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Phobic anxiety in 11 nations Part I: Dimensional constancy of the five-factor model

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Abstract

The Fear Survey Schedule-III (FSS-III) was administered to a total of 5491 students in Australia, East Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Guatemala, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Spain, Sweden, and Venezuela, and submitted to the multiple group method of confirmatory analysis (MGM) in order to determine the cross-national dimensional constancy of the five-factor model of self-assessed fears originally established in Dutch, British, and Canadian samples. The model comprises fears of bodily injury–illness–death, agoraphobic fears, social fears, fears of sexual and aggressive scenes, and harmless animals fears. Close correspondence between the factors was demonstrated across national samples. In each country, the corresponding scales were internally consistent, were intercorrelated at magnitudes comparable to those yielded in the original samples, and yielded (in 93% of the total number of 55 comparisons) sex differences in line with the usual finding (higher scores for females). In each country, the relatively largest sex differences were obtained on harmless animals fears. The organization of self-assessed fears is sufficiently similar across nations to warrant the use of the same weight matrix (scoring key) for the FSS-III in the different countries and to make cross-national comparisons feasible. This opens the way to further studies that attempt to predict (on an *a priori* basis) cross-national variations in fear levels with dimensions of national cultures. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Fears; Five-factor model; Cross-cultural; Factorial invariance; Multiple group method; Sex differences

1. Introduction

Hallowell (1938) pointed out that fears and phobias are based on the individual's interaction with his/her particular cultural environment within which the cultural beliefs are important factors in the conditioning of fears. Culture defines not only the situations that arouse certain fears and anxieties; it also determines the degree to which these responses may be regarded as abnormal (see also Al-Issa & Oudji, 1998; Chaleby, 1987; Chambers, Yeragani, & Keshavan, 1986). This viewpoint would imply both qualitative (dimensional) and quantitative (base-rate) differences between national/cultural groups in terms of self-rated fears. Yet, there are no published studies involving more than two countries in which attempts have been made to identify the dimensions of national cultures that reliably predict any observed mean level differences in self-assessed fears. A forthcoming study (to be published as a follow-up to the present investigation) represents the first attempt to do so.

One important prerequisite for carrying out mean level comparisons across national samples is the demonstration of the cross-national stability of the dimensional model of fear involved. Such a study could make an important contribution to cross-cultural (clinical) psychology, which has the test of the generality of psychological laws as a major purpose (e.g. Triandis, 1980, p. 3). Derogatis and Cleary (1977) and Eysenck and Eysenck (1983), among many others (e.g. Goldstein & Link, 1988; Sue, 1999) have argued that we cannot, on *a priori* grounds, assume that explanatory models apply to different ethnic groups, to different subgroups on other demographic denominations, or to different national samples, in the absence of evidence or logical reasoning, a position which is consistent with the principle of scientific skepticism (Sue, 1999).

Thus, in more concrete terms, prior to proceeding with the empirical determination of the national culture variables that predict cross-national variations in national fear levels (Arrindell et al., in preparation), it should be demonstrated that the operational definitions of the fear con-

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