The Evolution of the Individualism-Collectivism Dimension

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1. Introduction

Culture is defined as “the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them (Lederach, 1995). Even this definition might elicit tremendous criticism from the scholars of different fields. The notion of culture is such an amorphous, abstract, and complicated concept that we try not to directly gauge it. However, with this fuzzy conceptualization, we constantly challenge ourselves by labeling, or mistakenly stereotyping, others in a certain way, while refusing to be placed in the frame that is assigned to our inner group. Whether we acknowledge or deny, it appears to be true that there are conceivable socio-cultural “patterns,” or collective phenomena, for a group of people. Typically, these patterns become more distinctive and revealing, when one pattern is compared with others.

Thirty five years ago, Hofstede (1980) attempted to measure and quantify the qualifications of cultures around the world. He analyzed a large survey database about values and related sentiments of people, who worked in the local branches of a large multinational corporation (IBM) in over 50 countries around the world. Initial analyses of the database at the level of individual respondents proved to be confusing. Once the course of the research was directed at a correlation between the mean scores of survey items at the country level, it brought out a model that represented a new paradigm in social science research. He came up with four dimensions of national cultures (masculinity-femininity, high-low uncertainty avoidance, long-short term orientation, and individualism and collectivism). In his later work, he added two more
dimensions (long-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint). A dimension is considered “an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other culture.”

Among many different dimensions, the present literature review will focus on the individualism–collectivism (IC) dimension which indexes "the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups," (Hofstede, 1980). In individualistic societies, the stress is put on personal achievements, individual rights, and independence from their in-group. Individuals give priority to their personal goals over the goals of their in-groups. Conversely, in collectivist societies, individuals are interdependent within their in-group such as family, tribe, and nation. They shape their behavior primarily on the basis of in-group norms and behave in a communal way.

The IC dimension has been the most widely used to distinguish the belief, values, and practices in different societies and is one of the most criticized topics. Furthermore, I have done some cross-linguistic or cross-cultural discourse analysis during my MA program and made some interesting observations. From the very beginning, I was aware of the danger of habitually resorting to the dichotomous divisions between the East and the West. However, some of the findings/discoursal evidence from my analysis indicate that there exist discernable cultural patterns, and some of the cultural variations partially touch upon the concept of IC. Thus, it would be beneficial to reevaluate my own work by making connections with existing theories and previous research. Focusing more on the role of culture and language use, I will briefly go over a few key studies and then closely review research that designs more genre-specific, data-driven studies working on a semiotic representation, such as the linguistic, discoursal, or multimodal manifestation of culture on both the micro level (grammatical feature) and macro level (structure and content).
2. Hofstede’s work and criticism

Like other new paradigms, Hofstede’s work initially met with approval, praise, rejection, and criticism. It has been especially, vigorously challenged, mainly because it organizes cultural differences into overarching patterns in a linear fashion.

One of the major criticisms is that each society may have a culture that holds both individualism and collectivism. When specific samples are drawn in individualist and collectivistic cultures, the respondents in the sample may not represent the predominant cultural I-C tendency (Triandis, 1995). For instance, when national in-group membership is threatened by other nations, the American society can show a more collectivistic tendency (Oyserman & Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Sinha and Tripathi (1994) also suggested that coexistence of IC is characteristic of the Indian psyche and culture. In India, in the domain of religion and ethics there is a strong emphasis on individualistic value such as the realization of self, through self-control and meditation, whereas collectivist values are important in the family setting.

Another problematic area is developing casual explanations for individual-level behavior by using dimensions of cultural variability. Kashima (1989) argued that since culture cannot be controlled in an experiment, it is impossible to test casual explanations of behavior based on cultural-level explanations. In the same vein with Kashima, but through more comprehensive meta-analysis, Oyserman and Lee (2008) claimed that cross-national differences do not stay the same but are in an ever changing state. This fluctuating cross-national difference is consistent with the fluctuation of individualism and collectivism, rather than a static systematic difference.

An overwhelming number of studies in cross-cultural psychology, including the studies aforementioned, have been done in the past twenty years, debating the traditional notion of IC
and trying to find the missing gap in Hofstede’s methodology and framework. The research is typically involved with statistics, the mean scale score on the IC questionnaire and survey, such as country level correlation analysis, country level factor analysis, individual correlation analysis, etc. That is, a majority of studies have treated it as psychological inquiry into the relationship between cultural values and a variety of social behavior patterns, but not many have looked at it from a linguistic perspective. It is necessary to go beyond the psyche and start looking at the language use that might have been taken for granted. I believe language plays a central role in culture and is one of the essential elements through which culture is embedded and passed on. Through language “we shape our own relation to a socially organized life world, one where the verbal calibration of diverse perceptions becomes part of the negotiation of ongoing social life” (Du Bois, 2011).

3. Linguistic (discoursal) representation and IC

The fundamental role of language in shaping culture can be found in small things like grammatical features. For instance, pronoun and modal expressions can be useful tools for examining cultural variations that are conceptually linked to collectivist or individualist orientation. Pronouns are known for the notion of inclusion and exclusion, while modal expressions are one of the linguistic devices that the writer could choose for the involvement or detachment of the reader, thus indicating the level of interpersonal aspect.

Twenge, Campbell, and Gentile (2012) examined changes in pronoun use in American books published 1960-2008. The results showed that the use of first person plural pronouns (we, us) decreased 10%, whereas first person singular pronouns (I, me) increased 42% and second person nouns (you and your) quadrupled. First person plural pronouns were linked to a collectivistic
cultural stance, whereas first person singular were linked to an individualistic cultural stance. Interestingly, second person nouns were also claimed as an indication of individualism, since they directly address the reader by separating the actor from other. They concluded that American culture had become more individualistic, promoting more individualist traits such as self-esteem, agency, and self-focus.

I think this study is valuable because most of the research in this area centers on the correlation between IC dimension and cross-cultural differences and often suggests a dichotomous conclusion, but it explores the correlation between IC dimension and cross-time differences within one culture. However, the database collected does not provide information about the authors, which could have become critical factors to determine the validity of pronoun use, such as single-authorship vs. co-authorship and their cultural heritage. More critically, the genres of the books (fiction versus nonfiction) are not identified. It is questionable whether the findings might be more focused on genre-specificity.

Another micro-level analysis on a particular grammatical feature was conducted by Strauss (2005). The study examined positive taste terms, typically adjectives and adjective clause, represented in TV food commercials from Japan, Korean, and the United States. The results showed that Korea and U.S. share similar linguistic patterns in which the food ads explicitly used more specific descriptors and displayed more direct, emphatic reaction to the tasting of the products. On the other hand, Japanese ads used generic taste terms and more implicit message for the qualities and tastes of the products by generating less emphatic reaction to the tasting. The study pinpointed that this pattern was inconsistent with the general dichotomous cultural framework (individualism vs. collectivism or indirect vs. indirect).
Although this study is not designed specifically to re-evaluate the IC dimension, I believe that it is meaningful work that reveals how significant the systematic analysis of contextually situated occurrences of discourse is in examining cultural variation. The unique situational context of mass media and advertisement seems to lead to a situated model of culture in each country. This study alludes that cross-national differences are not static, but rather dynamic depending on genre, its specific context, or the moment-to-moment salience of IC.

Kim and Thompson (2010) also investigated a specific grammar feature, the writer’s use of modal expressions of obligation, represented in Korean and English newspaper science popularization texts. The results showed that the writers of the two cultures had different views of their role in this genre, thus employing different strategies that were appropriate to their culture (Western culture: task-oriented and individualistic and Korean culture: relation-oriented and collectivistic). The English writers depended more on third-person scientific experts and specified the obligation-imposed explicitly by making explicit reference (you) to the reader. Increasing the perceived objectivity and accuracy of the information, English writers highlighted the imposition of obligation involvement, but dealt less with politeness. In contrast, the Korean writers imposed obligation in their persona, and represented the obligation implicitly by overtly downplaying interaction, but placing higher priority on maintaining polite relations with the reader.

I think this paper can contribute to the cross-cultural study in many ways. Much previous research of cross-cultural texts analyzes the writing conventions in academic genre. But academic genre may not be a reliable data source to trace the cultural nuance, since the technical writing conventions have been established in academia across the world. Thus, this genre, which is written to meet the expectation of the general public, is a better place to reflect any cultural
pattern arising. But in the data collection process, only “grammaticalized” (e.g. must) and
“lexical modal expressions” (e.g. be required to) are selected, and “metaphorical expressions”
are excluded. As a result, it is uncertain how the addition of metaphorical expression of
obligation to the data could reveal much of any communicative patterns that are used in a more
subtle way, in order to soften the imposition on the readers.

Some scholars like Wu and Rubin (2000) examined not only a specific feature, but also a
wide range of writing features: indirectness, personal disclosure (the use of personal singular
pronouns and personal anecdotes), use of proverbs and other canonical expressions, collective
self (the use of first personal plural pronouns and statements of humaneness and collective
virtues), and assertiveness. They evaluated the impact of IC on argumentative writings of
Taiwanese and American students. At cross-national comparison, it was found that the US
students gave more private self-responses (more direct/assertive and personal anecdotes), while
Taiwanese students gave significantly more collective self-responses (frequent use of proverbs
and emphasis on humanness and collective virtues). However, the cross-language comparison
within the same nation showed a mixed result that the Taiwanese students’ compositions in
English displayed writing features that are both conceptually linked to IC. Thus, they concluded
that certain writing features are a matter of socialized conventions.

This study is significant in the respect that they comprehensively analyze the texts by covering
various writing features associated with broader cultural factors. However, their final conclusion
with the cross-language comparison seems to be a “jump” in the logic of their argument. Based
on their findings, I become even more convinced of the correlation between the IC dimension
and language use, although the English proficiency of the subjects should be clarified to see
whether the students’ choice of writing features originate from their cultural background or
deficiency of language. In spite of their insufficient command of the foreign language, the fact that Taiwanese could still transfer major characteristics of collectivism and could resist the nature of individualism in their English writing indicates marked cultural patterns. Genres like this can be tricky to accurately discern what a culturally typical writing pattern is or not.

There are studies that focus more on macro level based analysis. Imada (2012) examined themes of stories and story characteristics in American and Japanese school textbooks (language arts and reading) to evaluate their cultural values and norms. The study found that American stories had higher ratings for the individual values, while Japanese stories had higher ratings for the collective values. Among the identified 50 values in the research, American stories emphasize ambition, a varied life, being influential, choosing goals, and enjoyment. Japanese stories underlie sympathy, friendship and affection, helpfulness, pleasure in making others happy, and a sense of belonging. The study recognized the overarching theme of the stories: American textbooks provide a model who is a strong, self-directed, goal-oriented, distinctive individual, whereas Japanese textbooks created a model who is a kind, considerate, an altruistic member of the group.

This study can add more insight into the field of cross-cultural studies because it detects the qualities and traits of IC in a more extensive and detailed manner. In particular, it is substantial that the study attempted to relate the other domains (perspective taking, success vs. failure outcome, causal attribution, visual attention, and emotion) in evaluating the cognitive tendencies of IC. Textbooks of first and secondary schools are believed to be an alive, thriving site for researchers to observe the role of education in cultural transmission. Stories in textbooks are full of critical features that carry cultural messages. However, as much as textbook stories could play an important role to cultivate culturally appropriate values and cognitive tendencies, it should be
noted that the status and influence of textbooks in each country can be drastically different. While Japanese textbooks are strictly approved by its governments and typically used across the county, American textbooks are not regulated or inspected by its government. The selection of teaching material is at an individual school’s or a teacher’s discretion. Furthermore, the year of the publications is not identified. It would be hard to see them as parallel data in this sense.

To keep the authenticity of data that represent cultural products around us, I include two more studies that focus on online social practice. When we talk about culture today, we cannot overlook online culture which has become a common means for social interaction and communication in our daily lives. The study of online culture will broaden the scope of cultural psychology by reestablishing or contesting the existing patterns, or discovering a new paradigm.

Chang (2011) explored Global 500 corporation’s website designs to determine whether they varied between the Chinese and English websites according to the Hofstede’s dimensional model. Cultural differences were indeed reflected in the website designs, but not exactly in the direction that the Hofstede’s model indicates. Some dimensions like Power Distance and Masculinity showed opposite patterns. The IC dimension displays a relatively consistent result with his model. The indicators for IC tendencies are usage of chat room, newsletter, family theme (pictures of family, teams of employees, emphasis on customers as family) and loyalty program (any effort made by the company to retain previous customer). Family theme and loyalty programs occurred significantly in the Chinese language websites, while the rest occurred in both websites.

This study indicated the inevitable impact of local culture on website designs including language choice, language use, and non-linguistic representation. Successful corporate websites
will be appropriately designed within the culture of each nature, but also accommodate the needs of the situated contexts (the sentiment of online community). For instance, the English website does not necessarily respond to a particular culture of a nation, namely America. The viewers, potential employees, and customers are unimaginably boundless. The online community might not necessarily resonate with the societal culture on which the online community is based.

Another contemporary online cultural product, social networking sites, was studied by Qiu, Lin, and Leung (2013). They explored cultural variations in Facebook (American) and Renren (Chinese) to investigate how bi-cultural individual adapt their behaviors to match the culturally shared practice on the two SNSs. The eight identified functions (uploading pictures, tagging pictures, commenting on other’s activities, sharing links, sharing other’s posts, posting notes, updating status and playing games) are coded as either sharing or non-sharing traits. The two platforms did not differ technically on system operation, but the same users perceived the Renren culture as more collectivistic such as sharing-oriented, conformity-oriented, hierarchical, and less egalitarian than the Facebook culture. Bicultural individuals were found to flexibly switch their behaviors between the different cultural frames by responding to crucial cultural signs.

Although SNSs is an excellent place that naturally records people’ social behaviors through multimodal semiotics, this paper seems to have some areas that can elicit alternative interpretation. First, “sharing links” which is coded as collectivistic tendency can be motivated by different reasons such as self-display, advertising, or in-group promotion. Secondly, the different behavioral patterns may not result from cross-cultural difference, but from the user’s different level of intimacy with their SNS friends. Depending on what types of friendship one has, the level of sharing can be intentionally controlled by the users. Thirdly, the concept of bi-cultural individuals can be vague to determine clear cultural patterns.
4. Conclusion and discussion

The reason that I reviewed the articles in a one by one fashion, rather than categorizing them into two groups by its stance-taking, is that it appears to be almost meaningless to take an extreme position on the IC dimension. So I looked into each study’s research design in terms of the significance and diversity of its data (American books, textbooks, argumentative writing, social network, corporation website, and advertisement), its research focus (macro vs. micro), identified indicators of IC (narrow/conventional vs. extensive/innovative), and its interpretation of the findings. None of the articles denied the role of culture, or the IC model, completely. Some of the studies indicated that it is also precarious to align with a straightforward claim like Hofstede’s cultural model. It has to be fuzzy and inconsistent. That’s exactly the nature of culture and human beings. Still, we are going to find less inconsistent phenomenon to satiate our fundamental motivation to find who I am and who you are. All the articles collectively serve to show that the concept of individualism and collectivism has been reshaped, reconstructed, and redefined as we have discovered more in different settings and contexts. The ever-fluid, ever-evolving nature of the concept of culture will continue to challenge the future scholars and push them to examine this topic from multidimensional angles. Each and every study, existing or upcoming, will always face major limitations and criticisms involving its external validity, since it would be impossible to generalize its findings across time, populations, and nations.

When scholars design their research, they should be candid and careful with the process of their data-analysis and interpretation. With a fresh eye, they should be alert for not gearing toward the pre-established cultural models; rather they should first analyze their data thoroughly within its situational contexts and then let any cultural patterns arise to the surface. Not the other way around. Hence, cross-cultural, cross-linguistic studies will become more meaningful.
References


