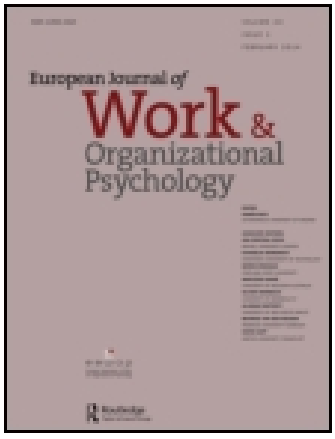

European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/pewo20

Cultural differences in prioritizing applicant attributes when assessing employment suitability

Serena Wee[a], Peter K. Jonason[b] & Norman P. Li[a]

[a] School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore

[b] School of Social Sciences and Psychology, University of Western Sydney, Penrith, Australia

Published online: 02 Aug 2013.

To cite this article: Serena Wee, Peter K. Jonason & Norman P. Li (2014) Cultural differences in prioritizing applicant attributes when assessing employment suitability, European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 23:6, 946-956, DOI: 10.1080/1359432X.2013.820377

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2013.820377

European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 2014
Vol. 23, No. 6, 946–956, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2013.820377

Cultural differences in prioritizing applicant attributes when assessing employment suitability

Serena Wee[1], Peter K. Jonason[2], and Norman P. Li[1]

[1]School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore
[2]School of Social Sciences and Psychology, University of Western Sydney, Penrith, Australia

We examined how culture influences perceptions of applicant attributes when assessing employment suitability. In two studies (N = 408), we compared members from a collectivistic society (Singapore) to two samples from individualistic societies (the United States and Australia) on their perceptions of applicant attributes across job contexts. For each job, participants either chose between candidates with different attribute profiles or created ideal candidates by allocating a fixed amount of percentile points across different attributes. More often than Australians, Singaporeans chose the candidate with higher levels of the trait (e.g., openness to experience) uniquely associated with the job (e.g., graphic designer). More so than either Americans or Australians, Singaporeans prioritized having the trait most associated with each job. Members from collectivistic societies may require higher levels of the traits most associated with different jobs than members from individualistic societies, who prefer more well-rounded individuals for each job. As discussed, the study of lay perceptions may have implications for training hiring professionals and managers.

Keywords: Context salience; Decision-making; Personality; Selection.

Cross-cultural considerations are important in a multicultural work context because each culture has a distinct system of shared meaning—a common way of interpreting actions and events that does not always hold across cultures (Triandis & Suh, 2002). Different interpretations become increasingly likely as the work context becomes increasingly multicultural—more ethnically diverse workforces within countries, more multinational joint ventures, and more expatriates assigned to host countries (Chen, Leung, & Chen, 2009). Although research has demonstrated the cross-cultural validity and generalizability of several Big Five personality traits (Oh, 2009; Salgado, 1997), it could also be informative to examine lay perceptions of these traits across cultures. Two examples illustrate the point: (i) a Singaporean manager is promoted by his Singaporean superior to an overseas posting in his organization's home office in Australia. His effective job performance is a result of being highly detail-oriented and adept at maintaining the existing hierarchy and thus, group harmony. In his host country however, he is perceived as unwilling to take risks and incapable of making independent decisions; (ii) an Indian employee is seeking a job opportunity in a French company. Although both the applicant and organization agree that conscientiousness is important, they differ in the extent to which they value that trait in comparison with other personality traits required for the job.

The current research examined how culture influences perceptions of applicant attributes when assessing employment suitability. In two studies, we compared members from a collectivistic society (i.e., Singapore) to samples from individualistic societies (i.e., the United States [US] and Australia) on their perceptions of applicant attributes across job contexts. The studies contribute to personnel selection in two ways. First, we examined how lay perceptions influenced the use of selection information, a relatively understudied area in personnel selection. Knowledge of lay theories and perceptions is critical because managers' perceptions of job requirements and candidate suitability, and, ultimately, their hiring decisions are often guided by lay theories. Thus, understanding how lay theories influence such perceptions affords opportunities for more effective interventions. Second, we considered the influence of cultural context on selection. As illustrated in our examples and highlighted elsewhere (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Ployhart & Schneider, 2012), cultural contexts can influence which selection methods are adopted (Ryan, McFarland, Baron, & Page, 1999), and how aspects of

Correspondence should be addressed to Serena Wee, Singapore Management University, School of Social Sciences, Level 4, Singapore 178903. E-mail: serenawee@smu.edu.sg

personality (Triandis & Suh, 2002) and performance (Ployhart, Wiechmann, Schmitt, Sacco, & Rogg, 2003) are construed.

Context matters

Personality predictors × job contexts. Job analyses consistently show that different jobs require different knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs). As person-environment fit theories (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010) argue, the more closely an individual's KSAOs match the requirements of the job, the more productive and satisfied that individual is likely to be. Specifically, people may gravitate toward jobs that fit their personalities (as measured by vocational interests; Holland, 1997). In line with this model, vocational interests predict performance when an individual's personality is congruent with representative characteristics of the environment (Nye, Su, Rounds, & Drasgow, 2012).

In general, there is reason to believe that the utility of personality traits for predicting performance may be circumscribed to particular contexts (e.g., Hough & Furnham, 2003). For instance, although conscientiousness and emotional stability consistently predict performance across job contexts (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Salgado, 1997), there is also evidence that the utility of emotional stability varies across jobs (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001). Extraversion predicts performance in jobs requiring significant interactions with others, especially when the job requires influencing others (e.g., managers and sales representatives; Barrick et al., 2001). Agreeableness also predicts performance in jobs requiring significant interpersonal interaction, but in these cases, the interactions involve helping, nurturing, and cooperative behaviours (e.g., team-oriented jobs or helping professions; Mount, Barrick, & Stewart, 1998). Openness to experience seems to predict behaviours such as creativity and innovation (George & Zhou, 2001), though the effect of context is inconclusive.

When perceptions were examined, the importance of predictors was generally consistent with their criterion validity—better predictors were rated as more important. Conscientiousness and emotional stability were ranked more highly than other personality traits for overall hireability (Dunn, Mount, Barrick, & Ones, 1995; van Dam, 2003). However, when performance was considered more broadly (e.g., counterproductive work behaviours), in addition to these two traits, agreeableness was also important (Dunn et al., 1995). When job contexts were characterized using the RIASEC typology (Holland, 1997), extraversion was perceived as important for "enterprising jobs" (i.e., jobs that require persuasion and selling skills, e.g., retail salesperson) but not for "social jobs" (i.e., jobs that require helping and working with others, e.g., mental health counsellor). Openness to experience was perceived as important for "artistic jobs" (i.e., unconventional or creative jobs, and jobs that require artistic expression, e.g., graphic designer), and agreeableness was not perceived as important for any specific job context.

In addition to personality dimensions, another good candidate for examination is positive self-concept (i.e., core self-evaluation) because it is related to performance through its impact on an individual's motivation (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998). Individual differences related to motivation that are commonly studied include self-efficacy and self-esteem. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' perceptions about their capacity to perform a specific task (Bandura, 1986), whereas self-esteem refers to individuals' global perceptions about worthiness of the self (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-efficacy is highly predictive of job performance (e.g., Judge, Jackson, Shaw, Scott, & Rich, 2007; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998) and self-esteem helps an individual to maintain optimism despite failures (Dodgson & Wood, 1998; Locke, McClear, & Knight, 1996), a critical component for effective task performance. Because individuals with high self-esteem demonstrate greater confidence when initiating contact (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988), self-esteem should also be especially important when a job requires significant interaction with others.

We were unable to locate research pertaining directly to the relative importance perceptions of either self-efficacy or self-esteem in applicant hireability. Based on the psychometric evidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem provide little incremental validity once other relevant factors such as personality are taken into consideration (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Judge et al., 2007). Nonetheless, we believe that considerations of unique effects (i.e., contribution of an attribute after including other attributes of interest) are unlikely to factor into most lay decisions. Conventional wisdom would suggest the simple association between motivation and performance, which leads one to conclude that self-efficacious and self-confident individuals make good employees.

In summary, there are separate lines of initial evidence suggesting that different personality traits are effective or perceived as effective for different types of jobs. However, the perceived importance of personality traits by job contexts interaction has not yet been systematically examined.

Cultural context and personnel selection. It is important to consider cultural contexts because culturally shared beliefs shape the way people construct their reality. Although cultures differ on several key dimensions (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995), we focused on individualism-collectivism because it seems to be fundamental, reflecting the "deep structure" of cultural differences (Greenfield, 2000; Triandis & Suh, 2002). Whereas individualism highlights individual rights, personal autonomy, and self-fulfilment, collectivism emphasizes interdependence and mutual obligations among members

of a group. Because collectivism emphasizes one's roles and relationships to others more so than does individualism, individuals from collectivistic societies may attend to the context more so than individuals from individualistic societies (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

In support of this argument, members from individualistic cultures (e.g., the US) fixated longer on a focal object (Chua, Boland, & Nisbett, 2005), provided more decontextualized explanations (Morris & Peng, 1994), and were more behaviourally consistent across situations (Church, 2000) as compared to members from collectivistic cultures (e.g., China). In other words, situational contexts tended to be more salient in Asian cultures (i.e., collectivist societies) than in Euro-American cultures (i.e., individualist societies). Thus, we argue that when considering candidate suitability for jobs, greater contextual salience should result in a greater emphasis on each job's unique requirements. As such, people in Asian versus Euro-American cultures are predicted to indicate greater shifts across job contexts in how important attributes are perceived to be for applicant hireability.

Although prior work has examined lay perceptions of employee attributes within a cross-cultural context (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1999), in that study, raters' cultural identifications were not explicitly considered (i.e., they were all members of an executive development seminar). Targets were described as employees who would be posted to a different culture (i.e., expatriates). Similar to previous results (Dunn et al., 1995), managers rated conscientiousness and emotional stability as most important for expatriate success. Because personality attributes were rated as equally useful regardless of whether targets were local employees or expatriates, it was argued that the cultural context might be unimportant (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1999). However, cultures differ in how they rank different psychological attributes (Williams et al., 1995). To the degree that culture provides differing frames of shared meaning, raters from different cultures may evaluate the same applicant differently. For example, evidence suggests that expatriates are judged as effective performers by home-country managers but not by host-country managers (Dalton & Wilson, 2000). Accordingly, we expected meaningful differences to occur in job-candidate assessments made by raters from different countries.

The current research

In two studies, we investigated lay perceptions of the relative importance of personality traits in different jobs across cultures. In line with research indicating that context is more salient and important in collectivistic cultures, we expected individuals in a collectivistic society to require higher levels of the traits uniquely associated with each job (e.g., extraversion is uniquely associated with a job that requires significant interpersonal interaction). In contrast, individuals from individualistic societies were expected to prefer candidates with a more balanced personality profile across jobs. In Study 1, participants judged the relative importance of traits across two broadly-defined job contexts. Participants engaged in the same task in Study 2, but jobs were specifically chosen to reflect differential emphasis on each of the personality traits.

STUDY 1

This study examined if lay perceptions differed across countries (i.e., the US and Singapore) with different standings on individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). The US served as an appropriate sample for studying an individualistic society, because most of the personnel selection research is conducted on US samples. By contrast, Singapore is a collectivistic society (with a Chinese majority), where the language of instruction and commerce is English, allowing a convenient opportunity to present the same measure in two cultures without the encumbrance of language or translational issues. Five applicant attributes (i.e., conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, self-efficacy, and self-esteem) were tested across two broadly-defined job contexts (i.e., contexts requiring or not requiring interaction).

We expected that conscientiousness and emotional stability would be perceived as important regardless of job context (H1), whereas extraversion would be perceived as important only when jobs require interaction (H2). We also examined how motivation is prioritized relative to personality because practitioners seem to also value motivational variables (Baumeister et al., 2003; Judge et al., 2007). We expected that self-efficacy would be perceived as important across job contexts (H3), whereas self-esteem would be perceived as important only when jobs require interaction (H4). Finally, reflecting our cultural theorizing, we expected Singaporeans to demonstrate larger shifts across job contexts in how traits were prioritized, as compared with Americans (H5).

Method

Participants. Undergraduates from Singapore ($N = 82$) and the US ($N = 156$) participated in the study in exchange for course credit in their business and psychology courses. The sample comprised 63% females ($N = 151$), 32% males ($N = 77$) and 4% ($N = 10$) who did not disclose their sex, with a mean age of 22 years old ($SD = 5.64$). In terms of employment, 60% of the participants were unemployed, 33% were employed part-time, and 7% were fully employed.

Task and procedure. The budget-allocation task (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Li, Valentine, &

Patel, 2011) was used to measure the relative importance placed on various applicant attributes. In this method, participants allocate a fixed budget of percentile points across different attributes in order to design the ideal employee. The budget task necessitates trade-offs and reveals priorities such that the created employee cannot be high on all the traits simultaneously. Trait descriptions of the five characteristics (i.e., self-efficacy, self-esteem, conscientiousness, extraversion, and emotional stability) are provided in Appendix A.

The participants imagined being in the position to hire job applicants, and indicated how much they wanted a prospective applicant to possess each of the five traits. Assigned trait values could range from 0 to 100 percentiles. Participants rated the traits they wanted in male and female employees[1] for one job that required interaction with others and another job where interaction was not required. That is, each participant rated four different targets, with order of target presentation counterbalanced across participants. As an example, here are the instructions for a male target for a job requiring interaction:

> Suppose that you are in charge of making hiring decisions at a company and you are considering a man who is a college graduate for a job that requires regular interaction with people either on the phone or in person. Indicate how much you want this person to be characterized by these five traits by moving each characteristic's slider to correspond to your answer.

The ratings were constrained to sum to 100 across the five traits, making the ratings for each trait dependent on the ratings for the others.

Results and discussion

Across groups, participants did not differ in age (Welch's $t = 0.53$), or sex ($\chi^2 = 0.24$), but they differed in employment status ($\chi^2 = 33.75$, $p < .01$) such that Singaporeans were less likely than Americans to be fully employed. Budget allocations were analysed using the general linear model (GLM) procedure in the IBM SPSS statistics program. Country (i.e., the US or Singapore) was the between-subjects variable, and job context (i.e., with or without interaction) and applicant attributes (i.e., conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, self-efficacy, and self-esteem) were the within-subjects variables. The dependent variables were the percentages allocated to each attribute.

Desired attributes differed significantly across job contexts and country locations ($F(4, 944) = 16.31$, $p < .01$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .07$). In support of H1 and H3, planned contrasts indicated that conscientiousness ($M = 24.33$, $SD = 8.61$), emotional stability ($M = 19.90$, $SD = 6.56$), and self-efficacy ($M = 19.97$, $SD = 7.09$) were more ($t(236) = 7.40$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .55$) highly valued than extraversion ($M = 18.72$, $SD = 6.71$) and self-esteem ($M = 17.08$, $SD = 6.12$). Further, in support of H1, conscientiousness was more highly valued than emotional stability and self-efficacy ($t(236) = 6.09$, $p < .01$, $d = .27$). Self-efficacy and emotional stability were not significantly differently valued ($t = 0.39$). Consistent with H2 and H4, a planned contrast indicated that extraversion and self-esteem were more ($t(236) = 14.33$, $p < .01$, $d = .93$) highly valued than other traits when jobs required interaction ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 11.23$), but not otherwise ($M = -10.44$, $SD = 8.09$). Further, tests of simple effects suggested that extraversion was more highly valued when job context required interaction ($M = 25.82$, $SD = 12.10$) than when job context did not require interaction ($M = 11.61$, $SD = 7.25$; $t(236) = 14.85$, $p < .01$, $d = .96$), and the same pattern was obtained for self-esteem ($M = 18.30$, $SD = 8.61$ versus $M = 15.86$, $SD = 7.17$; $t(236) = 3.74$, $p < .01$, $d = .24$). In partial support of H5, job context effects were larger in Singapore than in the US for extraversion ($M = 19.06$, $SD = 14.09$ versus $M = 11.67$, $SD = 14.51$), and self-esteem ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 9.85$ versus $M = 1.80$, $SD = 10.17$), though significantly so only for extraversion ($t(236) = 3.77$, $p < .01$, $d = .51$), and not self-esteem ($t = 1.36$).

Consistent with previous research (Dunn et al., 1995), conscientiousness and emotional stability were both highly valued traits. However, inconsistent with validity research, these results suggested that lay perceivers uniquely valued self-efficacy. Thus lay perceptions may not be effective because the most highly valued attributes (i.e., conscientiousness and self-efficacy) share substantial variance. The results also showed that cultural differences influenced perceptions of the attribute profiles for an ideal candidate. However, because the situational context was solely defined by whether the job required interaction or not, we conducted another study to further examine this hypothesis and we made several other improvements.

STUDY 2

In Study 1, Singaporeans demonstrated larger shifts across job contexts in how traits were prioritized, as compared with Americans. However, the study was conducted on a sample of college students that might have had little exposure to the working world; 60% were unemployed. In Study 2, we sought to replicate the contextual salience effect using working adults as our sample. Australians formed our individualistic sample in Study 2. We reasoned that if the effects were driven by cultural differences in individualism-collectivism, then sampling a different country nearly as individualistic as the US provided a strong test for our argument.

[1]Because target sex was not the focus of this article, and Bonferroni corrected *t*-tests indicated that eight out of the ten possible pairwise comparisons were not significant, responses were aggregated across target sex to minimize the complexity of subsequent analyses.

In addition, Study 1 provided relatively little contextual information regarding each job. Jobs were described as either requiring or not requiring interactions with others, but no specific job description was provided. In Study 2, we systematically varied job contexts (see the Method section below for details) to provide a more thorough test of our hypotheses, and allow for an examination of the boundary conditions of contextual salience. In doing so, we selected jobs that separately required each of the Big Five personality traits. Because only a limited number of attributes could be meaningfully tested, we dropped the motivational variables and focused on personality traits.

Two versions of the budget-allocation task were used. In the first task, participants chose between candidates with different trait distributions. In the second task, participants assigned budgets to design ideal candidates. We hypothesized that the effect of contextual salience is larger for Singaporeans than for Australians; Singaporeans would be more likely to choose (or create) candidates with higher levels of the most job-relevant trait (but lower levels of other traits; see Appendix B for the match between jobs and their most relevant traits). In contrast, Australians were expected to prefer candidates with a more balanced trait profile across jobs.

Method

Participants. Working adults from Australia (N = 95) and Singapore (N = 75) participated, in exchange for approximately $5 cash. The sample comprised of 69% females (N = 118; the rest were males), and had a mean age of 32 years (SD = 14.89). The Singaporean sample was older (Welch's t = 10.57, $p < .01$) and comprised a smaller proportion of females (χ^2 = 23.99, $p < .01$) than the Australian sample.

Task and procedure. The O*NET was used to select five jobs. Job descriptions were perused, and jobs were selected to maximize the differences in tasks and skills required for each job. Specifically, chosen jobs had tasks that reflected differential emphasis on each of the Big Five personality traits. The O*NET job descriptions were summarized and adapted for this study (see Appendix B for job descriptions, and their most relevant traits).

For both versions of the task, participants read the job description and definitions for the Big Five traits before they completed the task. Trait descriptions (i.e., conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, openness to experience, and agreeableness) are provided in Appendix A. In the first task, participants were provided with two candidate profiles for each job (see Figure 1). Candidates differed in their relative distribution of Big Five traits: one candidate had a relatively evenly distributed profile, whereas the other candidate had a more peaked profile. For example, in the case of an accountant, one candidate (peaked) was shown as having much higher levels of conscientiousness than other traits. Although the other candidate (broad) was also shown to have relatively high levels of conscientiousness, differences between the level of conscientiousness and the level of the other traits were not as large. Total percentile points across all traits were fixed at the same overall level for all candidates. Participants were instructed to chose the candidate they felt would be more suitable for the job. In the second task, participants indicated how much of each of the Big Five traits they wanted applicants to have. They did this by allocating 100 percentile points across the five traits. Unlike Study 1, targets did not vary on sex. That is, each participant rated five targets, one target of unspecified sex per job.

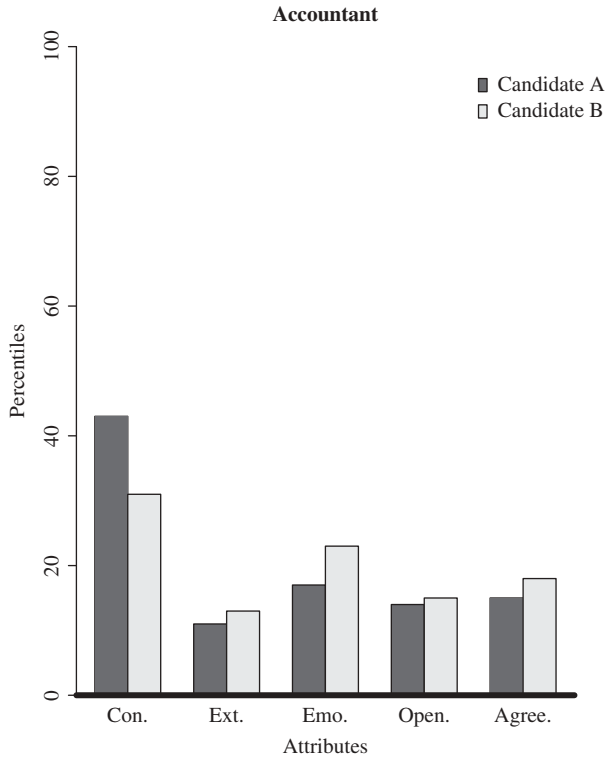

Figure 1. Example candidate profiles used as stimuli in Study 2. Participants were instructed to choose the candidate they felt would be more suitable for the job of an accountant. Candidates differed in their relative distribution of traits: in this example, Candidate A had a more peaked profile compared to Candidate B, where the peak corresponds to the more job-relevant trait of conscientiousness. Con. = conscientiousness; Ext. = extraversion; Emo. = emotional stability; Open. = openness to experience; Agree. = agreeableness.

Results and discussion

For the first task, Singaporeans picked the peaked profile distribution more frequently than Australians, across all contexts (see Figure 2). A two-sample test for equality of proportions was performed for each job. Proportion

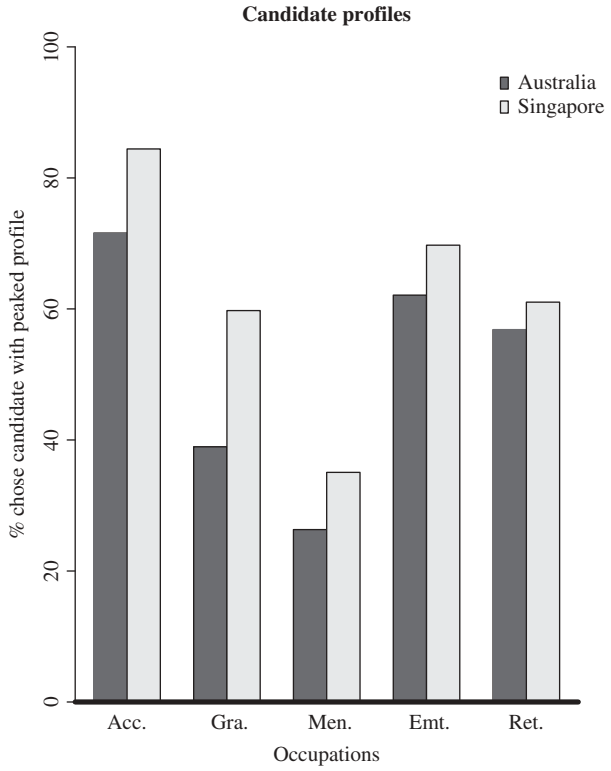

Figure 2. Proportion of candidates from Australia and Singapore choosing the candidate with the peaked profile. Acc. = accountant; Gra. = graphic designer; Men. = mental health counsellor; Emt. = emergency medical technician; Ret. = retail salesperson.

differences were significant for the accountant (84% versus 72%; $\chi^2 = 4.00$, $p = .02$) and graphic designer (60% versus 39%; $\chi^2 = 7.36$, $p < .01$) positions, but not for the mental health counsellor (35% versus 26%; $\chi^2 = 1.54$), emergency technician (69% versus 62%; $\chi^2 = 0.85$) or retail salesperson (61% versus 57%; $\chi^2 = 0.31$) positions. Thus, there was partial support for the hypothesis that Singaporeans would be more affected by contextual salience. More than Australians, Singaporeans preferred the candidate with the more peaked profile distribution for each job; however, statistical tests indicated that these differences were significant in only two of the five individual cases.

For the second task, we analysed budget allocations using GLM in IBM SPSS statistics program with age and sex as covariates, country as the between-subjects variable, and job type and applicant attribute as the within-subjects variables. The dependent variables were the percentages allocated to each applicant attribute. The mean percentiles by country location (Singapore versus Australia) and job type for each of the applicant attributes are presented in Figure 3. Consistent with the graphical summary, a three-way interaction ($F(16, 2640) = 5.74$, $p < .01$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .03$) indicated that desired applicant personality attributes differed across job types and country locations.

To test the hypothesis that Singaporeans would allocate more of their budget to the most job-relevant traits, new variables reflecting the planned contrasts were created and tested using linear regression. Unlike an independent samples *t*-test, regression allows control for the sex and age differences across samples. Compared to Australians, Singaporeans allocated more of their accountant budget to conscientiousness than other traits ($\beta = .34$, $t(165) = 3.47$, $p < .01$), more of their graphic designer budget to openness to experience than other traits ($\beta = .37$, $t(165) = 3.74$, $p < .01$), more of their emergency medical technician budget to emotional stability than other traits ($\beta = .18$, $t(165) = 2.15$, $p = .03$), and more of their retail salesperson budget to extraversion than other traits ($\beta = .39$, $t(165) = 3.97$, $p < .01$). Samples did not differ in their mental health counsellor budget allocations ($\beta = -.08$, $t = -0.77$). These results provided support for our hypothesis in all but one job context.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study examined cultural differences in the relative importance perceptions of attributes for applicant hireability across job contexts. Consistent with prior research (Dunn et al., 1995; Holland, 1997), we expected people to recognize that different jobs require different trait profiles, and to choose or create candidates accordingly. Overall, our results are consistent with this hypothesis. Additionally, we expected context differences to be more salient for people from collectivistic than individualistic societies, because prior research indicated that collectivists pay more attention to situational cues (e.g., Morris & Peng, 1994). Consistent with this hypothesis, Singaporeans usually allocated more of their budgets to the contextually salient trait as compared with either Americans or Australians.[2]

Although people generally allocated budgets according to the job-trait match that we hypothesized, this matching was not entirely successful for all jobs. For example, agreeableness was seen as less important than emotional stability for a mental health counsellor. For some jobs, the secondary traits were perceived to be important too. Although emotional stability and extraversion were most important for the emergency medical technician and retail salesperson jobs, respectively,

[2]A plausible alternative explanation for our results is that Singaporeans were simply more careful in responding to the stimuli. If this were true, we expected that Singaporeans would have a smaller mean *SD* across all point allocations (i.e., tighter clustering of responses around the sample mean), compared to either Americans or Australians. We examined this hypothesis with data from Study 2, and found that the converse was supported—a larger mean *SD* (11.78) was found in the Singaporean sample as compared to the Australian sample (8.75). Thus, although response style provides one possible explanation for our results, our examination of the data suggests that it is unlikely to account for the differences that we observed across groups.

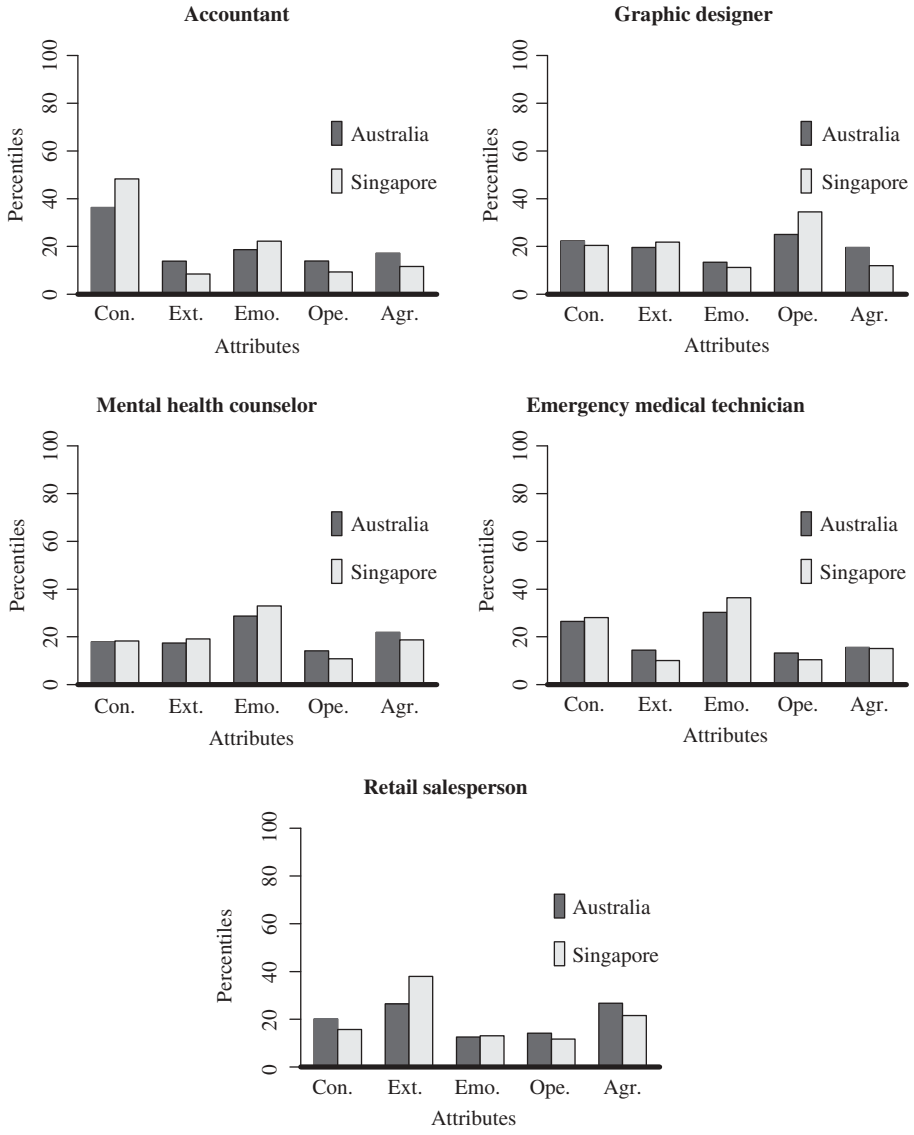

Figure 3. Mean percentiles of budgets allocated by Australians and Singaporeans to each of the Big Five traits, by occupation. Con. = conscientiousness; Ext. = extraversion; Emo. = emotional stability; Ope. = openness to experience; Agr. = agreeableness.

conscientiousness and agreeableness were also perceived as being relatively important in these cases (see Figure 3).

Also, there were somewhat inconsistent findings regarding the relative importance of conscientiousness and emotional stability across all job contexts. When job context was not explicitly mentioned (Study 1), participants indicated that these two variables were more important than other traits, consistent with their relative importance as indicated in validity research. However, when job context was explicitly manipulated (Study 2), participants did not value these traits more than the manipulated job-relevant traits. These results suggest that in the absence of specific information, conscientiousness and emotional stability are perceived as generally desirable traits. But, when job contexts are made salient, these traits receive less priority than validity research indicates they should. These findings are significant because they imply that the provision of job-specific information may, in some cases, lead to poorer prioritization of valued traits than a situation where little job information is provided. We speculate that representativeness heuristics might overly influence people's judgements of which traits need to be relatively prioritized; interventions could be targeted at getting raters to evaluate the base rates of various job-relevant tasks. For example, although retail salespersons need to be sufficiently extraverted to provide warm and friendly service, perhaps more importantly, they need to arrive at work punctually and accurately ring up sales (both behaviours associated with conscientiousness) in order to perform their jobs effectively. Additionally, in order to develop alignment among a heterogeneous group of raters (e.g., managers

from many different cultural backgrounds) it might be helpful to use tools such as behaviourally anchored descriptions of expected or ideal behaviours (e.g., Bernardin, Buckley, Tyler, & Wiese, 2000). Alternatively, by having raters watch and discuss videos of different behaviours, a common standard of acceptable level of behaviour could be reached.

Limitations and future directions

Several study limitations need to be addressed. First, because we set out to examine lay perceptions, our research was conducted on working adults and (for the sake of convenience) college students. Nonetheless, as our aim was to ultimately inform processes affecting managers and hiring professionals (e.g., recruiters), some caution is warranted in generalizing from our study to that population. Still, given that managerial actions are not always influenced by research evidence (Rynes, Brown, & Colbert, 2002), and that common sense and lay perceptions do frequently influence selection practices, we believe that this study provides useful information regarding the relative importance of applicant attributes, and the potential cultural differences that moderate these perceptions. Further, the undergraduate and working adult samples performed similarly in the budget-allocation task, suggesting that these lay perceptions are influential regardless of work experience. Future studies should continue to explore this topic using samples with specialized knowledge about selection and hiring practices.

Second, the budget-allocation task allows a simultaneous consideration of the relative value of several traits. Because each potential employee embodies several traits, such a method offers advantages over tasks requiring traits to be considered separately or without constraint. Nevertheless, the budget task required that we focus on a small number of attributes. This relatively small number reflected a practical constraint imposed by the cognitive load participants face when ranking numerous attributes, and the likely unsystematic noise introduced (Benjamin, Diaz, & Wee, 2009). However, judgements about the relative importance of one attribute over another can only be made considering other attributes in a set. So, although we chose theoretically meaningful traits, this study does not address the relative importance of these tested attributes in comparison to other highly valued attributes such as abilities, skills, and relevant experiences, and we urge that future research should consider different sets of attributes.

Third, using country as a marker of cultural differences, we found systematic differences in the way Singaporeans allocated budgets as compared with Americans and Australians. Given that culture results from collective processes rather than from the simple aggregation of members' characteristics (Chan, 1998; Matsumoto, 2003), operationalizing culture as the intersubjective perception of values might provide another useful approach for studying cultural differences (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010). It is also possible that country differences are explained by cultural differences beyond individualism-collectivism. Further research should consider how cultural dimensions (e.g., tightness-looseness, uncertainty avoidance) jointly influence the perception of applicant attributes. Such a study could advance our understanding of how cultural perceptions influence selection practices. Lastly, country differences in budget allocations might not be influenced by cultural differences (Cohen, 2007). Instead, demographic, economic, or some other structural differences may explain differences in budget allocation. One particularly intriguing possibility is that budget allocations might reflect population differences in trait distributions across countries (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005).

Fourth, our stimuli in the form of job descriptions focused on task performance. As highlighted earlier (Ployhart & Schneider, 2012), effective performance should also include the larger context (e.g., attributes for team performance and organizational citizenship). Previous research has shown that the traits useful for predicting effective task performance are not necessarily the traits that predict (or are perceived to predict) citizenship behaviours (Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2001; Dunn et al., 1995). Because few possess high levels on all traits, this also suggests a need for perceptual studies that simultaneously consider multiple performance criteria.

Lastly, there is reason to expect relatively little cultural differences on personality traits because they are defined to be broad and relevant across many different situations. In that sense, this study provides a conservative test of the potential impact of lay perceptions on selection practices. Future research should consider looking at more contextualized predictor variables (e.g., situational judgement tests, assessment centres, etc.) to see if the influence of lay perception is larger when these instruments are used. As highlighted in the cultural psychology literature (Weber & Morris, 2010), culture influences the way we perceive and attribute meaning within a given situation and thus is implicated in how judgements and evaluations—a core facet of personnel selection—are determined.

CONCLUSION

Our study was motivated by the need to address an organizational landscape where multicultural workforces are the rule rather than the exception. Given that many practitioners believe they can make effective hiring decisions without the use of decision aids (Lodato, Highhouse, & Brooks, 2011), and that cultural effects are pervasive but intangible, a common set of selection procedures and processes need not mean the same thing to

everyone. Indeed, we know little about how our objectively derived selection criteria are interpreted once implemented (Anderson, 2005). This study provides evidence that country differences influence perceptions about selection methods, and suggests that these differences must first be systematically delineated and understood before effective interventions can be designed.

REFERENCES

Anderson, N. (2005). Relationship between practice and research in personnel selection: Does the left hand know what the right is doing? In A. Evers, N. Anderson, & O. Voskuijl (Eds.), *The Blackwell handbook of personnel selection* (pp. 1–24). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Bandura, A. (1986). The explanatory and predictive scope of self-efficacy theory. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *4*, 359–373. doi:10.1521/jscp.1986.4.3.359

Barrick, M. R., & Mount, M. K. (1991). The big five personality dimensions and job performance: A meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, *44*, 1–26. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6570.1991.tb00688.x

Barrick, M. R., Mount, M. K., & Judge, T. A. (2001). Personality and performance at the beginning of the new millennium: What do we know and where do we go next? *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, *9*, 9–30. doi:10.1111/1468-2389.00160

Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *4*, 1–44. doi:10.1111/1529-1006.01431

Benjamin, A. S., Diaz, M., & Wee, S. (2009). Signal detection with criterion noise: Applications to recognition memory. *Psychological Review*, *116*, 84–115. doi:10.1037/a0014351

Bernardin, H., Buckley, M., Tyler, C., & Wiese, D. (2000). A reconsideration of strategies for rater training. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, *18*, 221–274.

Borman, W. C., Penner, L. A., Allen, T. D., & Motowidlo, S. J. (2001). Personality predictors of citizenship performance. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, *9*, 52–69. doi:10.1111/1468-2389.00163

Buhrmester, D., Furman, W., Wittenberg, M. T., & Reis, H. T. (1988). Five domains of interpersonal competence in peer relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *55*, 991–1008. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.55.6.991

Cascio, W. F., & Aguinis, H. (2008). Staffing twenty-first-century organizations. *The Academy of Management Annals*, *2*, 133–165. doi:10.1080/19416520802211461

Chan, D. (1998). Functional relations among constructs in the same content domain at different levels of analysis: A typology of composition models. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *83*, 234–246. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.83.2.234

Chen, Y.-R., Leung, K., & Chen, C. C. (2009). Bringing national culture to the table: Making a difference with cross-cultural differences and perspectives. *The Academy of Management Annals*, *3*, 217–249. doi:10.1080/19416520903047244

Chiu, C.-Y., Gelfand, M. J., Yamagishi, T., Shteynberg, G., & Wan, C. (2010). Intersubjective culture: The role of intersubjective perceptions in cross-cultural research. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *5*, 482–493. doi:10.1177/1745691610375562

Chua, H. F., Boland, J. E., & Nisbett, R. E. (2005). Cultural variation in eye movements during scene perception. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *102*, 12629–12633. doi:10.1073/pnas.0506162102

Church, A. T. (2000). Culture and personality: Toward an integrated cultural trait psychology. *Journal of Personality*, *69*, 651–703. doi:10.1111/1467-6494.00112

Cohen, D. (2007). Methods in cultural psychology. In S. Kitayama & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural psychology* (pp. 196–236). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Dalton, M., & Wilson, M. (2000). The relationship of the five-factor model of personality to job performance for a group of Middle Eastern expatriate managers. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *31*, 250–258. doi:10.1177/0022022100031002007

Dodgson, P. G., & Wood, J. V. (1998). Self-esteem and the cognitive accessibility of strengths and weaknesses after failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*, 178–197. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.75.1.178

Dunn, W. S., Mount, M. K., Barrick, M. R., & Ones, D. S. (1995). Relative importance of personality and general mental ability in managers' judgments of applicant qualifications. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *80*, 500–509. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.80.4.500

George, J. M., & Zhou, J. (2001). When openness to experience and conscientiousness are related to creative behavior: An interactional approach. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *86*, 513–524. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.86.3.513

Greenfield, P. M. (2000). Three approaches to the psychology of culture: Where do they come from? Where can they go? *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, *3*, 223–240. doi:10.1111/1467-839X.00066

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Holland, J. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed.). Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Hough, L. M., & Furnham, A. (2003). Use of personality variables in work settings. In W. Borman, D. Ilgen, & R. Klimoski (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology* (Vol. 12, pp. 131–169). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Judge, T. A., Erez, A., & Bono, J. E. (1998). The power of being positive: The relation between positive self-concept and job performance. *Human Performance*, *11*, 167–187. doi:10.1080/08959285.1998.9668030

Judge, T. A., Jackson, C. L., Shaw, J. C., Scott, B. A., & Rich, B. L. (2007). Self-efficacy and work-related performance: The integral role of individual differences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *92*, 107–127. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.92.1.107

Kristof-Brown, A. L., & Guay, R. P. (2010). Person-environment fit. In S. Zedeck (Ed.), *APA handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 3, pp. 3–50). Washington, DC: APA.

Li, N. P., Bailey, J. M., Kenrick, D. T., & Linsenmeier, J. A. W. (2002). The necessities and luxuries of mate preferences: Testing the tradeoffs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*, 947–955. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.947

Li, N. P., Valentine, K. A., & Patel, L. (2011). Mate preferences in the U.S. and Singapore: A cross-cultural test of the mate preference priority model. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *50*, 291–294. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2010.10.005

Locke, E. A., McClear, K., & Knight, D. (1996). Self-esteem and work. *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *11*, 1–32.

Lodato, M. A., Highhouse, S., & Brooks, M. E. (2011). Predicting professional preferences for intuition-based hiring. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *26*, 352–365. doi:10.1108/02683941111138985

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, *98*, 224–253. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224

Matsumoto, D. (2003). The discrepancy between consensual-level culture and individual-level culture. *Culture & Psychology*, *9*, 89–95. doi:10.1177/1354067X03009001006

McCrae, R. R., & Terracciano, A. (2005). Personality profiles of cultures: Aggregate personality traits. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *89*, 407–425. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.89.3.407

Morris, M. W., & Peng, K. (1994). Culture and cause: American and Chinese attributions for social and physical events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 949–971. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.67.6.949

Mount, M. K., Barrick, M. R., & Stewart, G. L. (1998). Five-factor model of personality and performance in jobs involving interpersonal interactions. *Human Performance*, *11*, 145–165. doi:10.1080/08959285.1998.9668029

Nye, C. D., Su, R., Rounds, J., & Drasgow, F. (2012). Vocational interests and performance: A quantitative summary of over 60 years of research. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *7*, 384–403. doi:10.1177/1745691612449021

Oh, I.-S. (2009). *The five-factor model of personality and job performance in East Asia: A cross-cultural validity generalization study* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Iowa, US. Iowa

Ones, D. S, & Viswesvaran, C. (1999). Relative importance of personality dimensions for expatriate selection: A policy capturing study. *Human Performance*, *12*, 275–294. doi:10.1080/08959289909539872

Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M. (2002). Rethinking individualism and collectivism: Evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *128*, 3–72. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.128.1.3

Ployhart, R. E., & Schneider, B. (2012). The social and organizational context of personnel selection. In N. Schmitt (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of personnel assessment and selection* (pp. 48–67). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ployhart, R. E., Wiechmann, D., Schmitt, N., Sacco, J. M., & Rogg, K. (2003). The cross-cultural equivalence of job performance ratings. *Human Performance*, *16*, 49–79. doi:10.1207/S15327043HUP1601_3

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ryan, A. M., McFarland, L. A., Baron, H., & Page, R. (1999). An international look at selection practices: Nation and culture as explanations for variability in practice. *Personnel Psychology*, *52*, 359–392. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6570.1999.tb00165.x

Rynes, S. L., Brown, K. G., & Colbert, A. B. (2002). Seven common misconceptions about human resources practices: Research findings versus practitioners belief. *Academy of Management Journal*, *16*, 92–102. doi:10.5465/AME.2002.8540

Salgado, J. F. (1997). The five-factor model of personality and job performance in the European community. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *82*, 30–43. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.82.1.30

Stajkovic, A. D., & Luthans, F. (1998). Self-efficacy and work-related performance: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *124*, 240–261. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.124.2.240

Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Triandis, H. C., & Suh, E. M. (2002). Cultural influences on personality. *The Annual Review of Psychology*, *53*, 133–160. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135200

van Dam, K. (2003). Trait perception in the employment interview: A five-factor model perspective. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, *11*, 43–55. doi:10.1111/1468-2389.00225

Weber, E., & Morris, M. W. (2010). Culture and judgment and decision making: The constructivist turn. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *5*, 410–419. doi:10.1177/1745691610375556

Williams, J. E., Saiz, J. L., Formyduval, D. L., Munick, M. L., Fogle, E. E., Adom, A., & Yu, J. (1995). Cross-cultural variation in the importance of psychological characteristics: A seven-country study. *International Journal of Psychology*, *30*, 529–550. doi:10.1080/00207599508246585

Original manuscript received July 2012
Revised manuscript received June 2013
First published online August 2013

APPENDIX A: TRAIT DESCRIPTIONS

Self-efficacy refers to the extent to which a person believes that he or she is effective and capable of managing situations and attaining goals.

Self-esteem refers to how well a person regards him or herself. A person with a high self-esteem has a positive self-image, whereas low self-esteem individuals tend to regard themselves negatively.

Conscientiousness refers to how hardworking a person is. It includes self-discipline, thoroughness, organization, reliability, deliberation (thinking carefully before acting), and need for achievement.

Extraversion refers to how externally focused a person is. Extroverts enjoy human interactions and tend to be enthusiastic, talkative, assertive, and interested in seeking out excitement.

Emotional stability refers to how calm a person is. High emotional stability means being even-tempered and able to handle stress, whereas low emotional stability means being nervous, anxious, tense, or easily rattled.

Openness to experience refers to how responsive to new ideas, experiences, and unconventional views a person is. People high on openness are intellectually curious, and appreciative of art. People low on openness prefer familiarity over novelty, and resist change.

Agreeableness refers to how considerate and cooperative a person is. Agreeable people value getting along with others, and they are warm, friendly, helpful, and cooperative.

APPENDIX B: JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Accountant. The major responsibilities (i.e., KPIs) for this job include: (i) preparing, examining, and analysing accounting records, and financial statements; (ii) creating tables of accounts and assigning entries to proper accounts; and (iii) developing and modifying record-keeping and accounting systems (emphasized trait: conscientiousness).

Graphic designer. The major responsibilities (i.e., KPIs) for this job include: (i) creating designs, concepts and sample layouts of products for customers; (ii) determining and selecting the types of materials to be used for illustrative material; and (iii) discussing with clients to determine layout design (emphasized trait: openness to experience).

Mental health counsellor. The major responsibilities (i.e., KPIs) for this job include: (i) encouraging clients to express their feelings and to discuss what is happening in their lives; (ii) helping clients to develop insight into themselves and their

relationships with others; and (iii) guiding clients in developing skills and strategies for dealing with their problems (emphasized trait: agreeableness).

Emergency medical technician. The major responsibilities (i.e., KPIs) for this job include: (i) administering first-aid treatment or care to sick or injured people waiting to be brought to a hospital (e.g., from a car accident); (ii) performing emergency diagnostic and treatment procedures (e.g., heart monitoring); and (iii) assessing the nature and extent of the illness or injury faced by a person (emphasized trait: emotional stability).

Retail salesperson. The major responsibilities (i.e., KPIs) for this job include: (i) interacting with customers, and getting to know their needs and wants; (ii) answering product-related questions and recommending, selecting, and locating products based on the customers' needs and wants; and (iii) accurately processing payment for purchased products (emphasized trait: extraversion).