Individualism, collectivism, and dissonance: a within-culture comparison

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Cognitive dissonance was examined among individuals with collectivist and individualist tendencies within a culture. To arouse dissonance, participants wrote counter-attitudinal essays under either high-choice or low-choice conditions. Participants were also given an individualism-collectivism questionnaire. Results indicated that participants in the high-choice condition experienced more cognitive dissonance (measured by degree of attitude change) than participants in the low-choice condition. Participants who scored high in individualism showed no significant difference in dissonance experienced compared to those who scored low in individualism. These results suggest that differences in cognitive dissonance experienced cross-culturally are due to factors other than individualism. Possible alternative explanations for the absence of a relationship between individualism and dissonance are discussed.

People experience an uncomfortable tension when their actions are inconsistent with their beliefs. This tension, referred to as cognitive dissonance, has been shown to occur in a number of different contexts (Festinger, 1957). For example, studies have shown that when a person willingly makes a statement that is inconsistent with what he or she truly believes, that person will experience dissonance, even when the statement has been written or spoken privately (e.g. Cohen, 1962; Harmon-Jones et al., 1996). To counter this dissonance, the person will be driven to change his or her original belief to be more consistent with the statement. The studies cited have taken place in the United States. However, when similar studies have been conducted across a range of cultures, varying results have emerged; individuals in some cultures do not change their original beliefs to line up with their private counter-attitudinal behaviors (e.g. Sakai, 1981; Heine & Lehman, 1997).

The primary cultural indicator of whether or not personal beliefs will change in response to counter-attitudinal behaviors of this type is whether the individual is from a collectivist or an individualist culture (e.g. Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005; Kitayama et al., 2004; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Sakai, 1981). People who are from collectivist cultures, which emphasize interdependence, conformity to group norms, and identification based off of group membership, do not always experience cognitive dissonance when their private behaviors are counter-attitudinal. Triandis (1995) argued that
this is the case because in collectivist cultures, where the needs of the group are more important than the needs of the individual, dissonance-reducing behavior would be less prevalent because it is less important for individuals to feel personally consistent. In contrast, in individualist cultures, individual freedom and autonomy are emphasized. Since people within individualist cultures are more likely to identify themselves according to their own personal attributes and behaviors, this type of private counter-attitudinal behavior would be more likely to produce dissonance. Individualist people may be concerned with feeling consistent in their personal beliefs and behaviors whereas collectivist people are more interested in being consistent in their public behaviors.

Although in collectivist cultures, private behaviors and beliefs are unlikely to cause cognitive dissonance, in communal situations, cognitive dissonance is more likely to occur. Sakai (1981) asked Japanese high school students to make a counter-attitudinal speech in support of the abolition of coeducation either publicly (with the participants’ names, grades and classes included in a tape recording of the speech) or anonymously. Because the speech could be presented to the community, students who made the speech publicly were more aware of the inconsistencies between their beliefs and their statements than were the students who made the speech anonymously. For those students, this led to increased cognitive dissonance as measured by their degree of attitude change. As explained by Markus and Kitayama (1991), people in collectivist cultures are greatly concerned with promoting smooth, harmonious relationships and avoiding unnecessary interpersonal conflict with group members. The potential for receiving counterarguments from the audience could have increased dissonance in participants in the public condition because they were more aware of the possibility of interpersonal conflict with group members.

Another study performed in Japan by Sakai (1999) further demonstrated that cognitive dissonance may occur cross-culturally following counter-attitudinal advocacy, but only under certain conditions. He found that when a person observes someone he or she knows make a counter-attitudinal statement (saying that a particularly boring task was actually very interesting and enjoyable), the observer will experience dissonance and will change his or her attitude to be consistent with the familiar person’s statement. People from Japan experienced dissonance in a communal way, when individuals they knew and liked were inconsistent in their beliefs and behaviors.

So, people living in collectivist cultures do not generally experience cognitive dissonance in private settings. They do, however, experience cognitive dissonance in communal settings whether actually with or imagining the opinions of both large groups from the community or single familiar individuals.

There is strong evidence of cross-cultural variation in dissonance; however, we cannot be certain that it is because of the individualist-collectivist tendencies of individuals within cultures that this variation is occurring. It may be due to other variables instead. In order to increase our understanding of the relationship between culture and dissonance, it is necessary to also measure dissonance among individuals within a given culture who exhibit varying degrees of collectivist and individualist tendencies. This measure will allow us to be more confident that it is the individualist and collectivist tendencies of individuals living within a culture that affects degrees of cognitive dissonance experienced cross-culturally as opposed to other cultural differences.

In this study, dissonance was compared among individuals who demonstrated either high or low individualist tendencies within the United States. Using an induced-compliance paradigm, participants wrote counter-attitudinal essays in either a high-choice or low-choice condition. It was expected that individuals in the high-choice condition would experience more dissonance (measured by degree of attitude change) than individuals in the low-choice condition. In addition to writing the counter-attitudinal essays, participants filled out an individualism-collectivism scale. It was expected that individualism would act as a moderating variable, with participants measuring high in individualism being more likely to experience dissonance than
those measuring low in individualism. No relationship between collectivism and dissonance was expected.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study consisted of 33 female and 14 male undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota. They were between the ages of 17 and 29 (M = 19.6) and of varying ethnicities, with a majority (28 out of 47) identifying as “white/Caucasian.” Participants were recruited from psychology courses that provided extra credit for participating in research experiments and received one extra credit point for their participation. Data from three participants in the high-choice condition were not used in the analyses because participants either refused to write in favor of mandatory finals or agreed to write in favor and then wrote against the finals. The analyses were conducted using data from a total of 22 participants in the low-choice condition and 22 in the high-choice condition.

Independent Variables

The main independent variables in the study were the individualism and collectivism scores of the participants. The manipulated variable was the high or low-choice condition to which the participant was randomly assigned. Cultural identification was also examined.

Dependent Variable

Attitude following the completion of the counter-attitudinal essay (in support of mandatory comprehensive final exams) was the only dependent variable.

Materials

The item “I support having mandatory comprehensive final exams at the University of Minnesota,” with a 21-point Likert scale ranging from -10 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) was used to assess attitude change (Appendix A). Individualism and collectivism were measured using the Subjective Individualism and Collectivism Questionnaire (SINDCOL; Triandis & Singelis, 1998; Appendix B), which has been found to have convergent validity with horizontal and vertical individualism-collectivism scales (Singelis et al., 1995), and the Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994; Triandis & Singelis, 1998). Individualism scores ranged from 3.5 to 7.42 (α = .57, M = 5.39, SD = 1.03) and collectivism scores ranged from 3.08 to 8.17 (α = .71, M = 5.39, SD = 1.12), with higher numbers indicating greater tendencies toward individualism or collectivism. A questionnaire of demographics (age and gender) was also administered and included questions on cultural identification (“With which ethnic group do you most identify?” and “How much do you identify with that ethnic group?” with a scale ranging from 0 = not at all to 10 = very much; Appendix C).

Procedure

The procedure was modeled after a study by Simon et al. (1995). Participants were told that the University of Minnesota was considering implementing a policy for all classes to have mandatory comprehensive final exams at the end of each semester. It was explained that because the university was considering such a program, the psychology department had been asked to get opinions from students on both sides of the issue. Participants were then given a consent form to review and were asked to sign it. Next, the experimenter asked (in the high-choice condition) or instructed (in the low-choice condition) the participant to write an essay in favor of having mandatory comprehensive final exams.

In the high-choice condition, participants were told that they could either write in favor of or against mandatory comprehensive final exams but that “we would prefer if you would write in favor of the mandatory comprehensive finals; would you be willing to do that?” If a participant said no or appeared hesitant, the experimenter said “We really need more essays in favor of the comprehensive finals” or “We would prefer if you would write in favor of the finals.” After the participant complied, the experimenter reminded the participant that the decision to write in favor of the mandatory comprehensive final exams was completely up to them. In the low-choice condition, participants were
simply told that they had been randomly assigned to write in favor of mandatory comprehensive final exams.

After completing their essays, participants were given a packet of questionnaires which included the item on attitude toward comprehensive final exams, the SINDCOL measure, and the questionnaire on demographics and cultural identification. After participants completed the questionnaires, they were thoroughly debriefed.

Results

A primary hypothesis was that participants in the high-choice condition would experience more dissonance than participants in the low-choice condition. To test this hypothesis, participants' attitude ratings toward mandatory comprehensive finals in the high-choice condition were compared to participants' ratings in the low-choice condition. An independent t-test was performed. Participants' ratings in the high choice condition \( M = -2.41 \) were found to be significantly higher than participants' ratings in the low-choice condition \( M = 3.38 \), \( t(41) = -3.08, p < .01, r^2 = .19 \). Means are displayed in Figure 1.

Another hypothesis was that individualism would act as a moderating variable, with participants measuring high in individualism experiencing more dissonance than those measuring low in individualism. No relationship between collectivism and dissonance was expected. To examine the direct effects of individualism-collectivism on support for mandatory comprehensive final exams, a multiple regression analysis was performed using centered individualism, centered collectivism and attitude ratings toward mandatory comprehensive finals in the high-choice and low-choice conditions. The overall regression was found to be significant, \( F(3,37) = 4.28, p < .05, r^2 = .26 \), but only the condition term was significant, \( \beta = .436, t(41) = 3.02, p < .01 \). There were marginal trends of both individualism and collectivism predicting support for comprehensive finals, \( \beta ' s = .24, p ' s = .10 \).

Additionally, a multiple regression analysis was used to examine the interaction of individualism-collectivism with condition. Again, the overall regression was found to be significant, \( F(5,35) = 2.90, p < .05, r^2 = .29 \), but neither interaction term was significant.

To further explore the possible moderating effect of individualism, separate t-tests using condition to

Figure 1
Mean ratings of support for mandatory comprehensive final exams in the high-choice and low-choice conditions
predict support were performed for people low and high in individualism (using a median split of individualism). Results indicated that for participants high in individualism, support was not significantly different in the low-choice ($M = -.92$) and high-choice ($M = 3.57$) conditions, $t(17) = -1.33, p = .2$. For participants low in individualism, support was significantly different in the low-choice ($M = -3.56$) and high-choice ($M = 2.83$) conditions, $t(19) = -2.59, p < .05$. Means are displayed in Figure 2.

Analyses of ethnicity, individualism and collectivism were conducted using independent samples t-tests. The majority of participants (28 of 43) identified as “White/Caucasian” and the second largest group identified as “Asian” (5 of 43). As discussed in Triandis (1994), Asians in the United States have been found to be more collectivist than most Americans. Therefore, it was expected that Asians would also measure higher in collectivism in this study. Results indicated that Asians ($M = 6.13$) were significantly more collectivist than White/Caucasians ($M = 4.83$), $t(31) = -2.31, p < .05$. There was no significant difference among Asians and White/Caucasians in individualism, $t(30) = -0.60, p > .55$. Since there were no more than two participants who identified with any other ethnic group, no further analyses of ethnicity were conducted.

Finally, gender, individualism and collectivism were examined using independent samples t-tests. No significant differences were found among females and males in individualism ($p > .23$) or collectivism ($p > .71$).

**Discussion**

The results indicating that individuals in the high-choice condition rated mandatory comprehensive finals more favorably than individuals in the low-choice condition were consistent with previous research (Cohen, 1962). These results support the theory of cognitive dissonance, suggesting that participants who did not have sufficient external justification for their actions (those in the high-choice condition) were driven to change their opinions toward mandatory comprehensive finals in order to create consistency between their beliefs and behaviors.

The absence of a relationship found between individualism and cognitive dissonance suggests that the differences previously observed in cognitive dissonance experienced across cultures are not due to the personal individualist tendencies of individuals
living within those cultures. Instead, the differences may be due to other cultural variables. Future research should investigate what other variables may be causing the differences in dissonance experienced across cultures.

It could also be the case that individualism and collectivism are responsible for the differences in dissonance experienced across cultures, but that there was not enough variability in the individualist tendencies of participants in the present study. Future research should investigate the relationship between individualism, collectivism and dissonance using a larger and more diverse sample. It may be difficult, however, to obtain a sample of participants with high variability in individualism within the United States. Even when individuals are originally from collectivist cultures, they may quickly adopt individualist traits after moving to the United States, causing them to experience dissonance in individualist ways. Additionally, since people who travel feel free to move away from their groups and tend to be more individualist, people who have emigrated from collectivist cultures may be more collectivist than others from the same collectivist culture. Because of this, many people who live in the United States, regardless of their culture of origin, may have individualist traits that lead them to experience dissonance in individualist ways.

One limitation in the research that may account for the lack of a relationship between individualism and collectivism is that the measure of individualism and collectivism (the SINDCOL instrument) had low reliability ($\alpha = .57$ for individualism and $\alpha = .705$ for collectivism). Future research should examine cognitive dissonance and individualism using other scales.

Future research could investigate dissonance experienced among certain groups within a culture that exhibit particularly high individualist and collectivist tendencies. For example, it would be interesting to compare dissonance experienced among military groups, which place high emphasis on group cohesiveness, to dissonance experienced among individuals who work in a highly competitive and individual-oriented business environment. Additionally, future studies should examine the relationship between individualism, collectivism and dissonance experimentally, by priming individualism and collectivism. This would allow a causal relationship to be established.

References


Appendix A

We are interested in your degree of support for mandatory comprehensive final exams. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement:

“I support having mandatory comprehensive final exams at the University of Minnesota.”

(Circle one)

-10  -9  -8  -7  -6  -5  -4  -3  -2  -1  0  +1  +2  +3  +4  +5  +6  +7  +8  +9  +10

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

Appendix B

The SINDCOL Instrument

Are You an Individualist or a Collectivist?

People differ in their emphases on collectivism and individualism. Collectivists place some collective (family, work group, country) in a central position regulating social life. Individualists place the individual in the center of things. For example, when there is a conflict between the goals of a collective and an individual, collectivist people believe it is obvious that the collective should “win” while individualist people believe it is obvious that the individual should “win”.

In this questionnaire we wish to help you find out for yourself if you are a collectivist or an individualist, by asking you to answer questions about your own circumstances and life style.

We will help you find out where you stand on these tendencies by summing “points”.

Under C (collectivism) and I (individualism) you should enter a rating on a 0 to 10 scale, following the instructions under each question.
For example, suppose we ask you: Do you feel a part of any group, so that if you were expelled by that group you would feel that your life has ended? If the answer is “Yes, very definitely, absolutely true”, you would enter 10 under C. On the other hand, if it is not at all true, you might use a zero.

We will ask you questions that either reflect individualism, so you should enter a number between 0 and 10 next to I =, or collectivism, so you should enter a number between 0 and 10 next to C =.

This activity is cooperative between you and the researchers. We will give you the theoretical rationale for each question, and then you will make your own judgment concerning whether you are high in C or in I.

We suggest that you simply add the various influences in the collectivist and individualistic direction to get your total scores.

Please follow the instructions carefully and faithfully, so you will get an accurate estimate of your individualism and collectivism.

1. Individualists tend to be concerned with their personal success, even if that does not help their family. Collectivists often choose family over personal goals. On the whole how close do you feel to your family? The closer you feel, the higher should be your collectivism rating.

To remind you: Enter numbers from 0 to 10.

0 = no trace 5 = quite a bit 10 = the maximum possible

C =

2. There are probably other groups to which you feel very close. These might be co-workers, neighbors; people of your own religion, race, nationality, political orientation, civil rights views, personal rights view, environmental views, social standing, people with similar aesthetic standards, etc. Now select the three or four groups that you feel closest to and enter an average collectivism rating, indicating how close you feel to these groups.

C =

3. The younger people are, the more they like to explore new ideas, and do things that do not necessarily fit what their groups want them to do. But that is not constant with age. Young children often want to do what their parents want them to do; in some cultures teenagers want to do what their friends want them to do; old people often want to do what their own children and grandchildren want them to do. Now think how free you are from group influences. If you feel totally free enter a 10. Otherwise use a lower number.

I =

4. Individuals who travel a lot, change residences frequently, do not feel that they must necessarily do what their neighbors want them to do. How free do you feel from the influences of your neighbors? If you feel totally free enter a 10.

I =
5. The smaller the community in which you live, the more people (fellow villagers, neighbors) know what you are doing, and you may feel that you must pay attention to their ideas about your life style. If you feel that you are paying maximum attention to the ideas that people in your community have about your life style enter a 10 below.

C=

6. You have probably picked up a lot of ideas about how you should live from your parents, and they from their parents. So, it is likely that traditions that were in the families of your grand-parents are still very influential in your own life. If these traditions are maximally influential in your life use a 10.

C=

7. Think of your grandparents and parents in terms of how much they have been influenced by individualistic cultures, such as the United States, England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or collectivist cultures such Africa, East Asia, Latin America.

One clue is the kind of child-rearing. When the child-rearing you have experienced was warm-controlling, in other words your parents adored you as long as you did what they told you to do, you are most likely to have become a collectivist; on the other hand, if the childrearing was warm-independent, that is your parents adored you and encouraged you to be independent, self-reliant, exploratory, it was okay to get into trouble and they would help you get out of trouble, you are likely to have become an individualist.

If your child-rearing was cold and neglected, you would also be an individualist; if it was cold and controlling you would be a collectivist, but these relationships are weaker, so do not give too many points in this rating.

Try to estimate how individualistic you are, taking into account who your parents and other important influences (e.g. relatives, teachers) were, and also how influential each of them was while you were growing up. If you feel you were influenced so as to become an extreme individualist enter a 10; if on the other hand, you were influenced not to be individualistic enter a 0.

I=

8. Think of the people you socialized (e.g. close friends) with when you were growing up. In the previous question the influences from the different cultures were present but they did not necessarily influence you directly. Now we are talking about direct influence. Did the people you socialized with come from different cultures and traditions? The more diverse they were the more likely it is that you are an individualist.

Rate yourself on I = by giving yourself a 10 if most of your friends and influential adults (e.g. teachers), when you were growing up, were from different ethnic groups.

I=

9. How interdependent are you in your finances? Some people cannot make any decisions about how to spend their money without consulting others, either because they have too little money or because they have important financial obligations. If you can not spend even small amounts of money without considering what that will do to other people, give yourself a 10.

C=
10. How much education do you have? The more education you have the more you can consider different points of view, from different parts of the world, and you have to decide for yourself what is right and wrong, and so you become more of an individualist. Rate the maximum a 10.

I=

11. How much formal traditional education did you have? This is education about your ethnic group (e.g., Sunday School, language school) covering the language, religion, history, rituals, and traditions of your ethnic group? The more traditional education you have had the higher you should rate yourself on C=.

C=

12. How much have you traveled alone abroad? If you have traveled that way a lot enter I = 10, because you have seen many countries and met people from all over the world, and you had to decide for yourself what lifestyle is best for you, and so you must have become more of an individualist. If you travelled with your own group, you maintained your home culture while you were abroad, so you did not have to face the question of lifestyles. In that case, give few points or a zero.

I=

13. Did you live abroad for more than 6 months? The chances are that if you did that you had to decide for yourself whether the way of life of the host people was the kind of life you wanted for yourself, and so you would have become more individualistic. If you have not lived abroad enter a 0; if you lived in different countries every few years enter I = 10.

I=

14. Are you married? Generally married people have to live in a way that pays attention to the needs of their spouse and that makes them more collectivist. How collectivist do you feel because of your marital status? If you are not married enter a 0.

C=

15. Did you grow up in a large family, with many siblings and other relatives, in which you had to pay attention to the needs of others? In that case you may have become a collectivist. Rate yourself accordingly.

C=

16. Television, movies and magazines often expound an individualistic viewpoint (e.g., boy meets girl, they fall in love and get married, though sometimes this upsets their family and friends). How much exposure to such media did you experience? The more exposure the greater the I.

I=
17. Do you approve or disapprove of the stories in the media mentioned in the previous question? The more you disapprove, the more collectivist you may be. If you strongly condemn these stories enter a 10 below.

C=

18. Are your jobs or most of your activities allowing you to do your own thing (e.g. you are writing novels as you see fit) or do you have to act so as to take into account the needs and views of others? The more you have to take into account other people the more collectivist you are likely to be.

C=

19. What percent of your time do you work alone? If you work alone almost all the time, you do not have to pay attention to the needs of others, thus enter a 10 under I.

I=

20. Do you enjoy doing fun things alone (e.g. taking a walk alone) or must you do things with others? The more you must have others with you in order to have fun, the more of a collectivist you are. Rate yourself on that.

C=

21. Would you say that most of the time you do “your own thing” paying no attention to whether or not it fits customs and “proper” behavior? If you do your own thing all the time enter a 10.

I=

22. How much do you value your privacy? If you value your privacy very much, enter a 10 below; if you think that privacy is unimportant rate I= 0.

I=

23. Is your occupation or job such that you can make decisions while ignoring the needs and views of others? The more you can do that the larger should be the number below.

I=

24. Finally, in your occupation or job do you generally pay a lot of attention to the views and needs of others? The more you pay such attention the higher the score.

C=
Appendix C

It would help if you told us something about your demographic status.

1. What is your gender? _______

2. What is your age? _______

3. With which ethnic group do you most identify? _______

4. How much do you identify with that ethnic group? (circle one)

   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

   Not at all

   Very