The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) on communication style preference was .15 and the variance in communication style preference across countries was significantly different from zero, $\chi^2(16) = 160.36$, $p < .001$. This ICC score indicates that about 85% of variance in communication style preference was between individuals and 15% between countries/cultures. That is, there is statistically significant cultural-level variation in communication directness, but the vast majority of variance in communication style is attributable to the individuals. Table 2 shows the results.

3.2.1. Individual-level analysis

When self positive face need, other positive face need, self negative face need, and other negative face need were introduced to the multilevel model as individual-level predictors of direct communication style, other positive face need and self

Table 2
Multilevel analyses results.

	Unstandardized coefficient	SE	t	df	p-value
For intercept 1, β_{0j}					
Intercept 2, γ_{00}	4.060	0.076	2.66	11	.02
IDV, γ_{01}	-0.001	0.001	-1.01	11	.33
OPF.M, γ_{02}	0.487	0.277	1.76	11	.11
SPF.M, γ_{03}	0.117	0.222	0.53	11	.61
ONF.M, γ_{04}	-0.262	0.266	-0.99	11	.35
SNF.M, γ_{05}	0.226	0.087	2.60	11	.03
For OPF slope, β_{1j}					
Intercept 2, γ_{10}	0.266	0.090	3.03	15	.01
IDV, γ_{11}	-0.004	0.001	-2.41	15	.03
For SPF slope, β_{2j}					
Intercept 2, γ_{20}	0.094	0.082	1.16	15	.27
IDV, γ_{21}	-0.002	0.002	-1.38	15	.19
For ONF slope, β_{3j}					
Intercept 2, γ_{30}	0.015	0.024	0.64	917	.52
For SNF slope, β_{4j}					
Intercept 2, γ_{40}	0.084	0.023	3.63	917	.001

Note: Equations illustrating the model with grand mean centered level-2 predictors.

Direct communication style_{ij} = β_{0j} + β_{1j} (OPF) + β_{2j} (SPF) + β_{3j} (ONF) + β_{4j} (SNF) + r_{ij} .

β_{0j} = γ_{00} + γ_{01} (IDV_j) + γ_{02} (OPF.M_j) + γ_{03} (SPF.M_j) + γ_{04} (ONF.M_j) + γ_{05} (SNF.M_j) + u_{0j} .

β_{1j} = γ_{10} + γ_{11} (IDV_j) + u_{1j} .

β_{2j} = γ_{20} + γ_{21} (IDV_j) + u_{2j} .

β_{3j} = γ_{30} (this intercept was treated as fixed because the variance in the intercept was not significant).

β_{4j} = γ_{40} (this intercept was treated as fixed because the variance in the intercept was not significant).

IDV, individualism index scores.

OPF.M, means of individuals' scores on other positive face need for each country.

ONF.M, means of individuals' scores on other negative face need for each country.

SPF.M, means of individuals' scores on self positive face need for each country.

SNF.M, means of individuals' scores on self negative face need for each country.

negative face need were significantly positive. As shown in Table 2, the more concern people had about protecting the positive face needs of other, the more likely they were to prefer a direct communication style (unstandardized coefficient = 0.27, $SE = 0.09$, $t [15] = 3.03$, $p = .01$). Self positive face need (unstandardized coefficient = 0.09, $SE = 0.08$, $t [15] = 1.16$, $p = .27$) and other negative face need (unstandardized coefficient = 0.02, $SE = 0.02$, $t [917] = 0.64$, $p = .52$) were not statistically significant. The more concern people had about protecting self negative face need, the more likely they preferred direct communication style (unstandardized coefficient = 0.08, $SE = 0.02$, $t [917] = 3.63$, $p < .001$). The degrees of freedom for coefficients for other positive face need and self positive face need were 15, reflecting the number of cultures, because the variances of the slopes (i.e., coefficients) were significantly different from zero as discussed below and the slopes were allowed to vary across cultures in the final model. The degrees of freedom for coefficients for other negative face need and self negative face need were 917, reflecting the number of participants, because the variances of the slopes (i.e., coefficients) were not significantly different from zero as discussed below and the slopes were fixed (i.e., not allowed to vary across cultures) in the final model.

3.2.2. Country-level analysis

Among the four predictors of face needs, the slopes of other positive face need and self positive face need had a significant amount of variance across countries. That is, the extent to which other positive face need was related to communication style preference was different across countries (variance = 0.019, $\chi^2(16) = 30.47$, $p = .02$). Additionally, the extent to which self positive face need was related to communication style preference was different across countries (variance = 0.024, $\chi^2(16) = 45.04$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, the way each of other negative face need and self negative face need was related to communication style preference was not significantly different across countries (variance of other negative face need slope = 0.002, $\chi^2(16) = 9.20$, $p > .50$, and variance of self negative face need slope = 0.001, $\chi^2(16) = 17.12$, $p = .38$). Thus, a country-level predictor needed to be introduced to explain the variance in the slopes of other positive face need and self positive face need, but it was not necessary for the slopes of other negative face need and self negative face need.

As mentioned above, the general relationship between other positive face need and direct communication style was positive. This pattern of the relationship between other positive face need and direct communication style, however, varied across different countries. When IDV was introduced to the model as a country level predictor for the relationship between other positive face need and direct communication style, it was significant, indicating that in the countries with higher IDV, the relationship between other positive face need and direct communication style was less positive (unstandardized coefficient = -0.004, $SE = 0.001$, $t [15] = -2.41$, $p = .03$). For example, for USA with an IDV of 91, other positive face need was not a significant predictor of direct communication style (OLS regression unstandardized coefficient $[B] = -0.13$, OLS regression standardized coefficient $[\beta] = -.12$, $p = .40$). For Russia with IDV of 39, other positive face need was a positive predictor of direct communication style ($B = 0.28$, $\beta = .34$, $p = .04$). For Columbia with IDV of 13, other positive face was a positive predictor of direct communication style ($B = 0.56$, $\beta = .51$, $p < .001$).

The general relationship between self positive face need and direct communication style was not significant, but varied significantly across countries. In a country like Korea, self positive face need was a positive predictor of direct communication style (OLS regression unstandardized coefficient [B]=0.41, OLS regression standardized coefficient [β]=.36, p = .01). Also, self positive face need had a significantly positive relationship with direct communication style in India (B = 0.34, β = .47, p = .001). In a country like Germany, however, self positive face need was a negative predictor (B = -0.21, β = -.26, p = .007). Also, self positive face need had a significantly negative relationship with direct communication style in Columbia (B = -0.42, β = -.50, p = .003). For many other countries, self positive face need was not significantly related to direct communication style (e.g., China, B = -0.02, β = -.02, p = .90; Russia, B = 0.08, β = .11, p = .48). When IDV was introduced to the model as a country level predictor for the relationship between self positive face need and direct communication style, it failed to explain the variance in the slope of self positive face need (unstandardized coefficient = -0.002, SE = 0.002, t [15] = -1.38, p = .19).

4. Discussion

This study examined individual-level and culture-level variation in preferences for direct communication style. Although there are good reasons to believe that cultural differences in directness exist, previous findings are inconsistent. The current findings help clarify the understanding of cultural differences in communicative directness by highlighting two important issues. First, proportionally, there is much more variation across individuals than across cultures in direct communication style. Second, IDV did not explain variations in direct communication style directly. That is, increases in IDV did not lead to a simple increase in direct communication style. Countries relatively low in IDV were among the highest and the lowest in direct communication style. Instead of having direct effects, IDV explained cultural variations in the relationship between one of the four face need types and direct communication style.

As expected, countries varied in direct communication style. Generally, Central and South American countries had the strongest preference for direct communication style while Asian countries had the lowest mean scores of direct communication style. That said, country-level differences explained only 15% of the total variance in direct communication style, while individual-level differences explained 85%. This finding may help shed light on why some prior research find expected cultural differences in direct communication while others do not. With much larger variations among individuals than cultures, it is likely that individual research findings are affected by the characteristics of individuals sampled within each culture.

One viable solution is to find variables that explain individual differences in each culture before projecting across cultures. Explaining individual variation makes good sense as a research strategy because that is where most of the variance is to explain. Once individual variation is understood, those explanatory relationships can be observed across cultures. Such a research strategy disentangles individual variation and cultural variation and therefore may help enhance the clarity and depth of cross-cultural research findings and theories.

Consistent with this thinking, the current study found individual-level relationships between face needs and direct communication style. Across countries, other positive face and self negative face need were positively related to direct communication style. The positive relationship between other positive face and direct communication style may indicate that being direct can be a way of complementing, encouraging or appreciating others effectively. Some people may consider that not beating around the bush can convey their sincere meanings fully and reflect genuine intentions of valuing others' face need. The positive relationship between self negative face and direct communication style may indicate that those who want to protect their autonomy may adopt direct communication style in order to get their meanings crossed efficiently and avoid miscommunication so that imposition by others and unnecessary interaction can be minimized.

That said, simply averaging individual level relationships across countries misses important cultural variation. In the current results, the relationship between other positive face need and direct communication style was not uniform across cultures. IDV was a significantly negative predictor of the relationship between other positive face need and direct communication style. That is, the relationship between other positive face need and direct communication style was less positive in countries with higher IDV like the United States. In cultures with lower IDV, people may be more likely to prefer communicating directly, explicitly, and openly with others as a way to respect the others' need for approval and being appreciated.

On the other hand, IDV was not a significant predictor for the relationship between self positive face need and communication style preference, even though cultures differed in the way self positive face need was related to direct communication style. The current study indicates that the individualism index ratings of cultures (or, the distinction of individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures) are not sufficient to explain cultural differences in the orientation of positive or negative face and their relations with direct communication style. Although individualism as a cultural-level value has been popular and powerful in the literature, other cultural values also need to be considered. For example, power distance may influence whether one chooses to use direct or indirect communication styles. In collectivistic and high power distance cultures such as Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, people communicate clearly if it is a top-down direction (cf. Merritt & Helmreich, 1996).

However, this study focused only on IDV as a culture-level variable and did not examine Hofstede's (2001) other cultural dimensions such as power distance index (PDI) for a few reasons. First, IDV has been the most widely used dimension in cross-cultural studies (Taras et al., 2010). Second, this study included only 17 countries. Including multiple culture-level independent variables was not wise for statistical reasons. Third, some of Hofstede's dimensions were highly correlated with

one another, especially for 17 countries included in the current study (e.g., $r = -.70$, $p = .002$ for IDV and PDI). Fourth, when we included each of other dimensions in our analyses one at a time, other dimensions such as PDI, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance were not significant predictors of communication style preference or the relationship between face needs and direct communication style.

The current findings imply that the search for an explanation for why people in a culture are more likely to be direct than people in another culture may benefit more by considering culture as a moderator that explains how individual-level independent variables have varied effects on a dependent variable of interest. Another approach to dealing with the within-culture variation problem that has been discussed and used in cross-cultural research is the individual-level culture approach. This approach seeks to measure individual-level mediators such as self-construals. The idea is that culture is the proximate cause of some measurable individual difference (e.g., interdependent self-construal), and the measured individual difference, in turn, is the proximate cause of the outcome of interest (e.g., communication directness). We find this approach less appealing than the moderator and multi-level approaches. Conceptually, the idea of “individual-level culture” goes contrary to the general understanding of culture. Culture is something that transcends individuals. The idea of individual-level culture strikes us as conceptually incoherent. Pragmatically, the validity measurement of constructs of such as self-construals has proven problematic (Levine et al., 2003). Empirically, the data just have not been supportive as evidenced by meta-analysis (Levine et al., 2003). Therefore, we believe moderator and multi-level approaches hold more promise for progress in this field.

4.1. Limitations

Collecting data from multiple countries certainly has numerous benefits, but it is not without challenges. Establishing an acceptable cross-cultural reliability for all the measures is extremely difficult (cf. Straus, 2004). Possibly due to translation, construct equivalence and other issues, the measures used in this study had less than ideal reliabilities. High random response error might have decreased the statistical power of the analyses.

Second, with only 17 countries included in the current sample, it was not possible to include many country-level predictors. Obviously, more countries would have been desirable. Countries in the Middle East were also notably absent from the current efforts.

4.2. Conclusion and suggestions for future studies

The relationships between two (or more) constructs can vary across cultures. Communication and other forms of human behavior often do not unfold in simple ways. The inclusion of moderating variables in cross-cultural analyses can help improve our understanding of differences in individuals' attitudes and behaviors. As shown in the current research, the effect of culture on preferences for direct communication style was not straightforward, but varied with different types of face needs and culture. Negative and positive face needs provide a way to explain cultural differences in preferences for direct communication style. A next step in this direction could involve further examination of whether each type of face needs in various situations would explain cultural differences in many other communication acts such as gratitude expressions (e.g., “thank you”), criticism, and compliments. Future research should also consider individual-level variables other than face to see if cultures moderate the relationship between those individual-level variables and outcome variables of interest. Regardless of the specific research focus, however, the multi-level and culture-as-moderator approaches are endorsed.

Appendix. Measurement items

Direct communication style (Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$)

1. It is important to say exactly what you mean in most situations.
2. I believe that it is generally better to directly say what you mean.
3. People should say what they think.
4. In most situations, I prefer that others say clearly what they mean.
5. I usually prefer to express my opinions frankly.
6. People should say clearly what they mean.

Other positive face (Cronbach's $\alpha = .61$)

1. It is important to treat others with respect.
2. I avoid making other's look bad.
3. I try to be sensitive to other people's self-worth.
4. I try to help other person to maintain their credibility.

Self positive face (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$)

5. I am concerned with not bringing shame to myself.
6. I am concerned with protecting my self-image.
7. It is important to me that others see me in a favorable way.
8. I am concerned with protecting my personal pride.
9. How other's see me is important to me.

Other Negative Face (Cronbach's $\alpha = .50$)

10. I try not to impose on others.
11. I avoid telling others what to do.
12. I try to respect other people privacy.
13. I try not to pressure other people to do things.

Self negative Face (Cronbach's $\alpha = .60$)

14. I do not like being bothered by other people.
15. I resent when people impose on me.
16. I do not like to be pressured by other people.
17. I don't like pushy people.

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