

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT [<https://chatgpt.com/>] on 28/8/2026 to Research & Structure. I used the prompt(s):

1. Summarize the main points for all the papers listed relevant to the topic of individualism and collectivism's presence in today's age. Separate each paper's points by the paper and sort by year. Suggest any other papers in relation.

2. Create a draft structure to answer as 'Both exist and are present today but are nuanced and complicated'.

3. Suggest headings for sections.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

1. Introduction: Individualism and Collectivism in Contemporary Society

I first ran into the individualism-collectivism dimension in my IBDP Higher Level Psychology course, where it gets introduced the way most textbooks introduce it. We were taught that the West values independence, self-expression, and being unique from the crowd while the East values harmony, cooperation and conforming to the group. It was one of the most memorable concepts from those lectures that stuck in my head because at the time, it felt like the perfect answer to every difference the West and East had. This is also probably a testament to why it survives in courses decades after the research underneath it got messier. In the real world, this topic gets a lot more complicated. My answer after working through the literature is yes, these orientations still exist, but not as two separate boxes people or nations fall into. People I have met exist while blending and layering into each other, inside the same populations. It proves that people are hard to contain to the label of individualistic or collectivistic, in a way that looks a lot more like a coexistence than a map with a clean line down the middle.

2. The Origins of the Individualism-Collectivism Dichotomy

For starters, Markus and Kitayama's 1991 paper on independent and interdependent self-construals started claiming that people raised in individualist cultural contexts tend to develop as understanding the self as a self-construal belonging primarily to that one person's self, with all their actions being solely to their personal identity. In contrast, people raised in collectivist environments tend to develop an interdependent self-construal. It was observed that their sense of self is relational by defining themselves through connections to family, community and group. Their personal identity is perceived as something that only makes sense in reference to those relationships. These two patterns of socialisation kickstarted follow-up research because

it offered testable predictions about attention, memory and self-description.. Markus and Kitayama were describing statistical patterns in how selfhood tends to get organised under certain cultural conditions. They did not draw a hard boundary that every person on one side of a border falls inside and every person on the other side falls outside, but it ended up being simplified to that point. The nuance of their paper got watered down somewhere between the 1991 original and the version that ended up in the pitch. The dichotomy becomes a sorting mechanism over being a description of tendencies, and once it's treated as a sorting mechanism, everything after it starts to look more simplified and binary than the original evidence portrayed.

3. The Limits of Treating Cultures as Homogeneous

Part of why the two-pole version of the theory feels shakier now has to do with where the data came from. In 2010, Henrich et al. produced a paper on WEIRD populations. WEIRD stands for Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic, and the paper's central point was that the overwhelming majority of psychological research, ~96% of subjects appearing in a sample of top journals at the time, came from populations fitting that description. This was a problem because those populations represented ~12% of the world's total population - American undergraduates in particular, the single most tested group in the entire field. This sample in particular turned out to be statistical outliers on almost every dimension researchers have thought to check, spanning visual perception, spatial reasoning, fairness judgements in economic games and moral reasoning more broadly - which results in a very skewed perspective. The theory that defines the individualist end of the individualism-collectivism spectrum was built almost entirely from data gathered on the population least representative of humanity as a whole, which means

the baseline the whole dichotomy gets measured against was never as universal as it was implicitly treated.

To understand the sampling problem better, we need to look at how individualism and collectivism were scored on a national level. The standard method was Hofstede's method: survey a sample of people in each country, average their responses and assign the country a single individualism score. Muthukrishna et. al. (2020) challenged this approach and built an alternative they call a cultural fixation index, modelled loosely on how population geneticists measure genetic distance between groups, specifically because national averages were collapsing enormous internal variation into one number per country and losing most of things that mattered in the process. Due to this, in an older individualism score, Brazil and Turkey come out almost identical despite sitting on different continents, speaking unrelated languages, and carrying entirely different religious and colonial histories. Simplifying to a singular digit is unfair to reality as it cannot hold two countries together without discarding something essential about what makes them different. They were describing rough averages of populations that, viewed more closely, contain a huge amount of multidimensionality and variation that the national mean erases.

4. Collectivism in the Contemporary World

Pelham et. al. (2022) Global Collectivism Index shows strong contemporary evidence in either direction. Instead of relying on self-report surveys, which are vulnerable to the kind of wording effects and reference-group problems that interfere with a lot of cross-cultural psychology, Pelham and colleagues built their index from behavioural indicators, things like

household living arrangements, multigenerational cohabitation rates and measures of ingroup favouritism, and applied it to a dataset covering 99.9% of the world's population. Collectivism scored highest across Sub-Saharan Africa, lowest across Western Europe, and landed somewhere in between across most of the rest of the world, and critically, national collectivism scores predicted real outcomes: suicide rates, alcohol consumption, rates of agricultural employment and the value parents place on child obedience, even after controlling for national wealth and technological development (Pelham et al., 2022) .

If collectivism operated as a true binary, most countries would cluster near one pole or the other, with a thin population in the middle representing genuine exceptions. Instead the data shows a gradient, with most humans sitting somewhere along a continuous scale rather than at either extreme and that pattern already looks a lot more like multidimensionality than binary sorting before any further complication gets added. It's also worth noting what this study gets right that the older Hofstede styled approach didn't. Because it is built from behaviour rather than self-report, it's far less vulnerable to the concern that respondents in different cultures might interpret survey items differently which was one of the standing critiques for years.

5. Individualism and Collectivism Are Not Opposing Poles

Kim (2024) is a meta-analysis of 99 studies comparing the United States and various Asian countries between 1988 and 2023 pushes the argument a step further and is essential in treating the two constructs as separable rather than opposite. Kim found that as socio-political conditions improved across several Asian nations over that 35-year window, collectivism scores tended to decline, which fits the standard modernisation narrative most people already assume.

What breaks the standard narrative is that this decline in collectivism did not correspond to a matching rise in individualism. The two trend lines moved independently rather than mirroring each other. If collectivism can fall without individualism correspondingly climbing, the two concepts were never sitting on opposite ends of a single dial and behave more like two separate entities that can each rise, fall or stay flat on their own timeline, occasionally moving together and occasionally not. That is a better description of a coexistence than of a seesaw, where by definition one side going down means the other side has to go up. Kim's finding shows the two halves of the dichotomy failing to behave like two halves of the same thing even when measured directly against each other.

6. Cultural Variation Within Nations

Jones and Campbell (2011) argue that treating the United States as a single, homogeneous individualist reference point misses an enormous amount of internal variation, since African American communities have historically maintained extended kinship networks, communal approaches to childrearing and collective coping strategies developed partly in response to historical exclusion, discrimination from mainstream institutions. These patterns sit much closer to collectivist norms than the national average implies. Crucially, this is not a story about immigration or first-generation cultural retention. This is more so a story about a population with a continuous presence within one national border developing and sustaining a distinct cultural orientation that a national individualism score simply cannot see because that score was built by averaging across a population as though it were internally uniform. Humans and their self-construals coexist inside nations, inside cities, inside families shaped by migration, historical exclusion and social position, layered on top of each other rather than one orientation simply

replacing the other as a population becomes more "modern" or more "Western." A national average smooths over this kind of multidimensionality that a genuinely accurate picture of contemporary society needs to include.

7. From Cultural Dichotomies to Cultural Complexity

All together, these 6 sources point toward the same conclusion. Markus and Kitayama (1991) establish that the underlying orientations were always meant as tendencies rather than rigid types. Henrich et al. (2010) shows that the base used to define one pole of the dichotomy was drawn from a narrow slice of humanity. Muthukrishna et al. (2020) demonstrated that the tools historically used to sort countries into individualist or collectivist categories were too blunt to support the confident distinctions built on top of them. Pelham et al. (2022) confirm, using global and behavioural data, while also showing that most of the world sits along a gradient rather than at either extreme. Kim (2024) shows that collectivism and individualism move independently of each other rather than trading off along one continuum. And Jones and Campbell (2011) show where the multidimensionality is most visible of inside nations rather than between them.

8. Conclusion

Both individualism and collectivism remain present in contemporary society. What exists in the present is a multidimensional mixture of both poles, shifting independently from each other. That is the sense in which individualism and collectivism still exist in contemporary society. Once thought to be two opposing teams with a scoreboard between them, now seen as

two entities folded into nearly every population on the planet, in ratios that keep shifting as time goes on.

References

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