Studying Personality and Personality Disorders among People in the Caribbean
Advocating for an Emic-Etic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses issues relevant to the examination of personality and personality disorder in contexts, such as the Caribbean, which are under-represented in this scholarship. The article argues that because normal personality is the standard against which definitions of non-normality (and at the extreme, disorder) are derived, a crucial first step in identifying personality disorder is clear and culturally relevant definitions of normal personality. Two key conceptual perspectives on personality development and manifestation are presented, followed by a brief exploration, using the etic traits approach, of the problematic nature of any one perspective on normal personality. The article argues for the need for combined emic-etic approaches to understanding normal and non-normal personality, particularly in under-represented contexts such as the Caribbean. It ends by offering concrete suggestions on developing, in the Caribbean, programmes of research committed to these tasks.

Keywords: Caribbean, emic-etic, personality disorder, personality, traits

Estudio Sobre Personalidad y Trastornos de Personalidad entre las Personas del Caribe: En Defensa de un Enfoque Émico-Ético

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RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda cuestiones pertinentes al examen de la personalidad y los trastornos de la personalidad en contextos, tales como el Caribe, que están insuficientemente representadas en esta área de estudios. El artículo argumenta que como la personalidad normal es el estándar frente el cual se derivan las definiciones de no normalidad (y trastorno, finalmente), un primer paso crucial en la identificación de los trastornos de la personalidad estriba en formular definiciones claras y culturalmente relevantes de la personalidad normal. Se presentan dos perspectivas conceptuales claves en el desarrollo y la manifestación de la personalidad, seguidos por una breve exploración que recurre al enfoque de rasgos éticos (etic), de la naturaleza problemática de cualquier perspectiva de una personalidad normal. El artículo argumenta la necesidad de combinar los enfoques émicos (emic) y éticos (etic) si se quiere comprender la personalidad normal y no normal, particularmente en contextos sub-representados como es el caso del Caribe. Se concluye brindando sugerencias concretas para desarrollar programas de investigación comprometida con estas tareas en el Caribe.

Palabras claves: Caribe, émico-ético, trastorno de personalidad, rasgos de personalidad

INTRODUCTION

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One of the perpetual and vexing issues with which researchers of personality and clinical psychology wrestle is the relationship between normal personality and personality disorders. Aside from the extensive debate between two distinct perspectives [the categorical approach and the dimensional approach] (1, 2), a crucial question to be confronted in

this area is: who/what defines normal personality, and deviations from such normality? This question is critical particularly in considerations of traditionally under-studied ethnic groups and/or groups from contexts different from those in which models of normal functioning have been developed.

Cultural and socio-ecological validity in scholarship is essential to the continued growth of the discipline of psychology. To this end, scholars today are encouraged to include diverse samples beyond western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic populations on which most psychological tenets have to date been founded (3). "Inescapably heterogeneous" Caribbean cultures (4) arguably present ideal contexts in which to explore the cultural and socio-ecological validity of models of personality.

In socio-historical contexts of colonialism, institutionalized discrimination, and violent intolerance to resistance, as is characteristic of the histories of many Caribbean countries, these are questions that should be at the core of discussions of normality and abnormality in personality expression and development. Intrinsic to the concept of personality disorders is the idea of deviation from social expectations, values, and norms (5). Yet, in contexts of oppression, such deviation has often been a key mechanism *via* which equity and justice are fought for and achieved. Questions about normative and non-normative personality manifestation and functioning are therefore at their core, questions about power and voice. Furthermore, discussions about disorder are, by their very nature, culture bound discussions (5).

The purpose of this article is to problematize the discussion of personality and personality disorder, considering how these phenomena are defined, and may manifest in contexts that are under-represented in extant scholarship on personality and personality disorder. We summarize two main conceptual perspectives on personality development and manifestation and then discuss the problematic nature of any one perspective on normal development using the traits approach as an example. We provide a brief critical review of key findings and debates in the scholarship on normal personality. Finally, we discuss the need for combined emic-etic approaches to normal and non-normal personality in under-represented and under-studied contexts and offer suggestions for programmes of research committed to these tasks.

Contemporary models of normal personality

A recent valuable contribution to conceptualizing personality is the six foci model of personality [SFMP] (6). Unlike strictly trait models that dominate much of the contemporary scholarship on personality, this framework includes both trait and social-cognitive approaches. Integrating systems theory with an explicitly developmental perspective (6), the SFMP shifts the focus from emphases on stability to more dynamic and multidirectional influences on individual growth and development within multilevel contexts (7). This reorientation has facilitated a reframing of change and continuity

across the individual life span where continuity is no longer the main focus of personality research and change is not considered a mere "nuisance variable". This is a major contribution in an area of research and practice in which stability is often used to label normality and non-normality.

The SFMP is organized to reflect a structural level with three focal areas (traits, personal action constructs, and life story), each with parallel processes (states, self-regulation, and self-narration, respectively). These structural and process level pairs comprise the levels of the "elaborated triarchic model" (6). Although the model recognizes some uniformity across individuals, it importantly captures patterns of individual diversity and change through differing goals and developmental tasks, which result in individual life stories that unfold over the life course (6). This type of conceptual model encourages an examination of normality and non-normality that is both dynamic and sensitive to contextual influences.

Despite the proposition of alternative models such as the SFMP, traits models – particularly the five factor model of personality (FFM) – continue to be the most widely accepted and researched approach in contemporary personality scholarship (8). The FFM argues that five traits – openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (OCEAN) – comprehensively describe human personality across cultures. This and similar trait models see culture and personality as distinct but interrelated phenomenon (8). Apart from the FFM, other instrument-oriented trait models exist and are widely used (9). Traditional ones include Cattell's sixteen-factor model, Eysenck's three-factor model (extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism) and Rotter's Locus of Control model (10). Alternative traits models, such as the honesty-humility, emotionality, extra-version, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience (HEXACO) model (11) and the Big Two (12), have been proposed more recently, which argue that instead of the FFM personality traits, others may be more prevalent in cultural contexts that have traditionally been under-studied in personality research. Normality and non-normality in these traditions are thus interpreted in relation to the manifestation of specific traits.

An example of the challenges of any one perspective: etic trait approaches to normal personality

Dominant perspectives see personality in terms of universal psychological traits that can be observed in all individuals and across all ages (8, 13), albeit with trait levels varying depending on developmental stage, gender and country context (8). These etic concepts of normative personality structure and traits have been developed primarily using studies from the United States of America (USA) or Europe (14), assessing mainly university student samples (15) and using English-based tools (*eg* the Big Five Inventory) translated into various languages (16, 17).

Cultural differences in normal personality are thus de-

fined by cross-cultural, cross-national, and cross-ethnic comparisons of mean-level, structural or individual differences in traits, and by comparing similarities and differences between such groups in continuity and change in these personality traits across the lifespan (14). With a few exceptions (18), this body of work has found no personality differences between ethnic groups at that broad trait level. However, a recent meta-analysis has suggested that ethnic groups may instead differ at the level of the components or facets that constitute each trait (19).

There have been mixed results on cross-cultural applicability of the etic traits approach, particularly in country contexts that are poor and less developed, contexts which are increasingly being referred to as the Majority World, as these are the countries in which most of the world's population live. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have indicated weak replication of traits such as neuroticism and openness (13, 15, 17, 20, 21). For instance, a study using the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory (CPAI) indicated that although four of the FFM dimensions were found in the Chinese population, openness to experience did not exist. Furthermore, a fifth unique factor, reciprocity in instrumental and affective relationships, was identified (22). Similarly, the HEXACO model replaces neuroticism with "emotionality," and includes an "honesty-humility" sixth factor (23). In recent studies of an Amazonian society in Bolivia, researchers found that the indigenous group displayed the "Big Two": prosociality and industriousness, instead of the FFM dimensions (12). Studies such as this underscore the need for research that examines what might and might not be applicable to populations other than those on which most studies of normal personality have been normed, even if the lens is solely or primarily a traits-based perspective (3).

However, etic traits scholarship rarely includes comparisons with populations from developing and small-state societies such as Caribbean countries. One of the few exceptions is a study assessing the FFM of personality traits in a Jamaican adolescent/young adult, unemployed population (21). This study, similar to ones described above, challenged the universality and comprehensiveness of the FFM and measures that are used to operationalize the model. Specifically, the structural validity and reliability of the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) were found to be questionable for the sample, with 73% of the items not performing well in confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) rotation. Furthermore, reliability estimates for items of the openness, extraversion, and neuroticism scales were typically lower than those reported for NEO-FFI scores (21). A follow-up study using the same Jamaican sample, found that a single higher-order factor was a superior model in comparison to the proposed five first order factors (23). These results call into question the validity of the FFM traits model for Jamaica and other Caribbean populations similar to the one in the study. Such studies illustrate why etic cross-cultural personality research must be used with a particular

sensitivity to its limitations, which include measurement bias (construct, method and item bias) and scalar inequivalence (17, 24).

Etic approaches test the transportability and applicability of personality models and measurement systems developed in Minority World contexts and/or samples to other ethnic groups. These cross-cultural approaches are top-down (22). Emic approaches, on the other hand, are based on indigenous psychologies (9, 22) and use a bottom-up approach to personality. These derived personality constructs are most reflective of individual and interpersonal experiences in local contexts (9, 22).

Combined emic-etic approaches to the study of normal and non-normal personality in under-represented contexts

Combined emic-etic approaches are essential to move toward understanding normal personality and personality disorders in "culturally inclusive and integrative models" (22). These approaches use the strengths of both the emic and etic perspectives while being sensitive and attending to their limitations (22).

Building upon exisiting examples of developing indigenous personality measures in Chinese and South African contexts (22), one emic-etic programme of research that will be valuable for Caribbean contexts is personality assessment. The development of personality assessment tools valid for research and practice between and within Caribbean countries is in early stages of development. As with most Majority World contexts, researchers and practitioners tend to use assessment tools that have been normed outside the Caribbean.

Emic-etic approaches to personality assessment require a systematic interrogation of the relevance of the assumptions implicit in such tools (*eg* literacy, cultural relevance of phenomenon detailed in items, the extent to which the items translate within and across Caribbean contexts). Professionals in the social and health sciences contribute to this research agenda when they assess whether normative factor structures assumed by etic measures are in fact replicated in Caribbean populations, whether cultural variations exist, to what extent, and the importance and meaning of any identified differences.

The development of emic conceptualizations of normal and non-normal personality in the Caribbean contexts is another element of this programme of research. These conceptualizations are founded on multi-tiered qualitative approaches. Exploration of local and regional literature to help identify modal psychological characteristics of persons within these contexts, focus groups and surveys with participants from varying sociodemographic groups, and expert interviews with psychologists, psychiatrists and other professionals, are elements of this qualitative investigation. Qualitative data clarify items to include in culturally appropriate multidimensional personality assessment tools

(10, 22). Using these tools alongside other established tools, particularly in the context of carefully planned and executed longitudinal studies, can help clarify dynamics important to the manifestation and development of normal and non-normal personality in the Caribbean.

CONCLUSION

In moving toward a greater understanding of normal personality and personality disorder in the Caribbean contexts, combined emic-etic approaches ensure that we are attuned to local realities while not throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Nationally representative studies in Caribbean contexts are essential to understand modal characteristics of members of the different countries (9) and to ascertain the prevalence of personality disorders. Traditional conceptual approaches and standard personality assessment tools are needed for this step. Similarly, the understanding of normality and non-normality can be assisted by the development of culturally relevant personality assessment tools.

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