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Letter to the Editors of Psychological Science (Accepted version)

How to measure a psychological construct in cross-national comparison: Regarding Rhoads et al. (2021)

Rhoads and colleagues' (2021) investigated how cross-national differences in altruism can be explained by objective and subjective well-being and other national characteristic (e.g., individualism). This study addresses the concern that a large majority of psychological research has sampled participants from so called WEIRD countries (i.e., Western Educated, Industrialised, Rich Democratic countries; Henrich et al., 2010). This study also highlights challenges of selecting cross-nationally valid variables to capture theoretical constructs (Hui & Triandis, 1985; van de Vijver & Tanzer, 2004). This study constructed a composite altruism variable from the following indices: (1) likelihood of donating money to a charity, (2) likelihood of volunteering, (3) likelihood of helping a stranger, (4) blood donation per capita, (5) living kidney donations per capita, (6) bone marrow doner registry members per capita, (7) humane treatment of non-human animals. WEIRD countries scored high in the composite variable: USA, UK, Germany, Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand are in top 10 out of 152 countries. This result raises a concern that the indices are based on practices common in WEIRD countries for reasons unrelated to altruism.

Cross-national validity of these altruism indices can be questioned for the following reasons. Likelihood of charitable donation depends on tax incentives, how easy it is to set up non-profit organisation and to transfer money (e.g., online payment). Volunteering is a culture-specific concept. For example, in Japan, the English loan word, "borantia", is commonly used to refer to this concept (Georgeou, 2010). Thus, volunteering is not a cultural schema (an activity that is rooted in cultural values and carried out routinely) in Japan. However, Japan has other indigenous practices for mutual support (Georgeou, 2010). Likelihood of helping a stranger depends on how often people encounter strangers. Countries with substantial rural populations would offer fewer opportunities than countries with highly mobile urbanised population (e.g., US). Blood donation per capita depends on accessibility of collection sites, and concerns about perceived risks (e.g., HIV infection) (Lownik et al., 2011). Organ donation per capita is partly determined by regulatory frameworks. For example, in Japan, a living person can donate organs only to relatives (The Japan Society for Transplantation, 2021), while in the USA, one can donate organs to strangers. Humane treatment of animals raises a more general question of construct validity as those who are altruistic towards animals are not necessarily altruistic towards other humans, and vice versa (Prudkov & Rodina, 2016).

Key measurements for cross-national comparison should consider the fact that *nations vary with respect to opportunities, incentives, ease, and cultural schemas and beliefs, for a particular behaviour*. Furthermore, we may need to critically examine cross-cultural relevance and robustness of altruism as a theoretical construct (Markus, 2021). In summary, in order to gain insights into human nature, one needs to test diverse populations (Henrich, et al., 2010) and investigate cross-culturally meaningful theoretical constructs (Markus, 2021), using cross-culturally valid variables. In future altruism research, one may use a variable directly derived from the theoretical construct (e.g., frequency/likelihood of helping strangers without expecting compensation) while controlling for opportunities (e.g., number of strangers encountered).

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