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Do individualistic and collectivistic cultures still exist in contemporary society?

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1.0 Introduction

The dichotomy of individualism and collectivism has been a basic framework in the understanding of cultural variation in psychological functioning, social behaviour, and cognition for a longtime. This paradigm, which has its roots in Hofstede's work and was expanded by Triandis and his colleagues, suggests that cultures can be meaningfully classified as a continuum between societies that value autonomy and self-actualization and societies that value group cohesion and interdependence, and collective welfare. But the endurance and relevance of this binary structure in today's societies, which are increasingly globalised, should not be taken for granted. This essay suggests that although the concept of individualistic and collectivistic orientations is well supported empirically, the division of these construct does need a lot of theoretical development. Recent studies suggest that these orientations take a multidimensional form, namely horizontal and vertical expressions, and that they exert different effects in different domains, populations, and contexts. In addition, the dichotomous notion of individualism-collectivism as mutually exclusive constructs is challenged by criticism concerning methodological shortcomings, conceptualization, and the neglect of within-cultural differences. In this essay, which is based on both classical and modern empirical research, it is argued that individualistic and collectivistic cultures remain alive in today's societies and that these cultures in fact exist in more differentiated and nuanced forms, not easily categorizable by either category.

2.0 Theoretical Foundations and Evidence

2.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Early Conceptualisations

Systematic study of individualism and collectivism as cultural dimensions began with the comprehensive analysis of IBM employees in over 70 countries by Geert Hofstede. According to Hofstede's dimensions of national culture, individualism-collectivism is one of the basic dimensions along which national cultures differ, with countries like Japan, China and Colombia being high on collectivism and countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia being high on individualism. This core study was one of the earliest, large scale

quantitative assessments of cultural differences and laid the groundwork for much of the subsequent work in cross-cultural psychology.

The theoretical underpinning of this distinction is that culture in individualistic cultures is more concerned with personal goals, autonomy, and self-expression; and personal characteristics and choices are more influential on identity (Zalewska, A. M., 2018). In this kind of society, decisions are based on what someone wants, and a person's emotional health depends on his/her success and achievement. In collectivistic cultures, community, family, and social harmony take centre stage, and the sense of identity is derived from group membership, with decisions made for the benefit of the group and for social duty. This separation has spurred a significant number of empirical studies showing its implications for a variety of psychological phenomena such as self-concept, emotion regulation, cognition, and interpersonal relationships (Zalewska, A. M., 2018).

2.2 Meta-Analytic Evidence: The Oyserman, Coon and Kemmelmeier Review

The best empirical study of individualism-collectivism differences is that of Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) (Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M., 2002). This review brought together results of many cross-national and within-United States studies on the impact of individualism-collectivism on self-concept, well-being, cognition, and relationality. The meta-analysis did show that European Americans were significantly higher on the individualistic aspect of self (personal independence) and lower on the collectivistic aspect (duty toward in-group) than members of other groups. The findings did show, however, some important nuances that cloud the dichotomous framework. No significant differences were observed between European American and African American participants or between European American and Latino participants, nor between European American and Japanese or Korean participants in terms of individualism-collectivism. There were large effects among the Asian populations only – Chinese were less individualistic and more collectivistic.

The results defy simple East-West bipolar interpretations and indicate that the cultural orientations may not be uniform in large geographical areas and bipolar in nature. The results of the meta-analysis showed moderate effects of individualism-collectivism on self-concept and relationality, and large effects on attributional style and cognitive processing, which justified the

use of these constructs, and at the same time, the need for more nuanced conceptualisation. Oyserman and colleagues had proposed more intricate and process-oriented theories of culture and more contextualised explanations of its effects on psychological processes (Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M., 2002).

3.0 Theoretical Refinements: The Horizontal-Vertical Distinction

A major step forward in the theoretical conceptualisation of the individualistic collectivistic continuum was the introduction of the horizontal-vertical distinction by Triandis and Gelfand (1998) (Rojas-Méndez, J. I., Chinelato, F. B., Zeidabadi, G., & Massi, M., 2026) . This refinement suggests that individualistic and collectivistic orientations can be manifested as both horizontal (individualism with emphasis on equality) and vertical (individualism with emphasis on hierarchy), and that these four orientations form distinct cultures: Horizontal Individualism (HI), Vertical Individualism (VI), Horizontal Collectivism (HC), and Vertical Collectivism (VC) (Zalewska, A. M., 2018; Triandis, H. C., & Gelfand, M. J., 1998).

3.1 Conceptual Definitions and Empirical Validation

Horizontal Individualism is based on the concepts of autonomy, uniqueness, self-reliance, and the equality of individuals. People with high HI "do their own thing," but do not seek to be better than others. Horizontal Collectivism promotes interdependence and cooperation but is concerned with equality between group members—social harmony is established through shared responsibility. Vertical Individualism values personal success and position, understands that there are degrees of success and implies competition for distinction. Vertical Collectivism is a focus on hierarchy, tradition, and authority in the group, and that the members put group interests before their own interests and submit to group and social hierarchies (Triandis, H. C., & Gelfand, M. J., 1998). This four-factor structure has been shown to be empirically valid in various cultural settings. In Study 1, Triandis and Gelfand (1998) validated and replicated the four constructs, using factor analysis, in Korea, which has a collectivist culture, in addition to the United States, a country with an individualist culture. The dimensional approach is supported by this cross-cultural uniformity, and the fact that individualism and collectivism do not represent opposites but can be found in different combinations within a single society.

3.2 Contemporary Evidence and Implications

Empirical studies carried out recently add to the confirmation of the horizontal-vertical distinction and offer valuable insight into the domain of well-being and psychological functioning. In a cross-cultural study of Turkish sample and German sample, vertical

collectivism and vertical individualism respectively predicted reduced well-being across the two samples and individuals (Europe PMC., 2026). In contrast, horizontal focus, more typical of the German sample, was associated with adaptive personality profiles that were associated with better well-being. Importantly, both countries' individualism and collectivism predicted healthy personality profiles when related to horizontal focus. The results of this study have implications for the understanding of acculturation and adaptation of migrants with migration backgrounds. The research indicates that cultural fit can be harmful, for instance, when the key cultural attribute (vertical focus) is one that is associated with poorer well-being and negative outcomes for individuals and societies. This calls into question the notion that cultural congruence is always a good thing and stresses the need to consider the foci of cultural orientations rather than take it for granted that any congruence with cultural norms is good.

The Polish context also shows the complexity of cultural orientations in the light of research. Results of the research among working adults in Poland revealed high values of Horizontal Individualism and Vertical Collectivism; in the case of Polish students' higher values of Horizontal Individualism and Horizontal Collectivism were found (Zalewska, A. M. 2018). This indicates that there is significant intra-cultural diversity, with various combinations of cultural orientations being expressed in different age groups and circumstances. These results reflect the complexity of individualism-collectivism as a cultural dimension and highlight the fact that this dimension is not a rigid attribute of a particular culture; it is actually a variable cultural orientation within populations.

4.0 Critiques and Limitations

4.1 Conceptual and Methodological Criticisms

Although the individualism-collectivism framework is well supported by empirical evidence, there are important conceptual and methodological issues argued by critics of the framework (Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M. (2002). Fiske (2002) contended that individualism/collectivism is too simple and precise, that the meaning is not always sufficiently discussed or considered, nor is the contextual variation. By considering cultures as homogenous and uniform, one loses sight of the significant differences that exist in societies of differing social class, region, gender, and other demographic factors based on their values.

In addition, some measurement issues have been detected, such as problematic factors structures of some measurement instruments and conflicting empirical results (Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M. (2002) . The use of self-report questionnaires, frequently given to samples of university students, may bias the results and limit their generalisability; it is possible that there might be distinct types of response biases arising from various cultural settings. The dominance of studies conducted on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) populations has also given the illusion of cultural uniformity (Killin, A., & Pain, R., 2022) meaning that most studies have been undertaken on only a small minority of human variations.

4.2 The WEIRD Critique and Cultural Variation

The WEIRD critique, which has been stated most explicitly by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, has strong implications for the study of individualism and collectivism. Their analysis shows that 96% of the subjects in psychological studies come from the western countries of the industrial world, where 12% of the world population is living. That the WEIRD populations are outliers in many psychological dimensions, such as visual perception, fairness, cooperation, and analytical reasoning, is beautifully illustrated by the critique (Killin, A., & Pain, R., 2022). The Müller-Lyer illusion, for example, which has been proposed as a universal characteristic of human perception, has been found to vary significantly across cultures, with WEIRD participants being much more susceptible to this perceptual error than those from non-Western cultures.

This critique highlights the implicit assumption that results obtained from the WEIRD sample are universally applicable and proposes that research on individualism-collectivism might have exaggerated the size and content of the cultural differences based on the assumption that the results obtained from the WEIRD sample are considered 'normal' human psychology. Henrich's (2020) overall idea is that there are historical, specifically Western European, changes that underlie the psychological oddities of WEIRD populations, including the effects of the Latin Church on marriage, kinship, and the psychological traits of individualism, analytical thinking, and impersonal prosociality.

4.3 Reductionism and Oversimplification

Another critique is about the dichotomous nature of individualism-collectivism. The framework only considers one dimension of the cultural differences and may fail to account for other aspects of cultural differences and their interactions. Some critics say that this binary approach lacks attention to universal values that can be used for both individual and collective purposes and thus comes with a limited understanding of human motivations and of social structures (Zalewska, A. M. 2018) . Moreover, the dichotomy does not adequately reflect the complex nature of cultures and societies, or even individuals, that can have both individualistic and collectivistic features.

Individualism/collectivism can also be misleading regarding the influence of power and ideology on cultural norms and values. Others have questioned the lack of emphasis in the framework on power relations and how the dominant group can develop cultural ideologies to sustain their social dominance. This restriction is especially important in the context of the extent to which Western psychological frameworks are applied to non-Western cultures, as the individualism-collectivism dichotomy could be due to colonial and postcolonial power dynamics.

5.0 Contemporary Evidence and Future Directions

5.1 Evidence from Diverse Contexts

However, current studies show that individualism and collectivism, as cultural concepts, remain valid and significant, especially from a multidimensional perspective. Systematic cultural differences, corresponding to individualist/collectivist dimensions, have been found in research on decision-making, emotional expression, and adherence to health behaviours. Research on parenting and schooling practices has revealed that individualistic cultures prompt independence, self-expression, and personal achievement, whereas collectivist cultures promote obedience, respect for elders, and interdependence.

The distinction has also been substantiated by research on communication styles, in which high-context cultures (collectivistic societies) tend to use a lot of nonverbal communication, as well as shared knowledge and indirectness, whereas low-context cultures (individualistic societies) use explicit and direct verbal communication. Likewise, research in organisational behaviour has shown that in individualistic cultures, where individual performance is the main source of pride, reward is distributed on the basis of merit; in

collectivistic cultures, where group performance is main concern and loyalty the key asset is rewarded.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Researchers have indicated several areas for further study given the drawbacks of the individualism-collectivism framework. First, editors and reviewers should hold researchers accountable for justifying any generalizations by citing evidence, recognizing that the results of research with WEIRD samples are limited. Second, granting agencies, reviewers, and editors should credit researchers for comparing a variety of subject pools that are not convenient, and not make it easier for the researcher if the research is based on a convenient sample of university students. Thirdly, grant-giving agencies should give greater weight to cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural research that offers additional understanding of cultural variation. Fourth, researchers should attempt to assess, to the extent possible, the applicability of their results to other populations, picking judiciously from populations that give “tough tests” of universality (Arnett, J. J., 2008)

Longer-term goals involve establishing a set of principles that researchers can apply to understand the variable from the universal and building interdisciplinary and international research networks for long-term studies of a wide variety of populations with a range of methods including experimental techniques, ethnography, brain imaging and biomarkers.

6.0 Conclusion

There is ample evidence for the existence of individualistic and collectivistic cultures in modern societies, but it is complicated. The cultural orientations are valuable broad descriptors of cultural variation, as is suggested by the various foundational frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the meta-analytic evidence of Oyseman and others. The contrast between individualism and collectivism, however, needs further theoretical development, because it is a two-dimensional contrast, and Triandis and Gelfand have added the horizontal-vertical distinction.

Current empirical evidence shows that cultural orientations are not singular within a society and are not limited to a binary expression. An individualistic-collectivistic orientation remains alive and manifests in systematic intercultural differences in self-concept, thinking, emotions, and interpersonal relationship. But they come in different forms, and there is significant intra-cultural variation that considers social class, education, age, and other socio-demographic characteristics. Moreover, globalization and the cultural hybridisation of modern societies imply that traditional cultural orientations are not vanishing but are being transformed, and people today are inhabiting distinct cultural "worlds".

There are some important limitations to the individualism-collectivism framework, as pointed out by several critiques. Conceptual oversimplification, measurement problems, and the lack of participation among non-WEIRD populations in psychological research are among the criticisms that have been levelled on the individualism-collectivism framework. These critiques highlight the importance of contextually acknowledging cultural variation in more complex ways, with attention to power issues, ideology, and the processes by which people and communities construct their cultural meanings.

The answer is finally, yes, individualistic and collectivistic cultures do exist in the modern world, but the answer is more nuanced and complex than earlier formulations and is more contextually and dynamically embedded. The evidence suggests a process construct of culture rather than a static characteristic of societies and that culture operates in many ways in relation to the psychological functioning of an individual. The study of cultural orientations' evolution and persistence will continue to be an essential task for psychological science in the current societies, which are amid rapid cultural transformations in the context of globalisation, migration, and technological change.

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