

The predictive power of socialization variables for thinking styles among adults in the workplace[☆]

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Abstract

The present study examines the predictive power of socialization variables for thinking styles among adults in the workplace. One hundred and seventeen managerial personnel (aged between 18 and 55 years) in England responded to the Thinking Styles Inventory—Revised based on Sternberg's theory of mental self-government and to questions concerning two groups of socialization variables: overt and covert. The overt variables included demographic characteristics and actual work environments, while the covert variables were relevant to perceived work environments and self-rated abilities. Results indicated that covert socialization variables were more powerful than were overt variables in predicting thinking styles. The implications of these findings are discussed for ordinary managerial workforce, management leaders, organizational counselors, and for educators.

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1. Introduction

Intellectual styles, broadly defined as human beings' preferred ways of processing information (see Zhang & Sternberg, 2006), have attracted the attention of many scholars and psychologists. In the study of intellectual styles, various labels with the root word 'style' have been proposed. The three most frequently used terms are cognitive styles, learning styles, and thinking styles.

The study of intellectual styles in non-academic settings has long occupied the minds of both organizational psychologists and management theorists. Following the publication of Kirton's (1976) adaption–innovation theory, many empirical investigations using Kirton's Adaption–Innovation Inventory have been carried out, first in the United Kingdom, then in several other

countries, including Australia (e.g., Mulligan & Martin, 1980), Canada (e.g., Ettlé & O'Keefe, 1982), and United States (e.g., Gryskiewicz, Hills, Holt, & Hills, 1987; Kirton, 1980). Several studies completed in Asia have also been documented in the literature (e.g., Thomson, 1980 in Singapore and Malaysia; Hossaini, 1981; Khaneja, 1982 in India and Iran). Meanwhile, researchers also looked into the intellectual styles of non-academic personnel, especially managerial personnel, by employing other psychometric tools, such as Kolb's (1976) Learning Styles Inventory, the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), Witkin and his colleagues' (Witkin, Oltman, Raskin, & Karp, 1971) Embedded Figures Test, and more recently, Riding's (1991) Cognitive Styles Analysis and Allinson and Hayes' (1996) Cognitive Style Index.

No one can deny the contributions that the existing studies have made to our understanding of people's intellectual styles in the non-academic world. However, there is one major limitation to this research. That is, all except for one (i.e., Riding's Cognitive Styles Analysis) inventory used in previous studies are based on style theories that are grounded in merely one of the three traditions to the study of styles (see Grigorenko &

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Sternberg, 1995). There is a strong need for studies that are based on a more general theory of styles—a theory that has its foundation in all three style traditions: cognition-centered, personality-centered, and activity-centered.

As one of the most recent theories of intellectual styles, Sternberg's (1988, 1997) theory of mental self-government has propelled much interest in the scholarly community. Sternberg proposed that just as there are different ways of governing a society, there are different ways that people prefer to use their abilities. These preferences in using one's abilities are defined as "thinking styles." The theory of mental self-government is viewed as a model of styles that is more general not only because the theory can be applied to both academic and non-academic settings, but also because it embraces all three traditions to the study of styles. The styles in this theory are cognitive in their way of looking at things (e.g., judicial style, global style, and so forth) and correspond to preferences in the use of abilities. But the styles are typical-performance rather than maximal-performance. Therefore, they resemble the personality-centered tradition. Finally, the styles resemble the activity-centered tradition in that they can be measured in the context of activities.

According to Sternberg, there are 13 thinking styles that fall into five dimensions: functions, forms, levels, scopes, and leanings. Based on empirical data, Zhang and Sternberg (2005, 2006) reconceptualized the 13 styles into three types.

Type I thinking styles are more creativity-generating and they 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 holistic picture), and liberal (taking new approaches to tasks) styles. Type II thinking styles suggest a norm-favoring tendency and they denote lower levels of cognitive complexity, including the executive (implementing tasks with prescribed procedures), local (focusing on concrete and discrete details), monarchic (working on one task at a time), and conservative (using traditional approaches to tasks) styles.

The anarchic (working on whatever tasks that come along), oligarchic (working on multiple tasks with no priority), internal (working on one's own), and external (working with others) styles are Type III ones. They may manifest the characteristics of the styles from both Type I and Type II groups, depending on the stylistic demands of a specific task. For example, one could be creative (i.e., using Type I styles) or conservative (i.e., using Type II styles) whether when one works alone (internal style) or when one works in collaboration with others (external style), depending on the nature of the specific task at hand.

Sternberg (1997) argued that styles are at least in part socialized, suggesting that they can be altered by the environment which people reside, albeit not to the same extent as are learning strategies. Learning strategies are far more easily changed than are styles.

Since its publication, the theory of mental self-government has guided many empirical studies in the academic arena in several cultures, such as in the United States (e.g., Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1997), Spain (e.g., Cano-Garcia & Hughes, 2000), the Philippines (e.g., Bernardo, Zhang, & Callueng, 2002),

Hong Kong (e.g., Zhang & Sternberg, 2002), mainland China (Zhang, 2004b), and more recently in Korea (e.g., Park, Park, & Choe, 2005), Norway (e.g., Fjell & Walhovd, 2004), and Turkey (e.g., Fer, 2005). This research conducted in academic settings has largely supported Sternberg's claim that thinking styles are malleable (Zhang & Sternberg, 2006).

However, the claim that thinking styles are malleable needs to be further investigated in the non-academic arena. A thorough search of the PsycInfo database merely resulted in three studies conducted among adults in the workplace: a) Kaufman's (2001) study of American journalists and creative writers; b) Hommerding's (2003) investigation among public library directors in the United States, and Zhang's (2005) study of business personnel in mainland China. Yet, none of these studies has examined the relative power of different kinds of socialization variables, broadly speaking, overt and covert socialization variables. The study conducted by Hommerding (2003) and that by Kaufman (2001) were not at all focused on looking into the roles of socialization variables (e.g., demographics and work environments) in thinking styles. Although Zhang's (2005) study included several socialization variables, her work had its emphasis on the relationship of work environments (actual and perceived) to thinking styles when some of the demographics (e.g., age, length of service, and educational background) were statistically controlled.

Given this background, the primary aim of this study was to investigate the relative power of two groups of socialization variables for predicting thinking styles: overt and covert. Two sub-groups of overt socialization variables were tested: demographic characteristics (age, gender, educational level, length of service in the current job, and previous work experience in other organizations) and actual work environments (size of the organization in which one was employed, type of organization, work function, salary level, and work position). Similarly, two sub-groups of covert socialization variables were examined: perceived work environments (view of one's salary level, perceived autonomy at work, and perceived level of future success) and three self-rated abilities: analytical, creative, and practical (Sternberg, 1996). The general hypothesis for the study was that both overt and covert socialization variables would statistically contribute to the research participants' thinking styles. Furthermore, based on Piaget's (1971) concept of constructivism—that people make sense of their own experiences, we predicted that the covert socialization variables would be more powerful in accounting for the variations in thinking styles than would be overt socialization variables. This prediction was further grounded in Zhang's (2005) finding that perceived work environments were more powerful than actual work environments in predicting the thinking styles of business personnel in mainland China.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

One hundred and seventeen (20 male and 97 female) volunteers from three types of organizations (construction,

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