Mental Disorder Diagnosis & Treatment Decisions: Essentialist Bias and Cultural Mediation

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Opportunity

Aim 1 | To identify if essentialist views of depression differ by nationality and/or socio-cultural identity.

Aim 2 | To assess the potential impact of essentialist-based thinking on treatment-seeking behavior for depression.

Background

The Burden of Depression | Over 350 million people are affected by depression.¹ 30% of Americans are likely to experience symptoms of depression within their lifetime, but only 12% of Chinese.²

Perceptions of Depression by Culture | Ryder et. al found that Chinese tended to describe depression symptoms more somatically, whereas Americans described symptoms more psychologically.³

Grounds for Essentialism | Essentialism is the idea that underlying “essences” dictate category membership.

Different perceptions of essences between Americans may result from medical practices’ emphasis (Traditional Chinese Medicine vs. Western medicine). Thus, the belief in different underlying “essences” may impact treatment-seeking behaviors and the categorization of depression.

Approach

Participants | Undergraduate Chinese, Chinese-Americans, and European-Americans

Procedure | Participants randomly see vignettes describing individuals with mental disorder symptoms, and make diagnosis/treatment decisions.

Vignettes

Disorder (2) x Version (2)

Physical/ Psychological Symptoms

Causal Reasoning

(1-9) Likert Scale

Likelihood rating of 3 possible causes

Situational

Genetic

Internal

Loss of someone

DNA

Personality

Essentialist Questionnaire

(Adapted from Anh & Haslam)

Physical Vignette Example:

Person A is 20 years old. For 6 months, she has had pain in her back and joints. She has lost her appetite to eat and when she does eat, she ends up with an an upset stomach. Most days she’s overwhelmed with fatigue. She feels as if her “Qi” is trapped in her liver and chest.

Results (Predicted)

Prediction 1 | Chinese participants will exhibit higher levels of essentialist views, specifically for a somatic explanation attributed to a genetic cause.

Prediction 2 | Higher essentialist-based thinking will predict less likelihood for treatment decisions; mediated by culture.

Impact

The current project aims to understand how mental disorder diagnosis and treatment decisions are influenced by prior essentialist beliefs, and how culture plays a role mediating this process. Results will inform clinicians to account for both cognitive and cultural factors when making diagnosis and treatment decisions.