



Globalization: Does "Learning from Life Experiences" Mean Similarly for U.S. and Chinese College Students?

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Introduction

Globalization has been discussed for many years. While a growing body of literature addresses the relationship between globalization and mental health, relatively little attention has been directed to explore "learning from life experiences" in our globalized world. Learning from life experiences plays a key role in human adaptation (Kolb, 1984), which is related to mental health (Leszczyńska, Jeżewska & Grubman-Nowak, 2014). Learning has been intensively studied and theories regarding learning from life experiences have been developed (see Ormrod, 2012). Due to cultural differences, Western theories may not be applied to understand how people raised in non-Western cultures learn from their life experiences. As the world becomes more globalized, differences between cultures may shrink and life styles across countries may become similar. Consequently, Western theories may be generalized to non-Western cultures to a certain extent, and Western approaches to facilitating life experience-learning may be applied to non-Western cultures. Nevertheless, few studies have explored the topic of "learning from life experiences" across countries, from the perspective of globalization.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the extent to which U.S. and Chinese college students conceptualize "learning from life experiences" in similar ways in this globalized world. If they conceptualize in similar ways, a template model can be helpful in facilitating individuals' learning from life experiences. If they conceptualize in different ways, some values of the local culture may survive the process of globalization, and the values may still strongly influence individuals' life experience-



learning in the local culture. Consequently, the values that survive the process of globalization need to be identified and incorporated into the above-mentioned template model for the purpose of helping people learn from life experiences. When people are more willing to learn from life experiences, their mental health is more likely to be maintained or promoted.

Theoretical Framework

Globalization

Globalization is the process of international integration arising from the interchange of worldviews, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture (Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann, 2006). Rosenau (2003) proposed that globalization would occur unevenly in different parts of the world. Source for globalization such as new technologies and intensified mobility (e.g., international travels and migration) greatly influence the speed of the process of globalization. Consequently, those parts of the world that more embrace the sources would be fragmented from their counterparts that less emphasize the sources. Friedman (2006) mentioned in his famous book *The World Is Flat* that the process of cultural interactions started from nation-to-nation encountering to cross-country business companies, and then to person-to-person connection through the Internet. He suggested that globalization would change many people's life, including job opportunities. Remhof, Gunkel and Schlaegel (2014) have posited that, in this globalized world, there is a great demand for employees who are willing to and capable of traveling and working in a different country. On the other hand, globalization has expedited migrations across countries. The gap between the economically advantaged and the economically disadvantaged societies has been enlarged by globalization (Bhavsar & Bhugra, 2008). Consequently, those who are from the economically disadvantaged societies tend to migrate to the economically advantaged societies (Sharma & Sharma, 2010).

Learning in the Globalized World

As part of the globalization process, which has been going on for many decades or even centuries, Western style educational systems have been adopted by non-Western countries; and many international students chose to study at university in Western countries. An interesting question thus arises—has globalization unified



learning approaches around the world? The answer seems to be negative. In a study that explored the impact of cultural factors on college students' learning styles in Japan and Australia, Sugahara and Boland (2010) found that Japanese students tended to learn by watching while the Australian students were more likely to learn by doing. The preference for watching or doing, according to Sugahara and Boland, seems to be related to cultural values of collectivism (in the Japanese sample) and individualism (in the Australian sample). Similarly, a cross-country study conducted by You and Jia (2008) showed differences in preferences for learning styles between the U.S. and Chinese college students. American students, as opposed to their Chinese counterparts, were more likely to learn by doing and integrating theories with practical experiences. In addition, American students were more prone to reading textbooks and class notes than did their Chinese counterparts. Joy and Kolb (2009) reported a marginally significant cultural effect on learning style preferences across seven countries. A more abstract learning style was found to be preferred by individuals in countries that highly value in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, future orientation and gender egalitarianism. On the other hand, a more reflective learning style was reported to be prevailing among individuals in countries that emphasize in-group collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and assertiveness. These studies were consistent in indicating that local cultures still significantly influence college students' approaches to learning.

Understanding/Interpretation of Learning between U.S. and Chinese College Students

Since globalization has not unified learning approaches around the world, local cultures appear to continue to play a role in influencing individuals' learning experiences. However, does that mean students' understanding/interpretation of learning differs across countries? In the present study, we were interested in exploring the extent to which Chinese and U.S. students understand/interpret the concept of "learning from life experiences" in similarly ways. The rationale for focusing on these two countries was that they represent two different cultures on the two hemispheres of the earth. Although they are different in many ways, China and the U.S. have developed a closer tie in many fields including education; and students and scholars from both



countries frequently visit their counterparts. In addition, the Internet and media have expedited the communication between the Chinese and the American cultures. Have the recurrent exchanges of ideas, thoughts, and life styles over the years diluted the effect of Chinese culture on Chinese students' understanding/interpretation of learning? In the book *Revisiting the Chinese Learner: Changing Contexts, Changing Education*, Chan and Rao (2009) discussed how Chinese teachers and students respond to the dramatic changes that have occurred in China, and their attempts to integrate Western and traditional Chinese educational beliefs and practices. Chan and Rao concluded that China is apparently developing a hybrid educational system. This conclusion is in consistent with Özekin and Arioz's (2014) perspective that globalization would end up in developing hybrid cultures. However, it has not been discussed whether this hybrid education in China echoes the perspective that events occur in the globalized world would be interpreted and understood within the local cultural context (Banerjee, 2002; Department of Economics and Social Affairs of the United Nations, 2003), or this hybrid education reflects the globalizing-culture researchers' (e.g., Fukuyama, 1992; Ohmae, 1998) suggestion that the sense of a global citizen would eventually dominate over that of a local dweller in developing countries?

As mentioned, the purpose of the present study was to explore the extent to which U.S. and Chinese college students conceptualize "learning from life experiences" in similar ways in this globalized world. Results of this study may provide information for establishing a global approach to life experience-learning, which can improve individuals' mental health.

Hypotheses

The hypothesis of this study was that U.S. and Chinese college students understand/interpret items on the Life Experience-Learning Scale (LELS) in similar ways. To test this hypothesis, the measurement model of the LELS (presented in Figure 1) was tested between U.S. and Chinese college students.

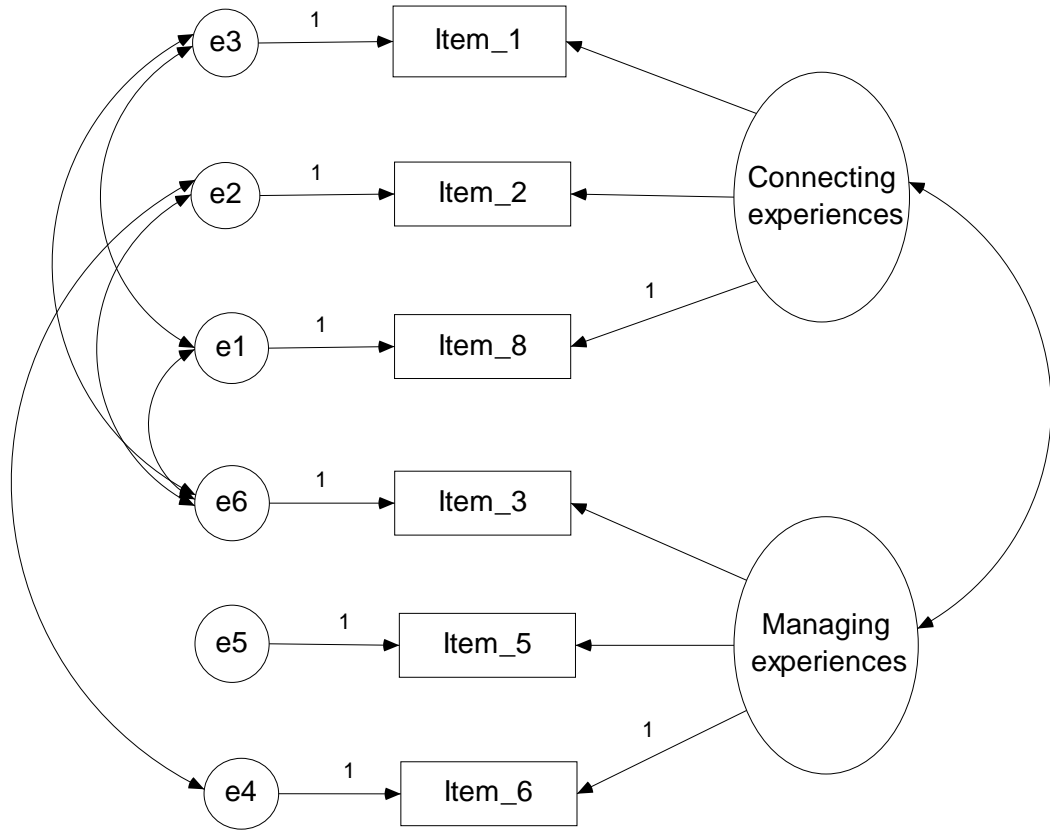


Figure 1. The Measurement Model of the Life Experience Learning Scale

Methods

The present study used two culturally different samples. The U.S. sample contained 264 college students enrolled in a university located in the East coast of the U.S. The Chinese sample included 311 college students enrolled in a university in the South coast of China.

All participants voluntarily participated in the study. Before making the decision on participation or not, potential participants were informed of the purpose of the study and how their participation might contribute to extending the understanding about contemporary U.S. and Chinese college students. Those who agreed to participate received an informed consent and the Life experience-Learning Scale. They signed the informed consent, completed the questionnaire, and then returned them to the researchers.



The Life Experience-Learning Scale (LELS) was developed by the researchers of this study. The LELS was applied to this study in order to evaluate participants' tendencies to learn from life experiences. The LELS is a 7-point Likert scale that includes 6 items. The items were developed based on theories of operant conditioning Skinner (1938), vicarious learning (Bandura, 1977), association and accommodation learning (Piaget 1970) and the 5-question experiential learning model (Jacobson & Ruddy (2004). Skinner's operant conditioning learning is related to learning from the consequences of one's own behaviors. Bandura's vicarious learning is associated with learning by observing other people's behaviors and consequences. Piaget's association/accommodation learning is about how one integrates new experiences with existing experiences. Jacobson and Ruddy's 5-question experiential learning model emphasizing the use of questions to facilitate one's learning. The 6 items of the LELS are listed below:

1. I learn from mistakes I made.
2. When I connect several different life experiences, I can form a new perspective.
3. When things do not happen the way I expected, I tend to explore the reason why.
4. I can organize my experiences by dividing them into categories.
5. I take a systematic, step-by-step approach to problem-solving.
6. I learn from the consequences of my decisions and behaviors.

All the measures were translated into Chinese for the Chinese participants, following a translate-and-back translate procedure.

Data were analyzed by Exploratory Factor Analysis, Confirmatory Factory Analysis, Multi-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis, and χ^2 difference test. The criteria used for deciding the number of factors in Exploratory Factor Analysis included (1) Eigen value greater than 1 and (2) scree plot (Green, Salkind & Akey, 2000). The criteria used for evaluating the measurement model in Confirmatory Factory Analysis and Multi-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis included CFI> .90 and RMSEA <.08. χ^2 difference test was applied to test differences in the measurement model between the U.S. and Chinese samples.

If results of Multi-Group Confirmatory Analysis showed no difference in the measurement model between the two samples, then the results indicated configural and



metric measurement invariance. When metric invariance is established, participants of the two samples in the study understand the items of the measurement in similar ways (Horn, McArdle & Mason, 1983).

Results

The first step of data analysis was to test the validity of the Life Experience-Learning Scale (LELS). The second step of data analysis was to test whether participants of different countries conceptualized/understood the LELS in similar ways.

The first step of data analysis involved statistical procedures of Exploratory Factor Analysis, and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Since the original LELS was in English, Exploratory Factor Analysis was first applied to the data associated with the U.S. sample. As mentioned, the criteria used for deciding the number of factors included (1) Eigen value greater than 1 and (2) scree plot (Green, Salkind & Akey, 2000). Results showed that the LELS was composed of two factors. The first factor was made up of items #1, 2, and 6; while the second factor was composed of items #3, 4, and 5. Next, we applied Confirmatory Factor Analysis to analyze data for the U.S. and Chinese samples. Results showed that the two-factor measurement model fit the data well for both the U.S. and Chinese samples, indicating that the LELS is composed of the two factors in both the English and Chinese versions. Model fit indices associated with the U.S. sample showed that CFI = .99 and RMSEA = .078, indicating an acceptable model fit for this particular sample. For the Chinese sample, model fit indices showed CFI = .99 and RMSEA = .06, showing a moderate model fit for the Chinese sample.

Regarding the second step of data analysis, Multi-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (MG-CFA) was applied to explore the extent to which the measurement model fit the data well across the U.S. and Chinese samples. We started with testing the totally unconstrained measurement model using both sample. If this model fit the data well and no significant difference was found between the two samples, the configural measurement invariance for the LELS was established, meaning that the same structure of the construct of "life experience-learning" was found in both the English and Chinese versions of the LELS. In other words, both the English and Chinese versions of the LELS were proved to be appropriate for measuring life experience-learning in their respective countries, and both versions measured the same thing across the two



samples. Results of testing configural invariance showed that the unconstrained measurement model fit the data well (CFI = .992, RMSEA = .046). On the basis of configural invariance, we compared the totally unconstrained measurement mode against the totally constrained measurement model, using Multi-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis. In the totally constrained measurement model we set the loading of each items on the LELS to be equal across the U.S. and Chinese samples. If (1) the totally constrained measurement model fit the data well and (2) no difference was found between the totally unconstrained and the totally constrained model, we could conclude that the metric invariance is established. In other words, students in both samples understood/interpreted the items on the LELS in similar ways. The results of MGCFA showed that the metric model fit the data well (CFI = .995, RMSEA = .028) and the χ^2 difference test showed that there was no significant difference between the totally constrained and the totally unconstrained measurement model ($\chi^2(4) = 1.036, p = .904$). These results proved that both U.S. and Chinese college students understood/interpreted "learning from life-experiences" in similar ways.

Conclusion

Learning is related to interactions between genetic makeup and the environment. For example, Piaget (1970) suggested that cognitive development occurs as individuals apply their inborn ability to adapt to the environment. With an increase of life experiences in their environments, individuals tend to organize the experiences by creating categories. Consequently, they form numbers of cognitive structures (i.e., schema) in their mind. As the world becomes more globalized, the environments in which individuals live may become more similar to each other than they were decades ago. This study explored the extent to which American and Chinese college students understand/interpret life experience-learning in similar ways.

Results of this study showed adequate validity of the LELS across the Chinese and U.S. samples, indicating that the LELS is an appropriate measure of life experience learning across the two samples. Additionally, results showed metric level of measurement invariance, showing that American and Chinese students' understanding/interpretation of life experience-learning were similar. Since the direction of cultural influences is more from the West to the East in the process of globalization



than the opposite direction (Giddens, 1990; Ritzer, 2002), Chinese college students' concept of "learning from life experiences" may have been influenced by Western cultures. Thus, Western models of facilitating life experience-learning may be able to apply to Chinese college students. However, findings of this study should not be considered definitive. More studies are needed.

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