



Singapore Journal of
Scientific Research

ISSN: 2010-006x

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Psychological Research Not Always Universal; Studies Should Involve More Cross-Cultural Collaboration, Says Researcher

Previous studies have found that the vast majority of published psychological research in the United States is based on American samples and excludes 95 percent of the world's population. Yet, these results are often generalized and taken as universal. When University of Missouri doctoral student Reid Trotter examined perfectionism and coping methods in Taiwanese culture for his dissertation, he decided to collaborate with a graduate student in Taiwan. From their collaboration, they found that models of perfectionism and coping were not universal. Trotter hopes his experience will encourage more researchers to develop cross-cultural relationships.

"In general, there has been very little cross-cultural research in the United States," Trotter said. "This has resulted in an insufficient understanding of the psychological functioning of the human species. Cross-cultural research requires developing a relationship with a member of the culture in which you plan to study. This relationship will help researchers address possible cultural blind spots that may unintentionally weaken the study."

Previously, geographical barriers limited researchers' ability to develop these relationships. Now, technology, such as Skype, can help scholars facilitate communication and work through possible cultural misunderstandings.

"Cross-cultural relationships require trust and respect and should be collaborative instead of hierarchical," said Puncy Heppner, Professor of Educational, school and counseling psychology in the MU College of Education. "Researchers need to be aware if they are coming across as condescending in another culture and realize they are examining a culture with their own glasses that may tint a situation blue, whereas other glasses may tint a situation yellow."

Previous studies that used samples in the United States have found that maladaptive perfectionists reported higher levels of psychological distress, such as depression and anxiety, whereas adaptive perfectionists reported higher self-esteem than the other groups. To examine the validity of Western models of perfectionism and coping models in Taiwanese culture, Trotter collaborated with Hsiao-Pei Chang, a Taiwanese doctoral student and Li-fei Wang, a professor from National Taiwan Normal University who helped connect Reid and Hsiao-Pei. They found that avoidance and detachment coping predicted maladaptive

perfectionism, which in turn predicted impaired psychological functioning. This is congruent with the Taiwanese cultural context that is strongly influenced by Confucianism, Heppner said.

Chang and Trotter talked consistently via Skype for several months before data was collected. Instead of using an internet survey, Chang helped collect data onsite in Taiwan. Then the data was sent to Trotter, so he could analyze the findings and eventually complete his dissertation. Chang was able to join Trotter's dissertation defense meeting in Missouri via Skype and contributed feedback about the study.

"The Skype meetings allowed them not only to discuss the best approaches to collecting data within the Confucian culture of Taiwan but also to develop a strong cross-cultural working alliance," Heppner said. "As a native of Taiwan, Chang was able to offer expert suggestions on numerous methodological procedures, such as how to present an informed consent to Taiwanese participants in a culturally competent and non-threatening manner and what type of incentives should be provided?"

Trotter will discuss his experience and findings at the American Psychological Association Conference this August.

"My collaboration with Chang helped me illuminate cultural differences and understand the intersection of culture and psychology," Trotter said. "I found that perfectionism means different things to different cultures. This study strongly suggests that perfectionism models are not universal."

Source: Adapted from materials provided by University of Missouri-Columbia