CASCH
Canadian Alliance for
Social Connection and Health

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HUMAN CONNECTION MOVEMENT

Evidence Brief | How does individualism shape social health?

Background

In discussing the social health of individuals and societies, people often talk about broader the role of culture. Of course, culture can be conceptualized in many ways. However, often times, attention is drawn to the concepts of individualism and collectivism (Kirkman et al., 2006). Frequently, such conversations bemoan the hazards of individualism and extol the benefits of collectivism. However, as cultural orientations, individualism and collectivism are complex phenomena with varied impacts on individuals and social groups. Understanding these terms in the context of our social lives therefore requires careful examination in order to understand how these constructs actually effect our motives and abilities to connect with one another.

Purpose

The purpose of this evidence brief is to characterize individualism and collectivism, explore the costs and benefits of these cultural constructs, and explore evidence related to their influence on our social lives.

Evidence from Existing Studies

Defining Individualism and Collectivism

Collectivism and individualism are conceptual frameworks used to understand the ways in which individuals construe their identities and relationship to others. These constructs are used to describe how societies organize individual and group interests, values, and practices (Triandis, 1995, 2002; Nisbette, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Bellah, 1985; Hofstede, 1984). Importantly, subtypes of individualism and collectivism have been proposed (Fatehi et al., 2020; Shulruf et al., 2007; Singelis et al., 1995) and there remains considerable difficulty in measuring individualism and collectivism at both the individual and population level (Chen & West, 2008; Earley & Gibson, 1998; Hui, 1998). Furthermore, in conceptualizing these two cultural dimensions, it is important to be aware that individuals may exhibit both dimensions in the ways they think and lead their lives (Chiu & Cheng, 2007; Hong et al., 2007; Ghorbani et al., 2003).

As typically conceptualized, *collectivism* refers to the cultural orientation that emphasizes the needs, goals, and identities of the group over those of the individual. In collectivist societies, the interests of the family, community, or nation often take precedence over personal desires or ambitions. Such societies tend to foster strong group cohesion, interdependence, and a sense of shared responsibility. Collectivism underscores the idea that the social unit is the primary entity, with individual members being fundamentally linked to the larger group. This orientation may be seen in various societal practices, such as decision-making processes or the extent to which one's social role or position determines their course in life.

In contrast, *individualism*, emphasizes the primacy of the individual over the group. It is a cultural orientation that prioritizes individual rights, autonomy, and personal achievement. In individualistic societies, personal independence and self-expression are highly valued, and the individual is seen as the primary unit of social, economic, and political life. The concept is often associated with the belief that individuals are responsible for their own destinies and that personal success is a result of individual effort and ability. Societies with a strong individualistic orientation typically place less emphasis on social conformity and more on personal choice and freedom.

Geographical Variation in Collectivism and Individualism

When conceptualized at the population level, Individualism and collectivism are frequently studied by comparing across countries and cultures. Typically, cultures in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have been conceptualized as more collectivistic, while anglosphere countries have been conceptualized as more individualistic (Triandis, 1995, 2015; Hofstede et al., 2010; Yuki, 2003). However, empirical studies demonstrate significant variation within and across countries and cultural groups (Daphna et al., 2002; Woodard, 2012). For example, in a study of 20 nations, Green and colleagues (2005) noted that there was significant variation in cultural orientations within and between national contexts. Thus, while the relative prevalence of collectivistic and individualistic beliefs vary from place to place (Gong et al., 2021; Vandelllo & Dov, 1999), descriptions of countries as "individualistic" or "collectivistic" should acknowledge that these descriptors indicate only propensities for relative prevalence of these cultural orientations.

Temporal Trends in Collectivism and Individualism

In addition to geographic variations in Individualism and collectivism, researchers have also sought to understand how these factors have changed over time – with conflicting results (Schmeets & Riele, 2014; Peetz, 2010; Hamamura, 2011). For example, Gorssmann & Varnum (2015) report that across eight cultural markers (e.g., uniqueness in baby names; percentage of adults living alone, publication of individualist themed books), Individualism increased in the United States over the course of the 20th Century. Similar studies have replicated these findings at various scales (Santos, Varnum, & Grossmann, 2017; Roberts & Helson, 1997). Such declines have even been observed on short timescales, with Borkowska & Laurence (2020) noting a decline in cohesion in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with these declines, evidence suggests there is a decline in household interactions, with individuals spending more time with their family and less time interacting with friends and others (Twenge et al., 2019; Voorpostel, 2017; Freudenburg, 1986) – though some questions remain regarding the extent to which various cohorts have changed (Wang & Wellman, 2010; Stevens & Van Tillburg, 2010).

Contextualizing these broader trends, researchers have examined potential drivers of cultural change, noting that economic growth, modernization, and upward mobility are key correlates of individualism (Leonard & Smith, 2021). For example, Bianchi (2016) notes that individualism in the United States rises and falls with economic changes – with greater expressions of individualism when the economy is doing well and greater indications of collectivism when it is not. Other authors have explored the role of diversity on individualism-collectivism, hypothesizing that individuality and diversity would naturally be related (Chirkov, 2008). However, McCann (2022) reports that in the United States, regional diversity is associated

with greater collectivism. Other authors agree, that diversity does not generally pose a threat to collectivism or social cohesion (Green et al., 2011).

Understanding the Costs and Benefits of Individualism and Collectivism

In understanding the social impacts of individualism and collectivism, it is important not to set one cultural orientation above the other – particularly in the context of an evolving and often conflicted body of literature. Rather, it is necessary to understand that each approach to life presents costs and benefits (Humphrey & Bliuc, 2021; Nosheen et al., 2017; Staden & Coetzee, 2010). For example, collectivism is often linked to greater social cohesion, enhanced provisions of social support, and a heightened sense of belonging (Sorensen & Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2002; Goodwin & Plaza, 2000) – resulting in reduced risk for mental health problems (Shelton, Wang & Zhu, 2017; Moscardino, 2010; Morling et al., 2002) and for loneliness (Heu et al., 2019; Stokes, 1985). It may also foster greater levels of prosocial behaviour – particularly those that result in little personal social benefit (Lampridis & Donna, 2017; Moorman & Blakely, 1995). However, collectivism may also demand greater conformity, contribute to more self-comparison, and lead to the oppression of individual expression, creativity, and personal agency (GIyengar & DeVoe, 2003; Goodwin & Plaza, 2000; Chung & Mallery, 1999; Triandis, 1989). Collectivism can also create a greater need for social connection, which could result in increased feelings of loneliness and greater negative impacts arising from loneliness when social needs are not met (Beller & Wagner, 2020; Swader, 2019; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2013). As well, individuals who are more collectivistic may place disproportionate emphasis on social ties with members of their clique or niche social group – which, while creating a more cohesive social network, may pose a challenge to diversity and intergroup contact (Heu et al., 2020; Sorensen & Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2002).

Conversely, individualism can support autonomy, self-expression, and growth (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Hui & Vilareal, 1989; Hofstede, 1980). Such benefits can contribute to enhanced wellbeing (Knyazev et al., 2016; Owusu-Ansah, 2005) and greater freedom pursue one's preferences for specific forms of social connection (Beilmann et al., 2017; Realo & Allik, 2009; Allik & Realo, 2004). As such, individualistic cultures may better support individuals in the pursuit of their self interest, which may often benefit the interests of others (Nguyen et al., 2010). Of course, as with collectivism, there are also drawbacks associated with individualism, such as an increased risk for loneliness and isolation (Twenge et al., 2013; Putnam, 2000; Triandis et al., 1988), difficult to meet expectations for personal success (Twenge et al., 2010), and greater social division (Toikko & Rantanen, 2020).

Analyses from The Canadian Social Connection Survey

Using data from the 2021 Canadian Social Connection Survey (n = 1,120), we examined the relationship between de Jong Emotional and Social Loneliness Scores and Cultural Orientations Scale scores, which includes subscales for four different dimensions of individualism-collectivism.
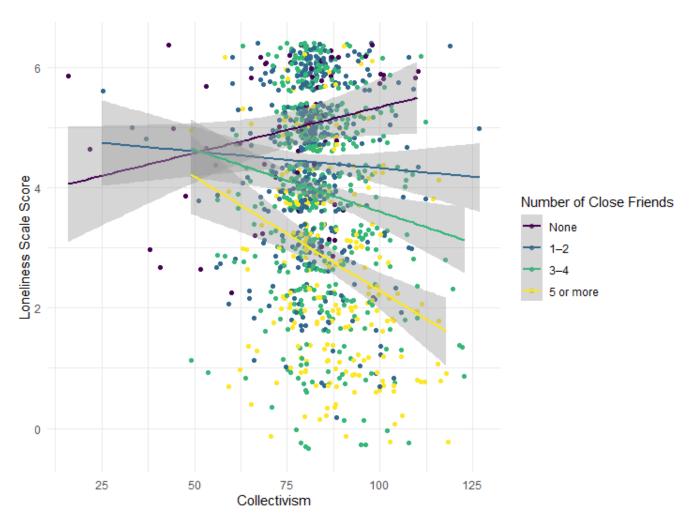
- **Horizontal Individualism**, which captures a preference for self-reliance and independence, but without a focus on hierarchy or competition (e.g., "I often do my own thing."), was associated with lower levels of loneliness (B = -0.017, SE = 0.007, p = 0.022).

- **Vertical Individualism**, which gauges an individual's drive for personal success and competition with others (e.g., "It is important that I do my job better than others"), was not associated with loneliness (B = -0.007, SE = 0.007, p = 0.345).
- **Horizontal Collectivism**, which measures the importance an individual places on group harmony, shared goals, and equal participation within the group (e.g., "I feel good when I cooperate with others."), was associated with lower levels of loneliness (B = -0.049, SE = 0.007, p < 0.001).
- **Vertical Collectivism**, which evaluates the extent to which an individual values group loyalty and respect for authority, often placing group objectives above personal desires (e.g., " It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want."), was associated with lower levels of loneliness (B = -0.026, SE = 0.007, p = 0.001).

All models adjusted for age, gender, ethnicity, and household income. In multivariable modelling, only horizontal collectivism exerted a statistically significant independent effect (B = -0.054, SE = 0.009, p < 0.001). Building on this result, **Figure 1** shows the relationship between loneliness and collectivism summing across the four scales, with separate associations drawn based on the number of close friends reported by participants.

Figure 1. Relationship Between General Collectivism and Loneliness, by Self-Reported Number of Close Friends

These analyses indicate that for those with at least 1-2 close friends, greater collectivism is associated with lower loneliness. However, for those with no close friends, greater collectivism is associated with higher loneliness. This suggests that collectivistic cultural orientations may create greater vulnerability for loneliness when social needs are unmet, while those who are more individualistic might be somewhat buffered against the effects of loneliness. Regression analyses confirm this effect, showing that the protective effects of collectivism against loneliness are only statistically significant for those with 3-4 ($p = 0.003$) or 5 or more ($p < 0.001$) close friends.

Discussion

Based on the evidence summarized above, it appears that collectivism and individualism may each offer benefits to individuals and communities. For example, while collectivism may provide a better framework for belonging and social support, individualism might help people accrue social capital and better meet their personal needs. Similarly, elements from individualistic cultures might help individuals navigate periods of solitude or isolation – buffering them against loneliness; and collectivistic cultures might prevent isolation in the first place by instilling social interaction as a fundamental priority.

Regardless of which cultural orientation might ultimately produce the greatest benefits, it may be helpful to explore how social wellbeing can be supported across cultures. For example, in individualistic cultures it might be beneficial to raise awareness of the personal health benefits of social connection (Martino et al., 2017). In more collectivistic contexts, it might be more effective to explore how collective actions can create a social safety net that protects people from isolation (Gardiner, 2016).

In considering these potential opportunities, we should note that there is substantial levels of disagreement in this research area, and most questions explored here remain unsettled. The lack of consensus seems to be related to measurement challenges, low study quality (e.g., ecological or observational designs), and the inherent complexity of multi-level psycho-cultural research (Grossman & Na, 2014). As such, continued research on the role of culture in social wellbeing is needed.

Conclusion

Given the information summarized above, we recommend that communities thoughtfully pursue social strategies that meet the needs of diverse peoples across the individualism-collectivism spectrum. While efforts to enhance autonomy, build community, provide social support, and foster belonging are likely consistent with either cultural approach, it is important that community interventions are informed by those they aim to serve. As such, it is important that social health promotion be pursued with a strong sense of cultural humility and interest in community-based consultation. This is particularly important in contexts where cultural differences may exist between groups.