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Relationship between Thinking Styles Inventory and Study Process Questionnaire

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Abstract

This study investigated further the relationship between thinking styles as defined by Sternberg's theory of mental self-government and learning approaches as defined by Biggs's model of student learning. Participants were two independent groups of American university students ($N_1 = 67$, $N_2 = 65$). Participants responded to the Thinking Styles Inventory and the Study Process Questionnaire. It was found that the two inventories generally were correlated in predictable ways. This finding confirmed the one obtained in an early study of two Chinese populations. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Theories of styles flourished during the late 1950s and the early 1970s. However, the seemingly permanent research on theorization of styles subsided partially because of the overwhelming output from the field and partially because of its lack of internal dialogue (Jones, 1997). Riding and Cheema (1991, p. 193) explained that "...many researchers working within the learning/cognitive style research, fail[ed] to mention the existence of other types of styles". In addition, the 'style' construct, by the year 1984 when Messick discussed the nature of cognitive styles, has been identified as labelled in 19 different ways and by the year 1991

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when Riding and Cheema overviewed the ‘style’ construct, 30 labels were found to be used in the literature. As a result, we were left with a research field that encompasses a variety of different, and yet similar constructs.

For the past decade or so, two types of efforts have been made in the study of the relationships among the different labels for the style construct. One is to make conceptual integration. The other is to conduct empirical studies.

Among the efforts in conceptual integration, three stand out. The first is by Curry (1983), the second by Riding and Cheema (1991) and the third by Sternberg (1997). Curry (1983) proposed a three-layer ‘onion’ model of style measures. He believed that all style measures can be grouped into three types resembling an onion. The outmost layer of the onion includes styles that characterize an individual’s instructional preference, that is, an individual’s choice of environment in which to learn (e.g. The Learning Preference Inventory, Rezler & Rezmovic, 1981). The middle layer contains style measures that assess an individual’s information processing style (e.g. The Learning Style Inventory, Kolb, 1976). The innermost layer involves style measures that assess an individual’s cognitive personality style, that is, an individual’s approaches to adapting and assimilating information (e.g. The Embedded Figures Test, Witkin, Oltman, Raskin & Karp, 1971).

A second major attempt at integrating the work on styles was made by Riding and Cheema (1991) who organized the style-based work along two style-dimensions and one family of learning strategies. The first is the wholist–analytic style dimension which is concerned with whether individuals perceive a whole or separate parts (e.g. converging–diverging, Guilford, 1967; field dependence–independence, Witkin, 1959, 1964). The dimension is the verbal–imagery style dimension which pertains to whether individuals think with words or pictures (e.g. verbalizer–visualizer, Richardson, 1977; verbalizer–imager, Riding & Taylor, 1976). The family of learning strategies contains such work as Biggs’s (1987) model of surface–deep learning approaches and Kolb’s (1977) four types of learners: divergent, convergent, assimilating and accommodating.

The third major endeavor made to integrate models of styles was that of Sternberg (1997). Sternberg discussed three approaches of the study of styles: cognition-centered, personality-centered and activity-centered. Styles in the cognition-centered approach most closely resemble abilities. Furthermore, like abilities, these styles have often been measured by tests of maximal performance with ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answers. Two models of styles that have generated the most interest are Witkin’s (1964) field dependence–independence and Kagan’s (1976) reflection–impulsivity. The personality-centered approach views styles as closer to personality traits. In addition, styles in this tradition are measured via typical- rather than maximum-performance tests. Major work in this approach has been done by Myers and McCaulley (1988, based on Jung’s, 1923 work on theory of types) and Gregorc (1979) who proposed four main types of styles, based on all possible combinations of two dimensions, concrete versus abstract and sequential versus random. The activity-centered approach focuses on the notion of styles as mediators of various forms of activities that tend to arise from aspects of cognition and personality. One major group of work in this tradition is represented by similar theories of deep- and surface-learning approaches proposed by Biggs (1979), Entwistle (1981), Marton (1976) and Schmeck (1983). Renzulli and Smith (1978) suggested different learning styles, with

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