

Associations of Individualistic-Collectivistic Orientations with Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health, and Satisfaction with Life: A Tale of Two Countries

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ABSTRACT - Cross-cultural research suggests that individualistic-collectivistic orientations tend to shape and influence psychological processes. The present study examined the associations of cultural orientation with emotional intelligence, mental health, and satisfaction with life in Australia (an individualistic culture) and India (a collectivistic culture). Participants from Australia ($n=207$) and India ($n=163$) completed questionnaires assessing individualistic-collectivistic orientations, emotional intelligence, mental health, and satisfaction with life. Regression analyses indicated that collectivistic orientation was significantly associated with greater emotional intelligence and better mental health outcomes. Cultural orientation did not significantly predict satisfaction with life in both countries. Implications based on these findings were discussed.

Culture as a broad concept is an important influence on individual and group attitudes, values, trends, and behaviors (Yetim, 2003). It consists of shared elements (Shweder & LeVine, 1984) that provide the standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historic period, and/or a geographic location. The culture of a group is generally seen as a single, unitary concept more or less exactly the same for all members of that group. Assessing cultural tendencies in different social contexts helps in identifying behaviors that accurately describe differences in specific social relationships (Ratzlaff, Matsumoto, Kouznetsova, Raroque, & Ray, 2000).

One of the most widely used dimensions of psychological culture is individualism-collectivism (I/C). To distinguish cultural analysis at different levels, Triandis (1989, 1995) labeled the individual levels of I/C as idiocentrism and allocentrism¹ respectively. In general, individuals with idiocentric tendencies endorse attitudes, behaviors, and values similar to those common in individualistic or independent cultures and individuals with allocentric tendencies endorse attitudes, behaviors, and values similar to collectivistic or interdependent cultures (Ratzlaff et al., 2000). In addition, individuals within a culture, regardless of its main orientation, may have differing personal levels of individualism and collectivism tendencies. For example, Triandis, Leung, Villareal, and

Clack (1985) found attributes of allocentrism in the U.S. similar to defining factors of collectivism, such as subordination of personal to group goal.

Cultural Orientation and Emotional Intelligence

Cultural orientation influences emotional experiences and functioning (e.g., Saarni, 1997). An attempt to comprehensively operationalize emotional functioning has been made through theories and research focusing on what has been termed as emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence can be defined as an ability to use emotions adaptively (e.g., Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2004) proposed that emotional intelligence involves the interrelated abilities of (a) perception of emotion in the self and others, (b) using emotion to facilitate decision making, (c) understanding emotion, and (d) regulating emotion in the self and others. Emotional intelligence has been conceptualized both as an ability and as a trait (e.g., Neubauer & Freudenthaler, 2005). It may be preferable to use trait definitions and measures when the aim of the research is to assess characteristic adaptive emotional functioning.

Several studies have revealed interesting cross-cultural differences in emotionality. For example, North Americans tend to maximize experiencing positive emotions and minimize experiencing negative emotions. However, this tendency is weaker in Asian societies (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000). Van Rooy, Alonso, and Viswesvaran (2005) found group differences for ethnicity in adaptive emotional functioning, operationalized as emotional intelligence, with Hispanics scoring higher on emotional intelligence as compared to Caucasians.

One of the common notions regarding those with collectivist orientation is that they are less emotionally expressive than individualists (Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, & Jing, 2003). Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002) suggested that members of collectivistic societies are socialized to control and regulate their emotional expressions so as to maintain in-group harmony. On the other hand, Markus and Kitayama (1991) reported that individualists are encouraged to express their feelings more directly because they do not expect others to read their minds in social exchanges. While exploring the culture-specific psychological processes involved in the prediction of emotional competence, Scott, Ciarrochi, and Deane (2004) found that individualism was associated with less skill in managing both self and others' emotions. Thus, it may be that adaptive emotional functioning is differently related to individualistic-collectivistic orientations.

Cultural Orientation, Mental Health, and Satisfaction with Life

Cultural orientation can also be a major force that influences and shapes the subjective experience of well-being (e.g., Diener & Suh, 2000). Past research has suggested that rates of depression and suicide especially in Western cultures have been growing rapidly as these societies become more individualistic. For instance, Scott et al. (2004) found that individualists reported poorer mental health indicators such as higher levels of depressive symptoms and stress. On the other hand, researchers (e.g., Lay et al., 1998; Sinha and Verma, 1994) found beneficial outcomes such as lower levels of depression and greater well-being related to collectivistic orientation.

In contrast, research has also shown that satisfaction with life is higher in individuals with individualistic orientations (Ahuvia, 2002). Individualistic cultures place more importance on emotions, and emotions provide direct feedback about the fit between the one's needs and goals (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1995). Hence, for people in individualistic cultures, emotions provide important information about life satisfaction. A life filled with many pleasant emotions and few unpleasant emotions indicates that one's needs and goals are fulfilled and that life is good. However, a different pattern can be found in a collectivistic society. People in collectivistic societies base their life satisfaction judgments on not only emotional states but also societal norms (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Thus, to make sense of well-being judgments across cultures, it may be important to focus on the differences in how the self is perceived in that particular culture. For example, in collectivistic settings, individuals' thoughts and feelings acquire full meaning only in reference to the thoughts and feelings of others who are crucially important in the very definition of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, while making global self-judgments, those with a strong collectivist orientation attend to their inner subjective experiences as well as the relational and normative factors of a situation (Suh et al., 1998).

Aims/Objectives

The present study was exploratory in nature, with the primary aim of examining the associations of individualistic-collectivistic orientations with emotional intelligence, mental health, and satisfaction with life in two different cultures.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and seven participants ($mean_{age} = 30.16$, $SD = 11.90$; females = 74.9%) residing in Australia and 163 participants ($mean_{age} = 23.78$, $SD = 5.04$; females = 65.6%) residing in India contributed information to the study. Participants were recruited from a university located in a country town in New South Wales, Australia and from three universities in medium-sized cities in northern India.

Measures

Individualistic-Collectivistic Orientations. The 27-item Individualism-Collectivism Scale (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) was used to assess I/C cultural orientations. Previous studies showed the scale to have adequate to satisfactory internal reliability ranging from .67 to .74 for individualism and .68 to .74 for collectivism (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). This scale has been used in various Asian countries, with validity evidence suggesting that those high on individualism scored higher on competition and emotional distance from in-groups; while those high on collectivism scored higher on interdependence and sociability (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Cronbach's alphas for the present study were .74 for individualism and .81 for collectivism.

Emotional Intelligence. The 33-item Assessing Emotions Scale (AES; Schutte et al., 1998) was used to measure emotional intelligence. Previous studies found the internal reliability of the scale ranging from .86 to .93 (Schutte et al., 1998; Schutte, Malouff, & Bhullar, 2009). Validity has been demonstrated through scale scores correlating with

scores on measures of attention to feelings, clarity of feelings, and alexithymia. Also, scores on the AES significantly discriminated between therapists and both therapy clients and prisoners (Schutte et al., 1998). This scale has been used in an Indian setting (Thingujam & Ram, 2000). The scale yields an overall score and can also be broken down into three factors: *Perception*, *Managing Own Emotions*, and *Managing Others' Emotions* (Ciarrochi, Deane, & Anderson, 2002). Cronbach's alphas for the present study were .90, .82, .86, and .68 for the total score, perception, managing own emotions, and managing others' emotions, respectively.

Mental Health. The 21-item version of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (*DASS*; Lovibond & Lovibond, 2002) was used to assess mental health indicators of depression, anxiety, and stress. Each subscale consists of 7 items. Low scores on these scales reflect better mental health. The internal reliabilities for the *DASS*-21 subscales were .94, .87, and .91 for depression, anxiety, and stress respectively in prior research (Antony, Bieling, Cox, Enns, & Swinson, 1998). Antony et al. (1998) validated the scale with depressive patients scoring highest on the Depression and Stress subscales, while panic disorder patients scored highest on the Anxiety subscale. Further, a non-clinical population scored lower on all the three subscales than a clinical group. The *DASS* has been used in numerous collectivistic countries (Lovibond & Lovibond, 2002). Cronbach's alphas for depression, anxiety, and stress in the present study were .89, .83, and .84, respectively.

Satisfaction with Life. The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (*SWLS*; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a measure of a person's general satisfaction with life. In previous studies the internal reliability of the scale ranged from .83 to .87, with the scale scores shown to be lower for psychiatric patients, prisoners, students in poor or turbulent countries, and abused women (Pavot & Diener, 1993). This scale has been used in Indian settings (Biswas & Diener, 2001). Cronbach's alpha for the present study was .78.

Procedure

All the measures used were in English. Participants were recruited in both Australia and India² either through oral announcements at the start of university lectures or by postings on unit electronic websites asking for volunteers. Participants in the present study responded anonymously and returned completed questionnaires in self-addressed and postage paid envelopes. No incentive was provided for participation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and *t*-test values for all the major study variables based on the country of origin³. Pearson's bivariate correlations revealed that age was significantly associated with greater perception ($r = .10$) and emotional intelligence composite score ($r = .13$), and less individualism ($r = -.21$), depression ($r = -.24$), and anxiety ($r = -.22$) (all $ps < .05$). However, there were no significant relationship between age and collectivism, managing own emotions, managing others' emotions, stress, and satisfaction with life.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Major Study Variables

Variables	Australia (n = 207)		India (n = 163)		t(368)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Individualism	5.55	1.00	6.25	1.05	6.53***
Collectivism	6.43	.90	6.87	1.16	4.09***
Emotional Intelligence					
<i>Perception</i>	38.21	6.21	35.91	5.29	3.77***
<i>Managing Own Emotions</i>	34.25	6.33	34.68	5.28	.70
<i>Managing Others' Emotions</i>	31.15	4.31	30.41	4.49	1.61
<i>Total Score</i>	127.68	15.33	124.61	15.67	1.89
Depression	1.60	1.10	2.13	1.25	4.35***
Anxiety	1.26	1.05	2.21	1.06	8.64***
Stress	2.29	1.01	2.54	1.02	2.37*
Satisfaction with Life	3.29	.98	3.07	.79	2.26*

Note. Satisfaction with life is a square root of the reflected variable; whereas Depression, Anxiety and Stress are the square root of original skewed variables.

* $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

In addition, females reported significantly greater perception of emotions ($M=37.98$, $SD=5.66$), managing others' emotions ($M=31.37$, $SD=4.07$), and emotional intelligence composite score ($M=127.93$, $SD=14.98$) as compared with their male counterparts, ($M=35.28$, $SD=6.15$; $M=29.49$, $SD=4.89$; and $M=122.45$, $SD=16.24$, respectively); $t(368)=4.08$, $p<.001$, $t(368)=3.81$, $p<.001$, $t(368)=3.12$, $p<.01$, respectively. In contrast, males ($M=2.05$, $SD=1.17$) reported significantly higher levels of depression relative to females ($M=1.74$, $SD=1.20$); $t(368)=2.20$, $p<.05$. There were no significant gender differences in individualism, collectivism, managing own emotions, anxiety, stress, and satisfaction with life (all $ps > .05$). Given that both age and gender seemed to be associated with majority of the study variables, these were statistically controlled for in all subsequent analyses to minimize variance.

Main Analyses

To examine the associations of individualistic and collectivistic orientations with emotional intelligence and mental health and satisfaction with life, we conducted separate two-step hierarchical multiple regression analyses for the Australian and Indian samples, with overall emotional intelligence composite score and three subscales: perception, managing own emotions, and managing others' emotions, depression, anxiety, stress, and satisfaction with life as dependent variables. In Step 1, age and gender were entered and two predictors (individualistic orientation and collectivistic orientation) were entered in Step 2. The results of the analyses are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

Results indicated that in both Australian and Indian samples, after controlling for age and gender, only collectivistic orientation was significantly associated with higher emotional intelligence in terms of better perception and managing self and others' emotions. Individualistic tendencies were significantly related to greater levels of stress; however, cultural orientation did not significantly predict satisfaction with life, depression, and anxiety in the Australian sample. On the other hand, after controlling for age and gender, collectivistic orientation significantly predicted lower levels of

depression, anxiety, and stress, but no significant association was found between cultural orientation and satisfaction with life in the Indian sample.

Table 2
Summary of Regression Analyses Investigating the Relationship of I/C Orientations with Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health, and Satisfaction with Life in the Australian (n=207) Sample

Dependent variable	Predictors	R^2	β	r	sr^2
Emotional Intelligence	<i>Perception</i>	.07*			
	Individualism		.01	-.02	.00
	Collectivism		.19**	.19**	.04
	<i>Managing Own Emotions</i>	.08**			
	Individualism		.07	.07	.01
	Collectivism		.25***	.26***	.06
	<i>Managing Others' Emotions</i>	.12**			
	Individualism		-.02	-.03	.00
	Collectivism		.32***	.32***	.10
	<i>Total Score</i>	.12**			
	Individualism		.01	-.02	.00
	Collectivism		.31***	.31***	.09
Depression		.09			
	Individualism		.09	.13*	.01
	Collectivism		-.06	-.06	.00
Anxiety		.05			
	Individualism		.15*	.17*	.02
	Collectivism		-.07	-.06	.00
Stress		.08**			
	Individualism		.21**	.19**	.04
	Collectivism		-.09	-.08	.01
Satisfaction with Life		.02			
	Individualism		-.03	-.03	.00
	Collectivism		.11	.11	.01

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. β = standardized beta coefficients and sr^2 = squared semi-partial correlations (amount of unique variance in the DV accounted for by a predictor). Covariates (age and gender) are not reported in the table.

To determine whether culture, as operationalized by country of origin, moderates the relationship between individualistic-collectivistic orientations and emotional intelligence and three mental health indices, we conducted separate regression analyses for all the dependent variables in the study. For each analysis, age and gender were entered as covariates, individualistic orientation and collectivistic orientation and the moderator (country of origin: Australia vs. India) were entered as predictors in block 1, and the interactions of individualistic orientation and collectivistic orientation of individuals with the moderator (country of origin) were entered in block 2. Following the recommendations of Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken (2003), main effects for the continuous variables were centered at the mean prior to computing the interaction term.

Table 3
Summary of Regression Analyses Investigating the Relationship of I/C Orientations with Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health, and Satisfaction with Life in the Indian (n=163) Sample

Dependent variable	R^2	β	r	sr^2
Predictors				
Emotional Intelligence				
<i>Perception</i>	.17**			
Individualism		.10	.26**	.01
Collectivism		.30**	.38***	.07
<i>Managing Own Emotions</i>	.28***			
Individualism		.08	.31***	.01
Collectivism		.46***	.52***	.16
<i>Managing Others' Emotions</i>	.36***			
Individualism		.05	.31***	.00
Collectivism		.53***	.58***	.21
<i>Total Score</i>	.36***			
Individualism		.10	.35***	.01
Collectivism		.51***	.58***	.19
Depression	.16**			
Individualism		.05	-.15*	.00
Collectivism		-.39***	-.39	.11
Anxiety	.13**			
Individualism		.05	-.13*	.00
Collectivism		-.37***	-.35***	.10
Stress	.08*			
Individualism		.13	-.01	.01
Collectivism		-.26**	-.26*	.05
Satisfaction with Life	.07			
Individualism		-.21	-.13	.03
Collectivism		.14	.05	.01

Note. β = standardized beta coefficients and sr^2 = squared semi-partial correlations (amount of unique variance in the DV accounted for by a predictor). Covariates (age and gender) are not reported in the table.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Of all the outcome variables, a significant moderation effect for the country of origin was found only for depression and anxiety. Results showed that collectivism was significantly associated with lower levels of depression, $F(7, 362) = 10.22$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $B = -.37$, $SE = .12$, $p < .01$, and anxiety, $F(7, 362) = 16.08$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $B = -.28$, $SE = .11$, $p < .05$ for individuals residing in India, after controlling for age and gender. There was no significant moderation effect of the country of origin on the relationship between individualistic-collectivistic orientations and emotional intelligence and stress (all $ps > .05$).

Discussion

The present study examined the associations of I/C orientations with emotional intelligence, mental health, and satisfaction with life in two different cultures. Results suggested that those with a higher collectivist orientation were more likely to have better emotional functioning as operationalized by emotional intelligence. The present study

found that collectivists tended to have better perception of emotions in self and others, which in turn, might make them better skilled in managing emotions in both self and others. This finding is consistent with a previous finding (e.g., Kang et al., 2003) suggesting emotion differentiation may increase an individual's interpersonal adaptability in collectivistic cultures. These authors argued that behaving appropriately in interpersonal situations often requires understanding others' feelings – a hallmark of an emotionally intelligent person.

As predicted, higher levels of collectivism were associated with better mental health outcomes in that collectivists from a collectivistic culture were significantly more likely to report lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Consistent with previous research (Scott et al., 2004), the present study also found that individualists in Australia (an individualistic culture) reported poorer mental health indicators such as higher levels of stress, but the present study failed to replicate previous finding that individualists report higher levels of depressive symptoms. In our study, individualistic orientation was significantly associated with higher levels of stress, but cultural orientation was not a significant predictor of depression and anxiety in the Australian sample. There was no significant association between individualism and depression, and anxiety in an Indian sample.

I/C orientations were not significant predictors of satisfaction with life in either the Australian or Indian sample. Satisfaction with life refers to one's overall evaluation of life domains such as health, job, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships (Diener & Diener, 1995). Studies (e.g., Kang et al., 2003) have suggested that levels of satisfaction with life in different societies can be influenced by various factors including self-esteem and the quality of interpersonal relationships. It may be speculated that I/C tendencies do not predict satisfaction with life directly; however, they are likely to exert an influence on other factors such as self-esteem and relationship quality, in turn, impacting on global judgments about satisfaction with life.

The present study found no moderation effect of country of origin on the association between I/C orientations and emotional intelligence and stress. However, the results did indicate a significant relationship between collectivistic orientation and lower levels of depression and anxiety for those residing in India (a collectivistic culture). This finding implies that a fit or congruence between a personal characteristic such as collectivism and a cultural norm or expectation (e.g., Ramamoorthy & Flood, 2002; Rego & Cunha, 2009) may have an added advantage in terms of better mental health outcomes.

The present study suffers from some limitations. First, there are methodological concerns regarding cultural comparisons of attitude, trait, and value scales. Heine, Lehman and Peng (2002) argued that people from different cultures adopt different standards when evaluating themselves on subjective Likert scales. Comparing measures with subjective Likert response options may conceal the cultural differences that confound the comparisons with the reference-group effect. Heine and colleagues (2002) maintained that the use of subjective Likert scales is most valid for identifying differences within rather than between groups. They also pointed out that participants rely less on social comparison when responding to items measuring well-being suggesting comparability of measures across cultures. Another limitation of the present study is that it is correlational in nature and cannot, therefore, be used to infer causality of the observed relationships.

The finding that high collectivist orientation predicts significantly better psychological well-being in both cultures has some interesting possible practical implications. To be congruent with individual-collectivist tendencies, education and training programs focusing on enhancing emotional intelligence and mental health might emphasize community cohesiveness, social integration and cooperation. Future research might examine possible role of personality and other individual difference characteristics on the variables studied in the present research. For example, moderating effects of the Big Five personality dimensions (Realo, Allik, & Vadi, 1997) and social support (Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008) could be examined.

Author Note

This manuscript is part of a larger dataset from which several other papers with different foci than the present study have been prepared.

Footnotes

1. Conceptually, idiocentric and allocentric tendencies were assessed in the present study, however, for the sake of simplicity; they are referred to as individualistic and collectivistic orientations respectively.
 2. The participants recruited from India were university students just as their Australian counterparts. The language of instruction in Indian universities is English, so participants easily understood the English version of the measures.
 3. Group means for country of origin were compared to see whether there were any differences between the two different cultures. Notably, results indicated that individuals from India scored higher on both individualism and collectivism than that of their Australian counterparts. In a study on university students in western India, Sinha and Verma (1994) reported that students scored high on individualism, though they rated Indian society as collectivistic. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that an attribute is valued that is not prototypical of that particular society, thus Indians are more likely to value individualistic tendencies.
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