



Thinking styles, self-esteem, and socio-economic status

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Abstract

The present study aimed at examining the nature of thinking styles. Six hundred and ninety-four students (ages ranging from 17–45) from the University of Hong Kong participated in the study. The participants responded to the Thinking Styles Inventory and the Self-Esteem Inventory (Adult Form) and provided a range of socio-economic status (SES) indicators. It was found that when age was controlled, thinking styles and self-esteem overlap. Furthermore, regardless of age, those students who reported using thinking styles that are creativity-generating and more complex, and those who reported higher self-esteem tend to be students from higher SES families. Discussion was made in relation to these findings' practical implications for teachers. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

For decades, scholars have been investigating the roles of styles in human performance. Between the late 1950s and mid 1970s, numerous theories and models of styles have been proposed. However, this proliferation of theories and research on styles subsided partially due to the overwhelming output from the field and partially due to its lack of internal dialogue (Jones, 1997). By 1991, when Riding and Cheema reviewed the styles literature, they discovered over thirty labels for the style construct. Thus, we were left with a research field that encompasses a variety of seemingly different, yet similar constructs.

In the past decade or so, there has been renewed interest in the work of styles. One major type of work is to conceptually integrate the style labels. Three of the most prominent works in this endeavor are Curry's (1983) three-layer 'onion' model of style measures, Riding and Cheema's (1991) model of two style dimensions and one family of learning strategies, and Grigorenko and

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Sternberg's (1995) three traditions of the study of styles. All three works have been illustrated in Zhang's (2000a) recent research paper.

In addition, efforts have also been made in trying to distinguish the most commonly used terms with the root word "style" in the literature. For example, Sternberg (1997) discussed the differences among cognitive styles, learning styles, and thinking styles. Cognitive styles might be used to characterize ways of cognizing certain information. Learning styles might be used to characterize how one prefers to learn about certain information. Thinking styles might be used to characterize how one prefers to think about the material as one is learning it or after one already knows it. These three types of styles, although different, have one thing in common. That is, styles are not abilities, but rather, they are individuals' preferred ways of processing information and of using the abilities that they have.

Sternberg (1988, 1997) also proposed his own theory of thinking styles, a theory he named as the "theory of mental self-government". Sternberg used the metaphor "mental self-government" to portray the way the human mind works. Just as there are many ways of governing our society, there are many ways of governing or managing our daily activities. These different ways of governing or managing our activities are what Sternberg (1988, 1997) called "thinking styles". This theory postulated 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 thinking styles), levels (including the global and local thinking styles), scopes (including the internal and external thinking styles), and leaning (including the liberal and conservative thinking styles) of the mental self-government. In the Appendix, each thinking style is briefly described.

In our opinion, these 13 styles can be classified into two types of styles. The first type of thinking styles (e.g. legislative, judicial, global, hierarchical, and liberal) are creativity-generating and require complex information processing (referred to as Type I thinking styles hereafter). People who employ Type I thinking styles tend to be norm-challenging and risk-taking. The second type of thinking styles (e.g. executive, local, and conservative) require simplistic information processing (referred to as Type II thinking styles hereafter). People who employ Type II thinking styles tend to be norm-favoring and/or authority-oriented.

Compared with previous models and theories of styles, the theory of mental self-government possesses three major strengths. First, the styles delineated in the theory fall along multiple dimensions rather than on just a single dimension. Second, unlike the traditional models and theories of styles, the styles in the theory of mental self-government are not "good" or "bad", but rather, they are time-, task-, and situation-dependent. Third, unlike traditional style theorists who argued that styles are mostly fixed, Sternberg (1997) contended that thinking styles are socialized.

The theory of mental self-government has been operationalized through several instruments, including the Thinking Styles Inventory (Sternberg & Wagner, 1992). Two types of work have been carried out in Hong Kong, Mainland China, as well as in the United States. The first is to validate the theory. This research resulted in sufficient reliability and validity data for the inventory in all three cultures. The second type of work is to investigate the nature of thinking styles by testing the thinking styles against both personal characteristics and against relevant constructs proposed in other style theories. So far, all studies using the theory of mental self-government have been conducted in educational settings. Results of this research are summarized briefly. First, students differ in their thinking styles depending on their personal characteristics (e.g. age,

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