

“To say ‘I love you’ one must first be able to say the ‘I.’”

-Ayn Rand

Individualism and Collectivism: A Categorization of the World

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Living in America, we tend to believe that *we* are the influencers of our temperament and setting – our environment simply exists for us to express our traits and carry out our actions in. We are quick to attribute others’ shortcomings to their personalities, yet, we label our own misfortunes as products of unfavorable circumstance. This phenomenon is called the “fundamental attribution error”, and it is reflective of the deeply-ingrained individualism that propagates ideals that we so dearly cling to – ranging from the American Dream, to rugged individualism, to capitalism... *We* are the makers of our destiny. In one’s attempt to meaningfully understand others and the world around them, two of the most fundamental things to examine include personality and culture, which are closely intertwined. The question, however, remains: Is our environment shaped by our attitudes, or vice-versa? The answer is simply “both”, depending on where and who you ask.

Sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists have debated the individualism-collectivism dichotomy since its inception, and they have classified countries accordingly. Individualism and collectivism both have two-part definitions. Individualism is “the habit or principle of

being independent and self-reliant.” The second part defines it as “a social theory favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control.”

Collectivism is defined as the “practice or principle of giving a group priority over each individual in it”, as well as “the theory and practice of the ownership of land and the means of production by the people or the state.” We will be focusing on all four definitions in the context of this article.

Can you name a nation that you believe to be most individualist? You guessed it, it’s the United States! Other countries that are generally considered to be individualistic include Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, Israel, Finland, Germany, and other such European or European-dominated countries. People living in individualistic countries tend to be expressive, goal-oriented, rational, impulsive, competitive, self-focused, self-reliant, having an internal locus of control, and likely to value one’s own goals over that of the group/family. They are more likely to assume control over the environment. They are more likely to phrase things in terms of “I” than “we” and are more likely to describe themselves based on how they view themselves – “I am fantastic”, not “I am a fantastic child”. This is not only reflected in our social world –

our political attitudes are affected too! According to psychology.wikia.com, “Individualism makes the individual its focus and so it starts ‘with the fundamental premise that the human individual is of primary importance in the struggle for liberation.’ Human rights and freedom are the substance of these theories. Liberalism, existentialism and anarchism are examples of movements that take the human individual as a central unit of analysis.” Our democratic culture, which places emphasis on the right to free speech/expression, property, privacy, and any other right in the Bill of Rights fosters these attitudes. With this, however, our divorce rates are higher. We are lonelier. We amass more than we can handle. At times, it seems like the more politically, socially and economically free we are in finding our identity, the more we lose ourselves along the way.

Collectivism, (in the context of both sociology and communism) is found in countries like China, Sweden, Iceland, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Argentina, Ethiopia, Mexico, Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Japan and others. Collectivist attitude involves group cohesion, conformity, thoughtfulness, familial and romantic harmony, rule-orientation, humility, respect for authority, selflessness, fear of rejection, and limited expression (both facial and vocal). Nevertheless, the environment one is in dictates one’s state of being, as well as how to appropriately conduct oneself, and what role to assume next. Collectivist thought does not always have to coincide with collectivist political structure, but in some cases, it does. Communism and fascism,

where the state is superior to the individual, are collectivist systems in which the *entire* body of citizens is considered for the purpose of achieving a “common good”. However, collectivist elements exist even in democracy, where “... Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ‘social contract’, maintains that ‘each individual is under implicit contract to submit his own will to the ‘general will’, and that the state should enforce this general will. This notion of an ethical obligation to subordinate an individual’s will to the group will is in fundamental opposition to individualism which advocates that individual action should not be restricted by others.” (psychology.wikia.com) Collectivist cultures are also defined by low relational mobility, which means that the relationships people have are stable, strong, and long-lasting, as opposed to those of their individualist counterparts. On the flip-side, fears of shame and rejection, associated with collectivism, may make a person reliant on the opinions of others. The general rule of thumb that exists for individualists is “place yourself above everyone else”. This principle does not resonate with collectivists, who sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of others. If humans were willing to give up individual liberty for the good of society, we would be in a starkly different place. But for now, the sliver of individual spirit still flickers or shines, regardless of person or place.

When people preach about the wonders of diversity and assimilation, take what they say with a grain of salt. The underlying conflicts that may arise from the United States and other countries being

individualist may pose a problem for immigrants from collectivist countries, and vice-versa. It is impossible to expect that one will adopt the customs of/fully assimilate into the person's country of residence. This creates a type of "disconnect" between immigrants, who may feel discomfort with considerably "American" practices, (which subsequently leads to a refusal to assimilate) and American-born people, who may use this refusal as a justification for racism. My very own parents, born and raised in collectivist Soviet Union, are certainly not communists. However, they do not agree with many of the modes of self-expression used by the people (especially that of the youth) living – the U.S. This is understandable. But, tensions eventually flare and frustration boils over. According to David Myers, writer of my AP Psychology textbook, "If set adrift in a foreign land as a collectivist, you might experience a greater loss of identity. Cut off from family, groups, and loyal friends, you would lose the connections that defined you as who you are." Relationship cultivation is placed on hold, as "... relationships are usually formed due to factors such as family and geographical area rather than personal choice. In a collectivist culture, it's difficult to build relationships with new people, partly because it's generally more difficult to meet them. Strangers are more likely to remain strangers to those from a collectivistic culture than they would be to people from individualistic cultures." (Cherry). And, with attempted efforts to help alleviate the stress of moving to an entirely

differently country, "[Cultural] differences can become significant when a therapist from one culture or gender meets a client from another. In North America, Europe, and Australia, for example, most therapists reflect their culture's individualism... Clients who are immigrants from Asian countries, where people do not give priority to personal desires and are mindful of others' expectations, may have trouble relating to therapies that require them to think only of their own well-being. Such differences help explain minority populations' reluctance to use mental health services and their tendency to prematurely terminate therapy (Chen al., 2009; Sue, 2006)." (Myers). Thusly, real differences between collectivist and individualist culture cannot be ignored for the sake of promoting an imperfect agenda of "diversity" – when two parties with diametrically opposed outlooks on life clash, chaos may ensue in the form of terrorism, racist/nativist sentiment, the formation of enclaves and overall animosity, which are things that cannot be fixed by simply forcing diffusion. It is impractical to believe that we will all join hands and sing "Kumbaya" in unison. Culture influences attitude, and both matter.

The truth is, however, that we have both individualists and collectivists in us. We aren't defined by where our home country lies on the individualist-collectivist scale. We all have goals that we'd like to achieve for personal gain, but we also feel connected to family ties and traditions. All labels aside, we are human beings just looking to find our place in the social world. To quote an answer from Quora, "The

everyday individualist is the asshole that drives with no regard for others, doing whatever it takes to get to his destination. Everyday collectivism is everybody

squeezing into the subway train (with help from the station employee) at peak hours having little regard for personal space.”

Individualism vs Collectivism Cultures

Ten Differences Between Collectivist and Individualist Societies

Individualism	Collectivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone is supposed to take care of him- or herself and his or her immediate family only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are born into extended families or clans which protect them in exchange for loyalty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I" - consciousness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We" -consciousness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right of privacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress on belonging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking one's mind is healthy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmony should always be maintained
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Others classified as individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Others classified as in-group or out-group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal opinion expected: one person one vote 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinions and votes predetermined by in-group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transgression of norms leads to guilt feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transgression of norms leads to shame feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Languages in which the word "I" is indispensable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Languages in which the word "I" is avoided
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of education is learning how to learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of education is learning how to do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task prevails over relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship prevails over task

<http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/hofstede.htm>