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Editorial: Insights from research on Asian students' achievement motivation

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The study of achievement motivation in different cultural groups has been of great interest to researchers in the past two decades. The importance of such research, as pointed out by Pintrich (2003), is that discoveries of similarities and differences in the application of existing theories in different cultures provide the chance to revise, accommodate and expand those theories so that they could become better and more comprehensive. It is believed that the complexity of achievement motivation cannot be fully understood without examining these theories in different contexts and cultural settings.

Among the various cross-cultural studies on academic motivation, research on Asian students has received particular attention, partly due to their outstanding performance in national or international studies of student achievement. Different views have been put forward to explain or comment on this phenomenon (Leung, 2002; Stevenson & Lee, 1996; Sue & Okazaki, 1990). To provide a background to the collection of papers in this special section, we will first highlight some salient cultural factors affecting Asian students' learning. There will then follow a summative introduction to the seven studies in this special section.

Asian cultural context

While we are aware that simple dichotomies such as East–West, individualistic–collectivistic (Hofstede, 1983) or Socratic–Confucian (Tweed & Lehman, 2002) are far from adequate in describing cultural

variations in the world, the broadly defined collectivistic–Confucian cultural tradition has been most widely adopted as the framework for understanding the Asian cultural context. This cultural tradition is shared by many Asian groups to various extents, including the Chinese and the Japanese, who have been most frequently studied in research on student motivation. Sociocultural themes that have been alleged to be salient in affecting achievement motivation in this tradition include collectivism, the virtue orientation in learning with an emphasis on effort, and high educational aspirations.

Collectivistic orientation. Western students are typically characterized as individualistic, independent, and competitive, whereas Japanese, Chinese, and in general Asians are believed to be more group- or collectivistic-oriented with high compliance to authority (Hofstede, 1983; Li, 2002; Tseng, 2004). Sagie, Elizur, and Yamauchi (1996) compared the structure of achievement motivation among adults and students in the US, the Netherlands, Israel, Hungary and Japan. They found that the individualistic (the US), collectivistic (Japan, Hungary), and mixed (the Netherlands, Israel) societies displayed similar multifaceted structures of achievement motivation. However, the collectivistic Japanese and Hungarian participants demonstrated significantly lower personal achievement tendencies than the more individualistic US participants.

Recent findings have revealed that this assumption of Asian students being group-oriented in their learning requires closer examination. Li (2006) asked 259 Chinese adolescents aged 12 to 19 to respond to 10 open-ended sentences on their goals

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(desired future outcomes) and sense of agency (acts done intentionally) in learning. She found that Chinese students talked a great deal more about individual than social goals and agency. Goals of aspiration, cognitive development, social contribution, socioeconomic advancement, and moral development were salient and frequently mentioned. The results from this study suggest that to the Chinese, learning is a unique domain in which students show greater and more refined individualistic and independent self-construals. This individualistic orientation is in great contrast to the collectivistic orientations that Chinese people usually display in social and family relationships.

Conceptions of learning and achievement. Tweed and Lehman (2002) describe differences in Western and Eastern approaches to learning simply in terms of the Socratic–Confucian dichotomy. The former is characterized by “overt and private questioning, expression of personal hypotheses, and a desire for self-directed tasks” (p.93), while the latter is distinguished by “effort-focused conceptions of learning, pragmatic orientations to learning, and acceptance of behavioral reform as an academic goal described” (p.93). Other researchers have proposed alternative conceptions. For example, through analyses of students’ perceptions of model learners, Li (2005) concludes that Western learners adopt the mind orientation in learning while Chinese learners adopt the virtue orientation, with the aim to “perfect themselves morally and socially, to achieve mastery of the material, and to contribute to society” (p. 191).

Associated with this argument for basic differences in conceptions of learning are calls for caution in interpreting cross-cultural findings. For example, Bempechat and Drago-Severson (1999) challenged Stevenson’s (Stevenson & Lee, 1996) conclusions about Asian students’ achievement based on Western conceptions of effort and ability. They argued that these conceptions had been superimposed onto the Asian students without understanding their culture-specific meaning (see also Hau & Salili, 1991; Li, 2004).

Educational aspirations. The high regard for educational achievement is a central value in the Confucian culture. Consequently both Asian parents and students put a lot of emphasis on the importance of education and harbour high aspirations for academic achievement. In a study analysing the US National Educational Longitudinal Study data, Goyette and Xie (1999) compared the educational expectations of Asian American students against those of Anglo

American students. After controlling for students’ SES and background characteristics, academic ability, and parental expectation, Asian American students still consistently displayed higher educational aspirations than Anglo American students. Goyette and Xie thus concluded, “it is indeed remarkable that so many Asian ethnic groups with diverse cultural heritages and immigration experiences actually converge in this important respect” (p. 33).

Overview of this Special Section

The seven empirical studies reported in this special section are related to a set of papers on achievement motivation, presented at the 26th International Congress of Applied Psychology held in Athens, 16–21 July, 2006. They reflect the current trends of research in this area, in particular its increasingly diverse nature.

In terms of the cultural groups under study, while the Chinese continue to be a focus of investigation in four of the seven studies (Chang & Wong, 2008; Ho & Hau, 2008; Liem & Nie, 2008; Zhou & Salili, 2008), Filipino and Indonesian students have also been included (Bernardo, 2008; Liem & Nie, 2008), alongside Asian American and Asian Australian students (McInerney, 2008; Zusho, 2008). Moreover, the approach to examining cultural influences range from identifying motivational characteristics in a single ethnic group residing in one country (Bernardo, 2008; Chang & Wong, 2008; Ho & Hau, 2008; Zhou & Salili, 2008), comparing differences between two or more ethnic groups in one country (McInerney, 2008; Zusho, 2008), to comparing differences between two ethnic groups residing in two countries (Liem & Nie, 2008). It is clear that while researchers continue to talk in terms of simple East–West differences in cross-cultural investigations of student motivation, the multiplicity and complexity of cultural differentiations involved are in fact far greater. Liem and Nie’s comparison of Chinese and Indonesian students is an example of researchers moving beyond the dominant focus on Western versus Asian students. It demonstrates that variations exist among groups that belong to the Asian-collectivistic culture, as collectivism would interact with other sociopolitical factors to produce effects on individuals’ behaviour. All these point to the need to consider carefully which groups to compare and what level of cultural comparisons to make in order to generate meaningful results for particular purposes.

As regards the motivation constructs being studied and how they are examined, the seven

studies are also quite varied. It is obvious that the goal theory still receives most attention, as it is a central motivation construct being examined in five of the seven studies (Bernardo, 2008; Chang & Wong, 2008; Ho & Hau, 2008; Liem & Nie, 2008; McInerney, 2008). In particular, special attention is being paid to the social dimension of achievement goals, which has been less examined in Western research but is considered a salient feature in Asian motivation.

In Chang and Wong's (2008) study of Chinese Singaporean university students, attempts were made to develop a measure of socially oriented achievement goals in terms of significant relationships: family, peers, teachers, and community. These goals were found to be positively related to both mastery and performance goals but variably related to different achievement motives (mastery motive, work ethics, competitiveness motive) and outcome measures (interest, educational aspiration, test anxiety).

Bernardo (2008) had a different perspective in his examination of the nature of Filipino university students' achievement goals. He adopted the widely used Western three-dimensional goal structure (mastery, performance-approach, performance-avoidance) and examined the individual and social dimensions of these goals. Results showed that students' socially oriented motivations (parent-oriented or teacher-oriented) were closely related to their achievement goals. The finding that mastery and performance-approach goals were positively correlated and that they both produced positive effects on achievement was consistent with previous findings with other Asian groups (e.g., Chan, Lai, Leung, & Moore, 2005; Ee & Moore, 2004; Ho, Hau, & Salili, in press).

Liem and Nie's (2008) study further explored how values might represent the deeper structure underlying achievement orientations and goals. Their comparison of Chinese and Indonesian secondary school students throws light on the fact that while it is useful to compare goals and orientations across groups, the cultural meaning of particular motivational tendencies could not be clearly defined without reference to the underlying value systems; and these value systems could vary even within the same broadly defined cultural group.

In Ho and Hau's (2008) study of Chinese secondary school students, the joint effects of goals, strategies and effort on achievement were investigated. Results showed that goal orientation and effort were more significant predictors of achievement than the strategies used in learning. As in Bernardo's (2008) study, the finding of a positive relationship between

mastery and performance-approach goals as well as their positive effects on achievement were replicated. Furthermore, it was found that positive relationships also existed for the apparently dichotomous cooperative/competitive or understanding/memorizing approaches to learning. Such deviations from Western theories are worth further exploration.

McInerney (2008) examined achievement goals alongside facilitating conditions, sense of self, and engagement in learning to see how they differed across ethnic groups in Australia. In this study, Asian-background students, who were the highest achieving group, were distinguished from the other groups mainly in their sense of purpose, educational aspirations, and positive attitudes towards school. All these are important features of the Confucian culture. Nevertheless, it was also observed that on the whole, all groups displayed quite similar motivational profiles. Decreased differences across ethnic groups had probably resulted from acculturation of the migrant groups, although it was interesting to note that some influences of the culture of origin had persisted.

Results from Zusho's (2008) study of Asian American and Anglo American students also suggested the acculturation effect in that more similarities than differences were noted between the two groups. Although the findings did not support the hypothesis that Anglo American students had a greater tendency towards self-enhancement, the general premise that people with an independent view of self have a greater tendency to self-enhance was supported. This study is unique among the studies reported in this section in that it used an experimental design rather than relying on simple correlation analyses or comparisons of group means based on questionnaire data, from which causal effects could not be inferred. More experimental studies of this kind are needed in future cross-cultural research so that more definite conclusions about causation could be drawn.

Findings in Zhou and Salili's (2008) study on the relationship between intrinsic motivation and home factors among Chinese preschoolers suggest that while autonomy or personal choice would enhance Western children's intrinsic motivation, this value for freedom may be less relevant and important among Asian children. Results from this study echo those in some earlier studies (d'Ailly, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999) but contradict findings by other researchers (Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005). More research is needed to take a closer look at the nature of motivational dynamics such as

autonomy and independence, or control and conformity, in different cultural contexts.

Both Zusho's (2008) and Zhou and Salili's (2008) studies point to the fact that self-construals may be significant mediators of the effects of individualism-collectivism on motivation and behaviour. In particular, a less autonomous or more interdependent view of self adopted by individuals in collectivistic societies might be a salient factor behind the different nature of their intrinsic motivation or self-enhancement when compared to their Western counterparts.

To sum up, this collection of papers provide us with a glimpse of recent research related to Asian achievement motivation. Some themes and methods appear to be more popular, such as the emphasis on achievement goals. The methods used largely involve the analysis of self-report questionnaire data, which allows us to identify relationships among constructs and describe group differences. Nevertheless, we also see significant diversity in perspectives and methodology in the various studies. Overall, they point to the need to extend research to a wider range of cultural groups, encompassing more varied motivation constructs and outcome measures. More refined instrumentation and study designs are also necessary to generate more precise findings.

The results from the present studies generally reveal that there are clear differences in motivational processes among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Yet mixed and sometimes inconsistent findings indicate that we are still far from arriving at a systematic understanding of the complex processes, where multiple perspectives may be involved.

A point to note is that while the interest in studying Asian students' motivation has at least in part arisen from their outstanding achievement, very few studies have succeeded in identifying specific motivational constructs or profiles that have strong links to actual achievement. In the few studies in this section that have included achievement or other constructs as outcome measures, the motivation-outcome relationships reported do not appear to be strong. Again, systematic investigations including a wider range of motivational constructs and outcome measures might help to generate a clearer picture about the role of motivational processes in academic achievement.

Culture has increasingly become an important construct in psychological research. However, it is often difficult to arrive at an integrative understanding of the various findings from cross-cultural studies, as the instruments used are highly

varied and the participants from different cultural groups are not always directly comparable. All in all, despite the various limitations with the studies reported here, they have generated useful insights for further research in this area.

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