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.
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