



## Is Confucian culture unforgiving? Commentary on Stankov (2010)<sup>☆</sup>

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 9 August 2010

Accepted 14 August 2010

#### Keywords:

Confucian culture

Test anxiety

Self-doubt

### ABSTRACT

Stankov (2010) has offered an original and provoking theory to account for higher achievement, anxiety, and self-doubt among Asians. Unfortunately, several empirical and conceptual gaps must be closed before the author can make a convincing argument on the relationship between “unforgiving” Confucian culture and high achievement/test anxiety/self-doubt. The author relies too heavily on a methodology, comparisons using Likert-type response scales, well known to yield artifactual differences between cultures. More importantly, the author has not even clearly established that the scales he uses truly measure an unforgiving nature and that Confucian culture truly is more unforgiving than European culture. Finally even if we ignore the first two problems, the author's argument still is undermined by the number of counterexamples that can be generated to his theory.

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Stankov (2010) reviewed recent studies showing that students from Confucian Asian countries report higher levels of anxiety and self-doubt than Europeans while outperforming Europeans on international tests of mathematical and scientific ability (e.g., the TIMSS and PISA). To explain these differences, Stankov argued that people from modern Confucian Asian countries are less forgiving than Europeans are, and this relatively unforgiving culture along with its emphasis on effort is responsible for both high achievement and high anxiety and self-doubt among Asian students. This idea is original and provocative. However, the author needs to address a few methodological and conceptual issues before he can make a convincing argument on the relationship between “unforgiving Confucian culture” and “high achievement/test anxiety/self-doubt.”

One methodological issue is that the author has not established that the two groups are significantly different on his measures of unforgiveness. That is, the author concluded that Asian countries are higher than European countries on these scales, but he reported the results of only two omnibus *F*-tests involving nine regions or countries. He did not report the results of post hoc tests or pairwise comparisons needed to show that his two groups of interest, Asians and Europeans, actually are statistically different from each other.

Even if Confucian Asians and Europeans are statistically different from each other on those scales, the author's other methodological problem is relying on scales to compare the two cultures. Indeed, the author himself states that “...psychological scales developed in the Western context may not be optimal scales for use in Confucian Asia”

(p. 11). So let me address what the problems are. First, most of the items on these scales are value statements. As pointed out by Peng, Nisbett, and Wong (1997), value surveys relying on rating scales (such as Likert-type scales) tend to have low validity for several reasons, such as the meaning of particular value terms might be interpreted or construed quite differently by various cultural groups. For example, the value term of “equity” may be interpreted by an African American in terms of racial equity and by a Chinese in terms of social equity.

Second, people tend to make judgment about their own values and behaviors relative to other people's. Thus, different cultural groups might be using different reference groups when evaluating their own beliefs, values, and behaviors, resulting in unreliable results in cross-cultural comparisons based on self-reports (see also Heine, Buchtel, & Norenzayan, 2008; Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002). For example, the reference group in Asia is likely to be better at math than are those in Europe. Thus in comparison to a different reference group, Asians may feel they are not doing as well in math as Europeans think they are doing. The author was too quick to dismiss this alternative explanation by stating that “this is not a strong argument, of course, since a similar situation must exist in European countries as well” (p. 10). The fact that Europeans exhibit the “better than average” effect (i.e., people think they are better than average), whereas such tendency is weaker or lacking among Asians (Hamamura, Heine, & Takemoto, 2007; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; at least when compared with ingroup members, Brown, 2004) indicates that the situation is not the “same” in European and Asian countries. This brings up another counter explanation: the cross-cultural differences on self-doubt may have more to do with Europeans' tendency to self-enhance and Asians' tendency to self-improve (Heine et al., 1999) than forgiveness. In sum, cross-cultural comparisons based on these self-report may be misleading because respondents are using

<sup>☆</sup> The author thanks Jill Jacobson, Stanka Fitneva, Albert Lee, Lindsay Schaefer, and Roy Spina for their comments and suggestions.

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different reference groups (Heine et al., 2002) and/or demonstrate self-enhancement to different degrees. Such criticisms can be applied to the anxiety measures as well.

Perhaps a more important problem that the author needs to address is the content validity of his scales. That is, it is unclear how endorsing toughness, maliciousness, and pro-violence relates to forgiveness. Some of the items on the latter two scales pertain to revenge, which is the opposite of forgiveness; however, the author did not conduct his analyses on just these items. Consequently, the conceptual clarity of the construct is muddled. For example, one could favor violence as a means to gain land or other assets, which has nothing to do with revenge or lack of forgiveness, but instead reflects greed or lack of concern for property rights. A more satisfying approach would be to show cross-cultural differences on actual measures of forgiveness or, better yet, forgiving versus vengeful behaviors.

Furthermore, it is a great leap from endorsement of toughness, maliciousness, and pro-violence to conclusions about Asian parenting styles particularly in response to their children's academic failure. The context is very different from those involved in the scales. How do questions such as: "I am tired of being forced to do things", and "Rules can kill your will to live" (toughness); "If I had complete power over people, many would regret the day they were born," and "the only difference between criminals and others is that criminals have the courage to act on their desires." (maliciousness); and "Killing is justified when it is an act of revenge," and "If violence does not solve problems, it is because there was not enough of it" (pro-violence) relate to parental attitudes toward academic failure?

Most critically, the link between high academic achievement and anxiety/self-doubt and unforgiving is not well established, neither empirically nor conceptually. Why would an unforgiving culture produce both high math and related achievement and high anxiety/self-doubt? Why not just one of the two? What not something else? Why math but not reading? Why do we not see a similar pattern in other cultures, particularly honor cultures like the Scotch Irish and Arabs, that are characterized by a more vengeful or unforgiving nature?

As to the big question why Asians perform well academically but report higher levels of anxiety and self-doubt (assuming no measurement problems), the jury is still out. The author argues that both are products of the unforgiving culture in Confucian Asian countries, but perhaps these two somehow feed into each other. In the following section, I propose several explanations that are not mutually exclusive, but are different from what the author proposed in his paper.

- (a) If anxiety and self-doubt are truly higher among Asians, part of the problem can be attributed to the exam system and part to social pressure. For example, students' marks and ranks in exams are often made public in Asian schools (Stevenson, & Lee, 1996), which rarely happens (if it happens at all) in Europe or North America. Such practice in Asia may serve as a great motivator for students to do well and move forward in the ranking system next time, but it may also lead to high anxiety about potential failures. Another consequence is that one can not fool him/herself into

thinking one is doing well or mislead others to believe it, if everyone can see that one is at the bottom of the class. As a result, low self-concepts in regard to the subject (math or else) may be more likely to develop in the Asian context.

- (b) Another related explanation has to do with the notion of "face". "Face" is one's public image, which is valued much more in interdependent cultures (such as many Asian countries) than in independent cultures (such as North America and Western Europe). Children are expected to do well in Asian countries so that they can have "face", and their parents and other family members can have "face", i.e., looking good to others. As a result, they may be more pressured to study harder (which could result in better performance), and they may feel more anxious about school and more guilty or shameful when they fail because they would be losing "face", or/and causing their parents to lose "face".
- (c) One other explanation is the emphasis on independence and interdependence in the two cultures. In independent European cultures, autonomy is emphasized and valued much more than in Asian interdependent cultures. As a result, European parents believe that children are independent agents who strive for personal freedom. Such sense of autonomy may lead European parents to be less likely to pressure their children to do well in school. Children thus will be less anxious and less guilty if they do not achieve academically. As a result, the academic environment will be less competitive than that in Asia.

In conclusion, the conceptual and empirical links between Confucian culture and high academic achievement, high anxiety and self-doubt have yet to be established before any meaningful conclusions can be drawn.

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