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Collectivism and Individualism towards a Plurality of Modern Society

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Collectivism and Individualism towards a Plurality of Modern Society

Abstract

Collectivism is better than individualism as the former holds the community together more than the latter do. Paradoxically, individualists tend to believe that there are universal values that should be shared by all, while collectivists tend to accept that different groups have different values. Many of the Asian cultures are collectivist, while Anglo cultures tend to be individualist. This paper sought to determine whether the collectivism and individualism dimension of culture influence every aspect of human life by relating it to the plurality of modern society that is brought about by globalization and urbanization. Though individualistic people are produced more in the globalization and urbanization era which is due to high and diverse competition, but individualism does not contribute to any factor which brings about unity. But, a group of individualistic people who share common understandings can still generate a collective group.

Keywords: Collectivism, Individualism, Plurality, Modern Society

JEL Codes: C11, J12

Introduction

Culture has been described as “the software of the mind” (Hofstede, 1981). Trompenaars (1994) suggests that culture is the result of finding solutions to problems with the environment, time, and relationships with others. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1960) considered the way in which individuals cope with time and temporal orientations to be a cultural dimension in itself. In fact, Jones (1988) concluded that:

“To talk about differences in time perspective is more fundamental than talking about cultural or individual idiosyncrasies (p. 21).”

Cultures are typically divided into two categories: collectivist and individualist. Nowadays the concepts of individualism and collectivism are broadly used by present-day social scientists, mainly as the result of Hofstede's book *Culture's Consequences*. Individualism and collectivism are the most often utilized concepts in studies of cross-cultural differences. There are many definitions and many versions. According to the Hofstede's (1991) definition, “individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as it opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-group which

throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”. Condon and Yousef (1975) make a distinction between individualism, prevalent in the United States, and individuality, which is different and prevalent in many other parts of the world. This fusion of individualism and equality is so valued and so basic that many Americans find it most difficult to relate to contrasting values in other cultures where interdependence, complementary relationships, and valued differences in age and sex greatly determine a person's sense of self. Individuality is different and appears to be much more the norm in the world than United States-style individualism is. Individuality refers to the person's freedom to act differently within the limits set by the social structure. Compared to the United States, many other cultures appear to be much more tolerant of "eccentrics" and "local characters." This confusion of one kind of individualism with individuality at first appears paradoxical: We might suppose that a society which promises apparently great personal freedoms would produce the greatest number of obviously unique, even peculiar people, and yet for more than a century visitors to the United States have been struck by a kind of "sameness" or standardization. Besides that, there are several defining attributes of individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995) that are important when identifying differences in temporal orientation among cultures:

Individualists generally view the *self* as independent of others, while collectivists

view the *self* as interdependent with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This is reflected in the differences in the way group membership is viewed. In general, individualists will have more, but less cohesive, group memberships than collectivists. Collectivists generally identify themselves as part of fewer, more cohesive groups, such as their family and workgroup.

Individualists generally have personal goals that are more important than the goals that their in-group pursues, while collectivists subordinate individual goals to pursue those deemed important by their in-group (Schwartz, 1990). Individualists and collectivists have different views of relationships. Individualists move in and out of groups easily. "When the costs exceed the benefits, the relationship is often dropped" (Singelis, et.al., 1995: 244). Collectivists consider relationships to be essential, and tend to maintain a relationship even if the costs of maintaining it are greater than the benefits. (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, & Yoon, 1994). Now, we will discuss more about the collectivism and individualism in more details. Collectivist cultures, such as those of China, Korea, and Japan, emphasize family and work group goals. Collectivism can be defined as the theory and practice that emphasizes the interdependence of every human in-group and the priority of group goals over individual goals whatever in the fundamental unit of political, social and economic. Besides that, collectivism also emphasizes community, group effort and

shared interest. Collectivism also develops ties with other people to satisfy the needs of the self as well as the members of the collective included in the self. For example the slogan of the McCain campaign "putting county first" and the military code explicitly put the good of the country and society above the individual. Collectivist's culture also requires self-sacrifice. As the collectivists normally will care about the group first and secondly is themselves. In the collectivist society, they relationship prevail over tasks. Moreover, harmony should always be maintained and direct confrontations are avoided. Next, collectivists normally will focus on their group, family, or on the community, society or nation. Furthermore, collectivism also stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are incorporated into strong cohesive in groups, which during people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for obedient loyalty. For instance, Mark Da Cunha wrote that " the collectivist ethical principle: man is not an end to himself, but is only a tool to serve the ends of others. Whether those 'others' are a dictator's gang, the nation, society, the race, (the) god(s), the majority, the community, the tribe, etc., is irrelevant -- the point is that man in principle must be sacrificed to others." For example, a Japanese scholar describes the Japanese value of social relations with others in the following way:

Japanese generally must understand where s/he stands in relation to other members of the group or society, and must acknowledge his/her dependence on the others.

Acknowledgement and maintenance of the relative position of others, rather than preservation of an individual's proper territory, governs all social interaction. (Matsumoto, 1988, p. 405). This statement not only describes the characteristics of social relations of the Japanese, but also other countries classified as the same collectivistic cultures, such as Korea, China, and Taiwan. Besides that, Collectivists are not very skillful at making new friends, but they "spend much time building relationships" (Triandis, 1991, p. 83) with other members of a group and maintain "a life-long intimate relationship, with many obligations" (Triandis et al., 1988, p. 325). Individualism was opposed of the collectivism. Individualism can be said as an independent individual who possesses an unassailable right to his own life. The individualists usually are rational being. Individualism also holds that an urbane society, or any form of society, collaboration or peaceful coexistence among men, can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights. Individualists are very good at entering and leaving groups (Triandis et al., 1993), have skill in making friends (Triandis et al., 1988), but often only establish relatively superficial (Triandis, 1991) and non-intimate relationships (Triandis et al., 1988) with other members of a group. In addition, individualism holds that a human being should think and judge independently. They are also more initiative and self-responsibility. The individualism normally will think about them first. For

instance, there was one off- duty police officers who refused to save a drowning child because they were off work. They are more interested with their own goals rather than others. Next, the individualist usually will promote the one's desires, goals and interests and so independence and self-reliance. Besides that, in the individualist culture, they are more voluntary. The individualist does not lend right to any view point that requires the sacrifice of the self-interest of the individual for any higher social causes. For example, Germany can be considered as individualistic with a relatively high score (67) on the scale of Hofstede. In Germany, the people stress on personal achievements and individual rights. They also expect from each other to fulfill their own desires. Group work is important, but everybody has the right of his own opinion and is expected to reflect those. In an individual country like Germany people tend to have more loose relationships than countries where there is collectivism where people have large extended families. Additionally, in the individualist society, voice out one's mind is a characteristic of an honest people. For example, the most significant cultural pattern in the United States is eager to share a thought, an opinion. And there were many instances when they even contradicted the teacher, openly disagreed with him/her. However, within each societal culture, whether individualistic or collectivistic, there is a range of people who are individualistic, called *ideocentric*, and who are collectivistic, called *allocentric*

(Triandis, 1995). For example, there are those in the United States who prefer to work alone (ideocentric) and those who prefer to work in groups (allocentric). However, the overall cultural variation in the United States is individualistic, with the majority being ideocentric (Triandis, 1995; Hofstede, 2001).

Discussion

From the different characteristics that can be found in individualism and collectivism, we can conclude that collectivism contribute more in forming unity of the society. This is mainly because members in collectivistic societies tend to be more united than individualistic members in a community as a whole. This implies that we agree on the statement which states that collectivism is better than individualism as the former brings unity. However, we do declare the importance of individualism in the society as a force towards achieving unity as well as the important contributions of individualistic beings in creating changes in the society today. Plurality can has many definitions such as the holding of two or more offices or positions at the same time, the quality or state being plural. Another meaning of plurality is a state of society in which members of different racial, ethnic, religious or social groups maintain an independent involvement in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the boundaries of an ordinary civilization. We noticed the fact that globalization in all its aspects and development of science and technology has been resulted in better interaction among

people and faiths in Malaysia. It was bringing about both challenges and opportunities in a more interdependent and interlinked world. Besides that, in an increasingly globalization world, the respect for a religious enhance the national identity, contributes to international cooperation and helps to create an environment beneficial to the exchange of human experience. In addition, the imbalanced development and irregular benefits as challenges of globalization and encouraged faith communities to strengthen cooperation in response to the challenges facing humanity, overcome social conflicts, in particular those linked with urbanization. There was a need to enrich the globalization with generally shared value as globalization poses challenge to protecting and preserving the faiths and cultural heritage and traditions. In modern-nation states as Malaysia, the ethnic differences were not rekindled because of the globalization phase, but it was been responsible for the presence of cultural pluralism. Furthermore, globalization also allows nations and people of the world to share common values, knowledge or events via the advances in the telecommunications and information technology. Each and every one of us would have the urge to be the best and to gain recognition as we were all nurtured to live to achieve our goals and desires. This makes us grow up as an individualistic person with our own ideas and goals. Under condition of globalization, a move towards new individualism in which people are actively constitute themselves and construct their own identities is becoming more common

and it happens in a rapid pace. The traditions in which 'social codes' was once used to guide people's choices and activities have significantly become unimportant and lack in use for consideration. For example, women who were placed in the house and were labeled as house maker which is according to the customs are no longer restricted to the domestic realm. Women now have their own choices. Special rights for women have also been established to protect women's rights. In this modern world with emerging day to day new technologies and knowledge, people need to have a back up support in life in order to continue to survive and to achieve their ultimate desires in life. Individualistic people who conduct their whole life by themselves would be soon being left by those people who are united to pursue common purposes or desires. Thus, those who didn't join their hands in creating harmony will be left to struggle alone or together with a group of individualistic beings when it is already too late for them to realize that they need to open up and contribute their efforts and ideas into the united human network in order for them to come out as successful as the rest of the community. Next, rapid urbanization also brought to the plurality of modern society in Malaysia. One of the examples of urbanized place in Malaysia was Kuala Lumpur. Migration is a major factor contributing to rapid urbanization. Most of the citizens from the rural place or small village were moved to mega cities seek for a job and they want to improve their life standard.

People tend to escape from their place of origin and migrate themselves into metropolitan cities with the aim of achieving a better living standards and a fruitful income, being a one man army with all the knowledge of the world alone is not good enough for them to turn their dreams and goals into reality. They need every type of support from anyone in order for them to gain as much strength and abilities to put themselves in the place which they wish to stay. Human kinds, in nature, are very ambitious and competitive even right after when they were born. For example, Hofstede (1980) found that the industrialized wealthy countries scored higher on individualism than the economically struggling developing countries, which lead to the popular belief that individualism causes economic development. However, collectivism can be better than individualism as the former hold of the community together. The organization with the collectivist values can achieve economic development by developing team think. In addition, children as young as one year old can already know how to get back their own toys by fighting with other children who took their so called property. However, as these children grow older, they will realize that being alone is not what it takes to survive in this fast developing world. This is mainly because of the changes which has taken place in the society around the world since the beginning when modernization and urbanization hits the globe. In this real world, everything is about competition.

Competition is used to determine or fix an individuals' identity whether it is their educational level, social status, income level, physical advantages or personal values. Each and every one of us would have the urge to be the best and to gain recognition as we were all nurtured to live to achieve our goals and desires. This makes us grow up as an individualistic person with our own ideas and goals. Under condition of globalization, a move towards new individualism in which people are actively constitute themselves and construct their own identities is becoming more common and it happens in a rapid pace. The traditions in which 'social codes' was once used to guide people's choices and activities have significantly become unimportant and lack in use for consideration. For example, women who were placed in the house and were labeled as house maker which is according to the customs are no longer restricted to the domestic realm. Women now have their own choices. Special rights for women have also been established to protect women's rights. Globalization is forcing people to live in a more open, reflexive way. This means that we are constantly responding and adjusting to the changing environment around us as individuals and we also evolve with and within the larger context in which we live. Even the small choices we make in our daily lives like what we wear, how we spend our leisure time and also how we take care of our health and our bodies are part of an ongoing process of creating and recreating our self-identities. However some of us share the same ideas and goals, and

with the magic of socialization, we were able to gather the people who have the same ideas and ambition as us and thus a group of people of the same aim is created. This group is called as a collective group whereby people in the same community group agree with the group's agendas. The three characteristics of collectivism such as interdependence, making sacrifices for the in-groups, relational social exchange will lead to conformity, institutionalization, collective goal congruency, and national goal congruency. These will very helpful in the development of the economic. The characteristics like groupthink, thwarting innovation, which is needed in the later phases of economic development and it can hold the community together. The collectivists normally will share information among their own kind. In addition, collectivism encourages collective and national goal through conventionality and institutionalization. The collectivism also more focuses on the interdependence and maintains harmony relationship among them. These factors can lead to less social crimes to happen. They also tend to integrate individuals outside their kinship into their primary network to expand their relationships. This interdependence coexists with emotional contact and will build cohesiveness in people working together. The second characteristic of collectivism pertains to the relationship between self and groups of people. They would like to develop the ties with other people to satisfy others need in the group such as family, friends and so on. They also are willing to sacrifice their self-interest to be a part of

this group. They will fulfill the groups need rather oneself. Individualists, by contrast, do not make such strong distinctions between in-groups and out-groups. The third characteristic of collectivism captures the nature of social exchange between self and others. Collectivists are unlikely to break a relationship as they hold an interdependent concept of self. They would like to have a long term relationship. Collectivists are not very skillful at making new friends, but they "spend much time building relationships" (Triandis, 1991, p. 83) with other members of a group and maintain "a life-long intimate relationship, with many obligations" (Triandis et al., 1988, p. 325). Moreover, they share their feeling and care about each other too. For instance, when one of them was feeling good, the others also will feel good and so the vice versa. Next, the collectivists will contribute their opinions and making a group decision or ask for opinions from others before making an important decision. For example, a subordinate often informs his or her superior before proceeding with an important decision. It has been found that collectivist cultures tend to create lasting institutions and policy shaping structures. For example, the Japanese Union of Scientists and Engineers (JUSE) were created after World War II to help streamline the scientific developments in Japan, and they continue to be active, and support the institutionalization of the quality circle movement that started in Japan (Crocker, Charney, & Chiu, 1984; Konz, 1979). There are many forms of collective

behaviour and some contribute in a positive way while there are others which give negative impressions and impact to the society. Panics and rumours are categorized as negative collective behaviour forms. Panic is a type of collective behaviour characterized by a maladaptive, fruitless response to a serious threat. In 1903, a fire broke out in Chicago's Iroquois Theater. An eye witness reported somebody yelled 'Fire!' and panic was ignited in the theater where people start to run for their life. But the fact was the theater was not burnt down. However, when the fire fighter came, 602 people has already died and many more were injured. Similarly, on a July morning in 1990 in the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, when the lights accidentally went out in a 600-yard-long tunnel through which thousands of Muslim pilgrims were walking, panic triggered a stampede and kills 1426 people. This form of collectivism does brings unity but in a disastrous way. As for rumours, it may not appear as unreal as a craze but it is not necessarily false. However, we should learn that rumours can generate conflicts within a society and it is unhealthy in the way to achieve unity. A rumour is an unverified story that spreads from one person to another. As the story circulates, each person distorts the account by dropping some items and adding their own interpretation. It is unverified not because it is necessarily a distortion but because people do not bother to check it against facts. The main contributing factors for the emergence of rumours is the people's demand for news about an

ambiguous situation which is not met by institutionalized channels of communication such as the newspapers, government announcements and television and radio newscasts; the more ambiguous a situation, the greater the chance that a rumour will develop. Another contributing factor is anxiety. For example, people who had lost or were afraid to losing their jobs were especially likely to believe or pass on damaging rumours about big companies. Even though panic and rumours reduces the healthy thinking level of the society, the socialization process still brings out unity within the community who took a role in the panic and rumour spreading activity. Another form of collective behaviours which gives more hope for the communities are crowds, fashions, public opinions and social movements. A crowd is a collection of people temporarily doing something while in proximity to one another. They may be gathered on a street corner protesting cruelty on animals or be in theater watching an opera while admiring the art. Some crowds may appear dangerous for the other group of societies like those who gather to vandalize public amenities and throw stones to the authority. Groups can be of uncertainty as well as a sense of urgency. For uncertainty, the participants do not share clear expectations about how to behave or about the outcome of their collective behaviour. In the other element common to most crowds which is the sense of urgency, the people in the crowd feel that something must be done right away to solve a common problem. The third characteristic of a crowd is the communication of mood,

attitude and idea among the members, which pressures them to conform. Crowds are also marked by heightened suggestibility in which those in a crowd tend to respond uncritically to the suggestions of others and to follow along impulsively with their actions.

Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1978) has classified crowds into four types which are casual, conventional, acting and expressive. The casual crowd exist the shortest and has the loosest organization as it emerges spontaneously. An example of a casual crowd can be described when a group of people are watching a street fight. Unlike the casual crowd, the conventional crowd occurs in a planned and organized manner like the audiences in a theater or spectators watching a football game. Conventional crowds are those which observe the content of activities. In contrast, acting crowds are those involved in the activity that enables its' members to focus their energy on a particular goal like revolutionary crowds. The expressive crowd, however, has no clear goals. Its' members plunge into some unrestrained activity, releasing emotions and tensions like those who attend a rock concert or participate in a religious festival. According to Le Bon's view, social contagion which is the spreading of a certain emotion and action from one member of the crowd to another enables people to strip down their individualism and let themselves become part of a collective mind. This happens as people tend to look for a safer place in a community. Like what we know, together we are strong. Therefore,

people tend to follow the crowd which is the strongest and is the most majority like those fashion groups, public opinion groups and social movements groups. Compared with crowds, fashions are more subject to traditional norms. All aspects of human life which includes clothes, hairstyles, architecture, philosophy and arts are influenced by fashion. However, it is short lived as it keeps on changing according to the pace of the world. Though, most of the famous crazes are conserved. Even the clothing fashion during the 70ties were brought back in this modern era like the bottom bell jeans and glittering shirts due to the emergence of disco community in the past and clubbing community in the present. As for architecture, Muslims designs for building like the mosque and its geometric designs gives the identity for its people and their tradition. Hence, fashion, which is one of the collective behaviours, generates unity within the members who appreciate them. Public opinion is the collection of ideas and attitudes shared by the members of a particular public. A public is a dispersed collection of people who share a particular interest or concern. As measured by polls and surveys, public opinion often seems fickle and it changes easily even as values appear constant. However, the main goal is to gather people and make them united to enable the expression of their opinion become successful. Two medium of collection are used. One is propaganda and the other is media influence. Politicians want to win peoples' hearts and minds while businesses want to win peoples' dollars.

Both uses the media to try to gain mass support by manipulating public opinion which is in other word, by generating propaganda. Alfred and Elizabeth Lee (1979) have identified seven methods that are frequently used to sway public opinion which includes name calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking and bandwagon. Name calling is an act of giving negative label for something to make the audience reject an idea, a person or a product so that those audiences will turn to other alternatives. Glittering generality is an idea or product which is associated with a general, ambiguous but extremely popular concept or belief. Transfer, however, is an association of an idea or product with something else that is widely respected, admired or desired like beautiful actresses or Prime Ministers. Testimonial is by having a famous person to endorse or oppose some idea or product such as a famous football player like Christiano Ronaldo to claim using a shampoo product of the brand name, Clear. As for plain folks, the propagandist would live like the average person to let other people see that the propagandist is like one of them. This is to create a comfortable relationship between the folks and the propagandist. Card stacking is the compilation of one fact or falsehood to support a point of view on top of another like the car commercials which do not tell out the strengths or the weaknesses of the car. Bandwagon is the creation of an impression that everyone is using a product or supporting an idea or a person like those

carbonated drink commercials which shows a bunch of youngsters to drink it together happily without any problems. And lastly is the social movement. Social movement is a conscious effort to bring about or prevent change. It is more purposive and far more structured compared with the rest of the collective behaviours forms even though they may not be centrally coordinated. Most social movements aim to change society but they seek varying degrees of change. They are classified into four types on the basis of their goals. First is the revolutionary movement which seeks total, radical change in the society. Their goal is to overthrow the existing form of government and replace it with a new one. This movement is typically associated with violence or some other illegal action like the revolution for independence in the United States, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the Chinese Communist revolution and the Castro-led revolution in Cuba. Second is the reform movement which seeks only a partial change in society. They support the existing social system as a whole and want to preserve it but they aim to improve it or remove some of its blemishes through a legal method. For example, the civil rights movements to rid society racial discrimination and the ecology movement which seek to put a full stop to environmental pollution. Third is the resistance movement which seeks to preserve an existing system by resisting social change like the Ku Klux Klan and the U.S Nazi party which have the aim to stop racial integration. In Muslim countries, the Islamic revolution seeks to protect the

traditional Islamic way of life against Western influences. Lastly is the expressive movement which seeks the change of individual, but not the society mainly those religious people who aim to convert people's faith to a particular faith. These movements enable their members to express their sense of guilt, their joy of redemption and their devotion to their religion like those Moonies, Hare Krishna's and many others.

Conclusion

All of the collective behaviour forms which we have discussed contribute to the formation of unity within the members of the society. From panics to social movements, all these bring the people together. They are gathered based on their common interest and same understanding. Even those who are individualistic would leave their individualistic nature and join the unity network as they believe being around with more people will guarantee safety and support. For example, if a person laughs alone for a comedy scene, the person would be interpreted as abnormal and does not follow the norm. However, if the comedy is shared by a group of people who laughs for the scene, the situation is normal and all the people who laughed would be seen as normal as the rest. Collectivist values can lead to group as well as organizational goal. The collectivist values captured by the three characteristics can have a positive effect on organizations in building teams. Though individualistic people are produced more in the globalization and urbanization era which is

due to high and diverse competition, but individualism does not contribute to any factor which brings about unity. But, a group of individualistic people who share common understandings can still generate a collective group. This situation display the stripping down of individualism into collectivism cultures. Therefore, unity is the product of collectiveness and collectivity is generated by a group of people working together to achieve their common goals or pursue their same interests.

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