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Thinking styles and the big five personality traits revisited

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Abstract

This article had two objectives. The first was to further explore the utility of measuring intellectual styles (a general term encompassing such style constructs as cognitive, learning, and thinking styles) in addition to measuring personality. The second was to verify Sternberg's (1988) claim that the theory of mental self-government is applicable to non-academic settings as well as to academic settings. The Thinking Styles Inventory (Sternberg & Wagner, 1992) and the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) were administered to 199 parents of secondary school students in mainland China. Findings suggest that it is meaningful to investigate intellectual styles in addition to examining personality. In addition, results supported Sternberg's assertion regarding the validity of the theory of mental self-government in both academic and non-academic settings.

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1. Introduction

Intellectual styles refer to people's preferences in using their abilities (Sternberg, 1988, 1997). Motivated by the repeated research finding that ability and personality do not tell the whole story about human performance, scholars have been using intellectual styles as an additional factor to explain variations in human performance for more than half a century. The argument about the

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utility of studying intellectual styles in addition to investigating personality has as long a history as does the field of intellectual styles. In trying to resolving this argument, scholars have engaged in examining the relationship between personality and intellectual styles at both the conceptual level (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Eysenck, 1978; Messick, 1996) and the empirical level (e.g., Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker, 1999; Furnham, Jackson, & Miller, 1999; Jackson & Lawty-Jones, 1996; Riding & Wigley, 1997).

In the realm of empirical research, two different conclusions have been drawn regarding the necessity of assessing styles. Some scholars (e.g., Busato et al., 1999; Riding & Wigley, 1997) have concluded that although there was some systematic overlap between intellectual styles and personality, it certainly makes sense to mention intellectual styles and personality separately in educational settings. Conversely, other scholars (e.g., Furnham et al., 1999; Jackson & Lawty-Jones, 1996) argued that since cognitive/learning style is a sub-set of personality, there is no need to measure intellectual styles independently, unless intellectual style is of interest in its own right.

In an attempt to join the debate, Zhang and her colleague (Zhang, 2002a, 2002b; Zhang & Huang, 2001) investigated the relationships between thinking styles as defined in Sternberg's (1988, 1997) theory of mental self-government and the big five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). These studies concluded consistently that although significant relationships were identified between thinking styles and personality traits, it is premature to claim that a personality measure such as the NEO Five-Factor Inventory can be used to measure thinking styles. One limitation with the studies of Zhang and her colleague is that they were conducted on the university student population. Accordingly, it is pertinent to enquire whether the same conclusion would be reached if the study were replicated in a sample from a non-academic setting. The primary aim of the current study is to explore the relationships between thinking styles and personality traits in a typically non-academic section of the population.

1.1. Sternberg's theory of mental self-government

Using the word “government” metaphorically, Sternberg contended that just as there are different ways of governing a society, there are different ways that people use their abilities. These preferred ways of using one's abilities are construed as “thinking styles.” According to Sternberg, there are 13 thinking styles which fall along 5 dimensions: (1) functions (including the legislative, executive, and judicial styles), (2) forms (hierarchical, monarchic, oligarchic, and anarchic styles), (3) levels (global and local styles), (4) scopes (internal and external styles), and (5) leanings (liberal and conservative styles). These 13 styles have been reconceptualized into three types based on empirical data (e.g., Zhang & Sternberg, 2005), and the following introduces the three types of styles. Meanwhile, one characteristic for each of the 13 styles can be found in the bracket next to each corresponding style.

Type I thinking styles are the ones that tend to be more creativity-generating and that denote higher levels of cognitive complexity, including the legislative (being creative), judicial (evaluative of other people or products), hierarchical (prioritizing one's tasks), global (focusing on the wholistic picture), and liberal (taking a new approach to tasks) styles. Type II thinking styles are styles that suggest a norm-favoring tendency and that denote lower levels of cognitive complexity, including the executive (implementing tasks with given orders), local (focusing on details), monarchic (working on one task at a time), and conservative (using traditional approaches to tasks) styles.

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