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Individualism–collectivism and group creativity

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Abstract

Current research in organizational behavior suggests that organizations should adopt collectivistic values because they promote cooperation and productivity, while individualistic values should be avoided because they incite destructive conflict and opportunism. In this paper, we highlight one possible benefit of individualistic values that has not previously been considered. Because individualistic values can encourage uniqueness, such values might be useful when creativity is a desired outcome. Although we hypothesize that individualistic groups should be more creative than collectivistic groups, we also consider an important competing hypothesis: given that collectivistic groups are more responsive to norms, they might be more creative than individualistic groups when given explicit instructions to be creative. The results did not support this competing hypothesis and instead show that individualistic groups instructed to be creative are more creative than collectivistic groups given the same instructions. These results suggest that individualistic values may be beneficial, especially when creativity is a salient goal.
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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the US business community has been keenly interested in differences between Asian and Western cultures. Spurred by Japan's economic success, there was widespread enthusiasm during the 1980s for applying Japanese management techniques to American businesses. Best-selling management books (e.g., Ouchi, 1981; Pascale & Athos, 1981) and the popular press heralded efforts by American companies to implement procedures (such as quality circles and autonomous work teams) that might re-create the cooperative atmosphere of a typical Japanese organization (Kagono, Nonaka, Sakaribara, & Okumura, 1985). Since that time, even as the source of rapid economic growth has shifted

from Japan to China, interest in Asian business practices has continued unabated.

Attention to Asian work practices has coincided with and perhaps fueled an increasing reliance on work groups in Western organizations (Ilgen, Major, Hollenbeck, & Sego, 1993). US corporations have become increasingly "team" based (McGrath, 1997), with employees spending a larger proportion of their time working in groups (Ilgen, 1999). As a result, it has become increasingly important to understand how employees might best meet the demands of a cooperative work environment. And, according to many management scholars, what is needed is a fundamental shift from the individualistic mindset that has traditionally characterized the American workplace to a more collectivistic approach that places the needs of the group over those of the individual (Locke et al., 2001).

Moving from an individualistic to collectivistic orientation has many potential implications. For example, it has been observed that collectivistic group values reduce

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social loafing and increase cooperation (Wagner, 1995), and that people in collectivistic organizational cultures will identify more strongly with their work groups (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998). However, there may also be some downside risks associated with a shift toward collectivism. Although collectivistic values may promote feelings of harmony and cooperation, they may also extinguish the creative spark necessary for innovation. Given the widely recognized importance of creativity for sustaining competitive advantage, such a byproduct of collectivism might have considerable negative consequences (Kanter, 1988).

To explore this possibility, we present an experiment designed to show how an individualistic vs. collectivistic orientation can influence the creativity of people working on a group task. This paper proceeds as follows. First, we describe the basic elements of individualism and collectivism by describing how people in these contrasting cultures view themselves in relation to others. Second, we link individualism and collectivism to creativity and argue that individualism is preferable when creativity is the desired outcome. Third, we consider an important counter-argument to our basic position. We explore whether people in collectivistic cultures may also be creative if they are instructed to arrive at creative solutions (Flynn & Chatman, 2001). Finally, we test these alternative hypotheses in a laboratory experiment on group creativity.

Defining individualism and collectivism

Just as Western businesses have intensified their efforts to learn from Asian organizations, so too has there been a rise in research on cross-cultural differences between the two regions (e.g., Ilgen et al., 1993). Asian and Western cultures have been distinguished along a variety of characteristics (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Triandis, 1994). However, it is the dimension of individualism and collectivism that has received the most attention by psychologists specializing in cross-cultural research.

Cultural values of individualism and collectivism differ in their relative emphasis on independence vs. interdependence with one's group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In individualistic cultures, people are viewed as independent and possessing a unique pattern of traits that distinguish them from other people (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). In contrast to such independence and uniqueness, people in collectivistic cultures view the self as inherently interdependent with the group to which they belong. Therefore, whereas people in individualistic cultures often give global and abstract descriptions of themselves (e.g., I am optimistic), people in collectivistic cultures might ask how they could possibly describe themselves in the absence of information about a particular situation (Bachnik, 1994). To someone from a collectivistic culture, a relatively abstract description of the person can appear artificial because it implies that he or she is the same regardless of context (Cousins, 1989).

One of the most important consequences of these divergent views of the self is the degree of conformity that is observed in social settings. A meta-analysis of studies using Asch's (1956) line judgment task suggested that Asians demonstrated a stronger tendency to conform than Americans (Bond & Smith, 1996). In fact, the very concept of conformity may have different connotations in different cultures. While conformity is often viewed negatively in an individualistic culture, uniqueness can be viewed as a form of deviance and conformity associated with harmony in a more collectivistic culture (Kim & Markus, 1999).

Because the person's identity is closely linked to his/her social group in collectivistic cultures, the primary goal of the person is not to maintain independence from others, but to promote the interests of the group (Davidson, Jaccard, Triandis, Morales, & Diaz-Guerrero, 1976). In contrast, most people in individualistic cultures assume that their identity is a direct consequence of their unique traits. Because the norms of individualistic cultures stress being "true" to one's self and one's unique set of needs and desires (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998), the person may be encouraged to resist social pressure if it contradicts his/her own values and preferences. Thus, people in individualistic cultures can be expected to be consistent in their views and maintain them in the face of opposition, while people in collectivistic cultures might consider the failure to yield to others as rude and inconsiderate.

In collectivistic cultures, self-esteem is not derived from idiosyncratic behavior or from calling attention to one's own unique abilities. There is greater emphasis on meeting a shared standard so as to maintain harmony in one's relationship to the group (Wink, 1997). People in collectivistic cultures are therefore not motivated to stand out from their group by competitive acts of achievement or even making positive statements about themselves (Kitayama, Markus, & Lieberman, 1995). Instead, there is a tendency toward self-improvement motivated by concern for the well being of the larger social group. Whereas members of individualistic cultures strive for special recognition by achieving beyond the norms of the group, collectivists are more motivated to understand the norms for achievement in the particular context so as to meet that standard (Azuma, 1994). Therefore, one might expect groups defined by collectivistic norms to be high in collaboration and achievement of collective goals, whereas groups with individualistic norms may have greater variability in performance among its individual members.

The malleability of cultural frames

Most of the research on the individual–collectivism dimension has found that growing up in a particular