

CULTURE AND NARCISSISM: MALAYSIAN AND AMERICAN YOUTHS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of culture on narcissism levels of college/university students from two perspectives – international (between Malaysia and America) and intra-national (among the Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia). The 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-40) was used to measure narcissism levels. Findings show that Malaysian students' narcissism level is comparable to that reported in the United States, and there is no difference in narcissism levels among the three ethnicities. It is conjectured that this lack of difference could be a result of the formation of a world culture through Americanisation.

1.0 Introduction

The term narcissism originated from the story of Narcissus, who, according to Greek mythology, was so in love with himself that he died of starvation from endlessly admiring his own reflection in a lake.

The field of psychology makes a distinction between two types of narcissism – pathological narcissism and sub-clinical narcissism. Pathological narcissism is recognised as a psychological disorder termed the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), which is defined as grandiosity, a lack of empathy, and a need for admiration (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Sub-clinical or normal narcissism refers to people who display narcissistic traits at levels that are not serious enough to be clinically diagnosed with NPD.

The present study examines sub-clinical narcissistic traits among college students in Malaysia. Hereafter, the term narcissism refers to sub-clinical or normal narcissism.

Narcissism is associated with unfavourable behaviours. Narcissists are attention-seeking, over-confident and lack empathy (Young & Pinsky, 2006); manipulative, self-centred, and given to grandiosity (Young & Pinsky, 2006); extrinsically motivated (Kasser & Ryan, 1996), disagreeable (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992); arrogant (Paulhus, 1998); and have a propensity for boasting about their talents and achievements (Brunell, *et. al.*, 2010). Consequently, they can be difficult to get along with and the positive first impressions they create will eventually turn negative (Young & Pinsky, 2006). Narcissists engage in exhibitionist behaviours to flaunt their superiority and achievements to obtain admiration (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). They are self-serving, have an inflated sense of self-worth, and a blatant disregard for the feelings of others (Brunell, *et. al.*, 2010).

However, narcissism is not necessarily a negative characteristic. Narcissistic individuals tend to be extroverts (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992); more adept at social interactions (Emmons, 1984); and create good first impressions (Oltmanns *et. al.*, 2004). Researchers have also found a positive correlation between narcissism and self-esteem (Emmons,

1984). In short, some level of narcissism is necessary for a healthy self-esteem and for coping with the ever-increasing competitive environment, but excessive narcissistic qualities can be detrimental (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

2.0 Statement of The Problem

There appears to be a link between narcissism and culture.

2.1 International Cultural Differences

Culture is defined as “the norms, beliefs and customs that are learned from society and lead to common patterns of behavior” (Assael, 1992). Each society has a common set of “values, ideals and assumptions about life” that influence people’s actions, behaviour and notions of what is considered socially acceptable (Safiek Mokhlis, 2009).

One aspect of culture that is pertinent to the current study is the notion of individualism versus collectivism. Individualistic cultures are more independent, mind their own business and look after their own interests and those of their immediate family first. In contrast, collectivists place group interests above individual ones, have strong in-group cohesiveness, and are inter-dependent on each other (Hofstede, n.d.).

People in individualistic cultures place themselves and their immediate families above others (Jandt, 2009). Individualistic cultures, which emphasise independence, individualism, being special and different, are more narcissistic (Foster *et. al.*, 2003).

According to Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Model, Americans are more individualistic than Malaysians. In a worldwide study conducted by Hofstede, the United States scored 91 on individualism, whereas Malaysia scored 26 (Itim International, n.d.). The United States is ranked as the most individualistic country among 50 countries surveyed, while Malaysia ranked 36 (Jandt, 2009).

Foster *et. al.* (2003) surveyed 3445 participants from 6 continents and found that respondents from more individualistic cultures reported higher levels of narcissism. The United States scored higher levels of narcissism than Asia.

Therefore, there is reason to expect that Malaysians, having been rated a lot lower on the individualism scale than the Americans in Hofstede’s study, would record lower levels of narcissism than the reported for Americans. Hence the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Malaysians would have a lower NPI score than the Americans.

2.2 Intra-national Cultural Differences

Cultural differences within the same country can influence the way people act and perceive themselves (Plaut *et. al.*, 2002). Foster *et. al.* (2003) found that Black Americans scored highest in narcissism, and Asian Americans scored the lowest, whereas White Americans scored lower than the Blacks but higher than the Asians.

In Malaysia, many studies have shown that the differences in the three main cultures (the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians) are a significant predictor of various aspects of their

behaviours and actions, for example, in terms of consumer decision-making styles (Safiyek Moklis & Hayatul Safrah Salleh , 2009); teacher commitment levels (Nordin *et. al.*, 2010); and knowledge acquisition and sharing strategies (Nik Maheran Nik Muhammad & Filzah Md Isa, 2009).

Therefore, there is reason to expect different levels of narcissism among these three ethnic groups. This gives rise to the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: There is a difference in NPI score among the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians.

2.3 Significance of The Study

In summary, this study aims to investigate associations between narcissistic levels and culture by investigating the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Malaysians have a lower NPI score than the Americans.

Hypothesis 2: There is a difference in NPI scores among the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians.

This study is important because there is growing concern about the Americanisation of the world. The term *Americanisation* refers to “the influence the United States of America has on the culture of other countries, substituting their culture with American culture” (Ssenyonga, 2006). The pervasiveness of all things American in Malaysia is evident in the popularity of American brands like Starbucks, Apple and McDonald’s, and American celebrities like Lady Gaga, Michael Jackson and Tiger Woods.

In addition, the mass media is a highly effective purveyor of American lifestyle and ideals (Ssenyonga, 2006). Sixty percent of Malaysian television consists of content from the United States (Ezhar Tamam, Wan Anita Wan Abas, 2006). The influence of American culture on Malaysian society has been the subject of many studies, and the general fear is that exposure to American lifestyle and values in the mass media would render Malaysians to abandon their Asian values and traditions in favour of American ones (Ezhar Tamam, 2009).

This echoes the assertions made by Mohd Yusof Hussain (2006):

“The contention is most of the western movies promote lifestyle, values, morals and belief system that are truly foreign; the news programs are based on the western conception of truth, freedom and democracy which may not resonate with the Malaysian cultural values, and the music videos are based on changing western taste devoid of spiritual values.”

Therefore, the findings of the present study, which aims to compare narcissism levels between Malaysians and Americans, would contribute to the body of knowledge about the Americanisation of Malaysia.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Participants and Procedures

Data was collected via convenience sampling. A survey questionnaire was administered to 200 participants from six different classes at a private college in the Klang Valley in Malaysia.

The questionnaire was distributed at the end of each class and collected after 15 minutes in order to ensure 100% response rate. The participants were requested to complete all questions in the questionnaire.

3.2 Measurements

The survey questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section One obtained demographic information about the respondents. Section Two consisted of a survey instrument, the 40-item NPI-40, to measure the respondents' narcissism levels.

The NPI-40 is an established instrument that measures sub-clinical narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Developed by Robert Raskin and Howard Terry in the 1980s, it consists of 40 pairs of narcissistic and non-narcissistic statements. For each pair of statement, respondents were asked to select the one that they identify with most. The NPI-40 has a maximum score of 40. The higher the NPI score, the more narcissistic a person is. The NPI score is not used to diagnose NPD. It merely provides scores that enable comparison of the degree of narcissistic tendencies (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

3.3 Method of Analyses

The NPI score was calculated for all the 200 respondents. To investigate Hypothesis 1, a one-sample t-test was conducted to compare the sample mean NPI score to the reported mean score from the Foster *et. al.* (2003) survey of 2546 respondents in America (mean = 15.3, SD = 6.8).

To examine Hypothesis 2, the normality of the sample mean NPI scores were ascertained through a histogram. Then a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean NPI scores of the Chinese, Malays and Indians. The level of significance used to accept or reject the hypothesis was 0.05.

4.0 Results

4.1 Summary Statistics

The sample consisted of 69 male and 131 female students from various academic programmes. Their ages ranged from 18 to 30 years, with a mean of 20 years. There were 66 Malays, 67 Chinese and 67 Indians. The mean age was 20.0 years (SD = 1.81).

4.2 Hypothesis 1: Malaysians Have a Lower NPI Score Than The Americans.

Table 1 – Mean NPI Score

| | N | Range | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|-----|-------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|
| NTotal | 200 | 30.00 | 2.00 | 32.00 | 15.2700 | 5.84705 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 200 | | | | | |

Table 2 – One-sample T-test of the Sample Mean NPI Scores

| | Test Value = 15.3 | | | | | |
|--------|-------------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|---|-------|
| | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| NTotal | -.073 | 199 | .942 | -.03000 | -.8453 | .7853 |

Tables 1 and 2 show that there is no significant difference in the mean NPI scores between the sample (mean = 15.27, SD = 5.85) and the score reported in Foster *et. al.* (2003) (mean = 15.3, SD = 6.8), $t(199) = -0.73$, $p < 0.05$.

4.3 Hypothesis 2: There is a difference in NPI scores among the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians.

Table 3 – ANOVA of NPI Scores and Ethnicity

| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|------|
| Between Groups | 131.672 | 2 | 65.836 | 1.944 | .146 |
| Within Groups | 6671.748 | 197 | 33.867 | | |
| Total | 6803.420 | 199 | | | |

Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference in NPI scores among the three races, $F(2,197) = 1.944$, $p < .05$.

5.0 Discussion

This study sought to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Malaysians have a lower NPI score than the Americans.

Hypothesis 2: There is a difference in NPI scores among the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians.

Hypothesis 1 is rejected. The mean NPI score for the Malaysian college student sample is surprisingly similar to that of 2546 American respondents from the Foster *et. al.* (2003) study, although according to Hofstede (n.d.), Malaysians rated much lower than Americans on individualism. One possible explanation is Malaysian youths could be becoming more individualistic because of their exposure to American culture and way of life through the mass media. This is supported by a study of Malaysian youths and their exposure to American entertainment and news programmes conducted by Ezhar Tamam, *et. al.* (2009), who found that youths who have been more exposed to American movies and music tend to be more individualistic. Lim (2001) also observed that Malaysians have become more individualistic “over the past decades.”

So, in line with the notion of Americanisation, it is possible that constant exposure to American movies have changed Malaysian students to become more individualistic.

Hypothesis 2 is also rejected. There does not seem to be a significant difference in mean NPI scores among the three major ethnicities. This could be because the respondents in the present study might have been relatively homogenous because they are all urban private college students. It stands to reason that urban societies, with more access to mass media and western influences than their rural counterparts, would be more Americanised. This idea is supported by Safiek Mokhlis (2009), who asserted that there are two types of Malaysian Chinese - the westernised Chinese who have adopted western lifestyle and values, and the more traditional Chinese who hold true to the traditional Chinese cultural values. Similarly, a distinction has also been made between urban (and modern) Malays who are more individualistic and independent and the *kampung* (village) Malays who are more community-oriented and collectivistic (Tham, 1982).

An alternative explanation is offered by M. Bakri Musa (2011) who commented that “There is now gradually emerging a common Malaysian culture...it is the natural consequence of people living and working together.”

The findings of this study can also be attributed to the pervasiveness of the mass media in spreading western and especially American culture and values, and the prevalence of digital technology (such as the internet, smartphones and tablets) which has increased interactions between people of different cultures from all parts of the world. As a result, a global culture with shared meanings, values and knowledge is slowly being created. In other words, the world is slowly becoming a global village, and national cultures are slowly giving way to a common “world culture” (Cohen, 2000).

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, there was no difference between the Malaysian and the American narcissism scores. There was no difference between the narcissism scores of the three main ethnicities in Malaysia. This study raises the question of whether Americanisation is truly making the world more homogenous.

Nevertheless, a major limitation of this study is that the sample is not truly representative of the Malaysian population as convenience sampling method was adopted in this exploratory study. Future research should attempt to obtain a sample that is more reflective of the Malaysian population.

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