Integrating global and local perspectives in psycholexical studies: A GloCal approach

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ABSTRACT

Similarities and differences in the results of psycholexical research across cultures may be due to real cross-cultural differences or to specific methodological choices. Two typically approaches used are: global, which follows a variation of the original lexical paradigm, and local, which is indigenous in methods and assumptions. We propose a GloCal approach that is more likely to yield a comprehensive picture of personality by combining approaches informed by a thorough understanding of that language and culture. The GloCal approach allows researchers to (a) identify shared and unique components of personality across cultures, (b) ensure that the lexicon used is relevant to the culture and (c) increase the ecological validity of stimulus materials in personality inventories.

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1. Introduction

Personality across cultures has been studied using the so-called etic and emic routes. Etic studies test whether personality structures obtained in personality inventories in culture X, usually a Western culture, are fit for culture Y. Conversely, emic or indigenous studies are interested in uncovering personality conceptions bottom up in the target culture. Psycholexical studies, which investigate personality attributes contained in languages, are said to be emic in their approach. However, the majority of those studies, as we show later, use a variation of the methods and assumptions that were designed for the study of Anglo-Germanic languages and cultures, where the psycholexical approach originated (Saucier, Hampson, & Goldberg, 2000). Therefore, that paradigm has arguably become more etic than emic, especially when it comes to the source of the personality descriptors in language. In this paper, we call this lexical paradigm "global". Conversely, a minority of lexical studies deviate from this global paradigm, for a number of reasons. We call their perspective "local". These studies have used unique approaches grounded in the local languages and cultures. Importantly, results are different within and between global and local studies across cultures. A seemingly obvious interpretation of these differences is that the structure of personality attributes differs across cultures. However, such a conclusion cannot be drawn before examining alternative explanations, notably the possibility that the different personality structures result from the methodological differences across studies.

We argue that the global paradigm, with the intention of cross-cultural comparability and psychometric rigor, has carried assumptions that may not be applicable to understudied cultures. Psycholexical work is predicated on the assumption that what matters in the implicit personality psychology of a cultural group is represented in the lexicon of its language (Goldberg, 1990). This assumption has corollaries; the most important are that the dictionary is the starting point for accessing the universe of personality descriptors, that single words should provide a comprehensive picture of personality, that trait terms (stable dispositions in the form of adjectives) are key to describing the implicit personality structure of speakers of that language, and that more important traits are more frequent and have more synonyms than those that are not (Saucier & Goldberg, 2001).

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Some studies have challenged the extent to which these assumptions are valid, notably the source from which descriptors are sampled. There is evidence that single words and traits, as found in a dictionary, are not enough to represent all relevant personality terms (McCrae, 1994). Also, the density (frequency and number of synonyms) of one term in a lexicon is not consistently predictive of its importance (Wood, 2015). Finally, there is evidence that traits in free descriptions are used more in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures (Valchev, van de Vijver, Nel, Rothmann, & Meiring, 2013).

In this paper, we propose a new approach, which we call GloCal, for the identification of personality descriptors. We illustrate in a study of Arabic personality how informed methodological considerations in the early stages of the psycholexical method can help ensure comprehensiveness of the personality structure obtained, thereby maximizing cross-cultural comparability of results and preserving psychometric rigor. Our approach advocates a specific integration of elements from the global and local paradigms. To that end, we show how the cultural specificity of a language can have a direct impact on the methodological choices in psycholexical studies.

We first argue that the most frequently used lexical paradigm has fallen short of the initial expectations of unraveling the cultural specificity of personality, because it imposed a methodology rooted in assumptions about how Western languages function on studies of languages where such assumptions did not hold. It has therefore produced results that are neither culturally specific, nor adequately comparable across cultures. The solution to this initial problem is unlikely to be a one-method-fits-all for thousands of the world's languages. Conversely, not every language requires its unique psycholexical approach. We also argue that the lexical paradigm would gain from more focus on, and an integration of, common (universal) and unique (culture-specific) aspects of languages; the choice of methods should follow from knowledge of the language and culture to be studied. The term GloCal was coined in the Japanese business world to describe the need for global corporations to adjust their standardized strategies to meet the demands of local markets (Robertson, 1995). This is in line with current thinking in cross-cultural psychology calling for a need to jointly study global and local aspects, the so-called emic–etic approach (Cheung, van de Vijver, & Leong, 2011; Fetvadjiev, Meiring, van de Vijver, Nel, & Hill, 2015). In this perspective, it is important that studies are not set up to focus exclusively on universal (etic) or on culture-specific (emic) aspects, but to use methods that can allow the expression of both indigenous and universal aspects of personality, as we illustrate in this paper. Although this has been advocated by cross-cultural researchers at large, there is a dearth of literature on how emic and etic approaches can converge in the early stages of the psycholexical method, namely in choosing the source of personality descriptors and in reducing them to manageable numbers. This initial stage has a large and direct bearing on the postulated personality structure and on resulting instruments. We argue and illustrate how, by starting from a deeper understanding of the language and culture involved, an adequate choice of methods can help unravel both universal and culture-specific aspects of personality. It is only through this careful choice of methods that we can make sure that our results will not depend on the method chosen to develop the personality structure.

In this paper, we present a critical examination of psycholexical methodologies to researchers interested in investigating new languages using this approach, and show how the GloCal approach makes it possible to (a) identify shared and unique components of the personality conceptions and structure across methods in one language, (b) ensure that the lexicon relevant to the culture is well represented and data is comprehensive, and (c) increase the ecological validity of stimulus materials in personality inventories. We showcase these advantages by using examples from the Arabic psycholexical study conducted by the Zeinoun, Daouk-Öyry, Choueiri, and van de Vijver (2015a, 2015b), and other studies that combined emic and etic approaches.

2. Current methods

2.1. Lexical models of personality

The psycholexical approach has been the main method for identifying how personality descriptors are tacitly organized across languages and cultures. By extracting personality descriptors contained in languages, and analyzing how participants assign these descriptors to themselves and others, researchers can extract broad factors that represent personality concepts in those languages and cultures. Until now, there are several derived models, the most prominent of which have proposed two, three, five, six, and seven personality factors. The Big Five or Five Factor Model (FFM) or its close variants have been replicated in Germanic and Romance languages, such as English (Allport & Odbert, 1936; Goldberg, 1990), German (Angleitner, Ostendorf, & John, 1990), Dutch (De Raad & Barelds, 2008), French (Boies, Lee, Ashton, Pascal, & Nicol, 2001), Italian (Di Blas & Forzi, 1998), and Spanish (Benet-Martínez & John, 2000). However, several analyses from diverse families of languages have found alternative results such as a three-factor model (De Raad & Peabody, 2005; De Raad et al., 2010), a six-factor model (HEXACO; Wasti, Lee, Ashton, & Somer, 2008), a seven-factor model (Almagor, Tellegen, & Waller, 1995), an alternative five-factor model (Cheung et al., 2001), and more recently a nine-factor model (Nel et al., 2012). The different results are not easy to compare and interpret because they are obtained through different methods.

2.2. Methodological considerations

The methodology of psycholexical studies has not been uniform (De Raad, 1994; Saucier & Goldberg, 2001). Even though studies

Table 1
Generic stages of psycholexical methodology.

Phase	Steps	Description
Identification of Descriptors	Source identification	Involves the identification of the sources from which the descriptors will be pooled e.g. dictionary, newspapers, verbal descriptions, etc.
	Filtering	Defining personality-relevant terms, (inclusion and exclusion criteria), and defining the word-classes to be included (e.g., adjectives, nouns, verbs)
	Culling	Involves the identification of specific ways of culling the descriptors from the identified source(s), including sampling method (e.g. all words available, first word on every page, every 4th page etc.), and judges (e.g., experts, students)
	Categorization	Involves the categorization of culled descriptors into their grammatical classes (e.g., verbs, adjectives, etc.), and into personality-descriptive classes, and making decisions of inclusion in the final list of descriptors
	Reduction	Involves reductions of specific categories (e.g., adjectives or traits), through ratings of synonymity, familiarity, clarity, or relevance
Identification of factor structure	Personality ratings	Involves collecting self or other rating data
	Data analysis	Involves reduction of the collected ratings into a parsimonious model