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# Personality and Individual Differences

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## A cross-cultural investigation of trait emotional intelligence in Hong Kong and the UK



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 17 February 2014

#### Keywords:

Trait emotional self-efficacy  
Cross-cultural psychology  
Cultural accommodation  
TEIQue

### ABSTRACT

Trait emotional intelligence (EI) has received considerable empirical attention over the last decade, especially in Western individualist societies. However, little is known about the construct in Eastern collectivist societies. The present study investigated cultural differences in trait EI between Hong Kong and the UK ( $n = 474$ ) using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire. Comparison of group factor structures revealed satisfactory congruence coefficients for the four trait EI factors of Well-being, Sociability, Emotionality, and Self-control. In addition, results showed pronounced cross-cultural variation in global trait EI scores, with British participants scoring consistently higher than their Chinese counterparts. Results from the Chinese sample also yielded support for the cultural accommodation effect, viz. that multilingual individuals respond in a manner that favours or conforms to the culture associated with the language of the questionnaire. Findings are discussed with reference to cross-cultural applications of trait EI theory.

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### 1. Introduction

Trait emotional intelligence (trait EI or trait emotional self-efficacy) refers to a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). The construct provides a comprehensive operationalization of people's self-perceptions of their emotional abilities and lies wholly outside the taxonomy of human cognitive ability (Carroll, 1993).

Relevant research has developed considerably over the past decade, with recent studies demonstrating that trait EI is related to mental health (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010), socioemotional outcomes (Frederickson, Petrides, & Simmonds, 2012), emotion regulation (Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, & Quoidbach, 2008), and affective decision-making (Sevdalis, Petrides, & Harvey, 2007). Despite all this research, studies examining cultural differences in trait EI remain few and far between.

#### 1.1. Culture and personality

Human societies are typically divided into two broad categories: collectivist and individualist (Triandis, 1995). In collectivist

cultures, such as China and Japan, there is strong emphasis on in-group achievement and interdependence, whilst in individualist cultures, such as Western Europe and North America, personal success and independence are prioritised over group goals.

A growing body of research has highlighted the impact of culture on psychological processes. For example, cultural comparisons have found that East Asian individuals tend to be more self-critical and have a stronger focus on negative self-relevant information than North Americans (Falk, Heine, Yuki, & Takemura, 2009; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine et al., 2001; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997), are more likely to engage in compensatory self-enhancement (Heine et al., 2001), and exhibit fewer and weaker self-serving biases (Falk et al., 2009; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Kitayama et al., 1997). Furthermore, in a large sample of undergraduates, Kitayama et al. (1997) found that American students were more likely to engage in self-enhancement, which can help boost self-esteem and autonomy, whilst Japanese equals were more likely to focus on self-criticism, which can promote interdependence of the self with others. These findings dovetail with Campbell and colleagues (Campbell et al., 1996) study, reporting that self-esteem is less important to the self-identity of Japanese students than to their North American peers.

The apparent disparity in self-serving bias across Eastern and Western societies may provide an explanation for the cultural differences in subjective well-being (SWB). To date, studies have

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revealed that individualist societies tend to have higher SWB levels and one explanation for this finding is that cultures differ in the value they place on personal happiness (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). While Eastern cultures place great emphasis on group cohesion, Western societies, by endorsing individualistic values, provide individuals with the freedom to pursue personal fulfilment, which, in turn, is thought to have a positive impact on SWB (Veenhoven, 1999).

Cross-cultural comparisons have also identified differences in positive affect and personality traits. For instance, Eysenck's "Giant Three" group have compared personality data from over 30 countries across all continents (Barrett, Petrides, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1998; Furnham, Eysenck, & Saklofske, 2008) and so have the "Big Five" group (e.g., McCrae, Terracciano, et al., 2005). Results consistently show that whilst the structure of the personality measure is reliable and similar across countries, there are small, replicable, and meaningful national mean score differences between them.

Studies have further revealed that British participants score higher than Chinese or Japanese participants on constructs associated with trait EI, such as happiness, extraversion, and psychological well-being (Furnham & Cheng, 1999; Furnham, Cheng, & Shirasu, 2001).

To date, trait EI has been extensively examined throughout Western individualist cultures. However, despite some cross-cultural investigations examining measurement invariance (e.g., Fukuda, Saklofske, Tamaoka, & Lim, 2012; Fukuda et al., 2011; Li, Saklofske, Bowden, Fung, & Yan, 2012; Martskevichvili, Arutinov, & Mestvirishvili, 2013), there is a serious dearth of trait EI research in Eastern collectivist cultures.

The present study aimed to investigate the potential cultural variations in trait EI between Hong Kong and Britain. Extant literature has highlighted cultural differences between individualist and collectivist societies in variables positively associated with trait EI (e.g., self-esteem, subjective well-being, happiness, extraversion and mental health; Furnham & Cheng, 1999; Furnham et al., 2001). Consequently, Chinese and British participants are expected to evidence markedly different trait EI score profiles. Furthermore, given the reports of emotion-related gender differences (Argyle, 1990; Petrides, Furnham, & Martin, 2004), the present study will also compare the trait EI scores of male and female participants across the Hong Kong and British samples.

## 1.2. Cultural accommodation effect

Another aim of the study was to test the cultural accommodation hypothesis by examining the impact of language use on trait EI. Previous studies have indicated that the language of a questionnaire can influence participants' response style and that individuals tend to respond to questions in a manner that favours or accommodates the culture associated with that tongue (Bond & Yang, 1982; Harzing, 2006). As individuals master a second language, they also acquire some of the cultural attitudes and values associated with it. Ralston, Cunni, and Gustafson (1995), for instance, found that Hong Kong Chinese managers using an English-language questionnaire showed more individualistic values compared to managers using the Chinese version, thus suggesting a cultural accommodation effect.

A large-scale investigation by Harzing, Maznevski, et al. (2002), yielded further support for the accommodation thesis. Results from 963 undergraduates revealed that when bilinguals were presented with English-language questionnaires, they responded in a manner that was more representative of native-English speakers than of their own culture. Furthermore, the study found that the cultural accommodation effect also exists in languages that are closer to English than Chinese, such as those belonging to sub-groups of the Indo-European family (e.g., Dutch, German, and Spanish).

These findings corroborate earlier research and illustrate the influential role of language in bilinguals' responses to questions concerning cultural norms and values.

Although scarce, there also appears to be some evidence suggesting that bilinguals exhibit cross-language differences in personality. In their two-part study, Chen and Bond (2010) investigated the cultural accommodation hypothesis through language effects on personality as perceived by the self and by others. Findings from the first part of this study revealed that Chinese-English bilinguals perceived Extraversion and Openness to Experience as traits emblematic of Western culture. In the second part, all participants were interviewed by a Caucasian and a Chinese interviewer in both English and Cantonese. Observer ratings showed that while conversing with Chinese interviewers, bilinguals were perceived as embodying more Western traits when speaking in English than in their native language.

Similarly, Ramírez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martínez, Potter, and Pennebaker (2006) examined the personality profiles of Spanish-English bilinguals and showed that they reported higher levels of Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness in English than in Spanish, a pattern closely mirroring the personality profiles of their monolingual American counterparts. Ramírez-Esparza and colleagues interpreted these results in the context of cultural frame switching (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000), a theory conceptually parallel to the accommodation hypothesis, suggesting that bilinguals exhibit language-dependent shifts in culture-related values and personality.

Taken together, these studies provide strong support for the cultural accommodation hypothesis and present valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and the self.

Based on the literature outlined above, it was hypothesised that there will be significant differences in global trait EI scores among the three study groups: British participants completing the English version of the TEIQue (BE), Chinese participants completing the English version of the TEIQue (CE), and Chinese participants completing the Chinese version of the TEIQue (CC). More specifically, it was hypothesised (H1) that the BE group will score higher than the CE and CC groups, and (H2) that the CE group will score higher than the CC group as a function of cultural accommodation. In addition to these hypotheses, as in previous studies (e.g., Sánchez-Ruiz, Pérez-González, & Petrides, 2010), we explored the data for main effects and interactions with gender.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 474 adults, of whom 293 were from Hong Kong (141 males) and 185 were from Britain (82 males). A total of 120 Chinese participants (59 males) completed the English version of the TEIQue (CE group), while the remaining 173 participants (82 males) completed the Chinese adaptation of the measure (CC group). They ranged in age from 19 to 64 years. The mean age in the CC group was 33.01 years ( $SD = 9.80$ ), in the CE group 30.56 years ( $SD = 8.90$ ), and in the BE group 37.84 years ( $SD = 10.36$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Trait emotional intelligence

Trait EI was measured using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides, 2009), a 153-item inventory that provides comprehensive coverage of the trait EI sampling domain. This measure yields scores on 15 emotion-related facets, four factors (Well-being, Self-control, Emotionality, and Sociability), and

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