



Measuring thinking styles in addition to measuring personality traits?

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Abstract

This paper intends to join the long-standing debate regarding thinking styles and personality traits—should thinking styles be measured in addition to the measurement of personality traits? The means to achieve this goal was to provide empirical evidence as well as to review other studies in the literature. The Thinking Styles Inventory and the NEO Five-Factor Inventory were administered to 267 (67 male and 200 female) students from a large research university in Beijing, People's Republic of China. Results showed that thinking styles and personality traits statistically overlap. However, this overlap is limited. Two major arguments are made. First, thinking styles make a unique contribution to the understanding of human individual differences. Second, the necessity for measuring thinking styles apart from measuring personality traits depends on who uses the inventories and for what purposes. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The period between the late 1950s and the early 1970s saw a proliferation of theories of and research on styles that are most often termed variously as cognitive, learning, and thinking styles. Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in the work on styles. Being dissatisfied with the old theoretical models of styles that mostly address one style dimension with bipolar styles (e.g. field-dependence versus field independence, and reflectivity versus impulsivity), Sternberg (1988, 1997) proposed a theory of thinking styles.

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In Sternberg's theory, the metaphor "mental self-government" is used to portray how the human mind works. Just like there are different ways of governing a society, there are different ways of managing people's daily activities. These different ways of managing our activities are construed as "thinking styles". The theory proposed 13 thinking styles that fall along five dimensions. These are functions (including the legislative, executive, and judicial thinking styles), forms (including the hierarchical, oligarchic, monarchic, and anarchic styles), levels (including the global and local styles), scopes (including the internal and external styles), and leaning (including the liberal and conservative styles) of the mental self-government. A brief description of the key characteristics of each style is provided in Appendix A.

The theory of mental self-government has been operationalized through several inventories, including the Thinking Styles Inventory (TSI, Sternberg & Wagner, 1992). The TSI has been tested among many samples in a few different cultures, including mainland China, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and the United States. With the majority of research participants being university students, these studies have obtained good reliability data, given the heterogeneity of the test items in the inventory. Internal validity data have been obtained through both Pearson's correlations among the 13 scales and exploratory factor analysis. Furthermore, external validity of the theory has been obtained by testing the scales in the TSI against other constructs such as Biggs's learning approaches (Zhang, 2000c; Zhang & Sternberg, 2000) and Holland's personality types (Zhang, 2000a, 2001a) that are in the family of styles work. In addition, the nature of thinking styles also have been examined by investigations of the relationships of thinking styles to such variables as the research participants' personal characteristics (e.g. age, gender, birth-order, socio-economic status), their situational characteristics (e.g. leadership experience and travel experience), academic achievement, and self-esteem. Detailed findings of this research can be found in Zhang and her colleagues' previous studies (e.g. Zhang, 2001b; Zhang & Postiglione, 2001; Zhang & Sachs, 1997).

However, nothing is known about the relationships of thinking styles to the five-factor personality model, one of the most prominent and heuristic models of personality in psychology. For the TSI, no published work exists that deals specifically with the relationship between the thinking styles as described in the theory of mental self-government and the big five personality traits.

For a relatively young science like psychology, there is a somewhat unique consensus about the description of personality based on five universal traits (e.g. Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker, 1999; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990). Some scholars (e.g. Goldberg, 1993; Taylor & MacDonald, 1999) asserted that the big five personality traits model accounts for most of the variability in personality.

The five factor model (FFM) is the product of several decades of factor analytic research centering around trait personality. According to Taylor and MacDonald (1999), the model was originally proposed by Galton (1884) and empirically followed up by Allport and Odbert (1936) and Norman (1963) among many other scholars. The FFM can be understood as a theory of normal personality traits which is composed of five essentially independent dimensions that have been reliably obtained across extensive investigations. The five personality dimensions are Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness to Experience (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). The following paragraph is a brief introduction of each of the five personality dimensions as illustrated in Costa and McCrae's (1992) work.

Neuroticism is the opposite of emotional stability. People high on the N scale tend to experience such negative feelings as emotional instability, embarrassment, guilt, pessimism, and low

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