Workplace offense and victims’ reactions: the effects of victim-offender (dis)similarity, offense-type, and cultural differences

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Summary
This study examined the effects of workplace offenders’ characteristics and offense-type on victims’ reactions. Responses from 352 employed graduate students in the U.S. and South Korea to a hypothetical offense incident revealed that employees from the U.S. and Korea differ in their expressed desirability of avoiding, seeking revenge against, and reconciling with an offending coworker depending on the offenders’ similarity/dissimilarity to the victim and on the type of offense. As expected, Koreans (but not U.S. Americans) were more likely to avoid and to seek revenge on a coworker whose offensive remark was group- rather than personally-directed. In addition, Koreans were most motivated to reconcile when an offensive remark came from a similar rather than dissimilar coworker and when the offense targeted them personally (not their group). However, U.S. Americans were most motivated to reconcile when an offensive remark came from a similar rather than dissimilar other and when the offense targeted their group (not them personally). Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Most people can recall at least one incident where they have been hurt, offended, or unjustly treated by a coworker. In this paper, we refer to such incidents as “workplace offenses” (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006). Workplace offenses often prompt a response from the person toward whom they are directed. Sometimes the injured party may respond aggressively by seeking revenge against the transgressor (Aquino et al., 2006; Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). A less aggressive response would be to simply avoid the offender (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Compared to revenge, avoiding one’s offender is less aggressive because the victim does not directly attempt to harm the offender. For this
reason, a higher degree of provocation is required to motivate revenge, although in practice revenge and avoidance may be positively correlated because both reflect a motivation to end a relationship with the offender.

An alternative to both revenge and avoidance is for the injured party to try and repair the relationship through reconciliation (Aquino et al., 2001, 2006; McCullough et al., 1997). Reconciliation involves an effort by one party in the relationship to extend acts of goodwill toward the other in the hope of overcoming the damage done by the offense. Reconciliation facilitates relationship repair and helps to defuse conflict; hence, it has been conceptualized as a prosocial alternative to revenge (cf. Aquino et al., 2006).

Seeking revenge and avoiding a coworker can impair workplace productivity and cooperation (Bies & Tripp, 1997). As a result, it is a matter of practical as well as theoretical importance to identify factors that may encourage employees to respond to workplace offenses in more prosocial ways, such as by reconciling. Our focus in this study is on how the employees who are the recipient of the offense respond to their transgressor. We distinguish this interpersonal response from those administered by the organization to either punish rule violators (e.g., a formal reprimand or suspension) or to initiate reconciliation between offenders and their victims via mediation-efforts and/or policy. Our study builds on and extends past research on employees’ responses to offensive incidents at work in several ways (e.g., Aquino et al., 2001, 2006; Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999; Tepper, 2000). First, we investigate differences in how employees from South Korea versus the United States react to workplace offenses. By comparing reactions to a workplace offense on the part of employees from South Korea versus the U.S., we are able to explore how cultural context may moderate how various attributes of a workplace offense influence victims’ responses. Second, the attributes of the offense we investigate are also an extension of previous research. Specifically, we examine how employees from the two cultures react when a workplace offense is targeted at them personally versus at the group with whom they strongly identify. We also assess how employees from these different countries respond when the offense is committed by someone who is similar rather than dissimilar to themselves.

Cross-cultural analyses of responses to workplace offenses can help managers of a culturally diverse workforce better understand how they should handle workplace offenses in a cross-cultural team or multi-national joint venture. These are new theoretical questions that, to our knowledge, have not been addressed by past management research. We focus on offenders’ (dis)similarity to their victims because we recognize that workplaces are becoming increasingly diverse and so it is highly likely that people will have to work with colleagues who differ from themselves in many dimensions (e.g., ethnicity, gender, values). Along with greater diversity comes a higher probability that differences in norms and expectations can result in interactions that might cause one or more parties to experience discomfort or offense, manifested in emotional conflict (cf. Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004). We examine the effects of whether an offensive remark is targeted at an individual versus a group to which that person closely identifies because there are theoretical reasons to believe that people react differently to these offenses depending on the degree to which their culture emphasizes the individual or the group.

We examine the questions above by contrasting the offenses perpetrated by coworkers using U.S. American and South Korean samples. We chose participants from these countries for comparison because there are established differences in general societal values or norms between Western and Asian countries (Hofstede, 2001). Specifically, South Koreans—relative to U.S. Americans—have generally been found to define themselves with interdependent self-construals (e.g., group-related identities, Kim, Aune, Kim, Hunter, & Kim, 2001; Kim, Hunter, Miyahara, Horvath, Bresnahan, & Yoon, 1996). The known properties of cultures that are stronger versus weaker in interdependent self-construals include differing attitudes toward similarity and dissimilarity (Cha, 1994; Hofstede, 2001; Kim & Markus, 1999; Kim & Shapiro, 2008).
Figure 1 presents a research model depicting the main variables in our study. The model shows that individuals’ response to an offense episode is affected by characteristics of the offense (whether its target is the individual or one’s group), the characteristics of the offender (whether the offender is (dis)similar from the victim), and the cultural context in which the offense took place. In the next section, we provide the theoretical arguments underlying the proposed relationships among the variables.

**Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

**Victim-offender perceived (dis)similarity**

One of the most reliable findings in social psychology is that we like people better who are similar rather than dissimilar to us (Byrne, 1971). Being liked has several advantages, among which are that we tend not to punish those whom we like and instead are more willing to forgive them for their transgressions (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Since people similar to us are more likable, and we tend to assign greater value to relationships with people we like, it follows that employees should be more motivated to preserve relationships with a transgressor who they perceive as more rather than less similar to themselves. This reasoning implies that following a workplace offense, employees should prefer relationship repairing (reconciliation) to relationship dissolving (revenge and avoidance) responses when the offender is similar to themselves. On the other hand, when employees view the offender as dissimilar to themselves, the opposite effect will ensue. However, as we explain below, it is possible that the effect of victim-offender (dis)similarity varies depending on the cultural context in which the parties are embedded.
South Korean versus U.S. societies: implications for responses to offense

The U.S. and South Korea have been found to significantly differ on cultural values (Hofstede, 2001; Kim & Leung, 2007; Kim & Markus, 1999; Kim & Shapiro, 2008). By “cultural values,” we mean “the shared values of individual members in a given culture or collective” (Sego, Hui, & Law, 1997). Cultural values or culture inevitably shape the way that people interact with one another in social environments, including organizations (Earley, 1997). With regard to U.S.–South Korea differences, Hofstede (2001) found South Korea, relative to the U.S., to be higher in collectivism (i.e., people’s belief regarding the importance of satisfying the needs of their organization or group before their own needs). Additionally, in their study on conformity and uniqueness, Kim and Markus (1999) found that relative to U.S. Americans, South Koreans preferred conformity to uniqueness, and placed greater importance on harmony. As a result, South Koreans, compared to U.S. Americans, are more likely to conform to what others think, feel, and behave and are less tolerant of being different from others in values, attitudes, and working styles.

Korean culture has created a unique socio-cultural background built on the foundations of collectivism and created an indigenous psychology of Korean collectivism: “We-ness” (Cha, 1994). This sense of belonging, oneness, bonding, and acceptance are the critical characteristics of the South Korean society. An individual’s happiness and wellness tend to be determined by how much that individual is liked and accepted by others in the society. These cultural norms may result from South Korea’s high level of cultural and ethnic homogeneity. It is reasonable to assume that people living in South Korea are, on average, less likely than people living in the U.S. to have encounters with people who are dissimilar to themselves on both visible (e.g., racial background and cultural practices) and less visible attributes (e.g., values and attitudes). Moreover, many South Koreans view their history as a pureblooded people with pride. Danil minjok (one nation) or uri minjok (our nation) describe the belief in the one pure race that originated from Tan’gun, the mythological founder of the Korean nation (Grayson, 1997). For this reason, the values of unity, cohesion, and solidarity have a strong historical foundation in South Korean culture. The educational system in South Korea reinforces this notion by being highly standardized and undifferentiated, meaning that South Koreans are socialized from an early age to think and behave similarly (Schwartz, Farver, Chang, & Lee-Shin, 2002). This emphasis on unity, cohesion, and solidarity in South Korean society may partly explain why people perceived to be dissimilar in South Korea are even more likely to be treated negatively than those perceived to be similar (Yoon & Choi, 1994).

In contrast, the U.S. is an open economy that has traditionally welcomed immigrants and workers from many different countries, resulting in one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world. As a result of these country-level differences between South Korea and the U.S., we expect people embedded in a U.S. context to be both more accustomed to and more comfortable with interactions involving dissimilar others.

Based on the greater societal heterogeneity of the U.S. relative to South Korea coupled with the higher value that South Koreans place on maintaining unity, cohesion, and solidarity, we theorize that the tolerance for a dissimilar offender will be lower in South Korean than in American society. As a result, we expect employees in South Korea to be more motivated to avoid and/or seek revenge against an offender whom they perceive as being dissimilar to themselves than employees in the U.S. In contrast, the victim’s (dis)similarity to the offender should matter relatively less to employees in American society when they are deciding whether or not to react negatively toward the offender by avoiding them or by seeking revenge. Note that in making these predictions we are not saying that victim-offender similarity versus dissimilarity will make no difference at all to employees embedded in an American cultural context. Rather, we hypothesize that the distinction should be relatively more consequential in a South Korean context. Also, we do not predict that victim-offender dissimilarity will
differentially affect the desire to reconcile with the offender among employees in South Korean and American society. We do not offer a hypothesis about reconciliation at this point because we believe that it requires a strong motivational orientation to overcome the natural desire to harm or to avoid a transgressor and to attempt to rebuild a relationship with him or her. Hence, we propose, and explain in a later section, that a more complex theoretical prediction is required to explain why South Korean and American employees might differ in their desire to reconcile. For now, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1a: After experiencing an offense from a dissimilar rather than a similar coworker, employees in South Korean (relative to the U.S.) society will express a stronger desire to avoid the offender.

Hypothesis 1b: After experiencing an offense from a dissimilar rather than a similar coworker, employees in South Korean (relative to the U.S.) society will express a stronger desire to seek revenge against the offender.

People embedded in different cultural contexts may also differ in how they respond to an offense depending on the target of the offense. We consider that possibility next.

Offense-type and South Korean versus U.S. differences

Research on negative interpersonal behaviors at work has typically focused on offenses directed against the individual. But what if the offensive act is directed against a group with whom one strongly identifies? Such offenses certainly occur in organizations, as when one employee makes a racial slur or denigrates a person because of his/her social class. We know of no study that has directly compared how people are likely to respond to a self- versus group-directed offense. Moreover, there are reasons to believe, again based on country-level differences in cultural and ethnic diversity, that employees from South Korea and the U.S. will respond differently to a group-directed offense.

We draw upon theories that have identified two distinct aspects of the self, or what is also referred to as an identity, to derive theoretical predictions about how the target of the offense might produce different reactions among South Koreans and Americans. One aspect of the self is a personal identity, which includes beliefs about one’s skills, abilities, or attributes. The other is a social identity which derives from a person’s knowledge about their membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance they attach to such membership (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). It is possible for people to define themselves in terms of both a personal (e.g., I am a sensitive person) and social (e.g., I am Korean) identity because the self is multi-faceted (Baumeister, 1995; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). However, since the identities people use as a basis for self-definition are hierarchically ordered (Stryker, 1980), a particular social identity can occupy higher importance within the “working self” than a personal identity, and vice versa.

Both personal and social identities are an important source of self-worth (Baumeister, 1995). Consequently, acts that threaten either of these identities can undermine self-esteem. Since people are generally motivated to maintain a high level of self-esteem (Taylor & Brown, 1988), they engage in a variety of cognitive and behavioral strategies to restore their self-esteem when it is threatened. One behavioral strategy relevant to this study is to respond aggressively against the perceived source of threat as a way of re-affirming one’s identity and status (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). Seeking revenge against the transgressor would fall under this category of defenses against identity threat. Alternatively, one could prevent further damage to one’s identity by simply avoiding the offender.

We propose that the U.S.–South Korea country-level differences we described earlier have implications for how much importance employees from each of these countries place on their personal
versus social identity and, as a result, how much importance employees from each of these countries place on a personal- versus group-directed offense. Specifically, we argue that in South Korea employees’ feelings of self-worth are more strongly connected to their social- rather than personal-identities and, as a result, a group-directed offense will probably be viewed to be more threatening to one’s self-esteem than it would be by U.S. Americans. If group-directed offenses are indeed more threatening to South Koreans than U.S. Americans, then under these circumstances relationship-dissolving and avoidant responses ought to be more likely to occur among South Koreans than among U.S. Americans. The basis for our thinking is, as we noted earlier, South Koreans are socialized from an early age to think and to behave similarly, and the values of unity, cohesion, and solidarity—all of which are social in nature—have a strong historical foundation in Korean culture (Schwartz et al., 2002). Consistent with these cultural descriptions, cross-cultural researchers (e.g., Kim et al., 1996, 2001) have found the self-construal of South Koreans relative to U.S. Americans to be more “interdependent” in nature—that is, more inherently social—and thereby an integral part of the collective. South Koreans and U.S. Americans have also been found to differ in the extent to which they are concerned with face (Gudykunst, 2004). For U.S. Americans, concern with face is more in the sense of an “I” identity, whereas South Koreans’ concern with face is more in the sense of a “We” identity. The latter two concerns have been referred to by Ting-Toomey et al. (1991) as concerns with “self-face (i.e., our own face)” and “other-face (i.e., the face of the people with whom we are interacting),” respectively. These differences in face saving concerns raise the possibility that South Koreans’ greater concern with “other-face” may make them more likely than U.S. Americans to avoid or to react negatively against those who insulted others rather than themselves. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 2a:** When an offense is group- rather than personally-directed employees in South Korean (relative to the U.S.) society will express a stronger desire to avoid the offender.

**Hypothesis 2b:** When an offense is group- rather than personally-directed, employees in South Korean (relative to the U.S.) society will express a stronger desire to seek revenge against the offender.

Our theorizing up to this point has focused solely on avoidance- and revenge-reactions to workplace offense due to the fact that we see the latter two response-options as sharing in common the absence of proactive efforts to repair a strained relationship. When people choose to engage in avoidance or revenge, they can do so unilaterally and with relatively little effort. In contrast, proactivity and interpersonal engagement are required when victims attempt to reconcile with their offender. For this reason, we believe that restoring relationships is more demanding and therefore the conditions under which it occurs are likely to require more facilitating conditions. More specifically, when will South Koreans and U.S. Americans be likely to respond to workplace offenses by rebuilding a relationship with their offender via reconciliation (rather than avoiding or acting vengefully)? We believe that victims of offense will be more likely to initiate reconciliation when the social psychological forces that motivate people to dissolve relationships by either pursuing revenge or by avoiding the offender are weakest. Guided by the logic preceding our previous hypotheses, South Koreans are more likely than U.S. Americans to feel punitive toward dissimilar offenders and to feel threatened by a group- rather than personally-directed offense. As such, South Koreans ought to be less threatened, hence more likely to consider reconciliation as a response to a workplace offense, when they suffer an offensive remark that is personal- rather than group-directed and when the offense comes from a similar other.

Indirect support for our thinking comes from the findings of Leung and Bond (1984) who compared responses to a verbal insult from either a member within or outside of their ingroup—that is, from a similar versus dissimilar other, respectively. Consistent with our thinking, Leung and Bond found that in response to a verbal insult, more injustice was perceived and less anger was expressed toward the more
similar offenders, and this was stronger for the participants from Asia than for those from the U.S. This support only indirectly supports our thinking, however, since Leung and Bond did not vary attributes of the offense in terms of whether it insulted one’s self versus one’s group, as we do in our study.

When will U.S. Americans be more likely than South Koreans to respond to workplace offenses by rebuilding a relationship with their offender via reconciliation (rather than avoiding or acting vengefully)? Our logic for our previous hypotheses suggests that, although U.S. Americans are less likely than South Koreans to feel unfamiliar with, hence threatened by, dissimilar colleagues (in light of the greater heterogeneity of U.S. society), U.S. Americans are still prone (as all people are) to the similarity-attraction bias. As a result, U.S. Americans are likely to also evaluate more positively offenders who seem more rather than less similar to themselves. Additionally, because U.S. Americans, unlike South Koreans, tend to define their self-construal in independent rather than interdependent ways (Kim et al., 1996, 2001), U.S. Americans are less likely than South Koreans to feel threatened by a group- than personally-directed offense. Cumulatively, this logic suggests the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3a:** South Korean employees will be most motivated to try and reconcile when an offensive remark comes from a similar rather than dissimilar other and when the offense targets them personally (not their group).

**Hypothesis 3b:** U.S. American employees will be most motivated to try and reconcile when an offensive remark comes from a similar rather than dissimilar other and when the offense targets their group (not them personally).

**Method**

**Sample and general procedure**

One-hundred and forty-three participants from the U.S sample and 209 from the South Korean sample completed both parts of the questionnaire and provided usable data on all study variables (N = 352). The U.S. sample consisted of working MBA students at mid-Atlantic (N = 68) and mid-western (N = 70) state universities in the U.S. Sixty-one per cent were male. Seventy per cent identified themselves as Caucasian, 12 per cent as Asian/Pacific Islander, 6 per cent as African-American, 4 per cent as Middle Eastern, 3 per cent as Latino/Hispanic, 1 per cent as Native American, and 2 per cent did not report their ethnicity. Their average age was 28 (SD = 6.4) and they averaged 8 (SD = 6.1) years of work experience. All 206 participants from the Korean sample were native South Koreans and were working MBA students at a state university in Seoul. Seventy per cent were male. Their average age was 35 (SD = 9.6) years and they averaged 11 (SD = 9.7) years of work experience. We found that age differed significantly between the two countries (F(1, 351) = 50.39, p < .01), but age did not significantly influence avoiding, revenge, and reconciliation (r = -.05, n.s.; r = .04, n.s., and r = .09, n.s., respectively). Additionally, consistent with Peng and Peterson (2008), we did not control for age in further analyses, since we found no literature suggesting that age difference should be relevant to the hypotheses of interest.

We collected data in two phases. At time 1, participants received a survey packet that contained demographic and personality measures as well as other items unrelated to the present study. Approximately 1 week later, a second survey containing a description of an offense scenario was administered. We asked respondents to report their perceptions of the offenders and how they were likely to react to the offense. Code numbers were used to match Part 1- and Part 2-surveys and to assure respondents that their responses would be confidential. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of
the four conditions that varied offense attributes. All of the surveys distributed in the U.S. were in English. The surveys distributed in Korea were translated into Korean following Brislin’s (1986) procedure. Two bilinguals blind to the study’s hypotheses independently translated the survey from English to Korean. There was 96 per cent agreement between the translators regarding chosen wordings and expression. A third bilingual translated the survey back to English. During this procedure, 12 words or phrases in the Korean version that were not exactly matched to the English version were back-translated into English, in accordance with the recommendation of Brislin.

All respondents were provided with a financial incentive in the form of a cash payment to encourage participation in the study. Respondents received the financial incentive only if they completed and returned both surveys. The full text of the scenarios is shown in Appendix A.

The offense episode

The attributes of the offenses to which respondents reacted were held constant with the exception of victim-offender dissimilarity and offense-type. The incident described a situation involving the study participant and a coworker. After reading a description of the incident, participants were asked to imagine how they were likely to act in response to the coworker’s actions. Using this basic scenario, we manipulated perceived dissimilarity and offense-type as described below.

Victim-offender (dis)similarity

We asked participants to focus on deep-level characteristics when assessing (dis)similarity between victim and offenders. This approach was taken because Schaubroeck and Lam (2002) noted that deep-level characteristics such as attitudes and personality tend to have more lasting influences on decision processes and outcomes than do surface-level differences such as gender, age, and ethnicity. Consequently, before presenting the scenario to our survey-respondents, we provided them a page whose instructions asked them to do three things: (a) name a current or past coworker with whom they felt most similar (in the Similar Condition) or with whom they felt most dissimilar (in the Dissimilar Condition) in terms of personality, career aspirations, work values, and attitudes, and working style; (b) list up to five ways that the person they just named was similar or dissimilar to them (in the Similar vs. Dissimilar Condition, respectively); and (c) think about the person they just described as the coworker referred to in the upcoming scenario. The final procedure was designed to make the chosen coworker salient to respondents when they read the offense episode that immediately followed their coworker-descriptions.

Offense-type

For the personal offense, we asked the respondent to imagine overhearing a coworker making insulting and demeaning comments targeted at the respondent him/herself. For the group offense, respondents were asked to imagine overhearing a coworker making insulting and demeaning comments against a group with whom the respondent feels a strong sense of belonging and liking.

Measures

Responses to offense

Twelve items were used to assess participants’ preferences for responding to the offense by taking revenge, by avoiding the offenders, or by reconciling with the offenders. Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert format (1 = not at all and 5 = absolutely) how likely they were to display each of several specific behaviors toward the offenders that fell under one of three response categories just described. Four items from Aquino et al. (2001) measured revenge (e.g., “I would do something to
make the coworker get what he/she deserves,” “I would get even with the coworker”). Four items from Aquino et al. (2006) measured avoiding (e.g., “I would keep as much distance from the coworker as possible,” “I would withdraw from the coworker”). Four items adapted from Wade (1989) measured reconciliation (e.g., “I would make an effort to be friendlier to the coworker,” “I would give the coworker a new start, a renewed relationship”).

We tested whether these items measure distinct responses to the offense by performing a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the full sample. The three-factor model fit the data reasonably well for both the U.S. American and the South Korean sample (χ²(51) = 106.27, p < .01, CFI = .93, GFI = .90, and RMSEA = .08; χ²(51) = 117.85, p < .01, CFI = .94, GFI = .92, and RMSEA = .08, respectively). We also conducted multi-group CFA using LISREL 8.30 to test whether the three-factor model demonstrated metric invariance (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998) across countries. We tested metric invariance by constraining the factor loadings to be the same across countries. According to Steenkamp and Baumgartner (p. 80), “metric invariance provides a stronger test of invariance by introducing the concept of equal metrics or scale intervals across countries.” The results show that the three-factor model was metrically equivalent across the two countries (χ²(102) = 224.12, p < .01, CFI = .93, GFI = .92, and RMSEA = .08), and thus the data from the countries can be combined to test structural relationships between the responses and other constructs cross-culturally. The Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities for the revenge, avoiding, and reconciliation subscales were .73, .88, and .73, respectively.

Country
Two dummy variables were created to operationalize the respondents’ nationality.

Control variables
We controlled for several individual difference variables that were not of direct interest but that have been shown in prior studies to be related to one or more of the responses to offense. All of these measures were obtained in the Part 1 survey. We controlled for the personality traits of negative affectivity (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and the Big-5 dimension of agreeableness because Skarlicki et al. (1999) showed that both traits have been shown to predict revengeful reactions to perceived injustice. Ten negative affect items from the PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1988) were used to measure negative affectivity (α = .84). This variable was measured as a trait rather than state by asking participants to indicate using a 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = a lot) how often they felt each of ten negative emotions (e.g., distressed, hostile, jittery) over the last 6 months. We measured agreeableness using five items from Goldberg (1992) (α = .78). These items were answered on a 5-point (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree scale). Finally, we controlled for potential social desirability bias in the reporting of offense responses by including 18 items from Paulhus’s (1989) measure of impression management. Items were answered on the same 5-point scale as the agreeableness items (α = .79). All of the Likert-type measures were averaged to form scales. We controlled for them at the individual level and centered social desirability, agreeableness, and negative affectivity against the relevant nation-level mean to adjust for cultural differences in response bias (Fischer, 2004).

Results

Manipulation check

We used the well-established empirical relationship between perceived similarity and likableness (Byrne, 1971) to evaluate the effectiveness of our dissimilarity manipulation. On the second survey,
after respondents described either the dissimilar or similar coworker (in the Dissimilar vs. Similar Conditions, respectively), they were asked to rate how “warm,” “likeable,” and “kind” the coworker was (via a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 = definitely not and 7 = definitely). These items were averaged to form a scale (α = .91). A one-way ANOVA showed significant differences between the similar- and dissimilar-conditions such that respondents judged the offenders as more likable in the former (M = 5.2, SD = 1.5) than in the latter (M = 4.2, SD = 1.6) condition indicating that our manipulation was effective, F(1, 343) = 43.89, p < .01.

Prior evidence shows that American society tends to emphasize the independence of the self from others more than South Korean society, whereas South Korean society emphasizes the self’s interdependence with others (Kim et al., 1996, 2001). This was a key theoretical basis for our argument that Korean employees would react differently to group- versus personally-directed offenses than American employees. We assessed whether such differences in self-construal were indeed present in our samples of employees in the United States and South Korea by using Singelis’s (1994) twenty-four item measure. This measure assesses both interdependent and independent self-construal and they are treated as conceptually distinct constructs. Example items for interdependent self-construals include “It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group” and “My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me.” Example items for independent self-construals include “I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects” and “My personal identity independent of others, is very important to me.” The reliability of the interdependent self-construals was acceptable (α = .76), but the reliability of the independent self-construals was low and we thus deleted two items to increase the reliability (α = .70, i.e., “I’d rather say “No” directly, than risk being misunderstood” and “I value being in good health above everything”). As expected, U.S. Americans reported significantly higher independent self-construals than South Koreans (M = 5.06 vs. 4.50, p < .01); however, the samples did not differ on the dimension of interdependent self-construal (M = 4.90 vs. 4.92, p < .01). It is plausible that since the respondents are all employed, the workplace has made them more aware of their interdependence with others. This result doesn’t necessarily invalidate our argument that the self would be more connected to a social than personal identity among South Koreans. Indeed, South Koreans reported significantly higher interdependent rather than independent self-construals (M = 4.92 vs. 4.50, p < .01). However, the significant country differences in reactions to workplace offense that we found remain significant after taking independent self-construals into account, suggesting that independent self-construals do not completely explain the significant country differences in the hypothesized effects of offense-attributes type.

Descriptive results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities for all study variables in the U.S. American and South Korean samples. The means for avoidance and reconciliation were higher than revenge in our sample (from South Korea as well as the U.S.), suggesting that employees were less likely, in general, to express a desire for revenge than for avoiding or for reconciling with the offenders. Victims may fear retaliation when they engage in revenge and so avoidance could be the preferred route. As expected, avoiding the offenders was positively correlated with revenge in both South Korea and the U.S. (r = .41, p < .01; r = .21, p < .01, respectively).

Hypothesis tests

We conducted a series of ANCOVAs to test our hypotheses with the three control variables as covariates. The eight cells in the design (i.e., 2 offender-types × 2 offense-types × 2 countries) ranged...
in number from 34 to 57. To cope with unequal cell sizes, we used Type III rather than Type I tests (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). Results of the evaluation of assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices were satisfactory. Results of the univariate $F$-tests are presented in Table 2.

Hypothesis 1a predicted that after experiencing an offense from a dissimilar rather than a similar coworker, employees in South Korean (relative to U.S.) society would be more motivated to avoid the offender; Hypothesis 1b predicted they would be more motivated to seek revenge. As shown in Table 2, we found a significant dissimilarity $\times$ country interaction effect on avoiding the offender, $F(6, 345) = 11.25$, $p < .01$. Specifically, American employees were more likely to avoid an offensive coworker whom they viewed as dissimilar rather than similar to themselves ($M = 3.28$ vs. $2.80$, respectively, $p < .05$). This difference was not observed in the South Korean sample and so the pattern did not support Hypothesis 1a. Also, contrary to Hypothesis 1b there was no significant country difference in the effects of victim-offender dissimilarity on revenge ($F(6, 343) = 1.78$, n.s.), as shown in Table 2.

Hypothesis 2a predicted that when an offense is group- rather than personally-directed, employees in South Korean (relative to American) society would be more motivated to avoid the offender; Hypothesis 2b predicted that they would be more motivated to seek revenge. Table 2 shows a significant offense-type $\times$ country interaction on avoiding [$F(6, 345) = 12.34$, $p < .01$]. Follow-up analysis of the interaction showed that South Korean employees were more likely to want to avoid the offenders when the offense was group- rather than personally-directed ($M = 3.07$ vs. $2.66$, respectively, $p < .05$). American employees, however, did not differ in their motivation to avoid the offender as a function of offense-type ($M = 3.06$ vs. $2.64$ for personally- and group-directed offense, respectively, n.s.), thus supporting Hypothesis 2b.

We also found a significant offense-type $\times$ country interaction effect on revenge [$F(6, 343) = 6.50$, $p < .01$]). Follow-up analysis of the interaction showed that South Koreans were more motivated to seek revenge when the offense was group- rather than personally-directed ($M = 2.10$ vs. 1.84,

---

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficients for study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Cronbach’s α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Agreeableness</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Negative affectivity</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>(.84)</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Impression management</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>(.83)</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Independent self-construal</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>(.70)</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Offender dissimilaritya</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Offense targetb</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Avoiding</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>(.87)</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Reconciliation</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.35</td>
<td>(.73)</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.72</td>
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<td>9. Revenge</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>(.86)</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.86</td>
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<td>SD</td>
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<td>.75</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>1.05</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ($N = 352$; the U.S. = 143, South Korea = 209). Reliabilities for all samples are in parentheses. The U.S. correlations are below the U.S. means and SD are the last two rows. Korea correlations are above diagonals, and Korea means and SD are the last two columns, diagonal. For all correlation above .15 in the U.S. and .14 in Korea, $p \leq .05$, for all correlations above .20 in the U.S. and .21 in Korea, $p \leq .01$.

*a,b*Offender similarity was coded as 0 and dissimilarity was coded as 1. Personally directed offense was coded as 0 and group-directed offense coded as 1.
Table 2. Results of regression analysis for the effects of personal offense on behavioral reactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Avoiding</th>
<th>Revenge</th>
<th>Reconciliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H1a</td>
<td>H2a</td>
<td>H1a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>$\eta^2$</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affectivity</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression management</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender dissimilarity</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offense-type</td>
<td>5.98*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>4.20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>11.25**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender dissimilarity × country</td>
<td>12.34**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender dissimilarity × offense-type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender dissimilarity × offense-type × country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ($N = 352$). $\eta^2 = \frac{SS_{effect}}{SS_{effect} + SS_{error}}$.

*p < .05; **p < .01.

Offender similarity was coded as 0 and dissimilarity was coded as 1. Person-directed offense was coded as 0 and group-directed offense coded as 1. The U.S. was coded as 0 and Korea was coded as 1.
respectively, $p < .10$). There was no difference among American employees, however, on the desire to seek revenge as a function of offense-type ($M = 1.90$ vs. $1.74$, for personally-directed and group-directed offense, respectively, n.s.), thus supporting Hypothesis 2b.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b predicted a three-way interaction effect on reconciliation. We tested these hypotheses by adding a dissimilarity $\times$ offense-type $\times$ country interaction to the models used to test the earlier hypotheses. Table 2 shows that this interaction term is significant in the model predicting reconciliation [$F(9, 340) = 9.52, p < .01$]. We conducted two planned contrasts to test whether the form of the interaction conforms to the predictions of Hypotheses 3a and 3b. The first contrast tested Hypothesis 3a and compared the mean reconciliation score of South Korean employees in the similar offender-personal offense condition ($M = 2.72$) to the means in the other three conditions: similar offender-group offense ($M = 2.43$), dissimilar offender-personal offense ($M = 2.30$), and dissimilar offender-group offense ($M = 2.30$). This contrast was significant [$F(1, 201) = 12.04, p < .01$], indicating that the mean in the similar offender-personal offense condition was significantly different and higher than the means of the other three conditions. The pattern of the interaction, depicted in Figure 2, supports Hypothesis 3a.

The second contrast tested Hypothesis 3b and compared the mean reconciliation score of American employees in the similar offender-group offense condition ($M = 2.91$) to the means in the other three conditions: similar offender-personal offense ($M = 2.54$), dissimilar offender-personal offense ($M = 2.55$), and dissimilar offender-group offense ($M = 2.30$). This contrast was also significant [$F(1, 135) = 8.98, p < .01$], indicating that the mean in the similar offender-group offense condition was significantly different and higher than the means of the other three conditions. The pattern of this interaction is shown in Figure 3 and supports Hypothesis 3b.

As a supplementary analysis, we tested the three-way interaction effects on avoidance and revenge. The results show that there was no significant country difference in the effects of the victim-offender (dis)similarity $\times$ offense-type interactions on avoidance and revenge ($F(9, 340) = 1.99$, n.s.; $F(9, 340) = 1.38$, n.s., respectively). Taken together, the pattern of the victim-offender (dis)similarity $\times$ offense-type interactions in the South Korean and American samples are consistent with our argument that offenses committed by a similar other tend to motivate a desire to reconcile, but that the strength of this motivation would vary depending on the target of the offense.
Discussion

Among our hypotheses was our expectation that an offensive remark from a dissimilar coworker would more strongly motivate the desire to avoid and to seek revenge among South Korean versus U.S. American employees. In fact, we found the opposite to be true. With the exception of this surprise finding, our other hypotheses were supported. Specifically, we found support for our prediction that group-offenses are more likely to motivate relationship dissolving responses (i.e., avoiding the offender and seeking revenge) among South Korean than U.S. American employees. And we found evidence supporting a more complex interaction involving culture, the perceived (dis)similarity of the offender, and the target of the offense as joint predictors of the desire to reconcile with the offender.

A key finding of our study was recognizing avoiding and not reconciling are conceptually and empirically distinct, and differentially preferable under varying circumstances. This suggests how individuals respond to an offense episode is very much qualified by the conditions of the offense, the type of offense (i.e., directed target), and the attributes of the offenders. The fact that South Koreans and U.S. Americans differ in their preferred responses to workplace offenses suggests future research regarding these choices needs to be sensitive to the cultural dynamics which may be operating within studies’ samples and/or within participating organizations.

In addition, the fact that group- rather than personally-directed offenses “pushed” South Koreans more so than U.S. Americans to avoid the offenders suggests, too, that what constitutes an “offense” may be culturally influenced. More broadly, future theorizing and research are needed to uncover when and why either or both of these response-options will be preferred over revenge. This promises to aid managers as well as management scholars to discover how to help offended employees to select the “positive end” of these options—that is, to talk about and reconcile with rather than to avoid or to seek revenge against.

Our study focused on similarity/dissimilarity effects. By doing so, we do not equate similarity to in-group status and dissimilarity to out-group status. Although it seems reasonable to assume people who are included in one’s in-group are more likely to be similar rather than dissimilar to the perceiver in various ways, this may not necessarily be the case. This means that in collectivist cultures where in-group/out-group distinctions are well-defined, offenders who are dissimilar from the victim on certain characteristics may still be perceived as a member of the in-group. If so, it may be that an
offense coming from a dissimilar in-group member would provoke a different response than an offense coming from a dissimilar out-group member. Unfortunately, we could not examine this possibility in our data because we did not ask participants whether the offender was viewed as part of his or her in-group. Further research on the dimensionality of similarity/dissimilarity in a tightly bound, homogenous, collectivist culture would further add to the understanding of the nature of responses to offense in these cultures.

It should be noted that the country differences in reactions to the group- vs. personally-directed offense are not explained by interdependent self-construals although interdependent self-construals were significantly different across countries as expected. Future studies need to consider other cultural and psychological dimensions that can unpack the country differences we observed. For example, collectivism is a multidimensional construct (Triandis, 1995), but we limited our measure to interdependent self-construals. In future research, the measure of collectivism should include other dimensions such as the importance of group goal-orientation (e.g., personal goals are subordinated to the collective goals in collectivism). Combining paper-and-pencil (survey) approaches with less intrusive approaches when attempting to assess cultural values, norms, and/or practices is important too, since doing so promises to enable scholars to “see” cultural norms and practices in holistic and analytic ways (cf. Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). A multiple method-approach to studying culture may help scholars access important aspects of cultural socialization that are not consciously accessible. Doing so would be consistent with recent calls for cross-cultural scholars to supplement survey-based approaches to assessing cultural socialization with other methods that are more “polycontextually sensitive” (cf. Shapiro, Von Glinow, & Xiao, 2007; Von Glinow et al., 2004)—that is, more sensitive to the multiple sense-modalities people use to decipher meaning from situations.

It would be also interesting to examine how subcultures in Asian countries and the U.S. can influence people’s reactions to workplace offense associated with offense target and offense-type. For example, compared to South Koreans and Japanese, Chinese are more concerned with self-face (i.e., their own face, Kim, Wang, Kondo, & Kim, 2007), and thus Chinese may react more negatively toward person-directed rather than group-directed offenses than do South Koreans and Japanese. Also, in the U.S., Southerners and Northerners have different attitudes about violence, which seem linked to notions of honor and respect (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Southerners, for example, are more likely to agree that violence is acceptable in defense of home and family and as a mechanism of social control, and they are especially likely to endorse violence as a response to personal insults than do Northerners.

From a practical standpoint, our findings suggest that people in diverse work teams, especially but not necessarily only in South Korea, may be less motivated to choose prosocial (i.e., relationship repairing) responses to offensive interactions that will inevitably occur. This may help to explain why conflict has generally been found to be greater in diverse rather than homogeneous teams, at least initially when norms have yet to be institutionalized and when the chance for misunderstandings and offensive remarks (perhaps unintentional in nature) are more likely to occur (Von Glinow et al., 2004). Diversity training aimed at generating awareness of the need to understand, embrace, and leverage individual differences may be particularly important in these cases.

Like all studies, ours has limitations that must be taken into account. One is that the use of a scenario methodology somewhat limits the generalizability of our findings. However, scenario methodology is commonly used in cross-cultural research as it allows for cross-cultural equivalence to be more easily obtained because of standardized stimuli (Leung & Bond, 1984). It also allowed us to control the nature of the offense, something that cannot be done in a field study. A second limitation of our study is that we did not directly measure cultural dimensions, such as collectivism, that previous theorizing and research has suggested differentiates Asians from U.S. Americans (Hofstede, 2001). It may be that assessing these dimensions would have allowed us to gain a better understanding of why South Koreans
and U.S. Americans may have responded differently as a function of offense attributes. On the other hand, some writers (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) have suggested that survey measures of cultural values like collectivism may be inadequate for getting at the non-conscious cognitive structures and processing patterns that may vary across cultures because there are aspects of cultural socialization that are not consciously expressible. If so, then researchers should ideally use national level indicators of culture in addition to pencil and paper measures to examine the effects of culture rather than assuming that the two approaches are interchangeable. Our study did not employ this multi-method approach, and so we recognize that some of the non-conscious effects of culture on responses to offense might have been missed.

**Acknowledgements**

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Debra L. Shapiro (Ph.D., Northwestern) is Clarice Smith Professor of Management at the University of Maryland’s Robert H. Smith School of Business (formerly the Willard J. Graham Distinguished Professor of Management at the Kenan-Flagler Business School at UNC-Chapel Hill where she was on the faculty from 1986 to 2003). A Past Chair of the Conflict Management Division of the Academy of Management (and a recipient of the Best Paper Award in that Division in 1991, 1992, 1996, and 2007), Shapiro’s research centers on how to manage conflict (e.g., change-resistance, perceived injustice) in organizations and in teams, and the challenges of doing this where there is cultural diversity. An author of over 60 journal publications and book chapters and the 2005 book “Managing Multinational Teams: Global Perspectives” (published by JAI/Elsevier Press), Dr. Shapiro is currently an Associate Editor of The Academy of Management Journal.

Karl Aquino is the Richard Poon Professor of Organizations and Society at the Sauder School of Business, University of British Columbia. His research interests include workplace victimization, revenge, and forgiveness in organizations, moral cognition, and behavior, and the effects of power and status on workplace outcomes. He received his Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from Northwestern University.

Vivien K.G. Lim is an Associate Professor in the Department of Management and Organization, School of Business, National University of Singapore. She obtained her Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from the University of Pittsburgh. Her research interests include use and misuse of technology, workplace deviance, cyberloafing, job insecurity, and money ethic. Her papers have appeared in the Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Vocational Behavior, and Human Relation among others.
Rebecca J. Bennett is the Herbert McElveen Professor of Management at Louisiana Tech University. She received her Ph.D. from the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. Her research interests include employee deviance, revenge, and forgiveness in the workplace.

References


Appendix A

Offense Stimuli With Experimental Manipulations

Nearly everyone can think of a past or current coworker who was (is) very different/similar from them. The coworker may be different/similar for many reasons (for example, different/similar personality, working styles, career aspirations, and different/similar values and attitudes). For now, we would just like you to think about the coworker from your past or current work experience who you think was (is) most different/similar from you. For a moment, visualize in your mind the coworker and the qualities that made you think that the two of you were (are) very different/similar. Below we would like you to list from 3–7 qualities that made (make) you think that you and this coworker were (are) very different/similar. You can list any number between 3 and 7, but we’d like you to list at least 3.

Now, keeping the image of the coworker you described in mind, we are going to describe a hypothetical situation involving the two of you. The situation may or may not ever have happened, but for the purposes of this survey, we want you to imagine that the incident has occurred. When doing so, do not think about whether or not the coworker you described would actually behave in this way, but rather think about how you might react if they did behave this way. After the scenario, we will ask you to answer a series of questions about some responses you may have to this coworker’s behavior.

Before you begin, please list 2–3 derogatory names that would offend you/that refer to your membership in a group with which you feel a sense of belonging and with which you highly identify. These should be names that you would NOT want to be called, names that you would find shameful or insulting.

Write the coworker’s initials in the blank space in the scenario that follows and then read the scenario carefully:

Moments ago, you were on your way to deliver something to ____________’s work area. As you approached, you heard the loud laughter of several people. Not wanting to interrupt, you stopped while you were still out of sight. What you heard shocked you. First you heard this coworker make some very ugly comments about you personally/a group with whom you feel a strong sense of belonging and liking. This coworker’s tone was mocking and seemed to be imitating some of your characteristics/some of the stereotypical characteristics sometimes attributed to members of your group. You did not think the imitation was at all funny, but rather highly insulting and demeaning. The coworker continued making rude and unflattering comments like this, using derogatory and slang terms about you/for your group, including the ones you listed above.

1The experimental manipulations are indicated in bold.