

Every culture has some understanding of the adult proficiencies needed for adequate functioning. People are socialized in environments that promote their specific skills needed for sufficient performance within that culture. “Culture must be learned through a prolonged process, over a considerable period of time, with much practice.” (Motsumoto & Juang, pg. 134). Socialization is the means by which people learn and internalize the rules and patterns of behavior that are affected by their culture. Extensive research has been done in the area of individualism and collectivism cultures, and how socialization processes promote or discourage these concepts. Research has indicated that individualist cultures promote self interest before the group, self-esteem, independence, and uniqueness. Collectivist cultures promote a strong identification with the group (family, religion, nation, etc.), fulfilling roles and obligations, interdependence, and group goals.

One process by which individuals are socialized to be individualistic or collectivist is through the construction of self-concept. In Kitayama et al (1997), the researchers examined the self-enhancement and self-criticism processes in which Americans and Japanese are socialized to be either individualist or collectivist. It is stated that Americans promote self-enhancement socialization processes of independence, competition, and self-esteem. Japanese promote a self-criticism (which leads to self-improvement) socialization process of interdependence, group goals, and shared improvement. The meanings of concepts are culturally constructed, and therefore concepts can have different meanings cross-culturally. An example of this is self-esteem. In American culture, self-esteem is a sought after commodity gained through independent endeavors aimed at success and self-gain. Japanese culture’s positive self-concept is

aimed more at fulfilling group goals and success for the collective group, and less at individual successes or accomplishments. The discussion of a self-concept in class led to an exercise in which we listed twenty characteristics of ourselves. We were then able to discuss how concepts are culturally constructed and how individualism and collectivism play a role in how we view ourselves. This discussion was beneficial in that we were able to discern how individualist cultures are more likely to use traits to describe themselves, while collectivist cultures were more likely to describe themselves in terms of the roles they occupy within the group.

Other researchers have looked toward the socialization processes in American and Japanese preschools to identify individualist and collectivist tendencies. Fujita and Sano (1988) used participant observation and cross-cultural interviewing of American and Japanese preschool teachers to try to reveal different cultural transmission of socialization processes. Through comparing the differences in American and Japanese day-care centers, the researchers were able to uncover contextual situations that promote or discourage individualist or collectivist behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms. Being simultaneously sensitive to the cultural construction of meanings behind American and Japanese culture allowed the researchers to discover that American and Japanese teachers do not interpret concepts in the same way. "Therefore, the teachers' interpretations reveal two distinct cultural frameworks underlying the American and Japanese systems." (Fujita & Sano, pg. 74). By comparing different activities offered in day-care centers, the researchers were able to ascertain that American teachers promote a more independent-oriented individual (encouraging the child to eat without help, use 'feeling words', and make decisions for themselves). But that does not mean that Japanese teachers promote a

more dependent individual. It seems as though the concept of independence is different for Americans than it is for Japanese. It is through research like this that sociologists and psychologists can gain understanding on what social processes are involved in forming a collectivist or individualist culture.

It is important to view individualism from both the individual level, as well as from the level of culture. On the individual level we are taught the behaviors, values, beliefs and norms that will help to ensure survival on the personal level. Through culture, we are taught the behaviors, values, beliefs, and norms that will ensure survival within that group. “Because culture plays such a major role in shaping our sense of self and identity, it has a pervasive influence on all our behaviors across all contexts.” (Matsumoto & Juang, pg. 299). By considering individualism at the level of the individual, we can characterize a psychological culture underlying the samples of research and examine its influence on other aspects of human behavior. It allows researchers to characterize the individualist nature of different groups and to examine the relative importance of individualism or collectivism in those groups. Measurement on the individual level can also help researchers because they will not have to assume that the groups are either individualist or collectivist, they can exhibit it empirically. And finally, according to Matsumoto and Juang (2004), individualist scores can be used as covariates in statistical analysis that test group differences with the effects of individualism statistically controlled. Considering individualism at the level of culture can show how individuals are socialized to adjust themselves to an attendant relationship or a group to which they belong, to be sympathetic, and to play their assigned roles. This was shown in Tobin’s (1997) research in Japanese preschools. Tobin was able to discern

individualistic traits from the context of culture. “After several years of studying Japanese preschools I have come to view them less as Marine-style boot-camps dedicated to breaking headstrong, spoiled recruits’ spirits to the yoke of group domination than as outward-bound programs intended to provide sheltered, home-bound children with a chance to learn to function as members of a group.” (Tobin, pg. 22). In this way, considering individualism at the level of culture is able to put into context the rules and behaviors associated with survival within the group.

North Americans have been viewed for decades as the epitome of an individualist culture. This bias has been made through much research done investigating the individualistic traits associated with an individualist culture. Hofstede’s study of individualism across thirty countries concluded with the idea that the U.S., Australia, and Great Britain were the most individualistic cultures, and that Venezuela, Colombia, and Pakistan were considered the most collectivist cultures. In class we were able to discuss many problems with Hofstede’s study including: if you do not measure individualism how do you know it is the causal factor, his questions only covered workplace topics, and he assumed that individual scores represent entire countries. This view of individualism OR collectivism has been replaced with a view of individualism and collectivism being placed along two intersecting lines, meaning that one can be high in both individualism and collectivism, or low in both. This new view on individualism and collectivism has shifted the way researchers have measured both individualism and collectivism among cultures. “People act differently depending on whom they are interacting with and the situation in which interaction is occurring. A person may have collectivist tendencies at home and with close friends and individualistic tendencies with strangers or at work, or

vice versa.” (Matsumoto & Juang, pg. 52). This view of individualism and collectivism suggests the value of generating context-specific scores on individualism and collectivism rather than producing single scores collapsed across contexts. With this in mind, I find it difficult to stake a claim in the fact that Americans are more individualist. It seems as though it depends on contextual situational factors how any individual will behave or react. While the socialization processes of Americans tend to lean toward the individualistic side of the spectrum, collectivism can be found in other areas of American society. For example: churches promote a sense of an in-group by which membership construed doing good for the sake of the group. Also, schools can promote a collectivist environment in terms of ‘team effort’ or ‘school spirit’. Therefore, it can be assumed that American culture is not truly individualistic or collectivistic. It is a combination of both within each individual that makes up the context of the culture we know as American.