Exploring the Relationships between Individualism and Collectivism and Attitudes towards Counselling among Ethnic Chinese, Australian, and American University Students

By

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and has not been previously submitted, in whole or in part, for assessment at any tertiary institution.

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the Relationships Between Individualism and Collectivism and Attitudes Towards Counselling Among Ethnic Chinese, Australian, and American University Students

Compensating for reduced public funding, Australian and American universities actively recruit full-fee paying East Asian international students. University staff, aware of international students having difficulties coping with cultural and emotional issues, often encourage them to seek university counselling services. However, East Asian international students under-utilise Western universities’ counselling services. It has been argued that the Western concept of counselling reflects Western cultural values, in particular individualism. Thus the reluctance of international students from more collectivistic cultures to seek counselling services may in part be due to a clash of cultural values.

Over a decade ago, Draguns hypothesised the existence of a relationship between Hofstede’s cultural dimensions of individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity, and their influence on individuals’ attitudes towards psychopathology and treatment modalities. The current study sought to offer
empirical support for Draguns' hypothesis as it related to individualism and power distance, and to attitudes towards counselling. In place of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, this study used the Triandis cultural concepts of vertical and horizontal individualism and collectivism.

Using the Triandis Individualism Collectivism Scale (ICS) and the Tinsley Expectations about Counseling-Brief Form (EAC-B) questionnaire, the current study explores the relationship between levels of vertical and horizontal individualism and collectivism, and attitudes towards the roles of counsellors, the roles of clients, and the process and goals of counselling. The research is based on data collected from three cultural groups: ethnic Chinese international students attending Australian universities, and Australian and American university students enrolled in their home countries.

This study is unusual in cross-cultural research owing to its use of the Rasch extended logistic model of modern item response theory (IRT) as a means of validating the data prior to standard statistical analysis. Whereas classical test theory emphasises the model fitting the data, the Rasch model of IRT requires that the data fit the model to be considered valid. Psychometric analysis of the ICS found its four scales separately fit the Rasch model quite well, as did three modified scales of the EAC-B. The IRT analysis also provided a means of identifying differential item functioning (DIF), that is, items functioning differently (demonstrating bias) among the three cultural groups.

Using the EAC-B to collect pre and post-intervention data, the current study assessed the effectiveness of a videotape intervention as a means of changing within and between-group attitudes towards counselling. It was anticipated that ethnic
Chinese participants, representing the group with the least familiarity with
counselling, would show the greatest change in counselling attitudes as a result of the
intervention. Americans were expected to show the least change, and Australian
participants to be in the middle position. Based on the findings, the intervention did
not significantly alter the participants’ attitudes towards counselling regardless of
their cultural background. Overall, the intervention served to strengthen existing
attitudes.

Lastly as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of the quantitative findings,
the study collected qualitative data from the participants and from university
counsellors. These findings indicated that there was a general lack of knowledge
about university counselling services even among those participants who were
familiar with counselling as a concept. Participants, in general, expressed reservations
about seeking counselling due to concerns of being seen by friends. This was
particularly true for the Chinese. Chinese participants also expressed scepticism
towards a non-Chinese counsellor’s ability to understand their problems.

In reference to Draguns’ hypothesis, overall the findings from this study
supported his model. The findings indicated that individuals endorsing collectivistic
attitudes expressed a strong preference for counsellors who were direct, expert-like,
and helped clients seek concrete solutions to their problems. The study also found
that an individual’s expressions of cultural dimensions, such as vertical collectivism,
were better predictors of counsellor preference than an individual’s cultural
background.

These findings have implications for university policy-makers who are
responsible for ensuring the existence of an infrastructure capable of meeting the
needs of the international students they so actively recruit. This would include appropriate funding for an adequate and diverse counselling staff extending itself to the university community. There are also implications for counsellor education programs in recognising the link between cultural variables and client expectations.
Although only a single name appears as the researcher and author of this work, its completion would not have been possible without the assistance and support of others. During the past three years, I have had the good fortune of receiving supervision from two top-notch academics, Pia Broderick, Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology, and Irene Styles, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education.

Dr. Broderick, serving in the capacity of Principal Supervisor, always asked the tough, but important questions. In spite of the demands placed upon her by the School and the University, Pia always found the time to read chapter drafts and provide useful feedback in a timely manner.

Dr. Styles deservedly received Murdoch’s Excellence in Postgraduate Research Supervision Award for 2002. It serves as a testament to her dedication to her students, to her profession, and to the University. Irene has been the quintessential guide during this journey. She has offered guidance, support, and direction at the appropriate times, but never leaving any doubt that this was my journey.

Thanks are also extended to Associate Professor Alex Main, School of Psychology, for providing valuable assistance during the initial phase of my research especially in the formulation of the research questions and the beginning of the survey of literature.

The video intervention used in this study was made possible by generous colleagues who donated that most valuable commodity – time. Thanks to Cozette Fraser, Hui Yean Tan, and Doug Brewer for their stellar performances, and to Jan Currie for the excellent voice-over narration.

A special thanks to Claire Pickering for her ability to exert control over unruly tables, figures, and text boxes; to create the Table of Contents, Table of Tables, Tables of Figures and References; and to format the text throughout the thesis. Not only was all of it done with aplomb, but always on time as well.

The word “acknowledgment” does not convey the depth of gratitude that I have for my wife, partner, and companion of la dolce vita, Jan Currie. Her support has been unwavering and unconditional. Although her professional life is demanding and she willingly gives her time to others, Jan has always been there to share in my joys with this research, to read countless paragraphs, and to listen to me whinge and fret. Four years ago she asked, “Why don’t you get your PhD?” “Ah, I’m too old,” I said. “No you’re not. I know people older than you doing it.” And, she was right. Thanks, Jan, this thesis is dedicated to you.
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