

Decision making styles in Australia, Malaysia and Singapore

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Abstract: This paper is an exploration of culture and the conflict model of decision making [1]. Six hundred and seventy three students in Australia, Malaysia and Singapore were tested on the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire [2] to explore cultural differences between these three countries. Vigilance was reported as higher for Malaysian students compared to Australia and Singapore. Decision self esteem was reported as higher for Australians than the other two countries. Hyper-vigilance was reported as higher for Malaysia than the other two countries, while buck-passing and procrastination was reported as higher for Australia and Singapore. There were no differences reported on defensive avoidance and rationalization. These results are discussed in terms of cultural differences.

Key Words: decision making decision self esteem vigilance hyper-vigilance procrastination buck-passing rationalization defensive avoidance

1. Introduction

We live in a global village where decisions made by an individual in one country may have far reaching consequences around the world. These decisions often have political, social, economic and environmental consequences. This paper considers decision making styles through an exploration of the conflict model of decision making [1] across three countries in the Asian region.

The conflict model of decision making is based on the idea that decision making may generate psychological distress as the decision maker considers alternatives that may have differential effects on the individual, and the negative impacts of making a wrong decision [1]. The way this stress is managed, is thought to influence the style of decision making that is adopted. Janis and Mann [1] identified a number of styles of decision making. *Vigilant*

decision making is seen as the most effective style, which is a methodical approach utilizing a number of clear stages.

Other styles of decision making are impacted by the psychological distress, resulting in a number of less effective styles of decision making, including *hypervigilance* or impulsive decisions, *defensive avoidance* as another style of decision making where the decision maker uses strategies such as *buck-passing*, *rationalization*, and *procrastination* as ways of making the distressful situation requiring a decision to be made due to an inability or unwillingness to make decisions [1].

Janis and Mann [1] noted that individual differences may influence the style of decision making adopted. Culture has been one of the factors that has been considered in terms of decision making style. In a study of three western cultures (USA, Australia and New Zealand) and three eastern cultures (Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), Mann et al. [3] found that vigilant decision making did not vary across these cultures. However, the Eastern cultures reported higher defensive avoidance and hyper-vigilant decision making styles. The western cultures also reported higher decision self esteem than the eastern cultures.

2. Problem Formulation

Western countries which are usually considered to be more individualistic in their orientations may have greater vigilance and decision self esteem and lower non-vigilant patterns of decision making than Eastern countries which are frequently considered to be more collectivistic. However, as the East and West influence each other, this should also be evident in the decision making styles, which accounts for similarities in the past research that has compared countries on decision making styles. For the differences that do exist, it is expected that Eastern countries with the least connection with Western countries will tend to report different styles of decision making.

The Australian sample collected between 2008 and 2009 and consisted of 336 respondents (65 males and 279 females) attending first year psychology lectures in a university in Sydney, Australia who received course credit for their participation. Respondents ranged between 18 and 69 years of age ($M=20.2$, $SD=5.4$). The Malaysian sample collected in 2009 consisted of 178 respondents (58 males and 129 females) attending a university in Kuala Lumpur. These respondents ranged between 18 and 60 years of age ($M=24.9$, $SD=8.1$). The Singaporean sample collected in 2008 consisted of 159 respondents (60 males and 99 females) attending a university in Singapore. Respondents ranged between 18 and 56 years of age ($M=19.9$, $SD=6.4$).

A questionnaire was constructed the consisted of some demographic questions and the *Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire*[2]. This scale was based on the Janis and Mann [1] conflict model of decision making and consisted of 31 items measuring various styles of decision making and a 6 item scale measuring decision self esteem. Items were rated on a 3 point scale of 1 (true for me), 2 (sometimes true for me), and 3 (not true for me), which were recoded from 0 to 2. Alpha reliabilities for the subscales were *Vigilance* ($\alpha=.80$, current study $\alpha=.74$), *Hypervigilance* ($\alpha=.74$, current study $\alpha=.72$), *Defensive avoidance* (current study $\alpha=.64$), *Buck-passing* ($\alpha=.87$, current study $\alpha=.80$), *Procrastination* ($\alpha=.81$, current study $\alpha=.73$), *Rationalization* (current study $\alpha=.52$), and *Decision Self Esteem* ($\alpha=.74$, current study $\alpha=.80$).

These questionnaires were administered through a paper and pencil survey for most of the students in Malaysia and through a secure web based on line survey for the remainder of the respondents. Following ethics approval at Macquarie University, flyers or questionnaires were distributed so that respondents could opt to complete the survey.

3. Problem Solution

The means for all of the variables were compared between the three countries using a one way analysis of variance, resulting in three distinct patterns which are reported in Table 1. For all three countries there were no differences reported on defensive avoidance and rationalization. Decision self esteem was higher for Australians than for citizens of the other two countries. Vigilance in decision making was reported to be higher for Malaysian and Australians than for Singaporeans. Hyper-vigilance in decision making was reported to be higher for Malaysians than for citizens of the other two countries. Buck-passing was reported as higher for Singaporeans and Australians than for Malaysians. Finally, procrastination was reported as higher for Australian and Singaporeans than for Malaysians. Thus, for country profiles, Australians scored higher on decision self esteem, vigilance and procrastination. Malaysians scored higher on hyper-vigilance than other countries. Singaporeans scored higher on buck-passing and procrastination than the other countries.

Finally, analysis was conducted to consider the relationship between the decision making variables and age. These results appear in Table 2. Most of the correlations were significant.

4. Conclusion

Probably the most useful analysis is to consider the profile of decision making scores from each country separately. Australian students demonstrated the connection between decision self esteem and vigilance, but also scores higher than at least one other country on procrastination and buck-passing. This suggests that Australians may feel confident in taking action in making decisions, delaying some decisions when there are too many options, but perhaps when these decisions go wrong, they may avoid responsibility for these decisions. These attitudes may relate to being a Western country that sees itself as competent which is commonly associated with a "can do" type of attitude and a willingness to "give things a go".

Malaysian students also reported themselves as high on vigilance in decision making, which

is consistent with the low scores they reported on buck-passing and procrastination. However, the vigilance scores are not in the expected direction with regard to hyper-vigilance and decision self esteem. It is unusual to have high vigilance scores and high hyper-vigilance scores reported. Perhaps this result reflects the ability to make vigilant decisions, but without the accompanying higher decision self esteem, may be accompanied by higher reported hyper-vigilance in a bid to manage the good performance on vigilant decision making. It may be that without the decision self esteem, that there is a lack of confidence reflected in the hyper-vigilance pattern. Malaysians have achieved well in terms of their development without the strong support of the west that has been present in Singapore. Perhaps they pride themselves as being somewhat independent and successful which is reflected in the high vigilant scores they reported.

Finally, Singapore reported a different pattern when comparing the three countries with lower decision self esteem and lower vigilance in decision making. However, they reported lower hyper-vigilance scores, and higher buck-passing and procrastination scores. Thus, it seems that they perhaps mirror Australia only in terms of higher procrastination and buck-passing scores and lower hyper-vigilance scores. It is possible that their decision making patterns relate to procrastination and buck-passing without the benefit of vigilant decision making patterns and decision self esteem. They have adapted very well to the Western market by creating an advanced commercial base that in some ways is supported through Western patronage. Being reliant upon the west may make Singaporeans very conscious of doing things the right way in the eyes of their consumers, accounting for a considered approach to decision making which is not hyper-vigilant, nor is it a vigilant pattern. Thus, to avoid dealing with the fallout of poor decisions, they may be tempted to rely upon buck-passing and procrastination, but have not resorted to the anxious approach of hyper-vigilance in decision making.

Of course these ideas are speculative and would need to be tested further before they could be confirmed. The limited sample of university students also makes these findings non-representative. Finally, the results are self report and suffer from all of the difficulties that are apparent with such surveys. However, the differences are interesting and are quite different from previous research on decision making. Perhaps in the last 20 years there have been changes in how these three countries relate to each other as they all attempt to obtain a greater share of the economic pot in the region which in some ways are reflected in these findings.

Reference:

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Table 1: Means and standard deviations (in brackets) for the decision making variables across country samples

Decision Making Variable	Australian Sample (n=336)	Malaysian Sample (n=178)	Singaporean Sample (n=159)
Decision Self Esteem	1.32** (0.44)	1.22 (0.44)	1.20 (0.38)
Vigilance	1.59 (0.40)	1.64 (0.33)	1.48*** (0.40)
Hyper-vigilance	1.04 (0.46)	1.16** (0.41)	1.04 (0.37)
Buck-passing	0.93 (0.51)	0.80** (0.41)	0.91 (0.42)
Defensive Avoidance	0.84 (0.49)	0.83 (0.38)	0.85 (0.43)
Rationalization	0.94 (0.41)	0.96 (0.36)	0.88 (0.40)
Procrastination	0.91 (0.49)	0.79* (0.41)	0.86 (0.43)

*P < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Table 2: Pearsons product moment correlations between decision making variables and age (n=673).

Variable	AGE	DSE	VIG	HYPER	BUCK	DEFAV	RATION	PROC
Age	-							
DSE	.11**	-						
VIG	.08*	.32***	-					
HYPER	-.16***	-.47***	-.03	-				
BUCK	-.18***	-.51***	-.19***	.47***	-			
DEFAV	-.17***	-.58***	-.18***	.59***	.74***	-		
RATION	-.17***	-.36***	-.16***	.64***	.47***	.53***	-	
PROC	-.15***	-.51***	-.17***	.54***	.64***	.69***	.54***	-