

Personality and Cultural Correlates of Childhood Psychopathology

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Abstract

Cultural pluralism, especially salient in North America, has become a worldwide reality. As a result, collectivistic and individualistic cultures are frequently forced to live side by side. These cultures can be differentiated by their respective values. Thus, independence is highly valued in individualistic cultures while interdependence is identified as a main characteristic of collectivistic cultures. Therefore, individual differences (e.g. personality traits and domains of psychopathology) may show theoretically relevant patterns across these cultural groups. We hypothesized that children from collectivistic cultures, relative to children from individualistic cultures, would present with personality profiles often connected to internalizing disorders. Specifically, we proposed that based on the Five Factor Model these children would score higher on Agreeableness and lower on Extraversion, which is consistent with an internalizing personality profile. We also predicted that children from individualistic cultures, relative to children from collectivistic cultures, would present with personality profiles often connected to externalizing disorders. Specifically, we hypothesized that these children would score higher on Extraversion and lower on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, which is consistent with an externalizing personality profile. We collected data on a large ethnically diverse community-based sample (N=176) of children in middle childhood (primarily ages 9-10). Multivariate tests showed significant differences in personality profiles of different cultural groups. Differences between internalizing and externalizing personality profiles were consistent with our hypotheses. Heterogeneity of personality profiles exhibited by the members of the collectivistic group questioned the categorical construal of individualism/collectivism. The study contributes to a better understanding of personality profiles and psychopathology predisposition of children of migrants to Canada.

Introduction

Cultural diversity has become a worldwide reality, but it is especially salient in North America and Europe. Since 1997, Canada has been admitting over 200,000 permanent residents each year. Over 50% of these new migrants choose to stay in the province of Ontario with over 40% of them settling down in Toronto [1]. Given that Canada admits a substantial amount of immigrants each year, many cultures with different values end up co-existing within its geographical boundaries [2].

There are many ways of differentiating between cultures, but in the present study we focused on the individualistic versus collectivistic dichotomy. The idea of self is central to the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures [3]. Independent self is promoted by individualistic cultures. A person representing this type of culture is considered to be a separate, somewhat non-social individual who exists independently from the rest of the society. On the contrary, interdependent self is a very important and valued concept for collectivistic cultures. A person representing the interdependent self gains a sense of meaning within the context of social relationships, roles, and duties [3]. Thus, values associated with autonomy prevail in individualistic cultures and values associated with connectedness and interdependence prevail in collectivistic cultures.

Cross-Cultural Differences in Personality

These differences in values instilled during a child's upbringing should result in related personality differences that emerge later

on in life. Indeed, differences in Five Factor Model (FFM) [4] personality profiles between individualistic and collectivistic cultures have been documented in adult populations [5]. The FFM consists of the following personality traits: Extraversion (characterized by sociability, positive energy, and gregariousness), Agreeableness (characterized by empathy and warmth toward others), Neuroticism (characterized by feelings of anxiety, irritability, and depression), Conscientiousness (characterized by one's organization and self-discipline), and Openness to Experience (characterized by being creative and holding non-traditional beliefs).

A study by McCrae and Terraciano [5] provided comparisons of FFM personality profiles in 51 individualistic and collectivistic cultures. They found that individualistic cultures (e.g., Americans and Canadians) scored higher on the dimensions of Extraversion and Openness to Experience than did the collectivistic cultures (e.g., Hong Kong Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and African), while collectivistic cultures evidence higher levels on Neuroticism and Conscientiousness.

Personality and Psychopathology

Childhood psychopathology can be characterized within externalizing and internalizing domains [6]. Externalizing pathology is characterized by disinhibited behaviors and includes oppositional behaviors, conduct problems (both aggressiveness and rule breaking), and symptoms of attention deficit and hyperactivity [6]. Children and adults exhibiting externalizing problems typically score low on Conscientiousness and Agreeableness and

high on Neuroticism and Extraversion [7, 8]. Internalizing pathology is characterized by overcontrolled symptoms of distress that may be more difficult to directly observe. Internalizing disorders include anxiety and depression (e.g. Social Phobia, Separation Anxiety Disorder, and Major Depression) [6]. Children exhibiting internalizing problems typically score low on Extraversion and high on Neuroticism [7]. Studies with adults suggest that internalizing disorders frequently correlate with low Extraversion, high Neuroticism, and high Agreeableness [8].

Integrating Personality, Culture and Psychopathology

Overall, significant differences are found between personality profiles of adults from individualistic and collectivistic cultures as well as between children and adults exhibiting externalizing and internalizing pathology [5, 7]. Importantly for the present study, personality profiles of adults from individualistic cultures (i.e. high on Extraversion and Openness to Experience, low on Conscientiousness) are similar to personality profiles of children and adults exhibiting externalizing pathology (i.e. high on Extraversion, low on Conscientiousness and Agreeableness). Similarly, personality profiles of adults from collectivistic cultures (i.e. low on Extraversion and Openness to Experience, high on Conscientiousness) are somewhat consistent with personality profiles of individuals exhibiting internalizing pathologies (i.e. low on Extraversion and high on Agreeableness).

The personality profiles between the two groups do not match on all dimensions of the FFM; however, there are striking points of convergence. Some researchers have suggested that individualistic cultures are more prone to developing externalizing disorders and collectivistic cultures are more prone to developing internalizing disorders [9, 10, 11]. However, the evidence is frequently contradictory and, therefore, inconclusive. Additionally, causal pathways that lead to differences in manifestation of childhood psychopathology across cultures warrant an investigation. Overall, if personality profiles exhibited by children from individualistic and collectivistic cultures are consistent with externalizing and internalizing personality profiles respectively, this similarity could suggest that the two kinds of cultures are differentially predisposed to developing externalizing and internalizing psychopathology. Matching personality profiles would provide a more indirect method of assessing cultural

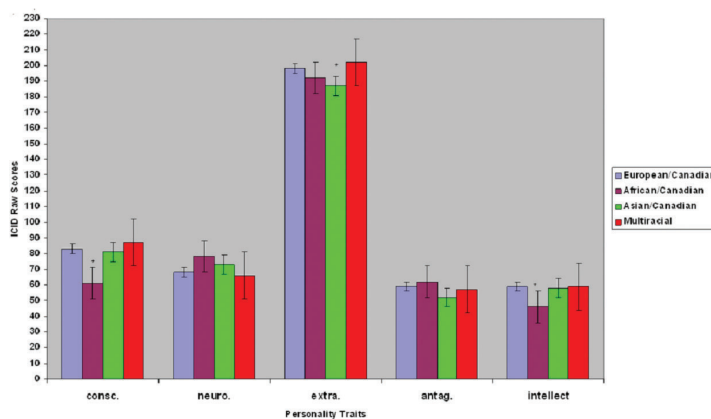


Figure 1. Personality Differences between Ethnicities. Significant differences were observed between the personality profiles of the different ethnicities represented in the sample. Personality profile of African-Canadian children was more individualistic than collectivistic in its nature: they exhibited low scores on Conscientiousness, high scores on Antagonism, Extraversion, and Neuroticism.

differences in predisposition to psychopathology and allow an investigation of potential causal pathways. Thus, our expected results may also suggest that personality could be a mediating variable in the relationship between cultural values and psychopathology.

In the current study, we hypothesized that personality profiles of children from collectivistic cultures will be similar to personality profiles of children that endorse a high number of internalizing symptoms. Specifically, we hypothesized that both of these groups will score low on Extraversion and high on Conscientiousness and Agreeableness. We also hypothesized that personality profiles of children from individualistic cultures will be similar to personality profiles of children that endorse a high number of externalizing symptoms. Specifically, we hypothesized that both of these groups will score low on Conscientiousness and Agreeableness and high on Extraversion. No predictions were made regarding the dimension of Neuroticism, since this trait is equally associated with both internalizing and externalizing psychopathology. Additionally, no predictions were made regarding the dimension of Intellect since it cannot be considered to be fully representative of the FFM trait of Openness to Experience.

Materials and Methods

See online supplementary material.

Results

Cross-Cultural Differences in Child Personality

Participants in the sample were divided into individualistic, collectivistic, and multiracial groups based on their ethnicity as indicated on the TMCQ. Thus, European-Canadian children were considered to be representatives of an individualistic culture and Asian-Canadian, as well African-Canadian children were considered to belong to collectivistic cultures. Multiracial children were considered to be a separate group.

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with cultural group (i.e., collectivistic or individualistic) as a fixed factor, personality traits (Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Extraversion, Antagonism, and Intellect) as dependent variables, and gender as a covariate. Personality profiles of individualistic and collectivistic cultures were not significantly different ($F = 1.55$, $p > 0.05$; Roy's Largest Root = 0.177). Directionality of the results sug-

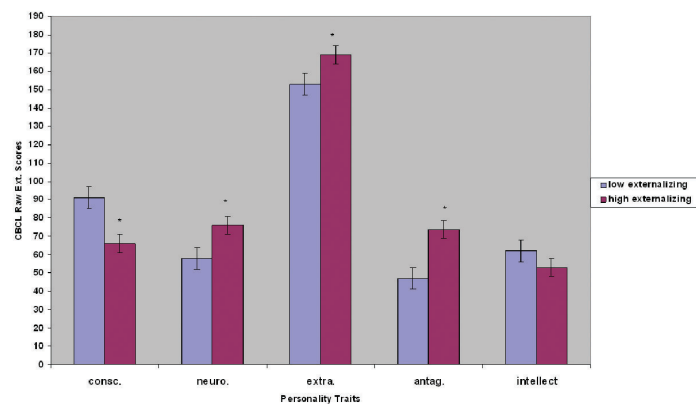


Figure 2. Externalizing Personality Profile. Significant overall differences were observed between personality profiles of high and low externalizers. High externalizers scored significantly higher on the dimensions of Extraversion, Antagonism, and Neuroticism and significantly lower on the dimension of Conscientiousness.

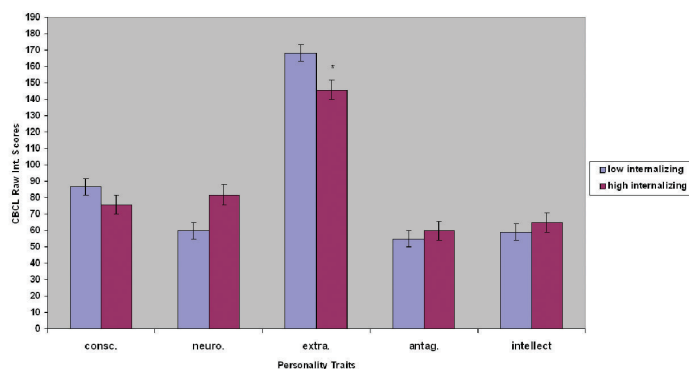


Figure 3. Internalizing Personality Profile. Significant overall differences were observed between personality profiles of high and low internalizers. High internalizers scored significantly lower on the dimension of Extraversion.

gested that individualistic cultures scored higher than collectivistic cultures on the dimension of Extraversion and Conscientiousness and lower on the dimension of Antagonism.

We further conducted a MANOVA with ethnicity as a fixed factor, personality traits as dependent variables, and gender as a covariate. Personality profiles of European-Canadian, Asian-Canadian, African-Canadian, and multiracial children were significantly different ($F = 3.53, p < 0.05$; Roy's Largest Root = 0.005). Post-hoc univariate tests revealed that the differences between ethnic groups reached significance at the 0.05 level on the dimension of Conscientiousness ($F(3, 177) = 3.83, p = 0.011$) and Intellect ($F(3, 177) = 2.96, p = 0.034$). Thus, both European-Canadian and Asian-Canadian children scored equally high on the dimensions of Conscientiousness and Intellect; the former were also marginally more extraverted and antagonistic than the latter (see Figure 1). The pattern of results also indicated that the African-Canadian children exhibited a personality profile that was significantly different from the other two groups. They exhibited the lowest score on the dimension of Conscientiousness and Intellect, the second highest score on the dimension of Extraversion, and the highest score on the dimension of Antagonism (see Figure 1). Personality profile of African-Canadian children was, thus, more individualistic than collectivistic in its nature.

Externalizing and Personality

In order to investigate potential differences in higher order personality traits between high and low externalizers, we conducted a MANOVA with externalizing groups (high and low) as a fixed factor and the higher-order personality traits as dependent variables. Children ($n = 18$) in the top 15% of the distribution of scores in the sample were considered as having high externalizing scores (CBCL raw score: >12). Children ($n = 28$) in the bottom 15% of the distribution of scores in the sample were considered as having low externalizing scores (CBCL raw score = 0).

Overall, significant differences in personality profiles of high and low externalizers were observed ($F = 13.58, p < 0.001$; Roy's Largest Root = 0.0001; see Figure 2). Post-hoc univariate tests indicated that high externalizers scored significantly higher on the dimensions of Extraversion ($F(1, 45) = 4.6, p < 0.05$) and

Antagonism ($F(1, 45) = 48.95, p = 0.0001$) and significantly lower on the dimension of Conscientiousness ($F(1, 45) = 32, p = 0.0001$) (see Figure 2).

Internalizing and Personality

In order to investigate potential differences in higher order personality traits between high and low internalizers, we conducted a MANOVA with internalizing groups (high and low) as a fixed factor and the higher-order personality traits as dependent variables. Children ($n = 18$) in the top 15% of the distribution of scores in the sample were considered as having high internalizing scores (CBCL raw score: >10). Children ($n = 13$) in the bottom 15% of the distribution of scores in the sample were considered as having low internalizing scores (CBCL raw score = 0).

Overall, significant differences were observed between personality profiles of high and low internalizers ($F = 5.2, p < 0.05$; Roy's Largest Root = 0.002). Post-hoc univariate tests showed that high internalizers scored significantly lower on the dimension of Extraversion ($F(1, 29) = 6.5, p < 0.05$); differences between high and low internalizers on the dimensions of Conscientiousness and Antagonism failed to reach significance at the 0.05 level (see Figure 3).

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study provide evidence for important differences in personality profiles of children from individualistic (e.g., European-Canadian) and collectivistic (e.g., Asian-Canadian and African-Canadian) cultures that overlap with personality connections to internalizing and externalizing psychopathology. Specifically, European-Canadian children tended to score higher on the dimensions of Extraversion and Antagonism, similar to high externalizers. Conversely, Asian-Canadian children tended to score lower on the dimensions of Extraversion, similar to high internalizers.

Some of the hypothesized differences in personality between European-Canadian and Asian-Canadian children failed to reach significance: this may be potentially due to a relatively small number of the latter represented in the sample. Additionally we discovered a lack of convergence in personality characteristics of the collectivistic group, which suggests that individualism and collectivism cannot be treated in a categorical manner. Specifically, although both Asian-Canadian and African-Canadian children were considered to represent collectivistic cultures, the personality profile of the African-Canadian children possessed characteristics more consistent with the individualistic profile with higher scores on Extraversion and Antagonism and lower scores on Conscientiousness in comparison with Asian-Canadian children.

These findings have important implications for future research on cross-cultural differences based on value systems. First, endorsement of a certain value system cannot be solely deduced from an individual's ethnicity. For example, it is not necessarily the case that an individual from a collectivistic culture will not endorse any individualistic values. Researchers should thoroughly assess individual value systems in future cross-cultural studies in order to further understand personality profiles exhibited by different cultural groups [15, 16].

Second, our findings suggest that the individualism/collectiv-

ism distinction may be more complex than a simple dichotomy. In our study, African-Canadian children exhibited a more individualistic/externalizing profile than that of even the European-Canadian children, despite their initial grouping in the collectivistic cultural group along with Asian-Canadian children. Since we treated individualism and collectivism in a categorical manner, we did not expect to see major differences within personality profiles of the collectivistic group. Thus, since our findings were contrary to our hypotheses, this suggests that values characterizing individualistic and collectivistic cultures should be presented in the form of a continuum. Some recent research literature on individualism/collectivism provides additional support for this suggestion [16, 17].

This study also contributes to a better understanding of personality profiles developed by children of migrants to Canada. The present results establish that personality profiles of children of descendants from African, Asian, and European countries are significantly different from each other. Thus, values of the native countries of the first generation of migrants continue to impact personality development of the subsequent generations. This can be observed in similarities between personality profiles observed in our study and the ones reported in a study by McRae and Terraciano [5] who studied residents of the native countries of migrants represented in our study. Future research should concentrate on variables that mediate the impact of the host-culture (Canadian) values on personality development in children of migrants. One such variable is likely to be the level of acculturation of the whole family and specifically the children of migrants.

One important limitation of our study is that, while we had a substantial number of multiracial children in the sample, we did not report any results for this group. Unfortunately most of the caregivers in the sample failed to mention the composition of their children's ethnic mix. We were, thus, unable to meaningfully interpret their personality profiles in the context of the individualistic/collectivistic dichotomy. The interpretation of the results of the study is also limited by our failure to ensure that all the ethnicities were equally represented in the sample. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain a balanced sample due to the fact that English-language fluency was required to participate in our study. Personality assessment measures that are available in multiple languages could be used by researchers in the future in order to overcome similar language barriers.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that collectivistic and individualistic cultures could be differentially predisposed to developing internalizing and externalizing psychopathology respectively. Personality is a likely candidate for a mediator in the relationship between cultural values and psychopathology. A complete match between individualistic/externalizing and collectivistic/internalizing personality profiles was not observed due to the categorical definition of individualism/collectivism as well the effects of acculturation. Thus, a dimensional construal of individualism/collectivism is necessary for in depth assessment of values in future studies. Overall, we concluded that native values and subsequent personality profiles tend to persist in children of migrants to Canada. This suggests that when diagnosing and treating psychopathology in migrants from collectivistic cultures, it is worth exploring a combi-

nation of emic (host-culture based) and etic (native-culture based) approaches.

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