



SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE, CULTURAL DISTANCE, AND CULTURAL HUMILITY IN CHILDREN'S MEDIA RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The study of children, adolescents, and media (CAM) places a special emphasis on the welfare of young audiences and the media that socially, culturally, and historically constructs their identity, knowledge, and understanding of themselves and the world around them. CAM scholars form a "legion of worriers and warriors ... focused on making the world a better place for children to live and learn" (Jordan, 2021, p. 147). This legion spans the world, embodying the three traditional realms of media studies (audience, texts, and institutions) as a "microcosm of media studies" (Lemish, 2015, p. 1) and crosses disciplinary, theoretical, and empirical boundaries. As such, CAM scholarship can sometimes be difficult to find since it is often located in many different disciplinary journals and books as well as in proprietary industry reports. Lemish (2019) spoke of her journey in finding a home for her children's media research and calls for the need for deeper internationalization of CAM that can account for the variance of children's lives and the structural forces that shape the market and content of children's media. This special issue contributes to this vision and highlights CAM research produced outside of a Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) society (Jordan & Prendella, 2019). Moreover, it allows for a space to reflect on CAM scholarship as a whole and future directions for consideration. Let's explore some of the limitations in existing children's media research and ways in which international collaboration can help to mediate some of these concerns.

Research Approaches and WEIRD populations

Research in children's media has a history of utilizing quantitative approaches. An assessment of the *Journal of Children and Media* indicates that in its first 12 volumes, 41% of the published work employed quantitative methods, particularly in scholarship produced in the U.S., the Netherlands, and Belgium (Lemish, 2019). Much of publishable quantitative research relies on locating statistically significant differences between and within groups and such is the case for children's media research as well. As Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2021) describe, "the logic is that the larger the difference observed in the sample among the groups, the more likely it is that those differences are also occurring in the population" (p. 256). Significant differences are then valued as marking noteworthy distinctions that can be generalized to the larger society. However, Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2021) also contend that "statistics can also be considered only a partial truth. There is always more to the story than statistics can convey" (p. 1).

Another part of the story is the question of who is being compared to whom - and perhaps more importantly why. Heinrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) expressed concerns that most of the research in human psychology and behavior is conducted with and about people from WEIRD societies. Go, Yuki, and Chu (2020) note that this is not just the case for human psychology and identify several other disciplines in which this is the case including neuroscience, education, linguistics, medicine, philosophy, and anthropology. Indeed, Go and colleagues (2020) further submit that not only is research conducted primarily with WEIRD populations, but also primarily with White WEIRD ones as well.

To move forward, Heinrich and his colleagues (2010) call for a crucial, long-term goal of tools and principles that can be used to "distinguish *variable* from *universal* aspects" (emphasis added, p. 29) of the human experience. While the measurement of differences among populations and cultures has a long history,

Muthukrishna and his colleagues (2020) developed a new method to consider the cultural distance of populations based on several dimensions resulting in the creation of a cultural fixation index (CF_{ST}). Currently, two CF_{ST} have been developed: 1) the American scale of culture distance from the U.S. and 2) the Chinese scale of cultural distance from China. These two scales allow for comparisons of any given population with that of U.S. and that of China to establish a sense of cultural similarity and dissimilarity. For example, Japan and Norway have a similar CF_{ST} score when compared with the U.S. (.115 and .124, respectively), but Japan and Norway are not necessarily similar to each other. A look at the CF_{ST} score with China for Japan (.118) and Norway (.206) demonstrates this suggesting that Japan is similar to both the U.S. and China and Norway is more similar to the U.S. than to China (Muthukrishna et al., 2020).

Finally, whether considering significant differences or cultural distances, both call for the need for cultural humility and an asset-based approach to research. In reference to physician/patient interactions, Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) introduce the concept of cultural humility as “a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the physician-patient dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (p. 123). Cultural humility needs to be applied to research as more and more is discovered about the human condition around the world, particularly in the interpretation of differences and distances. A statistical difference is just that, a noted difference among groups. Power is often assigned in these differences, and as researchers interpret these differences between groups, cultural humility needs to be ever present to generate understanding rather than judgement of difference. Moreover, the deficit-based models have long informed social scientific research, particularly with marginalized groups, tending to “catalog the disadvantages particular social groups face at the expense of considering their strengths, which defines the asset-based approach” (Alper et al., p. 108). By taking an asset-based approach, CAM scholars can identify the skills, resourcefulness, resilience, and strength

of individuals and how media plays a role in their achievements. In this way, CAM scholars can practice cultural humility to examine power imbalances of areas such as media access and media misrepresentation or lack of representation in the pursuit of children’s welfare.

CAM Scholarship advances and potential

In order to examine current trends in children’s media scholarship publication, an analysis of the *Journal of Children and Media* was conducted with specific attention to countries studied, country comparison studies, and applying CF_{ST} scores to Asian countries (Muthukrishna et al., 2020). Articles published in the *Journal of Children and Media* between 2013 and 2023 were examined. Two issues were excluded (JOCAM Next, 2016, 10(1) and JOCAM Bridges, 2010, 10(2)) since those issues focused on reflection of the field and did not contain new studies in the field. Additionally, book reviews and commentaries were also excluded. As such, a total of 321 articles were analyzed.

Most articles reported on research conducted in 1 country (87.2%), followed by 5.9% in 2 countries, 5.0% in more than 2 countries, and 1.9% in non-specified countries. Forty-nine countries (See Table 1) were specifically identified with just under half solely or jointly in the U.S. (47.6%). Regarding regions of the world, most of the 302 articles covered North America (U.S. and Canada; 45.2%), and Europe (28.0%). Asia was the next highest region with 23 articles (7.2%), followed by the Middle East (primarily Israel, 3.4%), Latin America (Mexico, Central America, and South America, 3.1%), Oceania (2.5%), and Africa (1.9%). No specific regions were mentioned in 6 articles (1.9%), and there were 22 articles (6.9%) covering more than 1 region.

Looking specifically at 23 articles featuring research in Asian countries (Table 2), one article compared 2 Asian countries (Singapore and Vietnam). Of the remaining 22 articles covering Asian countries, most of the articles were from China (31.8%), followed by India (18.2%), Japan and Singapore with 13.6% each, Korea (9.0%), and Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam with 4.5% each.

While there is some overlap in years from Lemish (2019) to this current analysis, it should be noted that 15 additional countries were represented in this analysis including Albania, Russia, China, Croatia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Hungary, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Malaysia, Portugal, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Trinidad and Tobago. Missing from this analysis were four countries previously reported (Lemish, 2019) including Indonesia, Hong Kong, Slovenia, and South Africa. It should also be noted that the countries represented in this analysis expand beyond the countries of the authors to include the area in which CAM was studied. The increased number of countries speaks highly to the continued internationalization efforts within the subdiscipline of CAM. Moreover, the CF_{ST} scores of the Asian countries suggest that culturally distant experiences from the U.S. experience are being noted and represented in CAM, with only two countries (India and Singapore) below a CF_{ST} score of .100, that is, countries similar to the U.S.

Conclusion

The legion of CAM scholars will continue to grow when we exercise cultural humility in our collaborations across the globe. We need to be particularly careful to heed the advice of Lemish (2019) to maintain a “deep conviction that we can learn so much from each other, and that the diversity of contexts can inform us about what is universal in the role of media in children’s lives and what is particular” (p. 120) when we do so. Special Issues of journals such as this also share vital research and context regarding the study of children, adolescents, and media (CAM) and help build the knowledge base beyond WEIRD experiences. We also need to recognize that

“invisible” children such as child refugees, children with disabilities, and children with housing, food, and climate insecurities exist around the world, using media in a variety of ways, and can add to our understanding of CAM, particularly when we take an asset-based approach to CAM research (Alper et al., 2016). It is crucial to continue CAM research around the world and share our findings with one another. We can do it, and we can make the world a better place to live and learn.

Table 1: Countries of Focus in JOCAM articles

Country of Focus	
Albania	Japan
Argentina	Kenya
Australia	Korea
Austria	Kyrgyz Republic
Belgium	Malaysia
Brazil	Netherlands
Bulgaria	New Zealand
Canada	Nigeria
Chile	Norway
China	Pakistan
Croatia	Peru
Denmark	Portugal
Ecuador	Romania
Estonia	Russia
Ethiopia	Saudi Arabia
Finland	Singapore
France	Slovakia
Germany	Spain
Ghana	Sweden
Greece	Thailand
Hungary	Trinidad and Tobago
India	U.K.
Ireland	U.S.
Israel	Vietnam
Italy	

Table 2: Cultural Fixation Index Scores by Country*

Country	American		Chinese	
	Cultural Distance	95% CI	Cultural Distance	95% CI
China	.150	[.146, .155]	---	---
India	.093	[.091, .097]	.106	[.104, .110]
Japan	.115	[.112, .119]	.118	[.104, .110]
Korea	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Malaysia	.125	[.121, .129]	.156	[.153, .160]
Singapore	.038	[.036, .041]	.124	[.120, .129]
Thailand	.129	[.125, .134]	.104	[.101, .107]
Vietnam	.182	[.177, .188]	.057	[.055, .061]

* CF_{ST} scores from Muthukrishna et al., 2020

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