

Empathetic vs. Cynical Orientations among New Zealand and Hong Kong Undergraduates

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Objectives

The aim of this exploratory, cross-cultural study was to operationalise and probe **'cynical-egoistic' and 'empathetic-altruistic' orientations to the social world**, and the ways in which these two contrasting worldview schemas relate to . . .

- (1) attributes of personality and self-conception, and
- (2) their perceptions of the people and society around them, of the social institutions, of issues of social fairness

Comparing 'zero-sum' & 'positive-sum' orientations to the social world

- We were particularly interested in exploring the contrast between what game theorists call "**zero-sum**" **perception** and "**positive-sum**" **perception**.
- Want to explore the attitudinal and behavioral differences between people who believe they live in a **you-OR-me world**, and people who believe they live in a **you-AND-me world**.

'Cynical-egoistic' vs 'Empathetic-altruistic' orientations to social interaction

- Cynicism vs empathy seems to capture this basic distinction in human worldview schemas, i.e., our preconceptions about whether others can or cannot be trusted, and whether or not one can afford to cooperate extensively with other people to solve difficult problems.
- Has many implications for interpersonal and intergroup relations, 'social capital' building, dispute resolution within and between societies.

Theoretical background, previous research:

- In studying personality traits that influence competitive-cooperative behaviour within groups and societies, cross-cultural and social psychologists have often distinguished between cynical and empathetic, or altruistic, perceptions of the social world (Triandis, 1991; Bateson and Shaw, 1991; Perugini, 2001; Fehr and Fischbacher, 2002; Kopelman, Weber and Messick, 2002; Frey and Powell, 2005) .
- This 'empathy vs cynicism' distinction extends to generalized modes of perception, and as such affects the way people will tend to frame their social, political and economic transactions.

Cynicism . . .

“ a negative view of human nature, a view that life produces unhappiness, that people exploit others, and a mistrust of social institutions.” (Leung et al. 2010)

- Empirically-derived construct. Construct validity tested in over 40 cultures by Leung et al. (2002, 2004).

Empathy-altruism . . .

Empathy: “an other-oriented emotional response elicited by the perceived welfare of others in need. It involves feeling for the other -- sympathy, compassion, tenderness...and the cognitive ability to correctly perceive another person’s internal state...feeling as another person feels. ” (Bateson 2008)

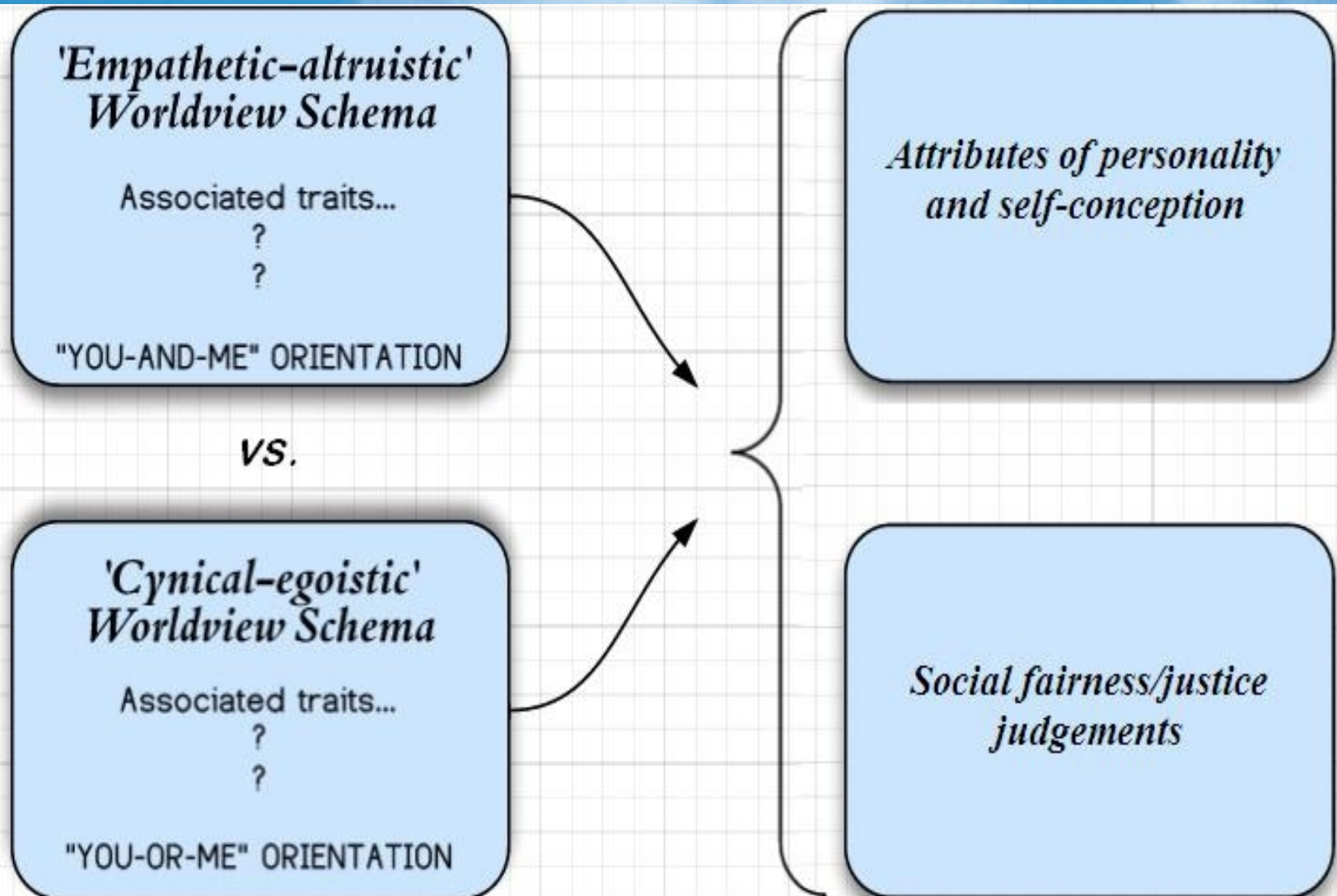
Altruism: “an emotional state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare.” (As opposed to ‘egoism’, a motivational state with the goal of increasing one’s own welfare.” (Bateson 2008).

- People with more *cynically*-oriented worldviews “tend to have individualistic or competitive motives, interpret rationality according to what is right for the individual, and are more concerned with the effectiveness or utility of behaviour,”
- . . . whereas people who have more *empathetic* worldviews “tend to display cooperative or altruistic motives, to regard behaviour as rational if it is in the interests of the collective or group, and to be more concerned with the morality of behaviour” (Fear and Denniss, 2009).

- Previous research on these perceptual types has shown that persons who hold empathetic worldviews are more likely to cooperate in common dilemmas than are those who hold a more cynical worldview.
- Cynical perceivers, by contrast, usually attempt to harvest more resources for themselves from a common pool than do empathetic perceivers.

- This suggests that the social worldviews or perceptual contexts in which social reality is being framed by these two different personality types is likely to influence . . .
- the way people will behave in a society
- what is considered a fair distribution of society's rewards, and
- what they will see as appropriate solutions to social and national problems.

The general 'model' that we are exploring . . .



Methods

Data gathered using a multi-construct written questionnaire instrument, administered cross-culturally (New Zealand, Hong Kong and Jamaica so far, others planned)

Administered to social science undergraduates at Auckland University of Technology-New Zealand), Lingnan University-Hong Kong), and University of Technology-Jamaica.

This presentation is based on the NZ (n=293) and the HK (n=284) samples.

Cynicism scale

The 20-item cynicism construct is based on a cross-culturally validated scale developed by Kwok Leung and Michael Bond (2004), that is part of their 'human social axioms' construct – which characterizes fundamental aspects of worldviews prevalent in various degrees in all human cultures (Leung and Bond, 2004; Bond, Leung et al, 2004; Leung, Huang et al, 2007).

1. Power and status make people arrogant.
2. Kind-hearted people are easily bullied.
3. People will stop working hard after they secure a comfortable life.
4. Powerful people tend to exploit others.
5. People deeply in love are usually blind toward others.
6. The various social institutions in society are biased towards the rich.
7. It is rare to see a happy ending in real life.
8. Old people are usually stubborn and biased.
9. To care about societal affairs only brings trouble for yourself.
10. Young people are impulsive and unreliable.

(cont.)

Cynicism scale (cont.)

11. People enjoy watching others fight among themselves.
12. People create hurdles to prevent others from succeeding.
13. Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses.
14. People dislike others who succeed in life.
15. People who become rich and successful forget the people who helped them along the way.
16. Opportunities for people to get wealthy promote dishonesty.
17. Praise is just a sweet way for people to get what they want from others.
18. Good connections with people in power are more important than hard work.
19. The only way to get ahead is to take advantage of others.
20. People always expect something in return for a favor.

Empathy-altruism scale

The 14-item 'empathy' construct combines items from Smith (2003), Sawyer (1966) and Rushton. (1981), and is based more generally on conceptualisations of empathy and altruism developed by Wispe (1978), Pilavin et al (1990), Davis (1994) and Bateson (2008).

1. When I get upset at someone, I usually try to “put myself in their shoes” for a while.
 2. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments. (rv)
 3. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in his/her place.
 4. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the “other person's” point of view. (rv)
 5. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
 6. Personally assisting people in trouble is very important to me.
 7. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal. (rv)
- (cont.)*

Empathy scale (cont.)

8. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.
9. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.
10. When I see someone treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.(rv)
11. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them.
12. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.(rv)
13. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
14. I feel that it is my duty as a person to help others who are in need, and to help make New Zealand a better society.

Note that the two constructs are being measured independently, rather than as opposite ends of a single dimension.

This is to avoid assumptions that they are necessarily mutually exclusive, and to include exploration of high cynicism/high empathy and low cynicism/low empathy participants, in ways that could generate counter-intuitive results..

Correlations with the 'Big Five' McRae-Costa Personality Factors

(Spearman's rho, n=293/NZ, 284/HK) (*p<.05 **p<.01)

<i>McRae-Costa personality factor:</i>	<i>Empathy</i>		<i>Cynicism</i>	
	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>
<i>Agreeable/Antagonistic</i>	.47**	.32**	-.06	-.19**
<i>Conscientious/Negligent</i>	.22**	.21**	-.13*	-.13*
<i>Open/Closed to Experience</i>	.16*	.17*	-.03	-.14*
<i>Extravert/Intravert</i>	.31**	.01	-.10	-.11
<i>Stable/Neurotic</i>	.14*	.05	-.24**	-.11

Operationalising Maslow/Alderfer's Human Psychosocial Needs . . .

PHYSICAL HEALTH	FINANCIAL SECURITY
10 - Feel completely	10 - Feel completely
9 secure about the	9 secure about being
8 state of my health	8 able to afford basic
7	7 necessities
6	6
5	5
4	4
3	3
2	2 Worry constantly about
1 Often feel worried	1 being able to provide
0 - about my health	0 - basic necessities

RELATIONSHIPS	RESPECT, ESTEEM	CREATIVE GROWTH
10 - A life full of	10 - Complete	10 - Satisfied that
9 love, warm	9 recognition &	9 I'm realising
8 friendships &	8 respect from	8 my fullest
7 good family	7 others	7 potential in
6 relations	6	6 life
5	5	5
4	4	4 Just about given
3 A life without	3	3 up hope I'll ever
2 anything; love,	2 Completely	2 get to do anything
1 friends, and	1 ignored by	1 important or
0 - warmth	0 - others	0 worthwhile

Correlations with Maslow-Alderfer Need Satisfaction Ladders

(Spearman's rho, n=293/NZ, 284/HK) (*p<.05 **p<.01)

<i>Type of need:</i>	<i>Empathy</i>		<i>Cynicism</i>	
	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>
<i>Creative growth, actualisation</i>	.06	.18**	-.21**	-.31**
<i>Respect & self-esteem</i>	.19**	.20**	-.19**	-.44**
<i>Good relationships</i>	.31**	.24**	-.27**	-.41**
<i>Financial security</i>	.08	.07	-.31**	-.21**
<i>Physical health</i>	.04	.01	-.12*	-.11

Correlations with Other Psychosocial Orientations

(Spearman's rho, *p<.05 **p<.01)

<i>Psychosocial orientation:</i>	<i>Empathy</i>		<i>Cynicism</i>	
	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>
<i>Self-concept (prosocial adjectives)</i>	.51**	.39**	-.18**	-.22**
<i>Self-concept (mastery adjectives)</i>	.09	.09	-.30**	-.25**
<i>Interpersonal trust</i>	.14*	.24**	-.29**	-.38**
<i>Positive/zero-sum perception</i>	.14*	.11	-.30**	-.36**
<i>Responsibility acceptance/denial</i>	.26**	.25**	-.14*	-.19**

Correlations with Sociopolitical Orientations, Societal Fairness

(Spearman's rho, *p<.05 **p<.01)

<i>Sociopolitical orientation:</i>	<i>Empathy</i>		<i>Cynicism</i>	
	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>
<i>Confidence in societal institutions</i>	.10	.17**	-.26**	-.27**
<i>Empowerment/powerlessness</i>	.14*	.22**	-.25**	-.34**
<i>Human nature (people good/bad)</i>	.21**	.17**	-.21**	-.29**
<i>Intergenerational fairness</i>	.26**	.29**	-.33**	-.32**
<i>Distributive fairness (equality/merit)</i>	.24**	.14**	-.04	-.07
<i>'Natural inequality' (soc.Darwinism)</i>	-.17**	-.17**	.22**	.29**

Correlations with Social Position (gender, class etc.)

(Spearman's rho, * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$)

	<i>Empathy</i>		<i>Cynicism</i>	
	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>	<i>NZ</i>	<i>HK</i>
<i>Gender (+=female)</i>	.21**	.15*	-.19**	-.30**
<i>Class (subjective identification)</i>	.21**	.02	-.10	-.02
<i>Social status anxiety</i>	-.17**	-.15*	.29**	.31**
<i>Economic insecurity</i>	-.10	-.04	.19**	.13*
<i>Unemployment concern</i>	-.08	-.01	.29**	.07