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Better meeting the counselling needs of ethnic Chinese international students: Exploring the relationship between cultural backgrounds and counselling expectations

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Abstract: *Compensating for reduced public funding, Australian 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 counselling services. This paper is based on the findings of a study seeking to offer empirical support for Dragun's hypothesis that related "individualism" and "power distance" to attitudes towards counselling. Using the Singelis Individualism Collectivism Scale (ICS) and the Tinsley Expectations about Counselling-Brief Form (EAC-B) questionnaire, the study explored 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 among ethnic Chinese, Australian, and American students. The findings from the study supported Dragun's model indicating 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 findings have implications for universities to provide funding for an adequate and diverse counselling staff to meet the needs of the international students they so actively recruit.*

Keywords: *counselling, international students, cross-cultural research*

Introduction

The demographic profile of student communities in Australian universities has markedly changed during the past 10 years. Within a decade, the number of international students enrolled in Australian universities more than quadrupled from 41,244 to 186,432 (Commonwealth Department of Education, Training, & Science (DEST), 2005). In 1994, one-in-fourteen students was from an overseas country; today the ratio is one-in-five.

During a similar ten-year span, the Australian government's funding of higher education decreased from 62 to 40 percent of total operating expenses. Consequently, universities were forced to look for funding elsewhere, such as increasing the number of full-fee paying students. This led Australian universities to actively recruit international students, especially from Asia. In 2004, the majority (62%) of international students came from Singapore, Malaysia, People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Taiwan.

The increased number of students from East Asian countries alters the university student community in terms of cultural characteristics. Characteristics that are deemed to identify fundamental differences among cultures are those of individualism and collectivism. These characteristics refer to the degree of importance attached to in-group affiliation. Individualistic cultures tend to place a greater value on the individual than upon the individual's affiliation with a group.

In contrast, collectivistic cultures tend to place a high value on group affiliation. The cultures of the East Asian countries are often described as collectivistic, whereas Western cultures such as Australia and the United States are seen as individualistic (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). These cultural differences are theoretically likely to impinge on attitudes towards other aspects of university life, for example learning styles, social life, and student services such as counselling. It has been argued that the Western concept of counselling reflects Western cultural values, in particular individualism (Sue, 1981). Thus there may be a clash in cultural values between the values upon which the university counselling services are predicated and the international students they have an obligation to serve.

International students experience a multitude of adjustment issues. They tend to have more counselling-appropriate problems than the general student population (Mori, 2000). Although the transition to university life can be stressful for all entering students, international students are likely to face unique adjustment issues, for example, difficulty with language, homesickness, and social customs. In spite of these adjustment problems, international students under-utilise counselling services. Compared to domestic students, they are less likely to seek services and more likely to prematurely terminate services. Ethnic Chinese students are deterred from counselling services because of shame and loss of face due to language limitations, the stigma associated with psychological services, and lack of familiarity with counselling as a concept practiced in the West. As the composition of the student community changes, the university's infrastructure must also change. Universities have an obligation to explore and identify barriers to the utilisation of services such as counselling and take remedial action to address the barriers.

Culture and counselling

Over a decade ago, Draguns (1990) hypothesised the existence of a relationship between the Hofstede (1980) cultural dimensions of individualism and power distance, and individuals' attitudes towards emotional and psychological problems and the methods of treating those problems. Hofstede's concept of power distance refers to the acceptance of a social hierarchy within a culture. Draguns (1996) stated that, "counselling will be concentrated on the self at the individualistic extreme and upon relationships at the collectivistic end of the continuum. Where power distance is high, emphasis will be placed on the counsellor's expertise, status, and credentials. In low power distance cultures, value will be accorded to the personal qualities of the counsellor" (p. 14). Further, according to Draguns, in individualistic cultures, the counsellor is expected to be a father figure, but a nurturing mother in collectivistic cultures. High power distance cultures favour direct forms of therapy, and low power distance cultures favour client-centred therapies.

This paper reports findings based on doctoral research (Snider, 2003) offering empirical support for the Draguns (1990) hypothesis. Until this study, the hypothesis remained untested. The study collected data from ethnic Chinese international students, and Australian and American university students. A unique feature of the study was the comparison of three cultural groups. Although similarities exist, Australia and the U.S. are nonetheless different cultures. Frequently studies compare data collected from participants from a single Eastern and a single Western culture. This paper reports findings based on Western-Western comparisons, as well as Australian-ethnic Chinese and American-ethnic Chinese comparisons.

In place of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, the study uses the Triandis (1995) cultural concepts of vertical and horizontal individualism and collectivism. The participants' cultural characteristics are measured using the Singelis Individualism Collectivism scale (ICS) (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk & Gelfand, 1995). The Tinsley (1982) Expectations about Counselling-Brief Form (EAC-B) questionnaire is used to measure attitudes towards aspects of counselling. Using these rating scales, it becomes possible to compare the three cultural groups in terms of their cultural characteristics and their counselling expectations. The study is unique in its use of the Rasch model of modern item response theory to ensure the validity of the scales and to provide a means of equating the scales. Further analysis of the data extracts the component factors from the ICS and EAC-B. These factors are then used in the regression analysis to establish the relationship that Draguns (1990) predicted.

Individualism and collectivism as cultural constructs

The cultural concepts of individualism and collectivism (I-C) have often been the focus of cross-cultural research. Gudykunst and Matsumoto (1996) contend that, "Individualism-collectivism is the major dimension of cultural variability isolated by theorists across disciplines to explain similarities and differences in behaviour" (p. 511). In spite of their frequent use in cross-cultural research, there is lack of agreement on the necessary and sufficient components of individualism and collectivism.

In addition to the problems associated with inadequate descriptions of the concepts, researchers must contend with the dynamic nature of cultures. Cultures are constantly evolving. Wee (1999) reflects this position writing, "Concepts or values such as 'Individualism' and 'Collectivism'... shift in meaning; the contexts and arguments that framed them mutate, though at the same time their polemical force suggests that the varieties of meanings were not infinite" (p. 336). This point was particularly important to the Snider (2003) study because the focus was on university students. Their motivation and ability to attend university often sets university students apart from the rest of the population. Also, the fact that students from diverse cultures interact within the university community sets in motion a series of dynamic forces that are likely to impact upon the expression of their cultural variables.

In an attempt to reduce the conceptual ambiguity of the individualism-collectivism concepts, Singelis et al. (1995) borrowed from the work of Markus and Kitayama (1991). They divided individualism and collectivism into two dimensions, vertical and horizontal. The vertical dimension reflects a cultural trait that accepts inequalities among group members, that is, a social hierarchy. The horizontal dimension reflects the emphasis on sameness in terms of social rank, that is, social equality. Using the Singelis et al. nomenclature, Triandis (1995) cites the United States as an example of a culture in which individuals are likely to reflect strong traits of vertical individualism (VI), and Australians as likely examples of horizontal individualism (HI). Asian cultures such as Korea and Japan are likely to value vertical collectivism (VC). An Israeli kibbutz would serve as an example of horizontal collectivism (HC).

Cultural characteristics, such as those identified above, serve to form the individual's worldview, that is, the collection of beliefs about life and the universe that determines how the individual interprets experiences. For example, the concept of illness or being unwell varies according to an individual's worldview: the type of physical or emotional manifestation constituting a symptom, the cause of the illness, the persons possessing the ability to restore health, the steps necessary to alleviate suffering, and the changes within the self or the environment indicating restoration of health (Sussman, 2004). In reference to counselling, the degree of congruence of worldviews held by the counsellor and the client is likely to facilitate the establishment of the therapeutic relationship. The greater the divide, the greater are the obstacles impinging on the relationship. The universally critical role of the therapeutic relationship in the efficacy of the counselling process is identified by Leung and Lee (1996). Extrapolating from the work of Hofstede (1980), Draguns (1990) hypothesised the influence of cultural dimensions upon the

expectations, goals, and methods of psychotherapy and counselling. The Snider (2003) study empirically explores a limited scope of Dragun's hypothesis.

Participants

The data for this study were collected from ethnic Chinese international students attending Australian universities, Australian university students, and American university students. The Australian and American students were enrolled in their home countries. It is worth noting that the participants did not represent a random sample of the defined populations; rather, they volunteered to serve as participants. Therefore, the study collected data from groups differing in mean ages, in educational levels, and in gender ratios as listed in Table 1.

For the purposes of the research, "ethnic Chinese" was operationally defined as international students from Singapore, People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Indonesia and identifying themselves as Chinese. One-way ANOVAs of the Chinese responses based on country of origin found no significant differences among the groups, and justified collapsing them into a single group. The terms "ethnic Chinese" and "Chinese" are used interchangeably in this paper. The labels "Chinese", "Australian", and "American" are used to identify cultural groups rather than geo-political groups.

	N	Gender		Age		Uni yr.				
		M	F	18-21	>21	1	2	3	4-5	Postgrad
CH	108	36	72	18	34	33	25	40	3	7
US	212	70	142	149	63	138	50	17	6	1
AU	83	33	50	55	28	21	22	16	11	12

Table 1. Study Participants: Demographics

Research instruments:

Singelis Individualism-Collectivism Scale (ICS)

To assess the participants' cultural orientations, the study used the Singelis Individualism-Collectivism Scale (Singelis et al., 1995). The scale consists of 32 items, eight items each for horizontal-individualism (HI), vertical-individualism (VI), horizontal-collectivism (HC), and vertical-collectivism (VC) dimensions. Examples of the items are: *One should live one's life independently of others* (HI), *Some people emphasise winning; I am not one of them* (VI-reverse scored), *It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group* (HC), and *We should keep our aging parents at home with us* (VC). The intensity of the individual's agreement or disagreement with the statements were indicated on a Likert scale with points labelled Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Slightly Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree.

Tinsley Expectations about Counselling - brief form questionnaire

The Tinsley Expectation About Counselling – Brief Form (EAC-B) (Tinsley, 1982) assesses an individual's assumptions or anticipations about various aspects of counselling. The EAC-B used for the study consisted of 66 statements. Respondents reported the direction and strength of their expectation for each item by using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Not true" to "Definitely true". The response scale did not have a neutral midpoint. The statements began with the stems, "I expect to..." or "I expect the counsellor to..." The items constituted 18 scales measuring expectations in five areas of counselling:

client characteristics, client attitudes and behaviours, counsellor attitudes and behaviours, counsellor characteristics, and counselling process and outcomes.

Data analysis

The current study is unique in its use of the Rasch multidimensional measurement model of modern item response theory. By using the Rasch measurement model for the analyses of polychotomous data, group responses can be compared at the item level and measurement scales can be equated. The process of “objectifying” the measurement of the variables important to this study is a means of acknowledging the cross-cultural methodological weaknesses of equivalence and bias (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997) and strengthening the validity of the findings.

The data in this study were processed with RUMM 2010 software (Andrich, Lyne, Sheridan, and Luo, 2002). The outputs, in the form of person location points, or logits, for each scale were entered into SPSS software for further analyses.

Individualism Collectivism Scale Analysis

The first step in the analysis of the ICS was to establish the validity and reliability of the data from the I-C instrument. The Rasch measurement model assesses the validity of items composing a scale by comparing the responses to a theoretical model. The four cultural dimensions are distinct variables; therefore, the items measuring a common dimension are treated as a distinct scale. The data from the four scales were found to be within the acceptable limits of the model, i.e., an acceptable goodness of fit. A one-way analysis of variance based on cultural origin for each of the individualism-collectivism scales (Table 2) found mean score variances among the 3 culture groups to be statistically significant at $p < .01$ on all but the HC scale.

Scale	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
HI	10.615	2	5.307	06.92	.001
VI	16.498	2	8.249	13.06	.000
HC	00.402	2	0.201	00.24	.786
VC	08.544	2	4.272	15.10	.000

Table 2. Analysis of Variance Statistics for HI, VI, HC, and VC Scales for CH, US, and AU

The ordinal positions of the cultural groups on each scale and the findings based on post hoc Scheffe tests of mean score differences are as follows: HI – Australians highest, Chinese lowest; Chinese and Australian and Chinese and U.S. mean differences were statistically significant; VI – Chinese highest, U.S. lowest; Chinese and U.S. mean difference was significant; HC – Chinese and Australian means were equal, and U.S. mean slightly lower; VC – Chinese highest, Australians lowest; Chinese and Australian and Chinese and U.S. mean differences were statistically significant. To summarise the findings from the three groups’ mean scores on the ICS, it appears that the distinguishing cultural dimension of the Chinese group is that of Verticalism. That is, the main feature is the acceptance of a social inequality. Australians appear to be characterised mainly by Horizontalism. That is, their defining feature is one of equality of status, with individualism perhaps being slightly less important. The American students endorsed characteristics that fall between the two opposing sets of characteristics described above. They endorsed HI more than Chinese and less than Australian students, and they were similar to the Australians in the endorsement of VC. They endorsed VI less than the Chinese and the Australians.

The above findings are based on mean scores; however, it is worth exploring trends in extreme scores. According to the Draguns (1990) hypothesis, the likelihood of variations in counselling preferences is relative to the strength of the cultural dimensions. Consequently, it is important to consider the distribution of scores in the scales. By limiting the scores to those that are equal to or greater than 1 standard deviation above the mean for each scale, and separating the data according to cultural backgrounds, it becomes possible to examine dimensions composed of strongly endorsed items. As Table 3 shows, the percentage of Chinese, Australian, and U.S. participants with scores at or above +1 standard deviation on the HI, VI, and HC scales are similar; however, the percentage of Chinese in the upper range of the VC scales is quadruple that of the other two groups. Thus, the findings suggest that the Chinese participants hold the strongest vertical collectivistic attitudes of the three groups in the study. Therefore it is likely that this group would potentially be most affected by the findings this study.

	HI	VI	HC	VC
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
CH	14 (13)	13 (12)	15 (14)	37 (34)
US	34 (16)	25 (12)	25 (12)	18 (8)
AU	15 (18)	9 (11)	13 (16)	3 (4)

Table 3. Participants from three cultural backgrounds with scores at or above +1 standard deviation on HI, VI, HC, and VC scales

A factor analysis determined the uniqueness of the four variables composing the ICS. The analysis indicates that, for the population in this study, VC/HC and HI subscales are the two defining variables of the ICS. Referring to Table 4, it can be seen from the rotated principal component matrix that Component 1 is composed of both the VC and HC dimensions, but VC is the more dominant in determining the component's value. Because collectivism is common to VC and HC, Component 1 can be described as mostly reflecting collectivism, then verticalism (social hierarchy), and lastly horizontalism (social equality). HI clearly controls Component 2. The HI scale is measuring the horizontal and individualism variables; however, the VI scale is weak in its measurement of the individualism and vertical dimensions. In the rest of the paper, the two components are referred to as (C) and (HI). The component labels are enclosed in parentheses to distinguish them from the cultural dimensions of collectivism and horizontal individualism.

Variable	Components	
	1	2
VC	.827	-.118
HC	.748	.401
VI	.489	-.336
HI	-.022	.896

Table 4. ICS Rotated Principal Component Matrix

Expectations about Counseling-Brief Form Analysis

To improve the construct validity of the EAC-B, a factor analysis identified three principal components labelled: Personal Commitment (Attractiveness, Immediacy, Outcome, Openness, and Responsibility), Low Engagement Counsellor (Acceptance, Genuineness, Nurturance, Trustworthiness, and Tolerance), and High Engagement Counsellor (Concreteness, Confrontation, Directness, Empathy, Expertness, and Self-Disclosure). The three EAC-B components, noted as (PC), (LEC), and (HEC), and the two components from the ICS, noted as (C) and (HI), are used for further analysis.

Regression analysis

EAC-B Factors as dependent variables

Entering the EAC-B factors as dependent variables and the ICS factors as independent variables, the linear regression analysis found the corresponding F statistics to be significant at $p < .01$. Using the regression coefficients, it becomes possible to some extent to predict the values of each of the 3 EAC-B factors based on I-C status. However, a stronger predictive association is found when the ICS factors serve as the dependent variables; therefore, the findings of that lineal regression analysis are covered more extensively next.

ICS Factors as dependent variables

To explore the capabilities of EAC-B for predicting individualism-collectivism, the ICS factors, (C) and (HI), were chosen as dependent variables and the EAC-B (PC), (LEC), and (HEC) factors as independent variables. A linear regression analysis ANOVA found that factors (LEC), and (HEC) were responsible for 17.2 percent ($R^2 = .172$) ($F(3, 399) = 27.55, p < .01$) of the ICS (C) variance and 10.5 percent ($R^2 = .105$) ($F(3, 399) = 15.68, p < .01$) of ICS (HI) – both significant proportions. The regression coefficients, together with associated t statistics, show the correlations between each of the ICS factors and the EAC-B factors to exceed $p < .01$ (Table 5).

ICS factor		Unstandardised coefficients			
		B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
ICS (C)	(Constant)	.000	.046	0.00	1.000
	(PC)	.139	.046	3.05	.002
	(LEC)	.200	.046	4.39	.000
	(HEC)	.335	.046	7.35	.000
ICS (HI)	(Constant)	.000	.047	0.00	1.000
	(PC)	.228	.047	4.82	.000
	(LEC)	.150	.047	3.17	.002
	(HEC)	-.176	.047	-3.71	.000

Table 5. ICS and EAC-B Factors Linear Regression Analysis B Coefficients and t Statistics

Based on the findings from the above regression analysis in which (C) and (HI) were each entered as the dependent variables, and (PC), (LEC), and (HEC) entered as independent variables, the relationships between I-C and EAC-B can be expressed with the following equations (Constant = 0 in both equations.):

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \text{ICS (C) =} \quad .139 \text{ (PC)} \quad \quad \quad +.200 \text{ (LEC)} \quad \quad \quad +.335 \text{ (HEC)} \\
 \text{ICS (HI) =} \quad .228 \text{ (PC)} \quad \quad \quad +.150 \text{ (LEC)} \quad \quad \quad -.176 \text{ (HEC)}
 \end{array}$$

From these equations, it can be seen that individuals described as Collectivistic express a pattern of counselling attitudes that strongly endorse High Engagement Counselling, and are relatively weak in the endorsement of Low Engagement Counselling and Personal Commitment. Individuals described as Horizontal Individualists are more likely to reflect Personal Commitment attitudes and moderately endorse Low Engagement Counselling. The HI individuals are also likely to hold attitudes that are contrary to the endorsement of the High Engagement Counsellor.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings from the current study are supportive of Draguns's hypothesis for individuals reflecting cultural characteristics of collectivism and social hierarchy. There is a direct relationship between the strength of individuals' endorsements of attitudes of collectivism and social hierarchy, their expectations for counsellors to be directive in their approach, to be experts, to share their own experiences, and to play a dominant role in the counselling relationship. The high (C) person would also expect the counsellors to assume most of the responsibility for the counselling process, as indicated by a weak (PC) factor, and (C) factor relationship. Based on the findings of the Individualism Collectivism Scale (Singelis et al., 1995), the ethnic Chinese participants are most likely to endorse strong VC attitudes. They are more likely to expect a counsellor to exhibit High Counsellor Engagement characteristics.

Based on the finding from the ICS, the Australian and U.S. participants are more likely than the ethnic Chinese to strongly endorse HI attitudes. In some respects individualistic clients, particularly in a Western university setting, are likely to share values similar to the counsellors and possess attributes favoured by the counsellors. This is an important consideration in the delivery of counselling services to students representing diverse cultural backgrounds.

It also becomes possible to apply theories of interpersonal relations to explain counsellor preferences. For example, nearly fifty years ago Winch (1958) postulated that dyad cohesion is dependent upon similarity and complementary motives and personality patterns. According to Winch (1958), the complementary motives and personality patterns achieve equilibrium within the dyad. Thus, to generalise from Draguns (1995) and Triandis (1995), high HI / low VC clients are likely to prefer client-centred therapy, expect to talk freely about themselves, prefer to focus on their affective states, and expect therapists to be sensitive. The complementary personality patterns are likely to be expressed by counsellors who are warm yet reserved, reflective, and generally comfortable allowing others to dominate conversations. These characteristics are likely to be found in Low Engagement Counsellors. Likewise, high collectivistic clients are likely to be comfortable with silence, expect directive therapy, perceive therapists as experts, and focus on their social roles and relationships. Again, applying the Winch theory, equilibrium is likely to be established through interactions with an outgoing, directive, and self-disclosing therapist, for instance, High Engagement Counsellors.

It is important to note that the study found wide variations in cultural patterns among individuals from a single culture. For example, some of the ethnic Chinese participants endorsed vertical individualism

statements more than some American participants. Consequently it would be an erroneous application of the findings for counselling staff to treat ethnic Chinese international students as a single unit and schedule their appointments with low engagement counsellors, and scheduling Western students to meet with high engagement counsellors. The findings indicate that cultural backgrounds are likely to impact upon counselling preferences, thus universities have a responsibility to ensure that counselling services are adequately staffed and adequately diverse in their delivery of services to the student community.

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