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Short Communication

Personal and family growth initiative as predictors of study engagement in Chinese and American college students: Is there any evidence for group differences?☆

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relationship between personal growth initiative (PGI), family growth initiative (FGI), and study engagement in a sample of 379 Chinese and 351 American college students. Consistent with expectations, PGI was found to predict different facets of study engagement in both cultural groups. When FGI was included, a consistent difference between Chinese and American students emerged. Specifically, FGI was found to account for additional amounts of variance in study engagement in Chinese students, but not in American students. Overall, our findings support the cross-cultural relevance of PGI in predicting studying engagement across college students from the East and West, and also point to the value of considering additional sources of growth for students that come from cultures that traditionally place a strong focus on the group.

According to Robitschek and colleagues (Robitschek, 1998; Robitschek et al., 2012), *personal growth initiative* is defined as the active and intentional process individuals engage in to facilitate self-change and development, and is predicated on four relatively distinct processes, namely, readiness for change (e.g., one's preparedness for making specific changes), planfulness (i.e., the ability to make effective plans to foster growth), using resources (i.e., the ability to capitalize on available resources), and intentional behavior (i.e., consciously pursuing personal growth). Consistent with personal growth initiative theory, findings have shown that scores on measures of personal growth are positively associated with positive psychological outcomes (e.g., positive affect & life satisfaction; Robitschek et al., 2012; Yang & Chang, 2014).

Because most of the studies conducted on personal growth initiative have been limited to the study of Westerners (e.g., Americans), they do not take into account the possibility that for individuals from non-Western cultures, external sources of growth initiative may also impact one's engagement in growth-related processes. As studies have found, whereas Westerners are motivated to focus on the self, Easterners are motivated to focus on the group (Chang, 2008; Chang & Asakawa, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Importantly, within Chinese society, the principle of *filial piety* (i.e., an appreciation for familial interdependence; Ho, 1996) would imply that for Chinese, motivation would be strongly predicated on respecting, honoring, and caring about how the family supports personal growth (Tao & Hong, 2014). To date, however, no study has yet examined the extent to which perceptions of growth initiative derived from sources outside the immediate self (e.g., family) might also contribute, beyond personal growth initiative, to optimal functioning across different cultural groups. Accordingly, in the present study of college students, we focus on the role of *family growth initiative*, namely, the active and intentional process that one's family engages in to achieve positive growth and change for all members of the family. Moreover, given the importance of pursuing academic achievement among college students, we focus on the prediction of study behaviors (Schaufeli, Martínez, Marques Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002).

1. Purpose of the present study

The two major objectives of the present study were: (a) to examine for normative variations in personal and family growth initiative between Chinese and American college students; and (b) to determine if family growth initiative would add, above and beyond personal growth initiative, to the prediction of study engagement in Chinese and American students.

Although the pursuit of positive self-change is presumed to represent an important motive across all cultural groups, we expected Chinese to report *lower* personal growth initiative levels than Americans.

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The opposite pattern was expected when examining family growth initiative. Additionally, given the central importance of academic success to college students, we expected personal growth initiative to emerge as an important predictor of study engagement in both Chinese and Americans. However, we expected family growth initiative to significantly augment the prediction model in Chinese, but not in Americans, given presumed cultural differences in motivational systems.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 379 (195 males & 184 females) Chinese college students attending a public university in China (Southeast) and 351 (133 males & 218 females) American college students attending a public university in the US (Midwest). For Chinese, ages ranged from 18 to 25 years of age, with a mean age of 19.5 ($SD = 1.3$) years. For Americans, ages ranged from 18 to 26 years of age, with a mean age of 19.7 ($SD = 1.4$) years.

2.1.1. Measures

2.1.1.1. Personal growth initiative. We used the Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (PGIS-II; Robitschek et al., 2012). The PGIS-II is a 16-item measure composed of four subscales, namely, Readiness for Change, Planfulness, Using Resources, Intentional Behavior. Respondents are asked to rate the extent of their agreement to these items across a 6-point Likert-type scale. Internal consistencies for the PGIS-II subscales ranged from 0.80 to 0.85 across the two samples. For Chinese students, a Chinese adapted version of the PGIS-II (Yang & Chang, 2014) was used. Higher scores on the PGIS-II subscales indicate greater personal initiative on that subscale.

2.1.1.2. Family growth initiative. We modified items on the PGIS-II by replacing all references associated with self-oriented growth (e.g., "I actively work to improve myself") with references involving family-oriented growth (e.g., "My family actively works to improve itself") to construct the 16-item Family Growth Initiative Scale-II or FGIS-II. The FGIS-II is composed of four subscales that assess for family growth, namely, Family Readiness for Change, Family Planfulness, Family Using Resources, and Family Intentional Behavior. For Chinese students, a Chinese adapted version of the FGIS-II based on translation and back-translation procedures was used. Internal consistencies for the FGIS-II subscales ranged from 0.78 to 0.83 across the two samples. Higher scores on the FGIS-II subscales indicate greater family initiative on that subscale.

2.1.1.3. Study engagement. We used the 9-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (UWES-S; Schaufeli et al., 2002). The UWES-S is composed of three subscales that that assess for study engagement, namely, Study Vigor, Study Dedication, and Study Absorption. Respondents are asked to rate the frequency of these situations across a 7-point Likert-type scale. For Chinese students, a Chinese adapted version of the UWES-S based on translation and back-translation procedures was used. Because one item on the Study Vigor subscale ("At my classes, I feel bursting with energy") resulted in a very low reliability estimate in the Chinese sample, that item was dropped in both groups. Internal consistencies for the UWES-S subscales ranged from 0.78 to 0.85 across the two samples. Higher scores on the UWES-S subscales indicate greater study engagement on that subscale.

2.2. Procedure

Approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the respective universities prior to data collection. All participants were given the present set of measures in random order. Measures were in both English and Chinese, and participants completed them in their native language.

3. Results

3.1. Between-groups differences on personal and family growth initiative in Chinese and American college students

Results of conducting a MANOVA between Chinese and Americans on the present set of measures revealed a highly significant multivariate effect for group differences, Willk's Lambda = 0.63, $F(11, 718) = 38.45$, $p < 0.001$, partial eta squared = 0.37. Accordingly, we next conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs examining for between-groups differences on personal growth initiative, family growth initiative, and study engagement (see Table 1). Significance values were adjusted for number of comparisons made. As the table shows, Chinese, compared to Americans, scored significantly lower on 2 out of the 4 personal growth initiative scales. For family growth initiative, Chinese, compared to Americans, scored significantly higher on 3 out of the 4 scales.

3.2. Personal and family growth initiative as predictors of study engagement in Chinese and American college students

To determine if family growth initiative predicts study engagement in Chinese and Americans, beyond personal growth initiative, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses predicting scores on each of the three UWES-S scales in both groups. For each of these analyses, we entered scores on all four PGIS-II subscales as a set in Step 1, followed by scores on all four of the FGIS-II subscales as a set in Step 2.

Results for predicting all three facets of study engagement in Chinese and Americans are presented in Table 2. As the table shows, for Chinese, the personal growth initiative set was found to account for a large 24% of the variance in study vigor, a medium-large 20% of the variance in study dedication, and a medium-large 28% of the variance in study absorption. When the family growth initiative set was entered next, it was found to account for a medium 12% of additional variance in study vigor, a medium 13% of additional variance in study dedication, and a medium 12% of additional variance in study absorption.

Table 1
Group differences between Chinese and American college students on personal growth initiative, family growth initiative, and study engagement.

Measure	Cultural group				$t(728)$	Cohen's d
	Chinese		American			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Personal growth initiative						
Readiness for change	12.82	3.25	14.33	3.94	−5.67***	0.42
Planfulness	16.39	4.33	17.27	3.95	−2.87*	0.21
Using resources	10.19	2.65	8.72	4.03	5.88***	0.44
Intentional behavior	14.39	3.12	14.87	3.35	−1.99	0.15
Family growth initiative						
Readiness for change	12.95	4.10	11.93	5.03	2.97*	0.22
Planfulness	17.35	4.42	15.23	6.40	5.24***	0.39
Using resources	9.00	3.28	7.81	4.02	4.37***	0.33
Intentional behavior	12.71	3.85	12.60	5.10	0.32	0.03
Study engagement						
Study vigor	8.16	2.39	5.85	2.56	12.60***	0.93
Study dedication	12.45	3.35	11.70	3.36	3.03*	0.22
Study absorption	12.08	3.79	9.57	3.99	8.71***	0.65

Note. For Chinese, $n = 379$. For Americans, $n = 351$.
* $p < 0.005$.
*** $p < 0.0001$.