Doctoral Thesis

The Need for Approval: A Psychological Study of the Influence of Confucian Values on the Social Behaviour of East Asians

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Abstract

This thesis begins with a critical overview of cross-cultural psychology and a re-examination of the concepts of emic and etic. It argues that the time has come for cross-cultural psychology to free itself from the moorings of its Western, universalistic paradigm and take non-Western, indigenous psychology seriously, especially that of East Asia.

To address the need for an East Asian psychology, the thesis presents an empirical study on the psychological influence of Confucianism on East Asians. It hypothesises that the Confucian values of filiality, propriety and harmony induce a strong need for approval and a range of approval-seeking behaviours in the individual. In contrast, the Western values of individuation, autonomy and conflict induce a strong need for independence and a range of independence-seeking behaviours.

To test this hypothesis, a 26-item, 5-point Likert scale was developed and administered to 1625 university students across East Asia, which include East Asian samples from China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, as well as Caucasian samples from Australia, United Kingdom and the United States.
The study has confirmed its hypothesis that the Confucian values of filiality, propriety and harmony characterise the approval-driven social behaviours of East Asians and that the values of individuation, autonomy and conflict characterise the independence-driven social behaviours of Westerners. However, it has also found that, contrary to many long-held assumptions, there are significant differences in the way Confucian values have exerted their respective influence on the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans and other East Asians.

The findings suggest not only that the culturally induced need for approval can be used as an overarching construct for the psychological study of East Asians from an indigenous perspective, but also that the innovative model used in this study can be applied to the study of other indigenous psychologies as well. More significantly, the study has found that, in contrast to the need for divine approval which has motivated the achievements of European Protestants in the past, the need for human approval is what characterises the achievement motivation and behaviours of Confucian East Asians today.