

**Discriminative Facility and Its Role  
in the Perceived Quality  
of Interactional Experiences**

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**ABSTRACT** Discriminative facility refers to an individual's sensitivity to subtle cues about the psychological meaning of a situation. This research aimed at examining (a) the conceptual distinctiveness of discriminative facility, (b) the situation-appropriate aspect of this construct, and (c) the relationship between discriminative facility and interpersonal experiences. Discriminative facility was assessed by a new measure of situation-appropriate behaviors across a variety of novel stressful situations. Results from Study 1 showed that discriminative facility had weak positive relationships with cognitive complexity and nonsignificant relationships with self-monitoring and social desirability, indicating that discriminative facility is a unique construct. Results from Study 2 revealed that higher levels of discriminative facility were associated with higher levels of perceived social support and a greater number of pleasant interpersonal events experienced, thus providing support for the theoretical proposition that discriminative facility is an aspect of social intelligence.

In daily life, some individuals adapt to different situations, whereas others behave unvaryingly, irrespective of the nature of situations. For instance, one person may exhibit a range of behaviors, such as chatting politely with his clients in the office but shouting roughly at his mates on the basketball court. Another person may tend not to alter her behaviors, such as talking loudly both at a rock concert and in a fancy restaurant. Her behaviors annoy others in the latter situation. Such common phenomena reflect individual differences in discriminative facility, which is conceptualized as an aspect of social intelligence and information processing that refers to sensitivity to subtle cues about the psychological meaning of the situation (Chiu, Hong, Mischel, & Shoda, 1995; see also Mischel, 1973; Mischel & Shoda, 1995, 1998). Individuals high in discriminative facility will make refined analyses of important features of social situations and consequently be more able to make discriminative choices of coping strategies, which may, in turn, lead to more competent social behavior across situations.

### Conception of Discriminative Facility

Theoretically, individuals with discriminative facility spontaneously engage in conditional analyses of social behavior by encoding social information into conditional, *if . . . then . . .* propositions that link a behavior or outcome to relevant features of the situation (Chiu et al., 1995; Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986; Koller & Wicklund, 1994; Wicklund, Braun, & Waibel, 1994; see also Wright & Mischel,

1987, 1988). Consistent with this notion, previous studies (Chiu et al., 1995; Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Wright & Mischel, 1987) have shown that individuals high in discriminative facility tend to encode information in psychologically contextualized, conditional terms (e.g., “when her son is naughty, she becomes angry”), whereas those low in discriminative facility tend to encode information in unconditional terms as broad, uncontextualized dispositions (e.g., “she is an angry person”).

These findings provide support for the proposal of discriminative facility as a cognitive style, but the nature of discriminative facility may be distinct from that of other cognitive style constructs such as cognitive complexity (Bieri et al., 1966; Crockett, 1965). Cognitive complexity has been defined as the capacity to construe information in a multidimensional way (e.g., Bieri et al., 1966; Goldstein & Blackman, 1978; Schroder, Driver, & Streufert, 1967). In this respect, discriminative facility is similar to cognitive complexity because they both indicate multidimensionality of an individual’s cognitions. However, cognitive complexity is a broader construct than discriminative facility because cognitive complexity also refers to other aspects of cognitions, such as enjoyment of thinking (Murphy, 1947), quest for reality (Murphy, 1947), need to understand (Katz, 1960), and the aesthetic value placed on complexity or simplicity (Bar-Tal, 1994). Although discriminative facility shares certain similarities with cognitive complexity, such relationships may be modest.

As “perception is for doing” (Gibson, 1979, p. 143), how individuals encode information in a particular situation will affect the subsequent choice of actions and adaptiveness of their behavior (Bandura, 1986; Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Mischel, 1973, 1990; see also Forgas, 1983a, 1983b). Flexibility (versus rigidity) in encoding increases behavioral freedom, and behavioral flexibility is thus posited as a behavioral expression of discriminative facility (Mischel & Shoda, 1995, 1998). In this aspect, discriminative facility seems to be similar to the construct of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974, 1979) because both constructs reflect behavioral variability across situations.

Factor analytic studies on self-monitoring (e.g., Briggs, Cheek, & Buss, 1980; Gabrenya & Arkin, 1980) have shown that this construct comprises three components, namely (a) *expressive self-control*, which refers to the ability to actively control and modify one’s behavior; (b) *social stage presence*, which refers to the tendency to regulate one’s

behaviors for attracting social attention to oneself; and (c) *other-directed self-presentation*, which refers to the display of behaviors in accordance with what others expect one to behave. Discriminative facility may be similar to self-monitoring because they both refer to expressive self-control. However, discriminative facility may, to a large extent, be distinct from self-monitoring because discriminative facility may not reflect social stage presence and other-directed self-presentation. To elaborate, although discriminative facility implies behavioral variability across situations, such variability may not necessarily imply chameleon-like conformity to momentary expectations or demands from other people (Chiu et al., 1995; see also Mischel, 1973). More importantly, individuals higher in discriminative facility can be sensitive not only to the particular needs, thoughts, and feelings of others but also to those of their own, and can self-regulate their behavior to take account of *both* others' and their own goals (Mischel & Shoda, 1995, 1998). Therefore, although discriminative facility and self-monitoring may share certain similarities, they may be regarded as distinct constructs because they may differ from each other in significant ways.

Besides, the flexible encoding and subsequent flexible behaviors of individuals high in discriminative facility may not reflect social desirability. Individuals high in discriminative facility may not be too concerned about others' evaluations of the desirability of their behaviors, but may pay more attention to the situational appropriateness of their behaviors. Therefore, we predict that discriminative facility may have nonsignificant associations with social desirability.

A major aim of this study was to scrutinize whether discriminative facility is a unique construct whose nature differs from that of the aforementioned alternative constructs. The relationships between a discriminative facility measure and other relevant measures will be examined in Study 1. We predict that cognitive complexity is an overly inclusive construct that not only taps certain aspects of discriminative facility but also other aspects unrelated to discriminative facility. Self-monitoring is proposed to be an overly exclusive construct that shares some components with discriminative facility, but differs from the latter construct in other significant aspects. Therefore, weak positive relationships may be found between discriminative facility and these two constructs. We further predict discriminative facility may be unrelated to social desirability.

### Situation-Appropriate Aspect of Discriminative Facility

Although situation-appropriateness is an important component of discriminative facility, few previous attempts have been made to address this issue. Hence, another objective of the present research was to explore the situation-appropriate aspect of discriminative facility. In this research, we evaluated the situation-appropriateness of participants' responses against a set of predetermined criteria based on previous theories and empirical findings.

Previous research has examined two "cognitive informational styles" (Miller, 1989), namely monitoring and blunting. Monitoring refers to the tendency to be alert to adverse cues in the environment, whereas blunting refers to the tendency to distract oneself from these signals. The effectiveness of these two strategies depends largely on the characteristics of stressful situations (e.g., Miller & Birnbaum, 1988; Miller, Rodolitz, Schroeder, Mangan, & Sedlacek, 1996; Miller, Roussi, Caputo, & Kruus, 1995), and thus these strategies are particularly relevant to the study of discriminative facility. Compared to those lower in discriminative facility, individuals higher in discriminative facility may be more adaptive because they possess psychological intuitions about the relationships between the usefulness of monitoring versus blunting and the relevant features of the stressful situation, and thus discriminatively vary their information-processing strategies across different situations to maximize the likelihood of effective outcomes.

Monitoring and blunting are assessed by the Miller Behavioral Style Scale (MBSS; Miller, 1980; Miller & Mangan, 1983), which comprises four hypothetical stressful situations, namely Dentist, Hostage, Layoff, and Airplane. Descriptions of the monitoring and the blunting responses to these four MBSS situations are included in Table 1. To determine the instrumentality of monitoring and blunting in the various MBSS situations, Chiu and his associates (1995) asked a panel of ten independent judges to evaluate, for each situation, the extent to which the monitoring strategies would be instrumental in eliciting a positive outcome. Only in the Hostage situation was monitoring rated as useful for effective coping. Consistent with the judges' ratings, the situation-appropriateness of monitoring in hostage situations was also revealed in a study by Strentz and Auerbach (1988). Other studies also provided evidence that constant monitoring of negative cues by individuals facing natural hazards

**Table 1**  
**Examples of Monitoring and Blunting Responses**  
**for the Extended Version of the MBSS**

Situations	Examples of Monitoring (M) and Blunting (B) Responses	Situation-Appropriate Response
Dentist	I would watch the flow of water from my mouth to see if it contained blood (M) I would try to think about pleasant memories (B)	Blunting
Hostage	I would make sure I knew where every possible exit was (M) I would try to sleep as much as possible (B)	Monitoring
Layoff	I would try to remember any arguments or disagreements I might have had with the supervisor that would have lowered his opinions of me (M) I would go to the movies to take my mind off things (B)	Blunting
Airplane	I would listen carefully to the engines for unusual noises and would watch the crew to see if their behavior was out of the ordinary (M) I would settle down and read a book or magazine or write a letter (B)	Blunting
Business Dinner	I would observe how other people socialize in the party (M) I would sit in a quiet corner and pretend not to see anyone (B)	Monitoring
Ballgame	I would judge my performance in the game according to the cheers of the audience (M) I would ignore the audience's reactions (B)	Blunting
Early Cancer	I would pay attention to any signs of deteriorating health (M) I would avoid thinking of the cancer and make myself busy with other things (B)	Monitoring
Terminal Cancer	I would pay attention to any signs of deteriorating health (M) I would avoid thinking of the cancer and make myself busy with other things (B)	Blunting

(Simpson-Housley & Bradshaw, 1978; Simpson-Housley, Lipinski, & Trithardt, 1978; Sims & Baumann, 1972) and those encountering uncontrollable stressful events (e.g., Cheng, Hui, & Lam, 1999; Folkman,

Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986; Miller et al., 1995) increased their anxiety and distress levels.

Apart from the four situations described above, we have added four more scenarios to the MBSS that are based on previous theories and research in order to increase the variety of hypothetical stressful situations. Two health-related scenarios, namely the Early Cancer and the Terminal Cancer situations were included (see Table 1). Previous studies by Miller and associates (Miller & Birnbaum, 1988; Miller et al., 1996) showed that high monitors, or those who actively sought threatening information and lacked the ability to distract themselves from adverse cues, showed greater physical and psychological distress in response to uncontrollable health threats than did low monitors. Based on these findings, adaptive outcomes may be attained through monitoring in the Early Cancer situation. However, adaptive outcomes require psychological distraction (i.e., blunting) from the ultimate threat in the Terminal Cancer situation.

Apart from the controllability of stressful situations, another factor that may be relevant to the usefulness of monitoring as opposed to blunting is focal self-attention, which refers to the tendency to attend to and evaluate aspects of the self by monitoring the audience's reactions. According to the control system theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1982), some individuals are more aware of the discrepancies between their behaviors and others' behavioral standards. Consequently, these individuals are more motivated to take actions to reduce such discrepancies and their associated negative affects. Monitoring the audience's reactions to the self is useful in novel social situations where new information or feedback from the audience is required for regulating one's behaviors. For example, when attending a business dinner for the first time, monitoring may be useful for assessing whether one's behavior is appropriate for the situation. Hence, monitoring should be an appropriate response to the Business Dinner situation (see Table 1).

However, monitoring the audience's reactions to the self may sometimes be debilitating. Baumeister (1984) proposed that when performing a skilled task (e.g., athletes participating in a ballgame), monitoring the audience's reactions may lead to a state of heightened self-attention, which may interfere with the well-rehearsed performance. In line with this proposal, research (e.g., Baumeister, 1984; Heaton & Sigall, 1991) has shown that, even in the presence of a supportive audience, the performance of a skilled task will be adversely affected when the performer tries to

monitor the audience's reactions. Blunting should thus be more adaptive for the Ballgame situation (see Table 1) than monitoring.

Because individuals high in discriminative facility are more sensitive to subtle situational cues, they may be more able to discriminate among situations and adopt the most effective information-processing strategies for each situation. Based on previous theories and findings, high levels of discriminative facility are operationalized by a preference for monitoring (versus blunting) only in the Hostage, Business Dinner, and Early Cancer situations, in which the outcome is contingent on monitoring adverse cues, but not in the other situations in which blunting is deemed more effective in eliciting adaptive outcomes.

### Role of Discriminative Facility in Interactional Experiences

A third aim of the present research is to scrutinize how discriminative facility, posited as an aspect of social intelligence (e.g., Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987, 1989; Mischel & Shoda, 1995, 1998), would be related to individuals' perceived quality of interactional experiences. To explore this proposal, Study 2 examined the role of discriminative facility in a real-life interactional context. We tracked working adults' social interactions in both their family and work environments for 2 weeks.

Family and work are two major contexts of social interactions for working adults. Because most adults spend a considerable amount of time working, interpersonal relations at work is especially relevant to adults' well-being (see Taylor & Repetti, 1997). Whereas supportive relations with supervisors (House, 1981) and colleagues (Gutierrez, Saenz, & Green, 1994) may serve as a buffer for work stress and promote psychological well-being and physical health, unpleasant or conflictive social relations at work are associated with negative emotions and poor physical health (e.g., Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993; Davis, Matthew, & Meilahn, & Kiss, 1995). Similarly, whereas supportive family relations tend to enhance psychological health (e.g., Holahan & Moos, 1985; Revenson, & Majerovitz, 1991; see also Cohen, 1992), chronic tension or conflicts within the family may have negative health implications (e.g., Fiore, Becker, & Coppel, 1983; Pagel, Erdly, & Becker, 1987; Rook, 1984; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988).

In summary, Study 2 examined both positive (i.e., support) and negative (i.e., conflict) perceived qualities of social relations with family



members who lived together and co-workers who worked in the same department (including supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates). We predicted that participants higher in discriminative facility would have more positive interactional experiences with family members and co-workers than did those lower in discriminative facility.

## Study 1

### METHOD

#### Research Participants

One hundred and twenty Hong Kong undergraduates participated in this study to fulfill a course requirement. The sample comprised 79 females and 41 males, and the average age was 21.03 ( $SD = 1.30$ ). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the study began.

#### Measures

*Discriminative facility.* Participants' discriminative use of monitoring/blunting strategies across different situations was measured by the EMBSS. As mentioned in the Introduction, this measure includes eight hypothetical situations (see Table 1). For each hypothetical situation, participants were asked to vividly imagine themselves encountering the situation. Their task was to decide whether they would employ a given strategy in handling the situation. Each situation consists of four monitoring and four blunting strategies.

The endorsement of an EMBSS item that matches the situation-appropriate criteria (see Introduction or Table 1) was given a score of 1 (e.g., endorsing the monitoring strategy in the Business Dinner situation), and the endorsement of an item that does not match those criteria was given a score of 0 (e.g., endorsing the monitoring strategy in the Terminal Cancer situation). The discriminative facility score ranges from 0 to 64, with a higher score indicates a greater extent of discriminative facility. The EMBSS (eight situations) has good internal consistency in a previous study (Cheng et al., 2000) and in the present study ( $\alpha = .81$  for the monitoring subscale and  $\alpha = .78$  for the blunting subscale). This scale also displays good criterion validity (Cheng, in press).

*Cognitive complexity.* The Cognitive Complexity Questionnaire (CCQ; Ben-Ari, Kedem, & Levy-Weiner, 1992) was used to assess cognitive complexity. This measure was chosen among other measures of cognitive complexity because it assesses participants' ability to differentiate among types of persons according to different attributes, rather than merely examining the raw number

of groups generated by participants (Ben-Ari et al., 1992; Scott, Osgood, & Peterson, 1979). In the CCQ, participants have to list 20 acquaintances from different areas of life (e.g., school, family) and group those acquaintances that belong together. After listing their names, participants are given a page with 18 empty squares. They are asked to list those acquaintances who possess a common attribute inside each square and to name the common attribute at the bottom of each square. Participants are instructed to generate as many groups as possible. They are also told that each acquaintance can be placed in as many groups (squares) as they like. The cognitive complexity scores, which are calculated by Scott's  $H$  (see Scott, 1962), range from 0 (low-complexity) to 4.32 (high-complexity).

*Self-monitoring.* Self-monitoring was assessed by the Chinese version of the Self-Monitoring Scale (SMS, Snyder, 1974; see Yang, 1997 for details on the psychometric properties of the Chinese SMS). The SMS has 18 items, and participants indicate "yes" (1) or "no" (0) to each item. The SMS scores range from 0 (low self-monitoring) to 18 (high self-monitoring). The SMS has good internal consistency in the present sample ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Social desirability.* The Chinese version of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability scale (MCSD; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; see Yang, 1997 for details on the psychometric properties of the Chinese MCSD) was used to assess social desirability. The MCSD consists of 33 items, for which participants indicate "yes" (1) or "no" (0). The MCSD scores range from 0 to 33. A higher score indicates a desire to achieve greater social desirability. The MCSD displays good internal consistency in this study ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

### Procedures

Questionnaires were administered to groups of 8 to 10 by a research assistant who oriented the students with instructions. Participants were allowed to take as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaires. No difficulties were reported by participants while filling in the questionnaires. Results of this study were discussed in a subsequent tutorial session.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The right panel of Table 2 presents means and standard deviations of the major variables in this study, namely discriminative facility, cognitive complexity, self-monitoring, and social desirability. Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted to examine the inter-relationships among these constructs. These results were shown in the left panel of

**Table 2**  
Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Major Variables of Study 1 ( $n = 120$ )

Variable	2	3	4	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Skewness
1. Discriminative facility	.20*	.12	-.09	30.09	12.09	-.33
2. Cognitive complexity	—	.11	.02	1.86	.71	.28
3. Self-monitoring		—	.14	9.01	4.98	-.12
4. Social desirability			—	16.60	9.85	-.30

\* $p < .05$ .

Table 2. Although discriminative facility was positively related to cognitive complexity and self-monitoring, such associations were modest with cognitive complexity and nonsignificant with self-monitoring. Moreover, a nonsignificant association was found between discriminative facility and social desirability. These results were consistent with our predictions that discriminative facility is a unique construct that does not overlap conceptually with relevant constructs of cognitive complexity, self-monitoring, and social desirability.

## Study 2

### Overview

In this study, we tracked 50 working adults' interactions for 2 weeks in both their family and work environments. The quality of social interactions at work and in the family was assessed by two sets of measures. First, the supportive and conflictive qualities perceived in social relations were measured by well-validated self-report questionnaires. Second, participants' daily interactions with family members and co-workers were tracked with a daily diary.

Because self-report measures on subjective perception usually contain a significant component of negative affectivity that may bias the relationships among the variables (see, e.g., Schaubroeck, Ganster, & Fox, 1992; Watson & Pennebaker, 1989), we have included a self-report depression inventory to measure participants' negative affectivity. The possible effects of negative affectivity would be covaried out in the subsequent statistical analyses.

## METHOD

### Research Participants

Fifty Hong Kong working adults (33 females, 17 males) who responded to newspaper advertisements on a “psychological study of daily activities” were recruited. They were each paid HK\$150 (about US\$20) for taking part in this study. Their average age was 28.92 ( $SD = 5.51$ ). Only 3 participants had taken an introductory psychology course. Other participants had no previous exposure to psychology. All the participants were asked to sign a consent form before the study began. At the debriefing session, none of the participants could correctly identify the purpose of this study.

### Measures

*Discriminative facility.* Discriminative facility was assessed by the EMBSS as in Study 1.

*Perceived quality of social relations.* To assess the perceived quality of social relations, participants completed the Chinese version of the Social Support Appraisals Scale (SS-A; Vaux, 1982; Vaux et al., 1986) and the Social Conflict Scale (SCS; Lepore, 1992; Moos & Moos, 1981; see Cheng, 1998, 1999; H.K. Ma & Leung, 1990; L.C.J. Ma, Chan, Chi, & Sham, 1990 for evidence of the reliability and validity of these two Chinese measures). Both were self-report measures, in which participants rated each item along a 4-point Likert scale. The SS-A scores, which range from 15 to 60, reflect the extent to which the participants believe themselves to be loved by, respected by, and involved with family members and co-workers. The SCS scores, which range from 16 to 64, reflect the amount of tension and conflicts perceived to be occurring in family and work relations. These two measures display good internal consistencies in this study ( $\alpha = .91$  and  $.83$ ).

*Perceived quality of daily social interactions.* The perceived quality of daily social interactions was assessed by daily log sheets specifically designed for recording the frequency and perceived quality of social interactions. In the daily log sheet, participants were instructed to (a) specify the interactant in each interactional event, (b) report the amount of time they spent with each interactant, and (c) rate on a 6-point scale the extent to which they perceived the interaction as pleasant or unpleasant (1 = *extremely unpleasant*; 6 = *extremely pleasant*). An interactional event with a rating of 4 or above is classified as pleasant, whereas an interaction with a rating of 3 or below is classified as unpleasant. Because the number of interactional events differed among participants, probability of pleasant interactional events, rather than the total amount,

was examined. Probability of pleasant interactional events was calculated by dividing the aggregated frequency of pleasant interactional events by the sum of pleasant and unpleasant interpersonal events. The probability ranges from 0 to 1.

Wheeler and Nezlek's (1977) definition of social interaction was included on the cover page of every set of daily log sheets. Specifically, the participants were informed that a social interaction was any encounter with one or more people for more than 10 minutes in which the involved persons attended to one another and adjusted their behaviors in response to one other. Participants were also given specific examples of social activities that would be classified as social interactions (e.g., chatting, dancing, and playing tennis with one or more people), and examples of activities that would not be so classified (e.g., sitting side by side with one or more people watching television, and working independently in a large office). Participants were instructed to read this definition of social interaction before filling in the daily log and to record every social interaction that lasted for 10 minutes or longer on alternate days within a 2-week period (i.e., a total of 7 days).

*Negative affectivity.* Negative affectivity was assessed by the Chinese version of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961; Chan & Tsoi, 1984; see Shek, 1990, 1991 for details on the reliability and validity of the Chinese BDI). The BDI was chosen because it is one of the most widely used self-report depression measures in nonclinical depression research (Rizley, 1978). The BDI consists of 21 items in which respondents choose 1 of 4 alternative statements that best describes how they presently feel for the past week. We adopted the consistent weighted score of 0, 1, 2, or 3 as recommended by Beck and associates (1961) for scoring the BDI items. A higher BDI score indicates a higher level of negative affectivity. The BDI displays good internal consistency in the present sample ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

### Procedures

The EMBSS, the SS-A, the SCS, and the BDI were given to one participant at a time in a cubicle. A trained research assistant read the instructions to the participant and responded to any inquiries raised by the participant. Then, the participant was left to complete the questionnaires, and the research assistant was available for further inquiries in a waiting room near the cubicle. Participants were allowed to take as much time as needed to complete the questionnaires.

After completing the questionnaires, participants were given a package of seven daily log sheets and were instructed to fill in each log sheet on alternate nights at home within a 2-week period. A research assistant phoned participants to remind

them to complete the log sheet, and any questions concerning the completion of log sheets were clarified at that time as well. A cover sheet with detailed instructions and a sample log sheet were attached to the package so that participants could refer to them whenever they had difficulties in completing the daily logs. The research assistant made arrangements for them to attend a debriefing session, in which the participants were debriefed, paid, and thanked for their participation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics of the major variables in this study—discriminative facility, perceived social support, perceived social conflict, probability of pleasant interactional events—are shown in the right panel of Table 3. The skewness values of perceived social support and probability of pleasant interactional events revealed that the distribution of these two variables is substantially skewed, and thus we employed a square root transformation for these variables to achieve normality and homoscedasticity. The transformed scores, rather than raw scores, of these two measures were used in subsequent analyses.

Partial correlations were used to examine the hypothesized relationship between discriminative facility and perceived quality of interactional experiences (i.e., perceived social support, perceived social conflict, probability of pleasant interactional events) with the effects of negative affectivity partialled out. Results of the partial correlations are summarized in the left panel of Table 3. As shown in Table 3, discriminative facility was significantly and positively related to both perceived social support and probability of pleasant interactional events, indicating that the higher the level of discriminative facility, the higher the level of

**Table 3**  
Descriptive Statistics and Partial Correlation Coefficients for Major Variables of Study 2 ( $n = 50$ )

Variable	2	3	4	Mean	SD	Skewness
1. Discriminative facility	.27*	-.19	.36*	33.90	13.90	-.36
2. Perceived social support	—	-.23	.23	35.38	5.03	-1.40
3. Perceived social conflict		—	-.10	26.40	5.23	.83
4. Probability of pleasant interpersonal events			—	.71	.21	-1.77

\* $p < .05$ .

social support perceived and the greater the amount of pleasant interactional events experienced. These results provide support that discriminative facility, as an aspect of social intelligence, was associated with positive interpersonal experience.

There was a negative trend between discriminative facility and perceived social conflict, but such a trend is nonsignificant. One possible reason is that conflict occurs in nearly all social relations, regardless of how close or how harmonious the relations are (Minuchin, 1974; Stephens, Kinney, Ritchie, & Norris, 1987). The ability to manage conflict, rather than the conflictive events themselves, may be a more reliable indicator of social competence (see Kellermann, 1996; Utley, Richardson, & Pilkington, 1989 for a discussion). Future studies may examine how discriminative facility is related to perceived social conflict and, more importantly, to conflict management. We expect that the association between discriminative facility and conflict management may be stronger than that between discriminative facility and perceived social conflict.

### **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The present research extends previous work on social competence in three major ways. First, at the conceptual level, the present research further clarifies the nature of discriminative facility. Individuals high in discriminative facility show a considerable extent of flexible encoding of the nature of situations, and such flexibility facilitates the deployment of situation-appropriate behaviors. Apparently, such cognitive and behavioral flexibility may overlap conceptually with other relevant constructs such as cognitive complexity and self-monitoring. We conducted a detailed analysis on and comparison among the conceptions of these constructs, and the analysis suggests that these constructs may be similar in some aspects but also differ in a considerable number of aspects (see Introduction). Consistent with our analysis, results from Study 1 revealed that discriminative facility was related only to cognitive complexity, but such a relationship was modest, thus indicating that discriminative facility is a unique construct.

Second, the MBSS was originally a measure examining cognitive informational styles for handling stressful situations. In this research, the MBSS was adopted to assess discriminative facility, which was operationalized by a variable pattern of situation-appropriate responses across

distinct events. Based on previous theories and findings, the MBSS has been extended with four additional hypothetical stressful situations. The EMBSS thus contains a greater variety of situations than does the MBSS. More importantly, we developed a set of criteria for evaluating the situation appropriateness of the EMBSS items. The development of the situation-appropriate criteria may contribute not only to the realm of personality by revealing individual difference in encoding flexibility but also to the realm of clinical psychology by identifying individuals who tend to cope in a maladaptive way.

Third, the present study used a more refined method to assess the quality of social interactions. In most previous studies on social competence, measurement of the quality of social interaction relied exclusively on participants' global evaluations of their interpersonal experiences. In the present research, the diary technique was adopted. The participants were asked to record their daily interactions at the end of the day for a relatively long period of time. This technique provided us with interactional data for a period in a relatively cost-effective manner, although it also relied on the participants' self-reports. As shown in Study 2, participants higher in discriminative facility perceived a greater extent of social support and reported more pleasant real-life interactional events. Such convergent findings provide further support for the construct validity of discriminative facility.

Before concluding, several cautionary notes in the present investigation need to be addressed. First, in this study, discriminative facility has been operationalized by variations in the deployment of different coping strategies across stressful situations. It is noteworthy that discriminative facility is a broad information-processing style and its benefits may extend to neutral and positive situations. Stressful situations were examined in this study because previous findings (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; Shoda et al., 1993b) revealed that cognitive competence is more useful in demanding than in nondemanding contexts, and thus individual difference in discriminative facility may be greater in novel, stressful situations than in neutral or positive situations. Further studies examining discriminative facility in the context of neutral and positive daily events should be conducted.

Second, the stressful situations used in the discriminative facility measure are hypothetical in nature. Thus, the present results may only reflect individuals' ability to discern subtle differences embedded in distinct hypothetical situations. Whether such cognitive astuteness will



be actualized in coping with real-life stressful situations cannot be assessed by this measure. In our recent study (Cheng & Chiu, 1997), we found that individuals higher in discriminative facility did realize their cognitive facility in actual coping behaviors, whereas those lower in discriminative facility displayed rigid coping behaviors across different stressful events in a real-life transition.

To conclude, flexibility in construals and reactions is believed to be important for social competence. The present research adds to the existing literature by examining individuals' sensitivity to subtle nuances in various hypothetical situations and discriminative deployment of attention strategies for situation-appropriate behaviors. It also establishes the relationship between discriminative facility and quality of interactional experiences.

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