Qeios

Peer Review

Review of: "Universalism and Innovation: The Influence of Impartiality and Inclusiveness on National Innovativeness"

Kyung Min Park[1]

1. School of Business, Yonsei University, Korea, Republic of

Overall Assessment

This paper makes a genuine and commendable contribution to the growing literature on cultural determinants of national innovativeness. By situating the concept of universalism — understood as the impartial and inclusive treatment of outgroup members — within established cultural frameworks and linking it empirically to the Global Innovation Index (GII), the authors open a theoretically rich and relatively underexplored avenue of inquiry. The manuscript is well-motivated, philosophically grounded, and ends with a stimulating discussion connecting moral capital to social capital. The reviewers find the paper worthy of further development and offer the following suggestions in the spirit of constructive scholarly dialogue.

Strengths

The most significant strength of the paper lies in its theoretical ambition. Whereas prior research on culture and innovation has relied heavily on Hofstede's dimensions — particularly individualism-collectivism and uncertainty avoidance — this paper introduces the moral dimension of universalism as an independent and theoretically grounded explanatory variable. The authors' decision to anchor this concept in the philosophical tradition of impartiality, drawing on Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, and Amartya Sen, lends intellectual depth that is rarely found in empirical cross-national studies. This philosophical scaffolding is not merely decorative; it serves to distinguish among conceptually distinct forms of universalism in a way that proves consequential for the empirical results.

The use of three independent measurement instruments — Trompenaars' scenario-based universalism score, Schwartz's Moral Inclusiveness Score, and the behavioral allocation measure developed by Enke

 doi.org/10.32388/7YW3U6

and colleagues — reflects a laudable methodological ambition. By sourcing data from culturally distinct measurement paradigms (normative scenarios, value structure analysis, and behavioral games, respectively), the authors implicitly test whether the relationship between universalism and innovativeness is robust to operationalization. This multi-instrument design is methodologically adventurous and, if properly validated, could substantially strengthen the paper's claims.

The discussion section deserves particular recognition. When the Enke-based measure fails to reach significance — in sharp contrast to the other two instruments — the authors resist the temptation of dismissal and instead offer a theoretically nuanced account. The distinction between an "either/or" conception of trust (in which universalism is purchased at the cost of ingroup attachment) and a "both/and" conception (in which bridging trust builds upon bonding trust) is both novel and intellectually compelling. This reading aligns elegantly with Putnam's classic distinction between bonding and bridging social capital and, in our view, constitutes the most theoretically generative contribution of the paper. The linkage between moral capital, social capital, and tolerance as a connecting tissue is similarly insightful and points toward a coherent research agenda for future work.

Major Concerns

The most pressing methodological concern is the absence of any reported inter-measure correlations among the three operationalizations of universalism. The paper treats all three instruments as alternative measures of the same theoretical construct, yet provides no evidence that they converge empirically. Given that the three instruments produce strikingly different patterns of association with the GII — Trompenaars yielding a Pearson r of .745 ($p < .001$), Schwartz yielding a significant positive relationship, and Enke yielding a near-zero and non-significant coefficient (rho = -.050) — it is difficult to sustain the claim that all three are measuring the same underlying construct. The authors should report the pairwise correlations among the three measures and, ideally, conduct a formal assessment of convergent validity, for instance through confirmatory factor analysis or a multi-trait multi-method approach. Without this, the theoretical coherence of the paper rests on an untested assumption.

Closely related to this concern is a logical tension in the paper's post-hoc explanation of the Enke measure's null result. The argument that Enke's operationalization captures a fundamentally different kind of universalism — one that trades ingroup trust for outgroup trust — is plausible and interesting. However, if this conceptual distinction was not specified a priori, the explanation risks circularity: the measure is reinterpreted as capturing something different only after it fails to support the hypothesis. To avoid this, the authors should either reframe their paper as explicitly exploring distinct subtypes of universalism from the outset, or acknowledge that the post-hoc reinterpretation is speculative and

requires independent confirmation in future research.

A further concern relates to the potential confounding effect of national multiculturalism. Countries with high levels of ethno-cultural diversity or large immigrant populations may score higher on universalism measures not because their citizens hold deeper moral commitments to impartiality, but simply because daily intergroup contact normalizes the equal treatment of outgroup members as a social practice rather than a moral principle. At the same time, demographic diversity is itself associated with higher levels of innovation through talent attraction and idea diversity. This creates a plausible spurious pathway: multiculturalism may drive both higher universalism scores and higher GII scores independently, producing the observed correlation without any direct causal link between the two. The authors should include proxies for national demographic diversity — such as immigrant stock as a percentage of the population or a fractionalization index — as control variables in their regression models.

The paper's cross-sectional design also renders the direction of causality indeterminate. The authors assume that universalism precedes and promotes innovativeness, but the reverse pathway is equally plausible: economically prosperous and highly innovative societies may generate the social conditions — reduced zero-sum competition, greater material security, broader cosmopolitan experience — that foster universalistic orientations. A design incorporating temporally lagged universalism measures would considerably strengthen the causal interpretation. The authors might also consider exploiting the pre-pandemic 2019 GII data already available in their dataset more systematically for this purpose.

Minor Concerns

On a presentational note, the paper repeatedly employs the term "chapter" when referring to the sections of the manuscript (e.g., "the next chapter will define the term universalism" and "the hypothesis is tested empirically in the following chapter"). In the conventions of journal article writing, the appropriate term is "section." The word "chapter" is reserved for subdivisions of monographs or edited volumes. While this is a minor point, its repetition across the introduction suggests that the authors may have drafted portions of the text with a book chapter format in mind. Correcting this usage throughout would improve the formal consistency of the manuscript.

The sample sizes across the three analyses — ranging from 49 to 63 countries — are modest and, as the authors themselves acknowledge, disproportionately represent economically advanced nations. This limits the generalizability of the findings, particularly for the relationship between universalism and innovation in middle-income or lower-income contexts where different institutional complementarities may be at play. Future work should endeavor to expand the country coverage, particularly by incorporating data from Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Latin America.

Suggestions for Future Research

The paper's closing discussion on the relationship between moral capital and social capital opens a particularly promising research frontier. One productive extension would be to incorporate behavioral measures of social capital — rather than relying solely on survey-based trust indices — as mediating variables between universalism and innovativeness. Prior research has demonstrated that social capital can be validly proxied through observable behaviors such as blood donation rates (Guiso et al., 2004), the density of voluntary associations (Putnam, 2000), voter turnout (Knack, 2002), and even the spatial distribution of open socialization venues. Employing such behavioral measures alongside the attitudinal measures already used in this paper would allow researchers to test whether universalism promotes innovation primarily by expanding bridging social capital (links across groups) or by preserving bonding social capital (dense ingroup ties) — a distinction that maps directly onto the paper's own theoretical discussion of the Enke null result.

More specifically, it would be theoretically productive to examine whether societies characterized by high densities of open, non-exclusive socialization spaces — spaces that facilitate spontaneous contact between strangers, as operationalized by Patulny and Svendsen (2007) — moderate the relationship between universalism and innovation differently from societies dominated by more exclusive religious or kinship-based associational forms. This line of investigation would provide a direct empirical test of the paper's core intuition that it is not universalism per se, but universalism combined with preserved ingroup attachment, that generates the social fabric most conducive to sustained innovation.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.