

Cross-cultural Differences in Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts
and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

The process of capitalization (sharing good news with close others) increases relationship satisfaction when the discloser perceives partner responses to be supportive and enthusiastic. However, cross-cultural differences in communication styles may lead to qualitative differences in how disclosers perceive their partners' responses to their good news sharing, and thus may differentially relate to relationship quality across cultures. In the present study, we examined cross-cultural differences in perceived responses to capitalization attempts (PRCA) and relationship quality in a sample of 169 White and South Asian undergraduates. Participants completed an online questionnaire measuring their PRCA and relationship satisfaction. Our results did not reveal cross-cultural differences between White and South Asian participants. Consistent with previous research, relationship satisfaction was positively associated with active-constructive PRCA (i.e., enthusiastic responses) but negatively associated with active-destructive PRCA (i.e., critical responses) and passive-destructive PRCA (i.e., ignoring the positive event). Contrary to prior research, passive-constructive PRCA (i.e., understated responses) was not associated with relationship satisfaction for either Whites or South Asians. We suggest potential reasons for the absence of cross-cultural differences (nativity, age of participants, etc.) and recommend including more diverse samples to extend the generalizability of our findings and their implications for capitalization theory.

Keywords: perceived responses to capitalization attempts, cross-culture, South Asians, close relationships

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Good things happen in our everyday life, and it is common to share these positive experiences with our loved ones. According to Langston (1994), the process of “capitalization” occurs when a person shares a positive event with his or her significant other and gains additional benefits from this good news sharing. Capitalizing on good events has intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits, such as better long-term health and well-being, greater life satisfaction, and higher positive affect (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Sharing good times is essential for relationship maintenance because, through sharing personal experiences, couples are able to understand one another on a deeper level as well as express their delights and concerns for the other (Sandhya, 2009).

In our study, we examined associations between perceived responses to capitalization attempts (PRCA) and relationship satisfaction. PRCA is significant in determining relationship satisfaction because we expect high levels of responsiveness from our close others (e.g., romantic partner, friend, family member) when sharing the occurrence of positive events (Gable & Reis, 2010). PRCA can be categorized into four types: Active-constructive, passive-constructive, active-destructive and passive-destructive. Given a situation where a discloser shares with his/her partner that they received a promotion at work, *active-constructive* responses, which are characterized by support and enthusiasm, may be revealed by a response such as “Wow! I’m so happy for you, good job! I knew you could do it.” *Passive-constructive* responses are reactions that are understated and quiet, which might be “That’s nice, sweetie” followed by a small smile. *Active-destructive* responses occur when a person demeans and discredits the positive event by saying “Are you sure you can handle this job? It sounds like it’s going to be

really excruciating.” *Passive-destructive* responses occur when the positive event is completely ignored by deflecting to another topic, such as asking, “What do you want for lunch?” instead of responding to the partner’s promotion.

Typically, only active-constructive responses increase relationship satisfaction (Gable et al., 2004). Active-constructive responses are clear, straightforward and evoke positive feelings, as opposed to passive or destructive responses, which are unassertive and apathetic (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006). When disclosers perceive their partners’ PRCA as highly involved and supportive (i.e., active-constructive), relationship quality is strengthened through a sense of validation and understanding, leading to a more positive sense of “we-ness” as a couple because it shows that the listener acknowledges and appreciates his or her partner’s achievements (Pagani, Parise, Donato, Gabel, & Schoebi, 2020). Therefore, active-constructive responses allow the responder to believe that the event is important and that he or she has extensive knowledge of the important values of the discloser (Gable et al., 2006). In contrast, active-destructive, passive-constructive, and passive-destructive PRCA are associated with lower relationship satisfaction because they are less enthusiastic and likely fail to communicate genuine appreciation, in turn, manifesting in less favorable interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits (Gable et al., 2004).

An important limitation, however, is that capitalization research tends to focus only on White participants, and does not consider potential cross-cultural differences (e.g., versus Asians) in communication styles that may influence the associations between different PRCA and relationship satisfaction. For instance, Whites place a premium on individual expression and are more likely to adopt straightforward and direct communication styles (Skowronski et al., 2014); this is in stark contrast with Asians, who place a premium on ingroup emotional harmony

(Matsumoto, 1990), which promotes more passive communication styles. In fact, Asian and White cultures adopt very different approaches to discussing issues within a relationship.

Burleson (2013) found that in intercultural relationships, Asian partners tend not to express many emotions and keep feelings inside, whereas White partners are more likely to openly share and express their feelings (Skowronski et al., 2014). Additionally, Asian spouses are more passive and avoidant in terms of communication, whereas White spouses undertake a more direct and verbally explicit communication style (Skowronski et al., 2014). Perhaps, the association between different types of PRCA and relationship outcomes might differ due to these cross-cultural differences in communication patterns.

In the present study, we focus on South Asians (i.e., people from the Indian subcontinent, including Indians, Afghans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Nepalese, Bhutanese and Maldivians) because they are one of the largest Asian populations in the world, yet the majority of cross-cultural close relationship research compares Whites against East Asians (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans), with very few studies focusing on South Asians (i.e., Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis). Even though East Asians and South Asians share seemingly similar cultural values, East Asian values are rooted in Confucianist beliefs (Yum, 2009), whereas South Asian values are rooted in more religious and sociohistorical origins (i.e., caste system; Hoff, 2016). In turn, these nuances likely translate to cultural differences between East and South Asians, but few researchers make such distinctions. Within the literature, there is reason to believe that cross-cultural differences exist between Whites versus South Asian communication styles. For instance, previous studies showed that South Asians have a low frequency of good news sharing and that South Asian couples reported having a happy marriage even though they rarely confided in each other because (1) they believe that sharing of information does not necessarily directly

lead to happiness (Sandhya, 2009) and (2) the cultural norm of promoting mutual-face preservation: Indian men and women who were raised in a traditional household are less likely to share personal information with their partners, such as their past relationship history, unless it is publicly known (Patel, 2015). When trying to overcome marital problems, South Asian couples tend to adopt more implicit communication styles whereas White couples opt for more direct and open communication styles (Ahmad & Reid, 2008). Such differences may result in differences in how PRCA is associated with South Asian couples' relationship outcomes.

Specific to capitalization theory, we argue that the association between passive-constructive PRCA and relationship outcomes are likely to differ between South Asian and White cultures. Prior research showed that passive forms of communication are common in South Asian cultures: Indian couples tend to prefer suppression, in which they voluntarily push distressing contents out of their conscious awareness, as a coping mechanism when facing marital conflicts (Fonseca, Kamble, Duggi, Flores, & Butler, 2018). Furthermore, South Asian couples are more likely to listen to understand when communicating in order to overcome problems in their marriage as compared to White couples who are more likely to mutually voice out their concerns during a quarrel (Ahmad & Reid, 2008). Thus, the negative association between passive-constructive PRCA and relationship quality observed in Whites might not translate to South Asians, as South Asians may employ more passive-constructive PRCA than Whites in their daily conversations.

Additionally, we argue that some forms of "destructive" PRCA might not be as detrimental to relationships satisfaction for South Asians, as compared to Whites. Intimate interactions are downplayed in South Asian communities (i.e., Indians; Sandhya, 2009) and love within South Asian marriages is often characterized by "heated noisy quarrels," which eventually

subside into laughter (Trawick, 1990; Sandhya, 2009). Consequently, active-destructive responses might not be perceived as harmful in South Asian cultures because it is common for Indian couples to engage in monitoring and controlling of partner actions, attitudes and behavior as it has been argued that a partner's inappropriate behavior will not only negatively affect his or her reputation but also the reputation of their family (Lavy, Mikulincer, Shaver, & Gillath, 2009).

Taken together, there is some evidence that some passive or destructive types of PRCA (i.e., passive-constructive and active-destructive) may have a blunted negative (or perhaps, a positive) association with South Asians' relationship quality. In the current study therefore, one of our goals is to extend the work on capitalization to the South Asian community. It is likely that the associations between active-constructive and passive-destructive PRCA and relationship quality will be similar across cultures because these are extremes and are less open to interpretation by culture. Specifically, we hypothesize that: (1) there will be a positive association for active-constructive PRCA and relationship satisfaction for both White and South Asian participants, (2) there will be a null association for passive-constructive PRCA and relationship satisfaction among South Asian participants, but a negative association for White participants, (3) there will be a null association for active-destructive PRCA and relationship satisfaction among South Asian participants, but a negative association for White participants, and (4) there will be a negative association for passive-destructive PRCA and relationship satisfaction for both White and South Asian participants.

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study was a preliminary test of our hypotheses in a sample of people living in the United States. Participants were 169 undergraduates recruited from the University of Michigan (67.9% women; $M_{age} = 19.26$ years, $SD = 1.57$). Ninety-four of the participants were White and 76 were of South Asian ethnicity, (86.84% were South Asian Americans, $N = 66$). To be eligible for our study, participants had to be of White or South Asian ethnicity and participants were excluded in our study if they selected an ethnicity that was not the focus of our study (e.g., East Asian); they also had to be either currently in a romantic relationship or had previous experience being in a romantic relationship that was at least three months long ($M = 16.65$ months, $SD = 12.21$). Participants were recruited through both the university's subject pool and through a snowball sampling method (e.g., personal networks, student organizations, Facebook groups). All participants were students in the university as they had to include their University of Michigan email to enrol in the study. Participants recruited through the university's subject pool were granted credits for their participation. For participants recruited through the convenience sampling method, the first 30 participants who completed the survey were awarded with a \$5 Amazon gift card, while the remaining participants ($N = 46$) were entered into a raffle for a chance to win one \$50 Amazon gift card.

Participants were asked to complete a number of online questionnaires that measured their perceived partner responses to capitalization and relationship quality. They were further asked to report their age, gender, and ethnicity.

Materials

Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts. The Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts (PRCA) scale is a 12-item measure used to assess partner responses to a disclosing partner's good news sharing (Gable et al., 2004). Three items are included for each of the four capitalization patterns (i.e., active constructive, passive constructive, active destructive, passive destructive) and participants provide their responses on a six-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true*, 6 = *completely true*). Sample items from the PRCA scale include, active-constructive: "My romantic partner usually reacts to my good fortune enthusiastically" ($a_{White} = .71$ and $a_{SouthAsian} = .75$); passive-constructive: "My romantic partner tries not to make a big deal out of it, but is happy for me" ($a_{White} = .75$ and $a_{SouthAsian} = .65$); active-destructive: "My romantic partner often finds a problem with it" ($a_{White} = .78$ and $a_{SouthAsian} = .77$); and passive-destructive: "Sometimes I get the impression that my romantic partner doesn't care much" ($a_{White} = .83$ and $a_{SouthAsian} = .92$).

Relationship Satisfaction. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) is a 7-item measure that is used to assess the general relationship satisfaction of people in relationships. Participants rated how satisfied they were with their relationship on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one (*low satisfaction*) to five (*high satisfaction*). Sample items in the scale are "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship with your romantic partner?" and "How good is your relationship with your romantic partner compared to most?" ($a_{White} = .90$ and $a_{SouthAsian} = .88$).

Analysis Plan

To maximize use of all available data, we used the expectation maximization method in SPSS to replace missing values. We first ran correlations on key variables (i.e., each subtype of

PRCA, relationship satisfaction) to examine the strength of the association between our study variables. Additionally, we ran independent samples *t*-test to compare White and South Asian participants on the four types of PRCA.

To test our hypothesis, we used the Hayes PROCESS v3.5 macro in SPSS 27.0 to examine whether culture moderated the association between different PRCA and relationship satisfaction in White versus South Asian participants. Because we hypothesized cross-cultural differences in two of four PRCA types, we ran separate moderated regression analyses for each type of PRCA, yielding a total of four models (one for each type of PRCA). Specifically, we regressed participants' relationship satisfaction on each type of PRCA and included the dichotomous moderator culture (i.e., White versus South Asian) to determine whether culture moderated the association between different PRCA types and relationship satisfaction.

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptives for the key study variables in our study. We first ran independent samples *t*-tests to compare the frequency of different types of PRCA by culture. We found that there was no significant cross-cultural difference in endorsement of active-constructive PRCA ($t = 1.53, p = .13$), passive-constructive PRCA ($t = .44, p = .66$), active-destructive PRCA ($t = -1.01, p = .32$) and passive-destructive PRCA ($t = -.68, p = .50$) responses.

We found a significant positive main effect of active-constructive PRCA on relationship satisfaction, such that when partners perceived more active-constructive PRCA, they reported higher relationship satisfaction ($b = .43, p = .00$). There was no main effect of culture ($b = -.10, p = .38$). There was also no interaction between active-constructive PRCA and culture predicting relationship satisfaction ($b = .02, p = .80$), suggesting no cross-cultural differences in the link from active-constructive PRCA to relationship satisfaction (Figure 1).

There was no significant main effect of passive-constructive PRCA on relationship satisfaction ($b = -.06, p = .45$), suggesting that passive-constructive responses were not associated, positively or negatively, with relationship satisfaction. There was no main effect of culture ($b = -.25, p = .10$). There was also no interaction between passive-constructive PRCA and culture predicting relationship satisfaction ($b = .02, p = .86$), suggesting no cross-cultural differences in the link from passive-constructive PRCA to relationship satisfaction (Figure 2).

There was a marginally significant negative main effect of active-destructive PRCA on relationship satisfaction, such that when partners perceived active-destructive PRCA, they reported lower relationship satisfaction ($b = -.20, p = .06$). There was no main effect of culture ($b = -.21, p = .14$). There was also no interaction between active-destructive PRCA and culture predicting relationship satisfaction ($b = -.14, p = .38$), suggesting no cross-cultural differences in the link from active-destructive PRCA to relationship satisfaction (Figure 3).

Finally, there was a significant negative main effect of passive-destructive PRCA on relationship satisfaction, such that when partners perceived passive-destructive PRCA, they reported lower relationship satisfaction ($b = -.51, p = .00$). There was no main effect of culture ($b = -.17, p = .15$). There was also no interaction between passive-destructive PRCA and culture predicting relationship satisfaction ($b = -.01, p = .95$), suggesting no cross-cultural differences in the link from active-destructive PRCA to relationship satisfaction (Figure 4).

In summary, contrary to our hypothesis, culture did not moderate associations between PRCA and participants' relationship satisfaction. Partners reported higher relationship satisfaction when they perceived active-constructive PRCA and lower relationship satisfaction when they perceived passive-destructive PRCA or (marginally) active-destructive PRCA.

Relationship satisfaction was unrelated to perceiving passive-constructive PRCA. None of these associations differed by culture.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to examine cross-cultural differences in people's perceptions of their partners' responses to good news sharing and links between these responses and relationship satisfaction. Previous research suggests that Whites are more likely to openly share and express their feelings to close others (Burlison, 2013), while South Asians rarely share personal experiences with their loved ones because of their belief that happiness is not dependent on the amount of good news sharing (Sandhya, 2009). Therefore, in our study, we hypothesized that South Asian and Whites are likely to differ in how they perceive two out of four different types of partner responses to good news sharing (i.e., passive-constructive, active-destructive) and show differential associations with their relationship outcomes.

Contrary to our hypotheses, we did not find any cross-cultural differences in our study. Our results showed that, regardless of one's culture, active-constructive PRCA was associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction, while active-destructive PRCA and passive-destructive PRCA were associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction; passive-constructive PRCA was not associated with relationship satisfaction. Our findings are partially consistent with previous research showing higher relationship satisfaction only when disclosers perceive active-constructive PRCA, presumably because active-constructive responses are validating and communicate partner responsiveness (Gable et al., 2006). Additionally, our findings were also consistent with previous research indicating that passive-destructive PRCA leads to lower relationship satisfaction regardless of culture. People who perceived passive-destructive PRCA believe that their partners are not able to acknowledge the significance of the

positive event and failed to respond in a positive manner because they did not genuinely feel happy for them (Pagani et al., 2020).

One potential explanation for the absence of cross-cultural differences here may be attributed to our sample characteristics: Almost all South Asian participants in our study were South Asian Americans ($N = 66$, 86.84%) and were not *native* South Asians. South Asian Americans may be less likely to hold South Asian cultural beliefs and values than their native South Asian counterparts (e.g., rarely confiding in their partners as they are predisposed to believe that sharing information does not lead to happiness; Sandhya, 2009) and instead exhibit couple communication patterns more similar to their White American counterparts. Our study is limited as we were not able to compare native South Asians, South Asian Americans, and White Americans; future research should expand the scope of the current investigation to assess differences in native South Asians' and South Asian Americans' communication styles when in a romantic relationship, which may in turn explain differential influence in their perceptions toward different PRCA and their relationship.

Interestingly, we did not find the hypothesized cross-cultural difference in active-destructive PRCA. Even though past studies showed that intimate communion was not a priority in romantic relationships among South Asians (Sandhya, 2009), active-destructive PRCA might not differ between cultures because active-destructive PRCA minimizes the significance of a positive event and reframes the event in a pessimistic light by pointing out possible negative implications of the event (Gable et al., 2010). Additionally, we reason that active-destructive PRCA might be negatively associated with South Asians' relationship satisfaction because the advancement of globalization has given people access to high expectations of romantic love through the media, even for South Asian participants in our study. Because people all around the

world have been consuming media that portrays happiness in a relationship as being supportive and caring in an overstated manner, people might develop higher expectations of attention in a romantic relationship by requiring their partners to be more outspoken about their feelings and devotion towards them (Sandhya, 2009). Therefore, this might have resulted in lower tolerance for active-destructive PRCA even among South Asians, as it demeans and discredits a positive event. This is especially true considering our earlier discussion that most of our South Asian participants are South Asian Americans, and thus they are more likely to consume Western media and internalized American values over their more traditional South Asian beliefs.

Partially supporting our hypothesis, our study found that passive-constructive PRCA was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction for both White and South Asian participants. As we argued earlier, passive-constructive PRCA might not be related to relationship satisfaction for South Asian participants because passive forms of communication are relatively common within the South Asian community; for instance, Indian couples tend to use suppression as a coping mechanism when they experience conflict in their relationship (Fonseca et al., 2018). More interestingly however, we found that passive-constructive PRCA was not associated with relationship satisfaction for White participants either. Although early investigations of PRCA in White American samples noted a negative association between passive-constructive PRCA and relationship satisfaction, the literature shows more nuanced findings with some studies finding no associations between passive-constructive PRCA and one's relationship satisfaction (e.g., Pagani et al., 2020). Indeed, passive-constructive PRCA are characterized by understated and reserved reactions and White Americans are more likely to discern these responses as innocuous and harmless (Gable & Reis, 2010) or not recognize them as a negative response. For instance, a study showed that passive responses did not draw as much

attention from White partners as compared to active-constructive responses (Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010). Thus, White participants might have perceived passive-constructive PRCA as less significant, which then resulted in the null associations between passive-constructive PRCA and relationship satisfaction in our present study.

There are important limitations in our study that are worth mentioning. One of the limitations of our study was the characteristics of our sample. The majority of the participants were undergraduate students and they were between the ages of 17 to 28 years old. Considering our participants' relatively young ages, it is possible that they have not internalized their cultural values, which may in turn explain the lack of cross-cultural differences. One study found that older participants are more likely to internalize their cultural values as compared to younger participants (Fung, 2013). Therefore, future research should take this into consideration and extend the present study to also include older participants in order to capture our hypothesized effects. Another limitation of our study is that not all participants were currently in a romantic relationship, as we included participants who had experience being in a relationship. A more accurate account of participants' reports of different PRCA on relationship satisfaction should be based on participants who are currently in a romantic relationship as some studies showed that memories can be distorted by people's knowledge, beliefs, and emotion (Kaplan, Van Damme, Levine, & Loftus, 2016). Hence, further research is needed to examine our findings in different samples (i.e., different age groups, and being in a committed relationship).

Despite these limitations, our study intended to highlight culture as a possible moderator of links between different PRCA and relationship satisfaction. We tested our hypothesis by running separate regression analyses for each type of PRCA and included culture (i.e., White versus South Asian) as a moderator to examine cross-cultural differences in the association

between PRCA and relationship satisfaction. Our findings did not reveal cross-cultural differences between different PRCA styles and relationship satisfaction, and instead showed that White and South Asian participants only perceive active-constructive PRCA as beneficial to their relationships in contrast to passive-constructive, active-destructive and passive-destructive PRCA. We suggest that future studies investigate whether native South Asians and South Asian Americans adopt the same communication styles in their romantic relationships and the degree to which they internalize their own cultural values when examining cross-cultural differences in PRCA. Future cross-cultural research should also consider recruiting older participants as they are more likely to internalize their culture's values, which might in turn affect the way they communicate with their romantic partners (Fung, 2013; Hummert et al., 1998). Lastly, future research should also consider recruiting participants who are currently in a relationship given that memories are susceptible to distortion by emotions (Kaplan et al., 2016). The present findings add to the work on capitalization theory, and we suggest that further research is needed to clarify if there are indeed cross-cultural differences in associations between PRCA and relationship satisfaction.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD
1. Active-constructive	-	-.22*	-.28*	-.55**	.65**	.27*	.09	-.05	3.97	1.24
2. Passive-constructive	-.19*	-	.38**	.27*	-.04	.05	-.08	.15	2.55	1.19
3. Active-destructive	-.04	.4**	-	.49**	-.28*	-.01	.07	.17	1.55	.84
4. Passive-destructive	-.39**	.42**	.49**	-	-.63**	-.17	-.08	.12	1.76	1.04
5. Relationship satisfaction	.54**	-.14	-.17	-.61**	-	.12	.15	-.04	3.88	.92
6. Age (years)	.00	-.01	.01	-.06	.10	-	.19	.10	18.68	.74
7. Gender	.24*	-.12	.06	-.18	.16	.08	-	-.02	.28	.45
8. Relationship length (month)	.16	-.08	-.03	-.16	.12	.02	.01	-	13.88	11.48
M	3.68	2.48	1.68	1.87	3.62	20.04	.33	17.77		
SD	1.36	1.04	.87	1.13	.94	2.00	.47	14.52		

Note. Values above the diagonal are South Asians ($N = 82$) and values under the diagonal are White participants ($N = 109$). Gender is coded 0 =

female, 1 = male. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

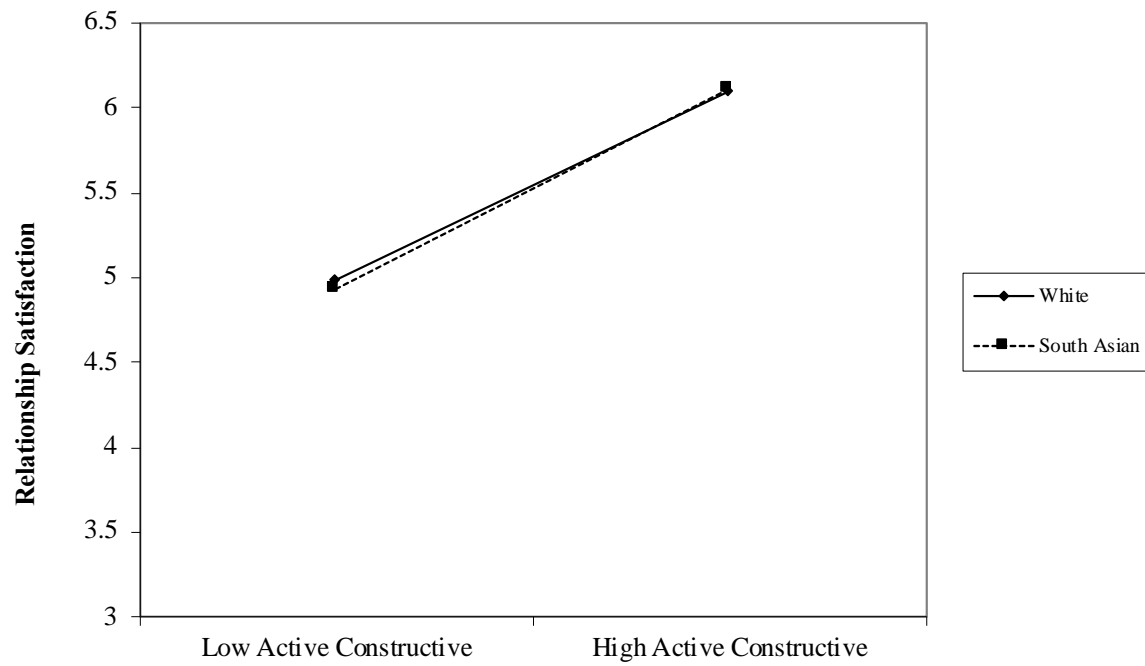


Figure 1. Interaction between active-constructive PRCA and culture on relationship satisfaction.

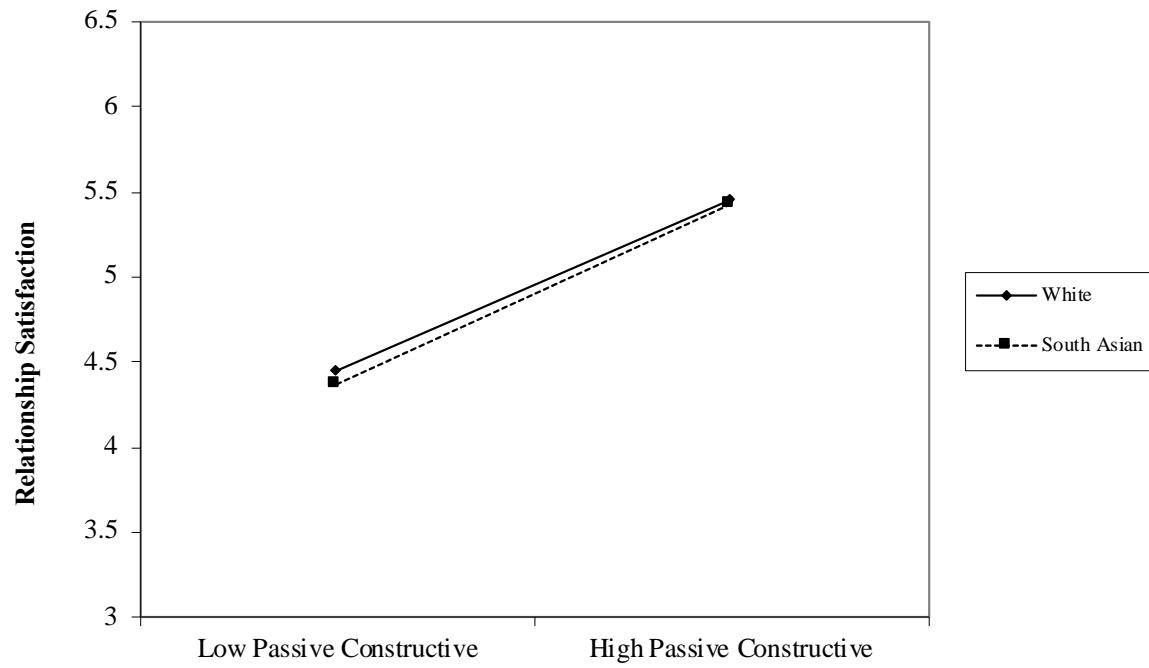


Figure 2. Interaction between passive-constructive PRCA and culture on relationship satisfaction.

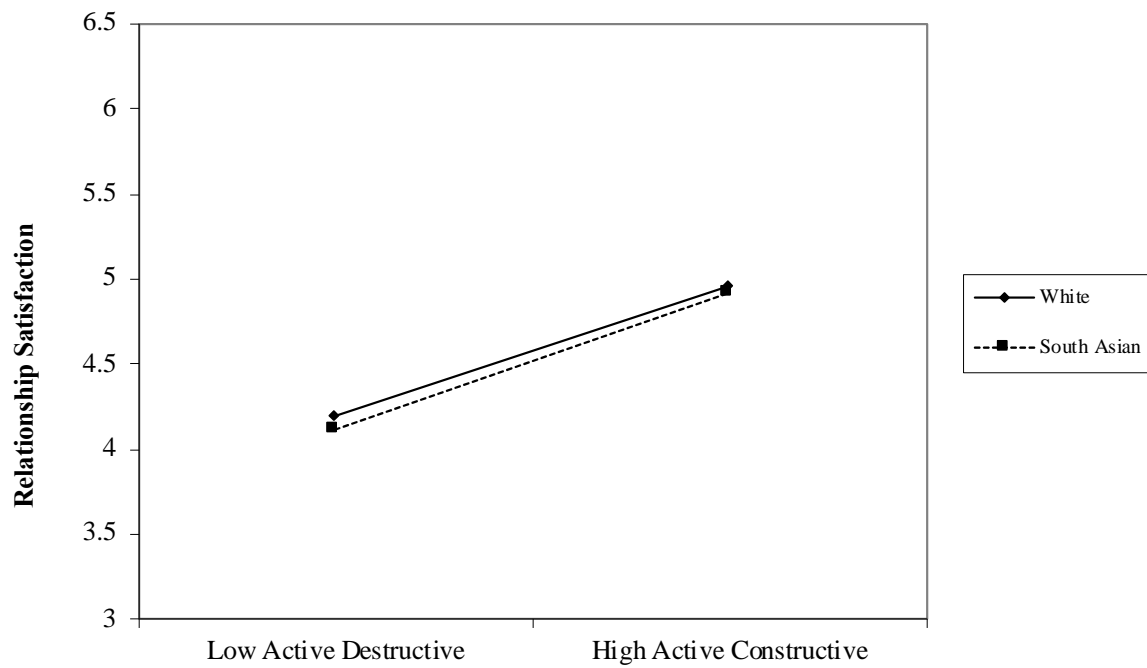


Figure 3. Interaction between active-destructive PRCA and culture on relationship satisfaction.

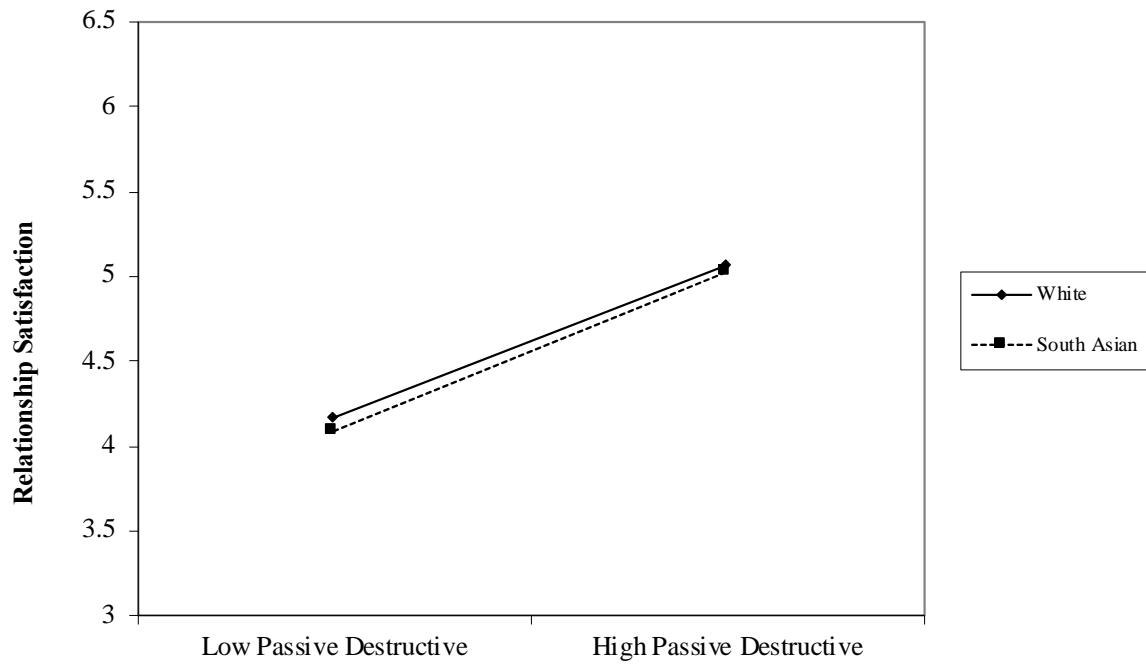


Figure 4. Interaction between passive-destructive PRCA and culture on relationship satisfaction.