



Further investigating thinking styles and psychosocial development in the Chinese higher education context

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ABSTRACT

Much theorization and research have been done independently on thinking styles and psychosocial development. The primary objective of this research was to further investigate the predictive power of thinking styles for psychosocial development through replicating Zhang and He's (in press) study of Chinese university students in Shanghai, mainland China. Data were collected from two Chinese contexts: Nanjing ($N=362$) in mainland China and Hong Kong ($N=117$). All participants responded to the Thinking Styles Inventory-Revised II (TSI-R2, Sternberg, Wagner, & Zhang, 2007) and to the Measures of Psychosocial Development (MPD, Hawley, 1988). The TSI-R2 is grounded in Sternberg's (1997) theory of mental self-government, while the MPD is rooted in Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development. Hierarchical multiple regression results confirmed Zhang and He's finding that Type I styles (typified by their creativity-generating characteristics) positively contributed to psychosocial development, whereas Type II styles (noted for their norm-favoring features), especially the monarchic and conservative styles, negatively contributed to psychosocial development. Two of the Type III styles (Type III styles may display the characteristics of either Type I or Type II styles, depending on the specific situation) consistently predicted psychosocial development: the external style positively contributed to psychosocial development, whereas the anarchic style did so negatively. Implications of these results are discussed for university students, faculty members, and for university student development educators.

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1. Introduction

For more than seven decades, scholars have been studying the functions of intellectual styles in human performance, including student learning and development (Zhang & Sternberg, 2009). Intellectual styles, a broad term for different labels with the root word "style" such as cognitive styles, learning styles, and thinking styles, refer to people's preferred ways of processing information (Zhang & Sternberg, 2006). These style constructs are conceptually different. Cognitive styles are used to characterize how individuals prefer to cognize information. Learning styles are used to characterize how individuals prefer to learn about information. Thinking styles are used to characterize how individuals prefer to think about the information as they are learning it or after they have already learned it. Nonetheless, these constructs are fundamentally similar in a major way. That is, all of them are different from abilities. An ability refers to what one can do, whereas a style refers to how one prefers to use the abilities one has (Sternberg & Zhang, 2001).

It has been widely recognized that intellectual styles are closely related to diverse domains of student life, including academic achievement (Tsagaris, 2007), cognitive development (Zhang, 2002), career development (Morgan, 1997), and personality (Fjell & Walhovd, 2004). In spite of this, one area that has yet to be more seriously studied is the relationship between intellectual styles and psychosocial development. Investigating the relationships between styles and psychosocial development would enhance our understanding of both constructs, and findings about the association between them would have practical implications for educational practice.

Psychosocial development concerns the tasks that individuals deal with throughout the course of their lifetime. People develop psychosocially at different speeds, contingent upon not only their biological processes but also their environments. As an individual-difference variable, psychosocial development also serves important functions in student learning and development (Senior, 2002).

Studying the relationship between styles and psychosocial development is important both at the theoretical level and at the practical level. Theoretically, people's intellectual styles should contribute to their psychosocial development. This argument is based on the following reason: people's preferred ways of processing information (i.e., intellectual styles) affect the manner in which they approach the world (Jung, 1923), which in turn, would influence the

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ways they interact with their environments. Such interactions would become important contributory factors to psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968). Identification of such relationships could enable us to better understand the nature of intellectual styles as well as that of psychosocial development. At a practical level, should the kind of intellectual styles that contribute to psychosocial development be identified, one could consider strategies for deliberately developing those styles in one's efforts to enhance psychosocial development. Complimentarily, one could consider purposely cultivating certain intellectual styles through facilitating the advancement of particular aspects of psychosocial development.

One would naturally wonder why a significant relationship between styles and psychosocial development could be expected. Consider this line of reasoning: Style theorists (e.g., Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995) have argued that styles are at the interface of personality and abilities. Meanwhile, personality researchers (e.g., Johnson, 1993) have contended that psychosocial development constitutes part of personality. Given these arguments, one would come to a logical conclusion that styles are related to psychosocial development because they could share a common space with personality. Indeed, Erikson (1968) himself suggested a parallel development between cognitive competence and psychosocial development. Furthermore, Erikson viewed the process of exploration as central to the formation of identity (Stage 5). This notion of exploration process has received attention in the post-Eriksonian literature (e.g., Kroger, 2003; Marcia, 1966) and it has been empirically examined with styles. For example, Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines and Berman (2001) found that individuals with the informational style (a style that is characterized by active exploration of alternatives, information seeking, and flexible commitments) scored significantly higher on the total exploration score and that individuals with the normative style (a style characterized by subservience, deference to authority, and inflexible commitments) scored significantly lower on the total exploration score.

Nonetheless, the existing literature on the relationship between styles and psychosocial development as defined by Erikson is largely confined to conceptual arguments. Following Zhang and He's (in press) study, the present research empirically investigates the relationships of thinking styles put forward by Sternberg (1997) to psychosocial development as described in Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development.

1.1. Sternberg's theory of mental self-government and its research

Using the term "government" metaphorically, Sternberg (1997) contended that just as there are different ways of governing a society, there are different ways that people prefer to use their abilities, that is, thinking styles. In his theory, Sternberg proposed 13 thinking styles that fall into five dimensions: functions, forms, levels, scopes, and leanings. Based on empirical data and on the value dimension concerning the nature of thinking styles, Zhang (2002) reconceptualized the 13 styles into three types.

Type I thinking styles tend to be more creativity-generating and they denote higher levels of cognitive complexity. These styles are considered as carrying more adaptive values because they are strongly related to desirable human attributes such as higher levels of cognitive development (Zhang, 2002) and the openness personality trait (Fjell & Walhovd, 2004). Type II styles suggest a norm-favoring tendency and they denote lower levels of cognitive complexity. These styles are considered as carrying less adaptive values because they are strongly associated with undesirable attributes such as lower levels of cognitive development and unfavorable personality traits such as neuroticism. Type III styles may manifest the characteristics of either Type I or Type II thinking styles. These styles are regarded as value-differentiated. Consider the internal style (preference for working independently), a style that is

classified as a Type III style. One may work independently, but creatively (thus, showing the characteristics of Type I styles). However, one could also work independently, but in a norm-conforming manner (thus, showing the characteristics of Type II styles).

Notice that because Type I styles carry the most positive values, Type I styles are deemed as the most desirable styles among all three types of styles. In Appendix A, the main characteristics of each of the 13 thinking styles (grouped into three types) are described.

Subsequently, the notion of three types of thinking styles has been broadened to that of three types of intellectual styles (Zhang & Sternberg, 2005) to contain additional style labels such as field-independent/dependent styles and divergent/convergent styles. For instance, along with Type I thinking styles, the field-independent (Witkin, 1962) style and divergent thinking style (Guilford, 1950) were classified as Type I intellectual styles. Likewise, along with Type II thinking styles, the field-dependent and convergent thinking styles were classified as Type II intellectual styles.

Thus far, over 100 studies have been conducted on the theory of mental self-government, all lending strong support to it. Research has also yielded strong evidence to support the notion of three types of thinking styles (Betoret, 2007; Fan, 2008; He, 2007; Tsagaris, 2007). The most widely used research tool is the Thinking Styles Inventory (TSI, Sternberg & Wagner, 1992) and its revised version—the Thinking Styles Inventory-Revised (TSI-R, Sternberg, Wagner, & Zhang, 2003). This research indicates that thinking styles are related to both personal variables (e.g., age and gender) and environmental variables (e.g., academic discipline). As previously mentioned, this research also suggests that thinking styles make significant differences in students' learning and development. Yet, except for Zhang and He's (in press) recent study, existing studies investigated thinking styles only with the construct of psychosocial development as defined in Chickering's (1969) theory. Yet, Chickering's theory merely concerns the university student population, thus examining issues that are especially encountered by university students, such as emotions (Zhang, 2008) and vocational development (Zhang, 2004). Chickering's theory of psychosocial development addresses university students' development in seven domains. These are developing competence, managing emotions, developing autonomy, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, developing purpose, and developing integrity. The present research, like Zhang and He's (in press) study, goes beyond past investigations by examining the relationships of thinking styles to developmental issues over the lifespan, as theorized by Erikson (1950, 1968).

1.2. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and its research

According to Erikson (1950, 1968), an individual develops through a sequence of eight stages that define the life cycle: 1) trust versus mistrust; 2) autonomy versus shame and doubt; 3) initiative versus guilt; 4) industry versus inferiority; 5) identity versus role confusion; 6) intimacy versus isolation; 7) generativity versus stagnation; and 8) ego integrity versus despair. Each stage is marked by a psychosocial crisis that is the product of the soma (body), ego (psyche), and society. Thus, the particular timing and methods by which the concerns are addressed are contingent upon the individual's society and culture as well as upon the individual's biological processes. Individuals experience different concerns at different points in the life cycle. Whereas an adolescent has the question of "Who am I?", a near-retirement professor is likely to be preoccupied with the concern of "What legacy shall I leave after I retire?" In each stage, the individual confronts, and hopefully overcomes, new challenges. Each stage builds upon the successful completion of earlier stages. However, this does not mean that the pattern of individuals' psychosocial development is linear. Instead, because the challenges of stages not successfully completed may be expected to reappear as problems at

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