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Cross-Cultural Values, Social Work
Students and Personality

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CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES, SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AND PERSONALITY

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CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES, SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AND PERSONALITY

Abstract

The international social work community is becoming increasingly aware that the nature of social problems facing Western and Third World nations differ greatly, and cross-cultural psychologists have consistently noted that the values, attitudes and behaviors across national boundaries are often significantly different. This paper compared the personality characteristics of social work students in the U.S. and in India. While the results indicated appreciable differences between U.S. and Indian graduate students, American undergraduates evidenced characteristics that were more similar to those of the Indian graduates than to those of their U.S. graduate counterparts. Implications of the results for social work education and the transfer of Western theory and practice methods are discussed.

CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES, SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AND PERSONALITY

Introduction

The international social work community is becoming increasingly aware that the nature of social problems facing Western and Third World nations differ greatly, and cross-cultural psychologists have consistently noted that the values, attitudes and behaviors across national boundaries are often significantly different. In recent years, social work educators in at least one developing country, India, have begun stressing the need to assess the wisdom of unilaterally transferring Western, specifically, the United States' social work theory and practice methods to their social work programs and are calling for the indigenous development of the profession. Some findings, however, have also indicated that those who are attracted to the social work profession in India are from the more affluent and educated strata of society (Ejaz, 1989) and may identify more with the values and behaviors of the West, which may be further reinforced by Western social work education, than with those of the indigenous populations they serve. This paper presents a general overview of some cross-national value differences between the cultures of the United States and India, suggests their effect on social work students and compares the personality characteristics of social work students in the United States and in India. Implications for social work education are also discussed.

Social Work, Values and Personality

Human values influence perception, problem solving, behavior (Bamberger, 1986; Connor & Becker, 1975; Rokeach, 1968) and, consequently, personality, because growing evidence suggests that people generally act on the basis of their values (Kahle, 1983; Morales & Shaefor, 1989). One must evaluate the importance of major values both in a profession and a national culture to assess their impact on those persons who discharge the responsibilities of that profession within a specific culture. Cross-cultural studies suggest that culture may be the primary determinant of individual values (Terpstra & David, 1985) while the professional environment, which cuts across national boundaries, tends to temper these values (Tse et al., 1989; Terpstra & David, 1985; Whitely & England, 1977). The value systems and behavior of social workers, therefore, are expected to reflect the integration of the values of both national and professional cultures.

Individualism and Collectivism in Values

While each society has a multitude of values on which its culture is based, this paper addresses only one important value area: The relationship of the individual to others in the society. Societies differ in the extent to which cooperation, competition and individualism (Mead, 1967) are emphasized or sanctioned. Hofstede's (1980) theoretical constructs of the social values of collectivism and individualism have had a significant impact on cross-cultural research. In collectivist societies, cooperation is high, competition is low and status and position are both ascribed and stable unlike in individualist cultures, where competition is high, individualism is valued and status and position are earned and changeable (Hofstede, 1980). As a rule, people in collectivist cultures give high consideration to the effect of

their behavior on others for it is implicitly assumed that the maintenance of the group's well-being will best insure the individual's welfare (Hui & Triandis, 1986). Individualistic societies recognize the importance of the individual distinct from the group and the need to maximize the attainment of personal goals. Relationships with in-groups are more detached than in collectivist societies and self-reliance is high (Triandis et al., 1988) with individuals being more willing to confront others in their in-group, less willing to subordinate personal goals and more likely to feel personally responsible for their successes and failures (Bellah et al., 1985; Hui & Triandis, 1986; Triandis et al., 1988).

Americans have some values that are unique and others that are shared by peoples of other societies (Cavanagh, 1984). Overwhelmingly, values in American life have been guided by principles that are fiercely individualistic and molded by enlightened self-interest (Cavanagh, 1984; Clough, 1960; Kahle, 1983). However, the values of American social work also stress the importance of the individual's responsibility to society and society's responsibility to the individual (Brill, 1990) or the need for humanitarian ideals to improve the welfare of all persons. While individualism, or separation from in-groups and self-reliance, appears to be the norm of the United States and other English speaking countries, Latin American and East Asian nations appear to be more collectivist (Triandis et al., 1988) with greater in-group integrity and interdependence (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Hofstede, 1980). Indian values, consistent with the norms of other non-western countries, reinforce collectivism and commitment to group success.

Social Work Values and Client Needs

American social work functioning in an individualistic society, fosters independence in clients by encouraging them to develop the skills and resources to meet their needs themselves. Indian social work, however, though based on theory and methods of the West, is expected to be tempered by a recognition of the importance and the influence of the in-group (usually the family or community) while meeting the needs of clients. As it is generally assumed and accepted that values have an major impact on human behavior, and specific values and beliefs have an influence on what people say, think and how they act, the values of social workers in each country must reflect some combination of their own national culture's values and those of the profession, and in such a way that their behaviors and attitudes are sensitive to the problems, needs and values of their respective client groups.

An important area of social work intervention across the globe is child welfare, and appropriately so, since currently over half the people of the world are under 25 years of age. Furthermore, in the developing nations of Asia, South America and Africa, the population consists of 80% of this age group (Anglin, 1990). Problems such as poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, delinquency and child abuse are prevalent in all countries, although the extent and severity may differ. And while many of these problems are a result of poverty, they are also grounded in the socio-cultural framework of the society. The major issue of child abuse and neglect, though a primary concern in the U.S. that has recently been termed a "National Emergency" (Advisory Board on Child Abuse, 1990), is one that has received little attention in India. Of the large numbers of social workers in the U.S. who are employed in the field of child welfare, most intervene in the area of child abuse and neglect which often reflect family dysfunction and the society's failure to

provide a supportive infra-structure for families before they abuse (Krugman, 1990). In contrast, workers in child welfare in India address issues of prenatal care, health care, nutrition and education for children, focusing on ensuring that services are accessible to children and motivating uneducated or untrusting families to avail themselves of these resources. Many of the problems coming to the attention of Indian social workers are due to poverty, illiteracy and sex discrimination, while the problems addressed by American social workers are not only the result of poverty and ignorance, but also are by-products of family dysfunction (Segal & Rane, 1991). Therefore, because the predominant type of social work intervention with children differs for the two countries, social workers in the United States and India may be expected to evidence not only the effects of their varying cultures but to draw differentially the general values of the profession.

Personality and Values

Values are complex theoretical constructs that cannot be observed directly and must be inferred from an individual's behavior (Koerin, 1977). Personal values are a basic component of personality (Cavanagh, 1984), and personal value systems, personality and personality traits are highly interrelated (Segal, Segal & Niemczycki, 1990). As values apparently affect the same variables (actions, attitudes, beliefs) that are used to identify personality traits associated with social behavior, one may assume that values must be a major determinant of the social and learned aspects of personality (Homer and Kahle, 1988; Rokeach, 1973). Some evidence also suggests that there is some relationship between personality and career values (Kunert, 1965).

This study sought to compare the personality traits, as a reflection of national and professional values, of social work students in the United States

and India. While in recent years, Western social work has become increasingly cognizant of the importance of the international dimension and also of the need to develop an understanding of social work in Third World countries, and although several articles have been written regarding this area, there have been few empirical studies of this component of social work education (Healy, 1986). It was expected that since most Indian social work students are often from the more educated and affluent families, and as social work education has its roots in American social work education, many of the values and personality characteristics between American and Indian social work students would be similar. However, the influence of the collectivist Indian culture was expected to have some impact on the personalities of the latter group, therefore the following hypotheses were tested:

- H1: American social work students will evidence more of the self-oriented behaviors associated with the individualist cultures of the West than will Indian social work students.
- H2: Indian social work students will evidence more of the other-oriented behaviors associated with the collectivist cultures of the East than will American social work students.
- H3: Some characteristics result from values that are not related to the profession or national culture; these will not differentiate between American and Indian social work students.

Method

Setting and Sample

The populations sampled were American graduate social work students, American undergraduate social work students and Indian graduate social work students. As social work training for graduate and undergraduate students differs in the United States in that the former are trained for more specialized practice and the latter receive a more generalist education, it

was expected that because their socialization processes differ, their attitudes, values and personalities may also vary, therefore both groups were separately included in the study, and, as indicated earlier, social work education in India is primarily offered at the graduate level.

Data for this study were collected from 78 American graduate students and 60 American undergraduates at two state universities in a mid-western and a south-western city in the United States. The 77 Indian graduate students were from two schools of social work, each located in a large city in North India. All students were volunteer participants who were informed that this was a study of their attitudinal and behavioral responses to a number of statements and were de-briefed after the allotted one-hour time limit.

Instrument: The California Psychological Inventory (CPI)

The California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1975) was selected as an indirect measure of personal values comparable to the instruments used by Hofstede (1980) and England (1967) and was administered to the 215 participants in the study. The CPI is used primarily with non-psychiatrically disturbed subjects and focuses on those characteristics that are considered important for social living and interaction, regardless of setting, culture or circumstance (Gough, 1975; Guthrie & Lonner, 1986; Levin & Karni, 1970; Megargee, 1970). Although the CPI was developed in the United States, it was designed, from the start, as an etic instrument which has been validated in many other countries, including India (Gough & Sandhu, 1964). It contains 468 statements, twelve of which appear twice, for a total of 480 items which are divided into 18 standard scales, each of which was developed to assess one important aspect of the personality. The items on each scale were designed for a specific purpose, to identify individuals possessing personal traits

associated with particular behavior patterns or attitudes. Thus, the personality traits of individuals are expected to reflect their personal value systems which, in turn, are influenced by national and professional cultures.

Dependent Measure Operationalized

Typically, the self-orientation behaviors or values that indicate individualism may be embodied in six of the CPI scales, those reflecting competitiveness, ambition, self-assurance and leadership, (a) dominance, (b) capacity for status, (c) sociability, (d) flexibility, (e) achievement via independence and (f) intellectual efficiency. The other-oriented values of collectivism, that place other's needs ahead of one's own and are marked by caring and reponsivity, may be found in the personality scales of (a) socialization, (b) self-control, (c) good impression, (d) tolerance, (e) communality, (f) femininity, (g) achievement via conformance and (h) psychological-mindedness. Not all values and/or characteristics of the CPI can be identified, or associated with individualistic or collectivistic orientations and may be neutral items that suggest an equal endorsement of both self- and other-oriented values. These may be (a) social presence, (b) self-acceptance, (c) sense of well-being and (d) responsibility.

Results

Table 1 displays summary measures (means and standard deviations) on all eighteen value characteristics for all three subject groups: U.S. graduate students, U.S. undergraduates and Indian graduate students.

Insert Table 1

T-tests were performed on each scale for every combination of the three subject groups, (a) U.S. graduates--U.S. undergraduates, (b) U. S. graduates--Indian graduates, and (c) U.S. undergraduates--Indian graduates, to assess if differences were significant. These results are also summarized in Table 1.

The t-tests indicate that (a) there were no significant differences between U. S. graduates and undergraduates on the scales of dominance, social presence, self-acceptance, flexibility and femininity, (b) there were no significant differences between U. S. and Indian graduates on self-control and good impression, and (c) there were no significant differences between U. S. undergraduates and Indian graduates on the ten scales of dominance, capacity for status, well-being, responsibility, socialization, tolerance, communality, achievement via conformance, intellectual efficiency and femininity. In addition, where significance was noted, (a) the means for U. S. graduates were higher than those for both the U. S. undergraduates and Indian graduates, and (b) the means for U. S. undergraduates were higher than those for Indian graduates, except on the scales of self-control and good impression where the latter group's scores were higher. The overall results of the tests of means supports the general contention that graduate American and Indian social work students are significantly different, and the findings did point to the directions predicted based on the values of individualism but not collectivism. A surprising outcome of the data analysis was that the scores for U. S. undergraduate students were more similar to those of the Indian graduates than to those of the U. S. graduates.

Discussion and Implications

The expectation that social work students from an individualist culture would evidence more self-oriented behaviors than would those from a

collectivist culture was supported at the graduate level but not in the comparison of U. S. undergraduates and Indian graduates. However, contrary to the prediction that Indian students would score higher on other-oriented behaviors, the findings revealed that the U.S. graduate students' scores surpassed those of the Indian graduates on all but two of the CPI scales; on these, they showed no significant differences. Thus, while H1 was supported, both H2 and H3 were rejected for the graduate students. Interestingly, the U.S. undergraduates evidenced scores more similar to those of the Indian graduate students than to those of American graduates, and although they scored higher on the self-oriented scales of sociability, achievement via independence and flexibility, they did not differ on the other scales calling for a partial rejection of H1 for these two subject groups.

U. S. graduates scored higher than U. S. undergraduates on all the scales except dominance, social presence, self-acceptance, flexibility and femininity where there were no significant differences. Furthermore, it was expected that the three subject groups would not differ on the values of social presence, self-acceptance, sense of well-being and responsibility. However, H3 was also rejected. U. S. graduates scored higher than the Indian graduates on all four scales. There were no differences between the two U. S. groups on social presence and self-acceptance and no differences between the U. S. undergraduates and Indian graduates on sense of well-being and responsibility.

It appears, therefore, that graduate social work students in the two countries of the U. S. and India differ greatly in terms of personality characteristics while the U. S. undergraduates' personality profiles are more similar to those of the Indian graduates than to the U. S. graduates. This latter finding was very unexpected and rather surprising since the impact of

the two very different cultures, Western and Third World, was anticipated to clearly influence the personality characteristics evidenced regardless of student status. This might lead one to conclude that the educational and socialization processes of social work students at the undergraduate level in America may be more similar to those of students at the graduate level in India, and both may differ from the educational and socialization processes of U. S. graduate social work students.

As suggested elsewhere in the paper, although national culture has a significant impact on the individual, the effects of a professional culture that cuts across national boundaries may be evidenced in that individual's behavior, attitudes and personality. Such a conclusion may merit consideration as in the field of child welfare in the United States, for example, line workers providing interventive and rehabilitative services to children are primarily baccalaureate degreed persons, while master's level social workers in the field move rapidly, if not immediately, into supervisory positions. In India, where the field of social work has not received as much support, where proportionately fewer social service positions are available and where there is a shortage of social workers, most graduate degreed social workers provide line services. Therefore, as direct services are delivered by bachelor's level workers in the United States and by master's level workers in India, it may be reasonable to assume either that persons with similar values and personalities are attracted to these two groups in the U. S. and India, or that they are socialized through similar processes.

Whether similar socialization and educational processes meet the needs of the client groups in the two countries, however, remains debatable. Although U. S. undergraduate social workers and graduate Indian social workers both

provide line services to their clients, the similarity may end there. Socio-cultural values and socio-economic conditions in the two countries are vastly different as are some of the needs of children, and although line social workers in both countries may subscribe to similar social work values, those in the United States primarily provide treatment and rehabilitation services while social workers in India engage in outreach, prevention and community service. However, as most social work students in India are from the more affluent and educated families, it becomes critical to assess if their education sensitizes them to the poverty, disease and illiteracy in their own country, or reinforces their upper-middle class values that are more akin to those of the West.

Social work education began in India in the mid-1930s as an adaptation of the United States' system of education (Nanavatty, 1985) not only because the founding director of the first school of social work in India was American, but also because, at that time, the American system was the only successful model available (Nagpaul, 1983). Furthermore, Indian social work education is mainly available at the MSW level as the U.S. model was primarily graduate, and since there was a ready made body of formulated concepts, theories and techniques from the U.S. social work literature, these were used, and continue to be used, to train Indian social work students (Nagpaul, 1988).

Historically, Western social work educators have offered assistance in the development of social work education programs in schools of social work in Asia and, to some extent, in Africa and Latin America (Kendall, 1979). However, when western methods of social work are applied to non-Western countries, several conflicts may arise because of differences both in cultural values (Jamshidi, 1978) and between Western and non-Western realities (Otis,

1986). In disciplines that rely on interpersonal processes and where theory and practice are culture-bound, national culture plays a mediating role in sharing knowledge (Casino, 1983). Nevertheless, often Western educators have assumed that knowledge and expertise originating in their countries are universally acceptable and have not taken into account the impact of specific cultural, political and economic influences on human functioning (Bogo & Herington, 1988; Loewenberg, 1979; Midgely, 1981). In addition, several critics of this transfer of social work education across national boundaries claim that U.S. models may be inappropriate and/or irrelevant in Third World Countries (Jamshidi, 1978; Nagpaul, 1988; Nanavatty, 1985; Ramachandran, 1988) because these models are a product of U.S. history, culture and socio-economic conditions and are couched in the basic ideology of the responsibility of people to shape their own welfare (Nagpaul, 1988). The findings of this study, that indicate similarities between American undergraduates and Indian graduate students, may indicate not only the effects of the transfer of social work education across national boundaries but also cultural similarities resulting from the increasing westernization of the upper classes in India and may reinforce the distance between service providers in India and their client groups.

With the globalization of all fields, including social work, must come a recognition that though theories and methods may be transferred across nations, they must be done so cautiously with care given to and understanding of the impact of the values, politics and economic conditions of each country. Schools of social work in the United States that draw students from around the world, and very often from Third World countries, need to sensitize themselves to the need for training social workers whose skills will have application in

their native countries. Likewise, schools of social work in Third World Countries, such as India, must modify their programs to recognize the need for indigenous social work education.

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TABLE 1

Group Means and Standard Deviations						
N = 215						
	U.S. Graduates		U.S. Undergrads		Indian Graduates	
	n = 78		n = 60		n = 77	
	\bar{X}	s.d.	\bar{X}	s.d.	\bar{X}	s.d.
CPI Scales						
Dominance ^b	31.01	6.6	27.82	10.4	24.58	6.2
Capacity for ^{ab} status	20.73	3.8	17.30	4.1	16.13	3.8
Sociability ^{abc}	25.89	4.6	23.85	4.6	19.64	4.7
Social ^{bc} presence	36.82	6.2	34.66	5.4	28.93	5.8
Self-acceptance ^{bc}	23.09	3.6	23.15	10.0	17.00	4.2
Well-Being ^{ab}	34.53	5.2	28.52	6.7	27.46	6.9
Responsibility ^{ab}	30.24	4.2	25.12	5.4	25.62	4.6
Socialization ^{ab}	35.53	5.1	32.18	6.4	32.83	6.7
Self-control ^{ac}	28.85	7.4	23.40	7.6	26.57	7.6
Tolerance ^{ab}	23.13	4.7	17.35	5.2	16.24	5.2
Good Impression ^{ac}	16.22	5.0	13.85	5.1	17.41	5.2
Communality ^{ab}	25.54	2.6	21.63	5.6	20.88	4.4
Achievement via ^{ab} Conformance	28.44	4.4	23.76	4.6	22.37	4.8
Achievement via ^{abc} Independence	22.15	4.3	18.12	5.0	16.09	4.1
Intellectual ^{ab} Efficiency	38.40	5.3	31.82	6.4	31.18	5.6
Psychological ^{abc} mindedness	12.62	3.2	10.90	3.1	9.40	2.9
Flexibility ^{bc}	10.53	3.7	10.45	4.0	8.76	3.8
Femininity ^b	21.83	3.9	21.35	3.8	20.17	3.6
Significance of t-tests						
a = $p < .05$ for U.S. graduates vs U.S. undergraduates						
b = $p < .05$ for U.S. graduates vs Indian graduates						
c = $p < .05$ for U.S. undergraduates vs Indian graduates						