Collectivism and Individualism

Description and Definition

In the fields related to intercultural communication (IC), the most used (and at times overused) construct or dimension for comparing and contrasting cultures has been the concepts of individualism and collectivism (IND/COL). IND/COL primarily concerns how people see themselves in relation to the social groupings or structures around them. In individualist cultures, individuals take precedence over groups. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, the group takes precedence over individuals. In social structures where the ties between people are loose, “individualism” is usually the priority, such that each person is expected to responsibly look after him or herself (or their immediate family); in tighter social systems where people are guided from birth to be an active, contributing part of clearly defined ingroups, variations of “collectivism” influence people to consider how their mutual sacrifices, loyalty, or shared efforts contribute to the protection, maintenance, well-being, or advancement of that group.

Since the beginning of cross-cultural studies, differences along the IND/COL divide have illuminated contrasts in communication in different societies, as individualists rely more on person-based information whereas collectivists on group-based information. Across a wide range of disciplines, IND/COL is often considered the most influential explanation for how people in different societies think, function, or relate. This entry describes IND/COL’s historical conceptualization, defining features, and operationalization, low and high context communication as a function of IND/COL, the relationship between IND/COL and individual communication, the dimension’s contributions to intercultural competence research and training, major critiques of IND/COL scholarship, and directions for future research.

Historical Conceptualization

IND/COL as an aspect of individual and/or social orientation appeared in the comparative work of sociologists as early as Ferdinand Tönnies who suggested there were two types of social order, those oriented toward traditional, rule-ordered group associations (Gemeinschaft, or bonds to community) and those oriented toward more modern, calculated, rational self-interest associations (Gesellschaft or the individualized, institutionalized, or industrialized society). This conceptualization continues to appear or be revived in various strands of comparative culture research, such as its theoretical update in work on children’s socialization in ethnic communities by Patricia Greenfield.

The specific terms individualism and collectivism that inter- or cross-cultural scholars adopted seem to have first been codified in the five broad social pattern dichotomies that Talcott Parsons identified. “Parsons Pattern Variables” were conceptualized in his edited book Toward a General Theory of Action, and one of the five schemas contrasted “collectivity” with “individual orientation.”

Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn and their Harvard Values Project team in the late 1950s built on these patterns and proposed “values orientations” as an even broader set of ideas that are universally present but differentially conceptualized, expressed,
and preferred across cultures. They proposed five basic human problems and a range of alternatives for each. Among them was “social orientation,” which included authoritarian, collaboration, and individualism as the range (published after Clyde’s death by his wife and Fred Strodtbeck as Variations of Value Orientations).

But it was not until Geert Hofstede’s groundbreaking large multi-national cultural sample that “individualism” and “collectivism” as opposite poles of a statistical dimension were conclusively shown to account for a major amount of variance across cultures. Hofstede’s Culture’s Consequences (1980) wowed the social science world with its massive sample that included 40 nations and regions and statistical correlations of each of his initial four dimensions (4D model, later updated to five, and since 2010, six) to a wide range of national economic, political, and social data. It ushered in a new world of statistical cross-cultural studies that sought to link diverse aspects of national cultural behavior to differences in those country-level “value dimensions,” the most frequently tapped one being his individualism/collectivism scores.

In preparing explanations for his original data set, Hofstede found that his first factor regarding social orientation accounted for an amazingly large amount of the data, and it was only on further analysis that he split the closely corresponding dimension of high/low power distance from the individual/collective one. In effect, this demarcation teased out the two concepts somewhat clouded in the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck range, i.e., personal social orientation and power orientation. Hofstede’s seminal work and its later iterations provided specific index scores for more than 70 countries and became a source book for a massive reexamination and reinterpretation of cross-cultural data. Intercultural communication scholars like William Gudykunst, Stella Ting-Toomey, and Young Yun Kim incorporated Hofstede’s four dimensions into their theorizing about interpersonal communication.

Concurrently, Harry Triandis and associates were analyzing variations of IND/COL and identified vertical and horizontal domains, yielding four broad value orientations. In general, people from vertical cultures seek to stand out whereas people from horizontal cultures avoid standing out. Vertical individualism stresses achievement and competition. Horizontal individualism emphasizes uniqueness without standing out. Horizontal collectivism stresses cooperation, and vertical collectivism underscores doing one’s duty and conformity to authorities. Some scholarship continues to note these distinctions.

More recently, Marilynn Brewer and associates broke collectivism down to two types: relational and group. They fine-tuned the dimension by examining the self, the agency, and values against individualism and two types of collectivism, resulting in 9 constructs. Depending on different domains of social life, one construct tends to be more predominant than others. For example, relational collectivism becomes salient when cooperation within work groups is highlighted. Group collectivism is emphasized in employees’ organizational citizenship. The work of those collaborating with Brewer continues to fine-tune our understanding of these constructs across a wide range of individualist, group, and collective motivational or behavioral contexts, addressing some of the critiques often leveled at the over-generalization, polarization, and extensively broad applications of IND/COL.

Defining Features
As intercultural research has shifted from value dispositions to identity orientations, individualism basically emphasizes the priority given to an individual’s identity over any related group identity, an individual’s sense of rights over the promotion of group rights, and individual needs over group needs. In contrast, collectivism reverses these and emphasizes one’s sense of group over the individual, shared aspects of “we” identities over any specific “I” identity, group orientation and corresponding allegiances and obligations over individual autonomy and rights, and ingroup-oriented goals and needs over individual wants and desires.

Thus, in collectivist cultures, social norms, obligations, and duties play a more important role than individual attitudes or goals in guiding people’s behavior. In individualist cultures, attitudes and personal needs and rights tend to be more important than norms and duties in guiding people’s behavior. In collectivist cultures, people stay in unpleasant groups or relationships because communal relationships are common and considered necessary for survival or advancement. In individualist cultures, people distance themselves from or leave unpleasant relationships more quickly.

Such societal value dispositions also affect the feature of ingroup-outgroup distinctions. Compared to individualists, collectivists tend to draw sharper distinctions between ingroups and outgroups. Thus, particularism is common in collectivist cultures (responding in differential ways depending on which group one is relating to), and universalism is common in individualist cultures (seeking to be consistent in behavior to all people, regardless of their group affiliation).

Triandis and associates isolated factors such as ecology, family structure, distribution of wealth, situational conditions, and demographics as antecedents of individualist and collectivist value orientations. In both Hofstede’s and Triandis’ analysis, typical “individualist” countries include Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, and United States. Frequently noted “collectivist” countries include Brazil, China, Colombia, Egypt, Greece, India, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Panama, Pakistan, Peru, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Venezuela, and Vietnam. Though these designations often have appeared in the literature, it is important to note, however, as a universal/etic framework, IND/COL is a construct of high abstraction. To gain a deeper understanding of specific cultures, emic data are needed.

**Operationalization**

Since Hofstede’s first labeling of the IND/COL dimension in 1980, numerous efforts have been given to the operationalization of the construct. Gudykunst developed early scales for the measurement of IND/COL that were utilized for correlations in his many projects, which were also used by Ting-Toomey and other intercultural scholars. Triandis worked with many associates on the multidimensionality of IND/COL at the culture level. For example, Theodore Singelis, Triandis, and others advanced a refined scale of horizontal and vertical dimensions of IND/COL that contains 32 items. Triandis and Michele Gelfand later put forward a 16-item “converged measurement” (also known as the Culture Orientation Scale) to measure their four dimensions of IND/COL. Representative items include: “I’d rather depend on myself than others” (Horizontal Individualism); “It is important that I do my job better than others” (Vertical Individualism); “If a coworker gets a prize, I
would feel proud” (Horizontal Collectivism); “It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want” (Vertical Collectivism). Researchers worldwide continue to strive to develop more nuanced and appropriate scales or interpretations of variations of IND/COL.

Low and High Context Communication and IND/COL

In addition to differentiating cultures (most often at the national level), the IND/COL dimension has been useful in explaining, predicting, or correlating to other noted communication patterns across cultures. Research has consistently shown that the low- and high-context communication systems proposed by Edward T. Hall correspond to individualist and collectivist cultures respectively, although it is also widely recognized that no culture exclusively operates at either extreme of the context continuum. According to intercultural interpersonal scholars like Ting Toomey, low-context communication encompasses communication patterns based on linear logic, overt, direct, verbal, interaction and negotiation styles focused primarily on the intent and desired responses of the sender. High-context communication encompasses communication patterns that involve circular or indirect logic, subtle, indirect, mediated, interaction and negotiation modes that are more prone to be sensitive to nuanced intentions, non-verbal cues, or other inferred responses of the receiver (or their group), the communicative situation, or consider what is expected or appropriate. Therefore, people from individualist cultures tend to focus more on self-expression and be more talk-inclined, affect-oriented, and motivated to gain affection, enjoyment, and satisfying inclusion through interpersonal interaction. In contrast, people from collectivist cultures tend to focus more on specific situational norms and pay more attention to others’ expectations, behavior, status, and face.

Linking IND/COL to Individual Communication

To bridge the link between culture and communication, it is important to realize that not all people from individualist cultures are individualists and not all people from collectivist cultures are collectivists. How people communicate is largely dependent upon how much they have internalized cultural values and how much cultures have taught them how to view themselves.

Gudykunst and Kim argued that the impact of culture-level IND/COL on individual communication is twofold. On the one hand, these broad value orientations are embedded in cultural norms and rules, which bear consequences on communication. On the other hand, through individual socialization, these cultural orientations are differentially internalized, resulting in different personality orientations, personal value preferences, and self-concepts. In terms of personality orientations, idiocentrism and allocentrism are a function of cultural IND/COL, respectively. In terms of Shalom Schwartz’s personal value preferences, individualists value stimulation, hedonism, power, and self-direction, whereas collectivists value tradition, conformity, and benevolence. In terms of self-concepts, independent and interdependent self-construals proposed by Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama are a manifestation of IND/COL.

Emphasis on an independent self-construal is often associated with uniqueness, self-expressions, self-realization, self-promotion, and directness. Emphasis on interdependent self-construals is often associated with fitting in, finding one’s right
place, engaging in appropriate actions, other-promotion, and indirectness. Although self-construals can be situation-dependent, the frequency of using one particular self-construal differs across cultures. In general, compared with culture-level IND/COL and personal value preferences, independent and interdependent self-construals are a better predictor of communication styles.

**Implications for Intercultural Competence Research and Training**

The cultural dimension of IND/COL and its various individual-level expressions have significant consequences on a wide range of domains of human life such as attributions, emotions, cognitions, social behaviors, language and communication, group processes, leadership, and conflict and negotiation. Cultural differences in these domains all exert influence on intercultural communication and adjustment. A familiarity with cultural differences in communication patterns along the IND/COL divide contributes greatly to intercultural competence.

For those involved in delivering or receiving cross-cultural training, it is important to note that whenever individualists prepare to interact with a collectivist culture, they need to become more aware of the perceptions of group membership that the people they interact with consider to be meaningful and important in their culture. They also need to pay attention to how ingroup and outgroup membership is defined, and to the different expectations held toward each. Similarly, communication attitudes like “sincerity” may not be defined as “verbal honesty” like in an individual-oriented culture, but rather as “loyalty” to the point of even being willing to tell a white lie to protect a relationship. Non-verbal messages will likely also be considered more important, and markers of identity and status will likely be paid more attention to. Before any significant interpersonal bonds can be formed or deals can be made, indirect ways of showing oneself to be a worthy counterpart and taking time to build a trust relationship are usually needed.

Conversely, when those from collectivistic cultures interact with individualists, they should seek to pay less attention to group identities and consider their counterpart’s unique qualities or abilities and their personal achievements or potential. They should realize that verbal “truth” is important, try to express their ideas more directly, and, worry less about giving or saving the other’s face, enhancing their status, or playing up to role expectations. It is important to remember that their statements will likely be taken at face value so any indirect or implied messages will likely not be readily received. Though the interaction may feel uncomfortably explicit or task-focused, this more direct style is not meant to offend but just to be efficient.

These types of behavioral adjustments can be achieved if the communicators are adequately trained. As early as the 1970s, drawing on initial knowledge of IND/COL obtained from Triandis’ analysis of subjective culture, “cultural assimilator” (sometimes called “cultural sensitizer”) training programs were developed, focusing on important qualitative content, situational cues, and specific attributions arising in contrasting cultures. A wide range of interactive culture episodes were developed and employed, with an emphasis on both general and specific cultural do’s and don’ts. More recently, scholars such as Dham Bhawuk have refined those assimilators and critical incidents on the basis of defining attributes of IND/COL and the horizontal and vertical aspects of the dimension. These programs have been framed within a coherent theoretical framework, allowing trainees to move beyond superficial understandings of cultural differences to delve into the core aspects of culture and
The dimension of IND/COL is also particularly useful in understanding cross-cultural differences in conflict management. Research indicates that in collectivist cultures, people prefer harmony within their ingroup and view conflict with outgroups as natural, while in individualist cultures, people view confrontation and debate within familiar circles (some type of “ingroup”) as normal but do not expect much conflict with outgroups, and in fact may avoid public disagreements based on perceptions of universals. According to Ting Toomey, because of the divergent preferences of “I” and “we” identity and self-face and mutual-face maintenance between these two contrastive cultural systems, individualist communicators are more prone to use competitive or control-oriented conflict styles, while collectivists prefer to revert to integrative or compromising conflict styles when seeking to deal with or manage conflict.

Major Critiques

Despite their wide use, the concepts of IND/COL have not been without their critics. Some scholars have questioned their theoretical and methodological assumptions, arguing that equating culture to nation-states and quantifying “culture” using abstract values are too simplistic. Mean country scores like those printed in Hofstede’s work are taken to suggest either a misleading “typical citizen” representation or claims for predictable explanations of variance between “cultures” (despite Hofstede’s admonition to beware of the “ecological fallacy”, i.e., that individual behavior can be accounted for using a culture-level theory).

Other scholars challenge the individualism-collectivism continuum and consider it to be two dimensions. Though the range across both of these domains shows similar implications at their endpoints, some studies suggest that they should not be conflated into one “dimension.” In one study, IND/COL was measured separately and it was found that Indian culture is both more collectivist and more individualistic than American culture. This finding suggests that the two broad value orientations may not be located on a continuum.

Through his extensive a priori and large-scale country-by-country values research program, Shalom Schwartz identified similar constructs, using autonomy and embeddedness as his two operative terms. His more than 70 national data sets show that when organized in a circular fashion in sequence with other closely-related values, though autonomy and embeddedness locate opposite of each other, some levels of coexistence of these conflicting values can be found within each culture sample. Ongoing research shows that though there are some associations to IND/COL, his terms include different nuances and tap into more consistently-rated and less-generalized concepts.

The utility of the broad, stable cultural dimension of IND/COL is further questioned when specific domains of these concepts are examined. In a major meta-review of the IND/COL enterprise, Daphna Oyserman and associates observed many inconsistencies regarding assumed national characteristics. Though Japan is often considered a classic collectivist culture and the US an individualist one, comparative data show that in most domains Americans are more collectivistic than the Japanese. When European Americans were compared with groups from other countries, similar results occurred, suggesting that differences in individualism or collectivism largely depend on which specific domain of each is being assessed. Thus, the assumed
cultural coherence among a nation’s people on which much of cultural dimension research has been based is not empirically confirmed in more careful studies.

Some scholars critique the constructs from the standpoint of observer status by challenging the legitimacy of researchers’ outsider position in studying cultures. The etic approach is often criticized for its inherent scientific ethnocentrism (mainly Euro-American). Theories and frameworks that are claimed as universal may have a Euro-American bias. Some scholars suggest that individualism probably makes intuitive sense to US Americans and Western Europeans because it is an incantation of features (even if confused or conflated) that people from those cultures (including much of the research community) broadly recognize as their own preferences, assumed social reality, or acceptable ideology. Collectivism makes similar sense in defining that “which we are not” – an antithetical representation of “other” and of assumed differences in other parts of the world that can be best explained in terms of what is in contrast to us.

Still others examine the concepts from a philosophical or ideological point of view. For example, Adrian Holliday views Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (including IND/COL) as neo-essentialist. There is an increasing trend among cultural anthropological and critical cultural studies to debunk the grand theories of structural–functionalism and their universalist, essentialist models of culture. Though Parsons’ formal structuralism have been discarded, much of social science is guided by neo-essentialism and implies that national social structures (“culture”) influences values and behavior in researchable, comparative, predictable ways (sophisticated stereotypes). Scholars like Holliday argue that this positivist, a priori cultural schema continues to dominate much of today’s work in intercultural communication, and suggest that approaches that better consider history, ideology, and specific groups or contexts need to be more adequately considered.

**Latest Research Developments and Directions for Future Research**

Since the 1990s, research on IND/COL has gone hand in hand with social cognition research. The seminal work of Markus and Kitayama on independent and interdependent self-construals noted above marked the entry of IND/COL research into mainstream social psychology (fitting its predisposition for empirical personality and attitude research), thereby exerting a parallel influence on intercultural communication research.

One important direction of social-cognition-oriented research is priming IND/COL in experimental settings. Numerous IND/COL priming studies indicate that these constructs have consistent and reliable effects across different samples and types of primes on associated domains like values, self-concept, cognition, and relationality. In other words, when representations of “individualism” are used as the prime, individualist tendencies are indicated more strongly, and collectivist tendencies become weaker. In contrast, when “collectivism” is primed, collectivist tendencies become stronger, and individualist tendencies become weaker. These findings pose a challenge to the traditional and rather deterministic assumption that culture influences behavior with some degree of predictability, and calls for a serious consideration of the situated-ness and human agency in IND/COL’s behavioral consequences.

Considering the fact that the dimension of IND/COL consists of specific domains and that its impact on individual behavior is context-dependent, future research should move beyond the mere description of a given culture as individualist or
collectivist to consider more specific questions such as the following: Does individualism mean the same thing in Culture A and Culture B? In what specific domains of the culture are cultural members individualist in their value orientation? How is their individualism manifested in those domains? How do situational constraints mediate the practice of their individualism?

To answer these questions, a domain-specific situation-dependent approach may be necessary in future research. Cultural comparisons and contrasts need first to center on specific domains of IND/COL in their emic settings. These aspects can then be examined and compared further in various life domains such as work, politics, religion, education, family life, and entertainment.

Another distinctive feature of this new approach is its emphasis on situational constraints on value-related variables. To theorize this, some scholars treat value orientations as cultural knowledge and their behavioral consequences are examined in terms of how this knowledge is activated and applied. Others have sought to connect values with situations through decision-making valuation. Research shows that only a few values will be activated and then valuated whenever an individual faces the quandary of action-related decisions. This line of research builds on the situational assessment and resulting activation of which values might cause costs or bring rewards. Such research also assesses the trade-off importance attributed to related values. Steve Kulich’s summary of value research notes how some scholars look at “sacred” or “taboo” values and how they fit into a range of social relationship preferences or styles (like Alan Fiske’s integrated circle of four relationship patterns: authority ranking, communal sharing, equity matching, and market pricing) and that similar work is needed to test how IND/COL is reflected in David Kolb’s circle of learning styles across cultures, or other circumplex models of cross-cultural constructs. Such experimental and interactive approaches to value-choice, value-behavior, and value-relationship dynamics show great potential for reducing past generalities on IND/COL and moving the field toward more realistic assessments of the degrees of hybridity, situational variation, and domain-specific social preferences across cultures.

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See also collectivity and individual orientation, collaterality and individualism, community and agency, traditionalism and modernity, communal sharing and market pricing, interdependent and independent selves

**FURTHER READINGS**


