

PERSONALITY AND COGNITIVE STYLE IN PRE
INDEPENDENCE AND POST
INDEPENDENCE
MALAYSIANS

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ABSTRAK

Malaysia mencapai kemerdekaan pada tahun 1957. Telah banyak pembangunan yang tercapai semenjak kemerdekaan termasuklah pembangunan infrastruktur dan ekonomi. Perubahan besar yang dialami oleh negara boleh juga mempengaruhi rakyatnya. Khususnya, dari segi kesejahteraan psikologi rakyat. Maka, kajian ini meneroka personaliti dan gaya kognitif rakyat Malaysia yang dilahirkan sebelum dan selepas merdeka. Soal selidik yang digunakan bagi mengukur kedua-dua konstruk psikologi ini adalah NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) bagi mengukur personality dan Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) untuk mengukur gaya kognitif. Responden kajian ini terdiri daripada 261 individu yang dilahirkan sebelum tahun 1957 dan 291 individu dilahirkan selepas 1957 (N=552). Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa tidak terdapat hubungan signifikan antara domain personality dengan gaya kognitif bagi generasi pra merdeka. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat korelasi positif yang lemah antara domain personaliti keterbukaan dengan gaya kognitif bagi kumpulan generasi pasca merdeka. Bagi gaya kognitif, terdapat perbezaan signifikan antara kumpulan pra dan pasca merdeka. Responden pasca merdeka adalah lebih kepada 'field independent' daripada responden pra merdeka. Keputusan juga menunjukkan terdapatnya perbezaan signifikan antara kumpulan pra dan pasca merdeka pada trait-trait keterbukaan dan kehematan. Rakyat Malaysia yang terdiri daripada generasi pasca merdeka adalah lebih terbuka pada pengalaman daripada mereka yang dilahirkan sebelum merdeka. Walau bagaimanapun, bagi trait kehematan, mereka yang dilahirkan sebelum tahun 1957 memperoleh kehematan yang tinggi berbanding mereka yang dilahirkan selepas merdeka. Dapatan kajian ini memberi implikasi bahawa wujudnya perbezaan pada personaliti dan gaya kognitif antara generasi Malaysia sebelum dan selepas merdeka.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiethnic country with almost 2.5 billion population and is currently envisioned to achieve first world country status by the year 2020. It has been 56 years since Malaysia attained its independence from the British. Sovereignty not only causes impact on the country's infrastructural and economical growth, it may also affect a nation's society. Psychological well being is essential to a society's growth and prosperity. For that reason, it is important to study such aspect as it can also determine the country's growth.

Research on personality often looked at the Big Five trait domains, namely Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to Experience. Soto et al. (2011) for example, has found age differences in personality traits. They found a particular age trend for some traits. Certain traits were more prominent for respondents who were in their childhood and adolescence than their older counterparts.

In the 1940's, Witkin initiated research on cognitive style, studying the perceptions of individuals in different spatial orientations. He found that people differed by how they use orientation tasks (Witkin & Goodenough, 1981). Witkin (1976) later characterized these perceptual characteristics among individuals as field dependent or field independent. His basic premise is that individuals differ in their learning styles and that individuals tend to teach according to their learning style . By recognizing these differences in learning styles, one can adapt instruction to meet the needs of all learners (Witkin, Oltman, Raskin & Karp, 1971).

Field dependent learners are global learners who prefer structured educational settings. They tend to have highly developed social skills and are aware of their social environment (Garger & Guild, 1984).

Witkin et al. (1971) find consistent gender differences by field dependence, with women tending to be more dependent than men. This is supported by many research studies (Cairns, Malone, Johnston & Cammock, 1985; De Russey & Futch, 1971; Morf, Kavanaugh & McConville, 1971; Parlee & Rajogopal, 1974; Saarni, 1973; Sherman, 1984; Takigami, 1975; Torres & Cano, 1994). However, a study by Rudd, Baker and Hoover (1998) and Baker, Rudd, Hoover and Grant (1997) disputes this finding. Demick (1991) believes further study is needed in this area, due to the argument that many of these studies supporting gender differences by field dependence show only a low statistical significant effect.

There is some evidence of a relationship between age and field dependence. Comalli (1965) and Schwartz and Karp (1967) find that older individuals tend to be more field dependent. They find that, after the late 30s, individuals tend to lean toward field dependence. Later research disputes this finding (Panek, 1985; Takigami, 1975). Panek (1982) who utilized the GEFT and a personality test on women aged 60-81, suggests

increasing age may have an effect on personality relationships. Knox (1981) notes that the transfer of learning tends to decline with age.

Research Objectives

The current study aims to examine:

1. the relationship between personality and cognitive style among the pre and post-independence generations
2. the differences in the five traits of personality for the pre and post-
3. the differences in cognitive style of the pre and post-independence generations

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The current study is a survey study using questionnaires to collect data. The sample of the study consisted of 261 participants who were born before 1957 (pre independence generation) and 291 participants who were born after 1957(post-independence generation). In total there were 552 participants participated in the study.

The adapted NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) was used to measure personality (Costa & McCrae, 1985). This adapted NEO Personality Inventory measures five dimensions of personality: openness to experience; conscientiousness; extraversion; agreeableness; and neuroticism. The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) has 60 items (12 items per domain).

The Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT) was used to measure cognitive style. GEFT was created by Oltman, Raskin and Witkin (1971). Items included in this test are specific items that are designed geometrically. Participants have to recognize and perceive these geometrical figures. The score for correct answer is 1 and the score for wrong answer is 0. Therefore the maximum score is 18 and the minimum score is 0. The cut-off point is 10. Participants who score between 0 – 9 are categorized as field dependent. While participants with scores 10 – 18 are field independent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows results of the correlations between personality traits and cognitive styles for the pre and post-independence generation groups. As can be seen in the table, only one trait, that is, Conscientiousness has a significant negative correlation with cognitive styles among the post-independence generation group ($r=-0.138$, $p<0.05$). None of the personality traits has a significant correlation with cognitive styles in the pre-independence group.

The result on the post-independence generation group suggests that individuals with high conscientiousness are more likely to have a field dependent cognitive style. According to Larsen and Buss (2013), field independent people are more interpersonally detached, whereas field dependent people are attentive to social cues and are oriented toward other people. Our results support the claim made by Larsen and Buss (2013) whereby it is found that people who are conscientious are also those who have high degree of social skills. These are some of characteristics of field dependent people (Vitkin & Goodenough, 1981). Nevertheless, the correlation only occurs in the post-generation group. One way of looking at the results is the fact that the correlation is a negative one. This also indicates the fact that the less conscientious the individual who was born after independence is, the more likely she or is he to be field independent. What this means is that where the post-generation group is concerned, the relationship exists between conscientiousness and cognitive style. Individuals who were born after independence who are field independent will be more likely to exhibit low conscientiousness. This is somewhat predicted from the Y generation (the generation who was born after independence). According to Kane (2014), generation Y is confident, ambitious and achievement-oriented. Having these traits, the individual may not have interest in other people but to focus on him or herself. This is not true with the pre-independence group. It does not matter whether individuals who were born before independence to be field independent or field dependent but they are still conscientious.

Table1: Correlations between personality traits and cognitive styles

	Pre-Independence	Post-Independence
Neuroticism	.012	-.067
Extraversion	-.071	-.069
Openness	.031	.057
Agreeableness	.076	-.013
Conscientiousness	.051	-.138*

*p<0.05

Table 2 shows results of t-test to test the differences between pre and post generation based on the five personality traits. Of all the five traits, only openness to experience and conscientiousness reach significance. There was a significant difference between the pre and post-independence generations on the openness trait ($t=4.22$, $p<0.05$). The post-independence generation participants were more open to experience than the pre independence participants. There was also a significant difference between the pre and post-independence generations on the conscientiousness trait of personality ($t=2.19$, $p<0.05$). The pre independence generation participants were more

conscientious than their post-independence counterparts. Neuroticism, extraversion and agreeableness did not reach significance.

Our results showed that the post-independence individuals have a higher openness trait than individuals from the pre-independence generation. It seems that individuals who were born after the year 1957 were more open to new experience than their pre-independence counterparts. According to Costa and McCrae (1992), individuals who are high on openness are those individuals who are imaginative and curious. These individuals tend to have a broad range of interest (Chery, 2013). The young Malaysians today are not surprisingly curious and possess broad interest due to the current vast development of information technology. The easy access to information via internet and other media can be the pivot of cultivating intellectual interest and curiosity. For example, according to Phillips (2013), space that is filled with interactive media can promote play and experimentation. This will then lead to intellectual curiosity. Another possibility is due to the educational environment of the pre-generation individuals that encourages these kinds of traits. The relationship between personality traits and education environment has been studied by researchers. For example, Nye et al. (2013), have shown that openness to new experience is associated to academic performance.

Interestingly, when it comes to conscientiousness, our results have shown that Malaysians who are now in their 60's and above are more conscientious than those who are in their 50's and below. According to Costa and McCrae (1992), individuals with high conscientiousness are those who are competent, orderly, striving for high achievement, self-disciplined and deliberated. Our findings suggest that Malaysians who are in their 60's and above possess the aforementioned traits. When compared to the younger generation today, it seems that the older generations are more thoughtful and careful. They are also better at self-disciplinary and striving for achievement. Perhaps the environment that these individuals (pre-independence) lived in when they were young demanded such traits to survive and become better. A lot of opportunity (e.g., education, jobs and career) may not have been easy for Malaysians who grew up before Malaysia had its independence also right after when it did. The condition of Malaysia then may have nurtured the pre-generation individuals to become more conscientious.

Table 2: T-test results for personality traits between pre and post-independence groups

Group	N	Min	SD	df	t
Openness					
Pre-independence	261	41.51	5.49	550	-4.22*
Post- independence	291	43.44	5.21		
Conscientiousness					
Pre- independence	261	44.80	4.66	550	2.19*
Post- independence	291	43.93	4.64		

*p<0.05

Table 3 exhibits results of t-test on the differences between pre and post-independence generations in their cognitive style. The results showed that cognitive style was significantly different between pre-independence generation and post-independence generation ($t=8.22$, $p<0.05$). Participants who were born after independence were more field independent than participants who were born before independence. It is also possible to postulate that Malaysians who were born before independence are field dependent. Field independent individuals process information in an analytic manner. On the contrary, field dependents process information globally (Musser, 2013). The results are somewhat consistent with our data on openness to new experience in the current study where we found that the young generations are more curious and imaginative. Here, our data also show that these young generations are more analytical than their pre-independence counterparts. Analytical way of thinking leads to an individual being imaginative and curious (Crowther, 2013). Individuals who were born before independence (before 1957) are field dependent. This could also mean that the older generations of Malaysia, being field dependent, have stronger social skills than the young generation (Larsen & Buss, 2005). This could explain why sometimes in certain situations we see that the young generations are less interactive and more interested in self orientated goals than the old generations here in Malaysia.

Table3: T-test for cognitive styles between pre and post-independence groups

Group	N	Min	SD	df	t
Cognitive Style					
Pre-independence	261	6.99	5.03	550	-8.22*
Post- independence	291	10.71	5.03		

*p<0.05

In conclusion, the current study found that there is a negative correlation between conscientiousness and cognitive style for the post-independence generation. This means that Malaysians who were born after independence and who are high on their conscientiousness are likely to be field dependent. Our results also showed that there is a significant difference between pre and post-independence generations on two personality traits: openness to experience and conscientiousness. It is found that Malaysians who were born after independence are more open to new experience than those who were born before independence. However, Malaysians who were born after independence are found to be less conscientious than those who were born before independence. The current results also showed that the young generations of Malaysia are field independent, while the old generations are field dependent. The different personalities and cognitive styles of these two different Malaysian generations are attributed to the vast development of information technology and educational environment exist today.

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