

Crossing Cultures 2: Collectivism vs. Individualism

If you have read the other article in this series, on Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance, you will be familiar with many of the ideas concerning cultural influences on how learners react, respond and expect to learn.

As was pointed out there

Culture provides moral standards about how to be an upstanding group member; it defines the group as a "moral circle". It inspires symbols, heroes, rituals, laws, religions, taboos, and all kinds of practices - but its core is hidden in unconscious values that change at a far slower rate than the practices.

Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede <http://www.geerthofstede.nl>

The first article focused on two aspects of culture and described how cultural norms affect how people interact and how misunderstanding and conflict can be the outcomes of differences in cultural norms.

This one is concerned with two other dimensions of culture suggested by Hofstede: individualism and collectivism.

This is important to us as language teachers because we usually teach groups and often the groups are made up of people who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

What is the difference?

Collectivist societies, as the name implies, are those in which the individual's preferences are subordinated to society. Individuals work for the good of the group first and themselves second.

Individualistic societies work the other way around: people take care of themselves and their immediate family first and their societies value autonomy and independence.

Here is a list of some other relevant characteristics:

Collectivist societies	Individualistic societies
People are members of extended families or clans to which they are loyal	People are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families
There is a so-called 'we' consciousness	There is a so-called 'I' consciousness
There is a strong motivation to maintain social harmony	Speaking out and expressing a conflicting opinion is not stigmatised
There is a tendency to classify others as in- or out-group members	Others are regarded as individuals not members of groups
Opinions are often determined by in-group preferences	Personal opinions are respected and expected
The purpose of education is to learn how to do things and contribute to society	The purpose of education is to learn how to learn and improve personally
Relationships are more important than task achievement	Tasks are more important than relationships

Which are which?

How do you know what sort of culture people come from? Well, one proposed way is to ask someone to finish the statement:

I am _____

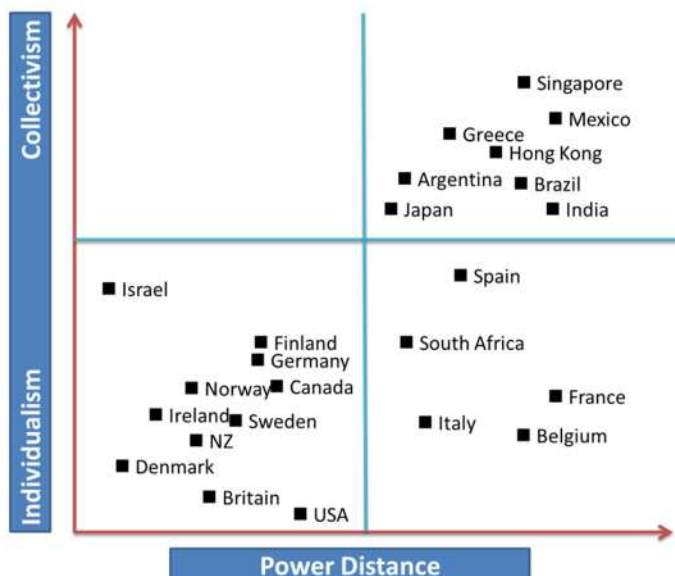
The theory is that people from individualist societies will finish it with something like *honest, outgoing, cheerful, shy* etc. and those from collectivist backgrounds will tell you something about their social identities, e.g., *a bank manager, a government worker, a farmer* etc. because the former consider individual traits more important than social role and the latter perceive the world the other way around.

This is not a simple either-or distinction. Cultures exist on a cline from highly individualistic (e.g., the USA and the UK as well as most northern European nations) to highly collectivist societies such as Greece, Latin American and many Pacific Rim nations. In addition, there is some evidence to conclude that within younger populations and large urban centres, the incidence of individualism tends to rise even in collectivist nations.

Collectivist			Individualist	
Argentina	Greece	Portugal	Australia	Ireland
Armenia	India	Romania	Austria	Italy
Belarus	Indonesia	Russia	Belgium	Luxembourg
Brazil	Japan	Saudi Arabia	Canada	Poland
Bulgaria	Kenya	Serbia	Czech Republic	South Africa
China	Korea	Singapore	Estonia	Switzerland
Dominican Republic	Lebanon Malaysia	Somalia	Finland	The Netherlands
Egypt	Nepal	Turkey	France	United Kingdom
El Salvador	Pakistan	Uganda	Germany	United States
Georgia	Palestine	Ukraine	Hungary	
Ghana	Philippines	Vietnam		
	Poland	Zambia		

As you can see, most societies tend to be more collectivist than individualist (some estimates suggest around 70% of people live in predominantly collectivist societies).

To give you some idea of the range, scores can be given to countries if they can be placed on a scale like this, which also includes the notion of power distance (see the first article for more of that).



In this diagram (adapted from the Hofstede data), it is simple to note that those cultures which have high levels of collectivism also show high power distances. The top left quadrant is blank.

Why should it matter?

Here are some reasons:

1. It will clearly make a difference to class dynamics because people's views are coloured by their culture
 - a. Those from highly individualistic cultures will often be happy to express their views openly
 - b. Those from highly collectivist cultures will be less happy to express an opinion and prefer to wait until a consensus is reached
 - c. Those from highly individualistic cultures will often be happy to accept newcomers in a group and judge them on their merits
 - d. Those from highly collectivist cultures will be less happy to welcome newcomers and will judge them on their backgrounds
2. It will make a difference to how people view tasks
 - a. Those from highly individualistic cultures will view task completion as important
 - b. Those from highly collectivist cultures will prefer to focus on reaching a consensus together and focus on their relations within their groups
3. It may make a difference to how people learn
 - a. Those from highly individualistic cultures will view learning as something for themselves – a means to a personal end
 - b. Those from highly collectivist cultures will see learning as a way of getting to be able to do something in order to contribute to their group or society
4. It may make a difference to how learners feel, especially if they are outside their own culture
 - a. Those from highly individualistic cultures will be happier to settle in to a new culture because their world is centred around themselves as individuals
 - b. Those from highly collectivist cultures will often miss the support of large extended families and clans and feel disoriented and lonely

With a little thought, you can probably add to this list.

You may, of course, take issue with much of the foregoing, especially concerning the temptation it supplies to stereotype learners and make unwarranted assumptions about individuals. That is fair comment.

You would, however, be unwise to dismiss it all out of hand and take no cognisance of the cultural backgrounds of your learners when trying to understand their motivations and behaviours.

References:

Hofstede, G (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*, 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications
Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede <http://www.geerthofstede.nl/>