

Abstract

People with a highly relational self-construal tend to define themselves in terms of their close relationships. This experiment tested the hypothesis that high relationals would have more positive reactions to a task when it was labeled as relationship-enhancing than when it was labeled as career-enhancing. Seventy-six participants were paired together and asked to complete an interview task. They were then told that the task was meant to improve either relationship or career skills. Results confirmed that high relationals had more positive attitudes toward their partner and reported more positive affect when the task was labeled as relationship-enhancing than when it was labeled as career-enhancing.

It's Not What You Do, It's What You Call It The Interaction of Self-Construal and Task Label

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Introduction

Person-Environment (P-E) Fit Theory proposes that the fit between individual characteristics and environmental contexts can have important psychological repercussions for the individual. We suggest that, if a task is labeled in a way that reflects a person's self-concept, then the person will view elements of the task as much more rewarding than if the task were not labeled in a way that is self-relevant. Therefore, the task itself may not be as important as the way it is labeled.

For this experiment, we focus on a self-definition based on one's close relationships (relational self-construal) and an interview task. We predicted that when the interview was labeled as one that enhances relationship skills, people with a highly relational self-construal would perceive elements of the task more positively than when the task was labeled as enhancing career skills. In contrast, we expected individuals with a low relational self-construal to perceive elements of the task more positively when it was labeled as career-enhancing than when it was labeled as relationship-enhancing.

Method

Participants: 76 undergraduates (15 men, 61 women). All participants volunteered in exchange for extra course credit.

Self-Construal: Participants completed the Relational-Interdependent Self-Construct Scale during a Mass Testing session earlier in the semester. (RISC; Cross, Bacon, Morris, 2000). These scores were matched later matched with their data using their Student Identification Number.

Interview Task: Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants were paired up and assigned an interview task. For this task, both partners were asked to interview each other for 12 minutes on a variety of questions that they chose themselves. After the interview task, participants were placed into separate cubicles and randomly assigned to receive one of two explanations for the task (Relational or Occupational). Both partners received the same explanation.

Perceptions of Task Elements: Participants then rated statements regarding the following task elements.

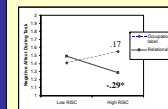
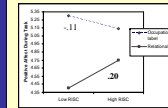
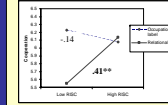
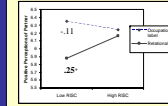
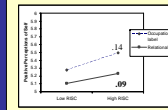
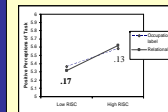
- Positive Perception of Self (e.g., "I felt that I made a good contribution during this task")
- Positive Perception of Task (e.g., "I found this task to be interesting")
- Positive Perception of Partner (e.g., "My partner listened carefully when it was my turn to talk")
- Cooperation with Partner (e.g., "My partner and I participated an equal amount in this task")
- Positive and Negative Affect during Task (e.g., "attentive," "anxious")

Results

We tested the hypothesis that the relational self-construal moderates the effect of task label on positive perceptions of aspects related to the task by conducting a series hierarchical regression analyses using the centered RISC scale score and the binomial Condition (0 = Relational Label, 1 = Occupational Label) variable and their interaction term as the independent variables (see Figures).

- Positive Perception of Self: No significant effects (p 's > .10)
- Positive Perception of Task: No significant effects (p 's > .10)
- Positive Perception of Partner: Marginal main effect of the RISC scale ($p < .10$)
Significant main effect of Condition ($p < .05$)
Marginal interaction effect ($p < .10$)
- Cooperation: Significant main effect of the RISC scale ($p < .05$)
Significant main effect of Condition ($p < .05$)
Significant interaction effect ($p < .05$)
- Positive Affect: Significant main effect of Condition ($p < .01$)
Marginal interaction effect ($p < .10$)
- Negative Affect: Marginal main effect of the RISC scale ($p < .10$)
Significant interaction effect ($p < .05$)

Figures



Correlation Matrix

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	
1. RISC	---	.11	.15	.08	.17	.05	-.05	
2. Positive Perception of Self		---	.66**	.48**	.40**	.45**	-.05	
3. Positive Perception of Task			---	.39**	.48**	.45**	-.13	
4. Positive Perception of Partner				---	.66**	.41**	-.08	
5. Cooperation					---	.40**	-.21*	
6. Positive Affect						---	-.05	
7. Negative Affect							---	
Mean		5.61	5.28	5.47	6.16	6.00	4.90	1.43
SD		0.72	0.76	0.86	0.56	0.66	0.98	0.37
α		.81	.86	.86	.92	.86	.90	.85

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

Implications

These findings suggest that obtaining a Person-Environment fit for individuals may require reframing tasks to fit the person's self-definition, rather than supplying a different task to fit the person's interests. This may be applied to work environments where employees are often required to a) work with others on tasks, and b) work in an environment with both high and low relationals. Future studies will investigate this effect using other tasks, environments, and measures of self-definition.