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# Individualism vs Collectivism in Different Cultures: a cross-cultural study

ABDEL-FATTAH E. DARWISH & GÜNTER L. HUBER

**ABSTRACT** *In this study, individualism vs collectivism, in line with the work of Triandis in 1985, was assessed in two groups of male and female students, in Egypt and Germany. The results confirm the effect that cultural background has on individualist vs collectivist orientations in both of these cultures for male and female students. Men and women scored higher on individualism in Germany than in Egypt, whereas collectivism scores were higher in Egypt than in Germany. These findings are discussed in terms of general recommendations for intercultural interventions that discourage viewing people solely in terms of group membership, and instead as distinct individuals.*

## **Introduction**

Educational interventions in intergroup relations are often built on the foundations of teamwork and co-operative learning. Miller and Harrington (1990) suggest a variety of team methods and discuss their prospects and problems from the point of view of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Among other propositions, a basic need to maintain a positive self-identity is essential in this theory. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), positive social identity is based mainly on comparisons between the in-group and a relevant out-group. Because these comparisons involve in-group-favouritism and rejection of out-group members, intercultural interventions should be aimed at a process of de-categorization by promoting differentiation and personalization in the perception of out-group members (Miller & Harrington, 1990).

There are doubts, however, as to the general validity of these suggestions for all groups. Hinkle and Brown (1990) have elaborated on the question of whether there might be a basis for positive social identity other than comparisons between the in-group and out-group. From their considerations we may conclude that there are sociocultural conditions, under which fostering a highly individualized and personalized perception of members of a relevant out-group could be even counter-productive. One of these conditions is defined by the dimension of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1981; Triandis *et al.*, 1988).

Individualism is defined as a situation in which people are concerned with themselves and close family members only, while collectivism is defined as a situation in which people feel they belong to larger in-groups or collectives which

care for them in exchange for loyalty—and vice versa (Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Collectivism can also be defined as a cluster of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours toward a wide variety of people. The difference can be expressed by the range of social “concern”, which refers to bonds and links with others (Hui & Triandis, 1986).

Cross-cultural research often focuses on the differences between societies that stress individualism and societies that stress collectivism. Dumont (1986) underlines that these differences between societies are also relevant for differences between individuals, because they influence even the most personal relations such as love, intimacy, marriage and the break-up of relationships.

### **Different Meanings of Differentiation in Individualistic and Collectivistic Groups**

It follows from analyses of individualist vs collectivist sociocultures that individuals do not feel as attached to an in-group when there are numerous in-groups to which they can belong and when each in-group provides only a small part of their material and emotional security. As a result, social behaviour is likely to be very different in proto-individualist, collectivist and neo-individualist societies.

Conformity may occur more frequently in collectivist cultures, when the norms are clear and sanctions are likely to be imposed for deviant behaviour. However, when the norms are unclear and sanctions are unlikely to be imposed, we might observe anti-conformity in collectivist cultures. This explains Frager’s (1970) findings that Japanese subjects conformed less (25%) than US subjects (usually 33%) in Asch-type conformity tasks (Triandis *et al.*, 1988).

In individualist cultures, there are many more in-groups (e.g. family, co-workers, clubs, peers), and much of the behaviour of individuals is aimed at goals that are valid within one of various in-groups, but not within others. In collectivist cultures, the relationship of the individual to the in-group tends to be stable and, even when the in-group makes highly costly demands, the individual stays with it (Triandis *et al.*, 1988).

Triandis (1988) commented on the possible effect of cultural background on the number of cognitions contained in the private self and the collective self. Using suggestions by Hofstede (1980) and Hsu (1981, 1983, 1985), he argued that the private self is emphasized more in individualistic cultures such as North America or Europe than in collectivistic cultures such as those of East Asia and Middle Eastern or Arabian countries. However, the collective self is emphasized more in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures.

Summarizing, individualist and collectivist cultures can be characterized as follows. Individualistic cultures emphasize promoting the individual’s and his/her immediate family’s self-interest (underlining individual rights, not responsibilities), personal autonomy, privacy, self-realization, individual initiative, independence, individual decision making, an understanding of personal identity as the sum of attributes of the individual, and less concern about the needs and interests of others. As examples of typical individualistic societies, Australia, Great Britain, Canada the

US are named. Collectivistic societies, on the other hand, emphasize loyalty to the group (while the group in turn cares for the well-being of the individual), emotional dependence on groups and organizations, less personal privacy, the belief that group decisions are superior to individual decisions, interdependence, an understanding of personal identity as knowing one's place within the group, and concern about the needs and interests of others. As typical collectivistic societies China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Pakistan and Taiwan are quoted (Baron & Byrne, 1997).

For example, Singh *et al.* (1962) compared the values held by Americans, Chinese and Indians. They found that Chinese ranked highest in society-centred orientation, whereas Americans ranked highest in self-centred orientation. On Edwards's personal preference schedule, Americans scored the highest on the need for autonomy (cf. Hui & Triandis, 1986).

It seems reasonable then to suppose that people with an individualistic cultural background will have more private self-cognitions, and fewer collective self-cognitions than people from a collectivistic cultural background. Therefore, promoting a more differentiated, personalized view of out-group members may be well in line with the goal of intercultural understanding if applied to in-groups of an individualist social background, while members of collectivist in-groups would find confirmation that those "others" really are very different and hard to understand.

### **Selected Findings from Cross-cultural Studies Focused on Individualism and Collectivism**

The roots of individualism in the Western world can be traced back to the history of ideas (e.g. Lukes, 1973), political and economic history (e.g. MacFarlane, 1987) religious history (e.g. Capps & Fenn, 1992), and psycho-social history (e.g. Waterman, 1981). Individualism/collectivism themes are already apparent in Plato's Republic and individualistic values in Sophists' teaching. Individualism has been attributed to the earliest Christian renouncers or has been linked to the emergence of private property in England around 1200 (MacFarlane, 1978). Closer to cross-cultural psychologists' understanding of the historical precursors of individualism/collectivism, however, are Tönnies's (1887 [1991]) *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, often translated as *Community and Society* (e.g. Smith & Schwartz, 1997).

Overwhelming evidence indicates differences in basic psychological processes between members of individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Differences have been noted in processes such as learning, reinforcement and social perception (Bond & Forgas, 1984). Perception of social episodes was found to be affected: for instance, Chinese subjects were emphasizing common feelings, social usefulness and acceptance of authority, while Australians were emphasizing competitiveness, self-confidence and freedom (cf. Kagitcibasias & Berry, 1989).

Triandis *et al.* were interested in individualism and collectivism constructs, which they analysed theoretically and linked them to certain hypothetical consequences (social behaviour, health indices). The sample consisted of 300 subjects from the US, 150 subjects from Japan and 97 from Puerto-Rico. The results suggested that US individualism is reflected in (a) self-reliance with competition, (b) low concern

for the in-group, (c) psychological distance from the in-group. In Japan as well as in Puerto-Rico, collectivism reflected that responses depend on who the others are (i.e. which in-group), on the context, and on the kind of social behaviour, e.g. feeling similar to others, being attentive to the views of others (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Triandis *et al.*, 1990).

Individualism–collectivism constructs (Lukes, 1973) have been discussed in many contexts within social science discourse. For example, in the areas of values (Hofstede, 1981; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961), social systems (e.g. Parsons & Shils, 1951), morality (Shweder, 1982), religion (Bakan, 1966), cognitive differentiation (Witkin & Berry, 1975), economic development (Adelman & Morris, 1967), modernity (Inkeles & Smith, 1974), the structure of constitutions (Massimini & Calegari, 1979), and cultural patterns (Hsu, 1983). The concepts used were closely related to these constructs (cf. Triandis *et al.*, 1990).

Trafimow *et al.* (1991) were interested in examining the distinction between the private self and the collective self. On the basis of Greenwald and Pratkanis' (1984) and Triandis' (1988) theory of individualistic–collectivistic cultures, a distinction between private and collective aspects of the self was drawn. Both theories predict that people with individualistic cultural backgrounds are more likely to retrieve more private self-cognitions and fewer collective self-cognitions than people with collectivistic cultural backgrounds. Results supported the notion that private and collective self-cognitions are even stored in separate locations in memory. In addition, subjects from individualistic cultures retrieved more cognitions about the private self and fewer about the collective self than subjects from collectivistic cultures (Trafimow *et al.*, 1991).

### **The Educational Problem**

Relationships with in-group members are intensive and interdependence is high in collectivist cultures, whereas there is more detachment, distance and self-reliance in individualist cultures. Social relations tend to be more enduring, involuntary, and to occur in large groups in collectivist cultures, whereas they are more temporary, voluntary, and occur in smaller groups in individualist cultures (Triandis *et al.*, 1988). Sinha (1988) assumed that people in individualistic cultures often have greater skills in entering and leaving new social groups. They make “friends” easily, but by “friends” they mean non-intimate acquaintances. People in collectivistic cultures have fewer skills in making new “friends”, but “friends” in their case implies lifelong intimate relationships, with many obligations. Subjects from individualistic cultures have individualistic values and behaviours, and vice versa for collectivistic cultures. This is reflected in other psychological processes and behaviours as well.

Examples are found in studies comparing Americans or Australians with East and South Asian groups (Kagitcibasi & Berry, 1989). Triandis (1988) commented on the possible effect of cultural background on the number of cognitions contained in private self and collective self, using suggestions by Hofstede (1981) and Hsu (1981, 1983, 1985). He argued that the private self is emphasized more in individualistic cultures such as North America or Europe than in collectivistic cultures such as

those of East Asia. However, the collective self is emphasized more in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures. It seems reasonable then to suppose that people with an individualistic cultural background will have more private self-cognitions and fewer collective self-cognitions (cf. Trafimow *et al.*, 1991).

Fostering processes of de-categorization and personalization of out-group members among the members of an in-group as a means of building intergroup understanding thus may work especially well for in-groups with an individualist background. Borrowing from their private self-cognitions may help to bridge the gap between the groups—at least from the individualist side. However, insisting on the individuality of members of an out-group, seen from the point of view of a collectivist in-group, may not help at all to reach the goal of mutual understanding. In the worst case, this strategy may make the individualist out-group members even more alien.

To examine the general attribution of individualism to European societies and of collectivism to Arabic sociocultures, we compared measurements of these social orientations in Egypt and Germany. The study tries to demonstrate (1) possible effects of cultural background on individualism vs collectivism, (2) differences between German and Egyptian subjects in individualism (vertical  $\times$  horizontal; see below), (3) differences between German and Egyptian subjects in collectivism (vertical  $\times$  horizontal), and (4) differences between male and female subjects' individualism and collectivism in both cultures.

## **Method**

### *Subjects*

Egyptian subjects were 35 male and 50 female students from Menoufia University. In Germany, the sample consists of 30 male and 30 female students from the University of Tübingen. Their age ranged from 19 to 23 years.

### *Procedure*

Subjects were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate self-perception and average group performances on an individualism–collectivism scale, and how these data relate to interpersonal judgements and behaviours. Triandis' (1985) Individualism–Collectivism Scale was applied as the instrument of measurement. The scale consists of 30 items and assesses four types of individualistic vs collectivistic orientations (see Singelis *et al.*, 1995):

- Vertical Individualism (VI) is defined as an inclination to favour more pronounced social hierarchies and greater social distance, thus characterizing the person and her cultural setting by autonomy and acceptance of inequality.
- Horizontal Individualism (HI), on the other hand, describes a social situation of low social distance and flat hierarchical relations, distinguishing this type of individualism by tendencies favouring autonomy combined with the ideal of social equality.

TABLE 1. Individualism vs collectivism scores

	German students		Egyptian students		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
<i>All subjects</i>						
VI	15	2.6	10.5	1.6	2.09	< 0.05
HI	15.2	2.8	8.7	1.9	2.4	< 0.05
VC	9.3	1.8	14.7	2.7	2.5	< 0.05
HC	9.1	1.3	13.9	3.2	1.9	< 0.05
<i>Male subjects</i>						
VI	15.2	2.7	11.8	1.7	1.9	< 0.05
HI	15.3	2.7	8.4	2.4	2.4	< 0.05
VC	9.2	1.5	12.5	2.6	2.2	< 0.05
HC	10.3	2.2	14.4	3.8	2.6	< 0.05
<i>Female subjects</i>						
VI	15.9	2.7	10.5	2.1	1.9	< 0.05
HI	16	2.9	11.1	1.4	1.9	< 0.05
VC	10.3	1.5	13.3	2.7	1.9	< 0.05
HC	10.9	1.3	14.5	2.6	1.9	< 0.05

- Vertical Collectivism (VC) stresses the hierarchical structure of society and more distant relations, characterizing a social setting in which the individuals are primarily parts of the collective and accept social inequalities.
- Horizontal Collectivism (HC), finally, is the hallmark of social settings in which hierarchy and distance are minimal; therefore, people belonging to a group ideally experience themselves as members in a collective of equals.

## Results

The analysis of the various individualism scores and collectivism scores produced a clear pattern of results (see Table 1):

The general assumption that there are differences between the subjects from Germany and Egypt was confirmed. German students expressed altogether significantly more individualistic tendencies than Egyptian students, on both the vertical and the horizontal sub-scales. The Egyptian students, in contrast, scored significantly higher on both collectivism sub-scales than German students. The differences were statistically tested by *t*-tests. All the *t*-scores represent error probabilities  $p < 0.05$ .

Since Hui and Triandis (1986) and Triandis *et al.* (1988) report gender differences in individual inclinations towards individualism/collectivism, we also tested the differences between male students in both countries as well as between the sub-samples of female students in Egypt and Germany. Again, all these differences are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). That is, we find the same tendencies both for male and for female students in each of the two countries compared. Male students

as well as female students scored higher on the individualism scales in Germany than in Egypt, while the collectivism scores of both gender groups were lower in Germany than in Egypt. Concentrating on our research question, we did not elaborate on possible significant differences between male and female subjects within each of these two countries.

## **Conclusions**

These results reinforce our doubts about the straightforward transfer of educational means deduced from findings within a particular sociocultural setting to problems in intercultural education. Specifically, we questioned the usefulness of stimulating decategorization processes by promoting differentiation and personalization of individuals within the out-group to promote mutual understanding of culturally diverse sub-groups. These educational strategies, as recommended by Miller and Harrington (1990), are well based on central constructs of social identity theory and seem to be efficient in organizing co-operation in American classrooms. However, they may become not only ineffective, but even dysfunctional, if cultural diversity of the sub-groups to develop mutual understanding includes individualism vs collectivism as a relevant difference.

If we want to prevent or solve problems between groups of Central-European and Arabic students, decategorization by motivating students to perceive individuals belonging to the out-group category as distinct individuals with unique characteristics may work perfectly for one group, but lead to undesired effects for the other group. When an in-group of students characterized by individualistic orientations learns to perceive the out-group no longer as a homogeneous group of de-personalized representatives of some stereotypical attributions, but as individuals with very personal traits and attitudes—the same “like us”—perception of similarities and attraction may be established.

German and Egyptian students in our study, however, showed marked differences in individualism vs collectivism. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account that the Egyptian group would approach an intercultural programme from an in-group perspective. This implies that the members of the in-group would perceive themselves, even if not as equal among equals, then at least primarily as parts of their collective. Their problem with the members of the (individualist) out-group would be that they experience and categorize them as individualists—highly distant from their own experiences as members of a collective group and highly distinct from each other. What could processes of differentiation and personalization, underlining the out-group members’ distinctiveness as individuals and uniqueness as personalities, contribute to a better understanding of, and even a liking of these people? In the best case, this educational approach would be inefficient, but in the worst case it would add to the problems by confirming a collectivist in-group’s point of view as regards the members of an individualist out-group. At least, it should be studied carefully whether intercultural education under individualist vs collectivist conditions should start with efforts that foster perceptions of differentiation and personalization.

The data available in this study only replicate findings from other individualist vs



collectivist cultures. They thus confirm the basic assumptions of this distinction. Our conclusions present almost obvious new hypotheses, which should be studied empirically before decategorization programmes are recommended generally for intercultural education. These studies should combine quantitative instruments, as applied here, and qualitative approaches, that would reveal in a more differentiated way the mutual perspectives by which individualist and collectivist groups perceive each other.

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