II. Theory: What Research Tells Us

Individualistic versus Collectivistic

An important dimension that researchers have identified as distinguishing cultures is that of individualism versus collectivism (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis, 1988, 1995). Cultures differ in the relative importance its members place on the notion of personal independence and success as opposed to the notion of interdependence and the success of one's group or groups. The basic distinction can be viewed as the answer to the question of how individuals perceive themselves. Do they see themselves as independent persons with very personal goals, aspirations, rights, interests, and desires? Or do they view themselves as members of a complex web of interlocking relationships, the needs and desires of which often supersede those of the individual. The answer to this question indicates where a culture falls along a continuum, with individualistic culture at one end and collectivistic culture at the other end. An important point to keep in mind is that this individualistic/collectivistic dichotomy refers to relative features, not absolutes. Cultures fall within individualistic or collectivistic categories along a continuum, as do the subcultures of a dominant culture. Although the United States has been described as the most individualistic culture in the world (Hofstede, 1980), different ethnic groups within this culture differ in terms of their emphasis on individu-

alism. Nevertheless, Americans, regardless of their ethnic background, are generally more individualistic than members of a strongly collectivistic culture such as China.

How can we describe the features that place cultures close to one end of the continuum as opposed to the other end? *Individualistic cultures* structure social experience around autonomous individuals. In an individualistic culture, individuals view themselves as autonomous, independent of groups, and reluctant or unwilling to subordinate personal goals to those of the group. It is considered weak or unassertive to be overly interdependent on others (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999:86). Individualistic cultures emphasize self-reliance, individual growth, personal achievement, and satisfaction. Individuals' own desires, personal goals, and particular motivation primarily influence their actions and behaviors in such cultures. Competition among individuals to be the best student, the best worker, the best athlete, and the best of anything is keen. The underlying assumption in individualistic cultures is that each individual has wants and needs and is an authority as to just what these wants and needs are. Independence is encouraged at a young age. Even young children are urged to make their own decisions, and young people leave home relatively early (generally after high school). Family and social ties are important, but the sense of dependence and interdependence takes a backseat to the needs and wants of the individual.

In the enculturation process of their young, individualistic cultures not only promote the fostering of independence but strive to nurture individual achievement, self-expression, and individual or critical thinking. Individuals in these cultures generally make educational and career choices based on their own personal needs and desires, rather than those of their families. Roles and social relationships in individualistic cultures are less rigidly hierarchical and more fluid than in collectivistic cultures, and rules governing social interactions are also less dictated by age and gender roles. The more individualistic a society is, the more the education system of the society emphasizes the right for students to speak up and actively participate in the learning process, especially in secondary and higher education. Individualistic cultures include most northern and western European countries, Australia, Canada, and the United States.

Other cultures structure their social experience around one or more collectives, such as the family, the tribe, the religious group, or the coun-

try—hence the term *collectivistic culture*. In such cultures, the goals of the group are valued over those of the individual. Social and familial relationships and networks are primary, extensive, and interlocking. There is a strong sense of reciprocal obligation and responsibility. If someone gives another person a gift or does a favor for someone else, the recipient of the gift or favor is indebted until such time as he or she can reciprocate with a gift or favor of equal or greater value or consequence. Collective and cooperative efforts are prized over individualized efforts.

Collectivists generally view themselves as appendages of their group, whether the family, a social group, a corporation, or other. Unlike individualists, collectivists feel interdependent with members of their group and are willing to subordinate personal goals to those of the group. An individual's needs and wants are established and realized within the context of the group. It is more important to act appropriately than to search for self-fulfillment. The primary motivation is toward the common objectives of the group, whether familial, social, business, or other. Competition takes place between groups rather than between individuals. A collectivist culture promotes interdependence, respect for authority, hierarchical roles and relationships, and group consensus. For example, the Japanese emphasize group affiliation over all other forms of social organization (Caudill, 1973). Negotiations are often conducted by several people who represent a group rather than by a sole representative for the group. Because individuals are defined by their group relationship, an unaccompanied representative is often regarded as someone lacking in status. Japanese children who have spent time abroad in an English-speaking country (perhaps for reasons related to a parent's work) will often avoid using any English upon returning to Japan in order to avoid being different in any way. It is more important to them to be the same as everyone else than to exhibit special knowledge, even in a language class.

In most collectivistic cultures, the family is central. Each person's behavior is determined and constrained by family needs, expectations, and responsibilities; at the same time, members can depend on the family always being there to assist and support in any way necessary to their well-being. Furthermore, a large part of a person's self-identity is established through the family network and concomitant in-groups (see chap. 5). Consider, for instance, the issue of a family-owned business. In the United States, very much an individualistic culture, if a son did not wish to join

the family business after completing high school, most school counselors would argue that the son should pursue his career choice and that he need not follow the desires of his family. However, in a collectivistic culture such as China or Japan, if the son chose to disregard the wishes of the family, he would most likely be a major disappointment to his family. He would be seen as wanting to put his personal goals above the larger ones of family and would accordingly be chastised by those around him. In a collectivistic culture, personal goals are to be aligned with a person's responsibilities to the group, that is, self-fulfillment is viewed as something derived from acting based on one's obligations toward the group rather than from making choices based on one's own potential and personal desires. Adherence to the wishes of the family is a matter of duty that transcends personal wishes and desires.

Because of the high value collectivistic cultures place on relationships or networks, they are also cultures where nepotism is rampant, as such behavior is both accepted and expected. It is part of, as well as a reflection of, the network of family and social relationships and group cohesiveness, and it embodies neither negative connotations nor legal implications. Within a worldview that highly honors relationships, it is clearly better to employ those we know and those who have some sort of ties to us than to hire complete strangers. The more collectivistic a culture is, the more its members rely on other people within their group rather than on outside organizations. In China, a person in need of something—whether information, financial assistance, socioemotional support, or otherwise—will turn to someone he knows, who in turn may turn to someone he knows who knows someone. Even in the use of financial institutions, there will be some relationship to a person's in-group. In many cultures, newly appointed officials openly fire all the civil servants under them and replace them with relatives (Pinker, 1997:435). After all, since relatives are members of one's in-group, they are natural allies and will work to ensure your (and their) continued welfare. In the United States, in contrast, it is illegal for most city, county, and state governments to hire someone based on family and social-group ties. There, the term *nepotism* has strong negative connotations and implications, both legal and moral. Indeed, many companies, institutions of higher learning, and governmental agencies in the United States and Canada have formal policies against nepotism.

Another example of differences in perspective between the individualistic and the collectivistic points of view lies in the notion of plagiarism. The idea of intellectual property and the social and legal ramifications associated with plagiarism differ cross-culturally. In individualistic cultures, where the efforts of the individual are encouraged, celebrated, and rewarded, plagiarism is conceived of as the stealing of someone else's thoughts and/or words. In an individualistic culture such as the United States, plagiarizing at a university and/or in a place of business will result in harsh treatment, often leading to dismissal of the one culpable. This contrasts to collectivistic cultures, where there is often both the understanding that words and ideas are to be shared by everyone and the belief that copying the words of another writer shows respect and honor. Given the radically opposing perceptions of self, interactions between individuals from a collectivistic culture and from an individualistic culture can easily result in cross-cultural miscommunication. Members of individualistic cultures are often faced with situations in collectivistic cultures where hiring an employee's family member is accepted and even expected or where a reward is assumed to expedite services or paperwork, practices that may actually conflict with the laws of the company or the institutional home office.

This individualistic/collectivistic dichotomy is also reflected in communicative behaviors. The types of discourse strategies members of collectivistic cultures prefer, for instance, often vary from those preferred by members of individualistic cultures. Lustig and Koester (1993:147) maintain that "people from individualistic cultures are more likely than those from collectivistic cultures to use confrontational strategies when dealing with interpersonal problems; those with a collectivist orientation are likely to use avoidance, third party intermediaries or other face-saving techniques." Members of collectivistic cultures, which value harmony and social relationships, prefer using indirect discourse strategies to minimize confrontation in formal social relationships. They will use what seem to Westerners to be extremely vague and convoluted expressions, so that a message is couched in a web of masterfully polite behavior. Chinese communicate by "beating around the bush," while Americans and Canadians "spell it all out" (see chap. 6). For Japanese speakers, open disagreement is an unpleasant experience. Therefore, to avoid such situations in cross-cultural business negotiations, the Japanese will appoint a middleman to serve as the go-between or the third person to assist in the negotiation

process. Such behavior is often disconcerting to members of more individualistic cultures, who expect to be dealing directly with their counterparts and who are not averse to disagreement and may even revel in it.

Polychronic and Monochronic Time

In addition to the dichotomy between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, researchers have also suggested a distinction among cultures based on how they regard time. According to Hall (1983), cultures organize time in two major ways: *polychronic time* (P-time) and *monochronic time* (M-time). In P-time cultures, scheduling of time is of little importance, and many events occur simultaneously. Members of P-time cultures often engage in several unrelated activities simultaneously; doctors in China may treat patients while holding conversations with visiting relatives about separate and often unrelated medical topics, and in Latin America, businesspeople may be interrupted during meetings to conduct personal matters.

The emphasis in P-time cultures is on personal involvement and the culmination of transactions over that of rigid adherence to timetables. Spending time with others is more valued than are strict schedules or punctuality. Meal breaks in P-time cultures are often long and encourage social interactions; conducting any sort of business while eating is often frowned on and regarded as rude. In P-time cultures, a person would avoid cutting a conversation short to be on time for an appointment. Appointments are viewed as approximate, flexible meeting times; people show up late or cancel at the last minute, even when the appointment is important. Such behavior occurs not because members of P-time cultures have no concept of time or punctuality but because these terms have different connotations than they do for members of M-time cultures.

In P-time cultures, the future is often viewed as unknown and unforeseeable; therefore, planning for the future is minimal and rarely cast in stone. Future plans may include caveats such as "God be willing" or "it be God's will," alluding to the belief that the future does not necessarily turn out as one has intended or projected. There is a high tolerance of ambiguity; members of P-time cultures tend to "go with the flow," are flexible with respect to agendas and timetables, and are willing to change course with little advance notice. Navajo Native Americans, a P-time cul-