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The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential applications of the individualism-collectivism (I-C) construct to intercultural training. Drawing on experience in Taiwan, especially on the author's training experience in Taipei, this theory was found to be useful in several aspects of training, including training objectives, program design, and training methods. The influence of I-C on behavior affects several aspects of intercultural communication in organizations, including negotiations, conflict, competition, cooperation, motivation, and reward structures. Application of the I-C construct to intercultural training, when carefully executed, should result in greater understanding, development of expertise, and ultimately improved communication skills in trainees. Contains 18 references, 5 notes and a figure. (Author/RS)

Application of the Concepts of Individualism and Collectivism to Intercultural Training

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Application of the Concepts of Individualism and Collectivism to Intercultural Training

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential applications of the individualism-collectivism (I-C) construct to intercultural training. Drawing on experience in Taiwan, especially on the author's training experience in Taipei, this theory was found to be useful in several aspects of training, including training objectives, program design, and training methods. The influence of I-C on behavior affects several aspects of intercultural communication in organizations, including negotiations, conflict, competition, co-operation, motivation, and reward structures. Application of the I-C construct to intercultural training, when carefully executed, should result in greater understanding, development of expertise, and ultimately improved communication skills in trainees.

Application of the Concepts of Individualism and Collectivism to Intercultural Training

The second half of the 20th Century witnessed a transformation of transportation, communication systems, and business. One result of this transformation is that unprecedented numbers of people from different cultural backgrounds have begun working together. Unfortunately, misunderstandings arising from cultural differences have led to failed overseas sojourns, failed joint ventures, decreased business efficiency, and even war. The cost of a failed overseas assignment alone averages \$150,000, and most failures are a result of problems understanding a foreign culture (Hammer, 1998).

Intercultural training attempts to eliminate such misunderstandings and improve the situation by providing participants with knowledge, frameworks, and skills which improve intercultural communication. The individualism-collectivism (I-C) continuum has been identified as one of the primary dimensions which differentiate cultures and their members (Gelfand and Realo, 1999). Therefore, I-C should be useful in intercultural training. The purpose of the current study is to identify how I-C may be helpful in understanding the communication that takes place in intercultural business settings. The present research will determine whether the application of this part of communication theory is useful in intercultural training, and if so, in what ways they have proven most effective. The questions to be answered are (1) How have these two concepts been used in the past? (2) Do they shed light on the day-to-day concerns of businesspeople, or do they increase confusion? (3) To what aspects of communication are the concepts most often applied? (4) How may these concepts most effectively be taught?

Definitions of Concepts

Individualism

Individualism is the degree to which people have an independent definition of self. The self is separated and detached from groups. A person's inner attributes primarily make up his or her consciousness. Their personal and communal goals are not necessarily aligned. Social behavior in societies where individualism is dominant are guided by a focus on attitudes, personal needs, rights, and contracts. Interpersonal relationships are not considered inherently valuable, but rather are evaluated to determine the costs and benefits of maintaining the relationship. Predominant values include autonomy, competition, freedom, independence, and achievement. Assertiveness and confrontation are dominant behavioral norms (Triandis, 1995; Gelfand and Realo, 1999).

Collectivism

Collectivism is the degree to which people define the self as interdependent and as a member of particular groups rather than independent of others. Their personal and communal goals are closely aligned. Social behavior is guided by norms, obligations, and duties. Interpersonal relationships are of particular importance, and are maintained, even when they are disadvantageous to the individual (Triandis, 1995). Prevalent values in collectivist cultures are belonging, preserving public image, modesty, and conformity. Maintaining harmony and cooperation with others are important behavioral norms (Gelfand and Realo, 1999).

Each society exhibits some aspects of individualism as well as some aspects of collectivism. Therefore, any national culture (represented by X in Figure 1) can be placed

somewhere in the middle of the I-C continuum, with no culture at either of the far limits of the continuum. The I-C construct essentially identifies the relative importance of relationships. The further toward the collectivism side a particular culture is, the more relationships will be considered a primary concern.

Intercultural Training

Training is the transfer of skills for a specific purpose. Intercultural training is training intended to transfer skills to people who are, or will be, working with people from different cultural backgrounds than their own. Participants in intercultural training include businesspeople working in a country other than their country of origin, or those working closely with people from other cultures. Participants may also include the families of businesspeople who are living outside their home country as well as students studying abroad.

Intercultural training is designed to transfer skills that were developed through the complicated process of socialization through which people gain their culture (ways of thinking, perceiving, and communicating). Therefore, for intercultural training to be effective, it must also give its participants a body of knowledge which forms the basis for the new skills they will be learning. Intercultural training has been referred to as “the mind-set which informs the skill-set” (Bennett, 1996).

Research over the past 30 years indicates that intercultural training is useful for preparing people to work in another culture. Therefore, research focus has shifted from the question “Are intercultural training programs effective?” to attempt to answer the question “Which methods are most effective?” (Bhawuk, 1998). The use of theory as a method of training deserves exploration because of its potential to illuminate, explain, and predict.

Application of Theory to Training

Scholars in a variety of fields have speculated on the usefulness of theory in training and the transfer of knowledge. The value of theory in developing a skill, referred to as transfer-through-theory, was demonstrated by Hendrickson and Schroeder in a classic experiment (1941). Groups of participants practiced shooting at an underwater target until both groups were able to hit the target consistently. Next, one group received training in the theory of refraction of light while the other did not. When the depth of the water was changed, the group which received theory-based training did significantly better in hitting the target than the group which received no training.

More recent research supported the idea that knowledge acquisition and application are assisted by the understanding of principles and theories (Bhawuk & Triandis, 1996). Much of the research on the application of theory to training focused on expertise development. Research in cognitive psychology showed that experts solve physics problems using theories, such as Newton's second law of motion, whereas novices in physics worked backward, step-by-step, to compute the unknown. The backward reasoning method followed by novices is less efficient, more time-consuming, and results in more errors (Larkin, 1981).

The development of expertise involves three progressive stages. In the first stage, the cognitive stage, definitions of key concepts are memorized. The learner then recalls the concepts and applies them to a specific situation. For example, an individualist (such as an American manager) who is new to a collectivist culture (such as Taiwan) may face an interpersonal situation in which he or she must disagree with a local employee. In this case,

the manager will recall that Taiwanese prefer not to be too direct in certain situations and are often sensitive to “face.” Therefore, the manager would show sensitivity to the employee’s “face,” and find an indirect way to show disagreement. The knowledge of these differences in behavior is declarative, and the manager would rehearse his or her knowledge during the interaction, all the while remaining aware of the process of recalling theoretical knowledge and applying it to the situation (Bhawuk, 1998).

The second stage of expertise development is the associative stage, in which people convert declarative knowledge into a procedural representation. Learners no longer have to recall knowledge before they can apply it. Instead, they follow a procedure that leads to a successful result. In the example above, the American manager would successfully interact with the Taiwanese worker without having to recall the fact that he or she should not disagree or say no directly. In this stage, people learn the steps of a particular task and perform each step in the proper sequence (Bhawuk, 1998).

The third stage involves making the skill become more habitual and automatic, and is called the autonomous stage. People know the task well enough to perform it quickly without following every step. This stage is characterized by speed and accuracy. In the scenario above, the American manager in Taiwan would be able to communicate disagreement without making an error that would upset the employee. A Taiwanese person is likely to think of this person as being very like Taiwanese or extremely polite. People in this stage are able to fluently use knowledge and broad principles to solve problems automatically, without having to consciously think about this knowledge (Bhawuk, 1998).

In a recent study, Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) advocated the use of the individualism-collectivism constructs in several aspects of training, including training objectives, audience analysis, program design, and training methods. They stressed that well-prepared intercultural trainers should be knowledgeable of theory, and added that theory can help in the design of training by providing coherence and direction.

Effective Uses of Individualism and Collectivism in Intercultural Training

The effective uses of the culture theory of individualism and collectivism may be explored using a general-to-specific pattern. The experience of the present author as an intercultural trainer in Taipei, Taiwan will be utilized throughout this section.

Presents Different Perspectives

Participants in training start with very little specific knowledge of cultural differences.¹ The dual constructs of individualism and collectivism, when properly explained, allow trainees to see the underlying assumptions of their own culture, which were previously below their level of consciousness (Hall, 1976). The two constructs of individualism and collectivism also allow trainees to see another culture in juxtaposition to their own. In this way, trainees are presented with an alternative view of the world which is informed by, or given reference to, their view of the world. While an emphasis is placed on difference rather than similarity, a contrast can demonstrate the distance between the two cultures and provide impetus for further training and learning.

One example of the effectiveness of presenting I-C as a different perspective is in Newcomer Orientations, given at the Community Services Center in Taipei, Taiwan. At the

¹ Aside from information obtained from mass media, which includes stereotypes, misinformation, and selective information.

Center, individuals, couples, and families are provided with a one day training session in which practical information is first presented to address pressing questions. After the initial concerns are dealt with, a brief introduction to Chinese culture is given. In this introduction, the I-C construct is presented, along with examples of how it makes doing business in Taiwan different from the way it is done in a person's home country. In a typical session, the trainer presents the I-C construct as an overarching framework. He or she then relates specific ideas to the collectivism part of the framework in the following manner:

Here in Taiwan, group orientation means that generally the group is more important than individual. What other people think of someone is therefore more important than what they think of themselves individually. A person's "face" refers to their status or level of respect in other people's eyes. Therefore, the idea of face is very important in Taiwan. It is important to avoid doing something, such as pointing out a mistake, which will cause someone to lose face in the eyes of others, especially subordinates.

Newcomers to Taiwan, especially those who have not lived in other Asian countries, are often surprised by such information. Learning from the beginning that the Taiwanese see the world in a different way helps make foreigners in Taiwan aware of the existence of a perspective or worldview vastly different from their own.

Provides a Framework which Contextualizes Behavior

After the background of a different perspective has been laid, participants in intercultural training can proceed to use the concepts as a framework for understanding the behavior of other people. Trainers can present case studies or short scenarios to give participants practice in identifying the underlying cultural value that is the cause for observed

behavior. Breakthroughs of understanding often result, as trainees begin to make sense of confusing or unexplainable behavior by recognizing the underlying reasons for such behavior.

At the Community Services Center, intercultural training is offered to both Western and Taiwanese businesspeople in one day sessions.² During these sessions, participants provide specific examples of communication difficulties that have arisen in their work. The I-C framework is often used as a tool that helps to explain otherwise inscrutable behavior. One example is behavior in meetings. Western managers are surprised and sometimes disappointed to discover that their Taiwanese subordinates appear to be unwilling to express their opinions in meetings. Taiwanese managers are likewise unprepared for the relative candidness, forthrightness, and outspokenness of their Western subordinates. When the behavior of the Taiwanese is contextualized within a collectivist framework, otherwise baffling behavior seems more logical. Taiwanese people's sensitivity to the feelings of others--especially one's superiors--as well as the reluctance to express one's opinion in meetings becomes more understandable. By the same token, when the behavior of the Westerner in Taiwan is contextualized within an individualist framework, the desire to fulfill one's own needs, the idea of free speech, and the need to express one's opinions also becomes more understandable to the Taiwanese.

Proscribes Appropriate Behavior and Predicts Behavior of Others

Armed with the tools of a new understanding of the structure of a society and the underlying motivation of people within it, participants in intercultural training can use this

² The training of Taiwanese and Westerners is conducted separately because it is introductory. Many people are sensitive about people from other cultures' making observations about their culture. Since most culture is subconscious (Hall, 1976), people must be made aware of their own culture in introductory sessions. The term Westerner refers to people from a European heritage, including U.S. citizens, Canadians, Europeans, Australians,

knowledge to predict the behavior of others. Understanding of the I-C framework can be internalized, allowing people in the autonomous stage of expertise development to not only know how to act in a given situation, but also predict what others may do.

A Westerner with such an understanding doing business in Taiwan communicates indirectly with Taiwanese people in situations where a person's face is at stake. His or her understanding of the importance of harmony in a collectivist society allows him or her to avoid making mistakes that would jeopardize harmony. This person will also be able to predict the behavior of others. Taking initiative is an example of an issue that often arises for foreigners working with Taiwanese. Since stability is one of the foremost values in the collectivist culture, much importance is placed upon status and hierarchy. The result is a very paternalistic attitude, meaning that subordinate employees in an organization expect their superiors to tell them exactly what to do and make all the decisions for them. A Western manager in Taiwan who understands the culture does not expect his or her employees to take initiative in the same way that is common in the West. Being able to predict this behavior allows him or her to take this fact into account and act accordingly. The manager can either accept the fact that specific orders and directions must be given or the manager can explicitly instruct employees to take initiative in the way that is expected.

Assists Understanding of Related Concepts

Individualism and collectivism are related to, if not the cause of, a number of other concepts often researched and discussed in the field of intercultural communication. Several concepts related to the IC construct have previously been mentioned in this paper. These

and New Zealanders.

include face, harmony, stability, indirectness, status and hierarchy. Another set of concepts which is closely related to I-C is low context/high context communication. Hall (1976), the originator of these concepts, acknowledged the connection between low context communication and individualism on the one hand, and high context communication and collectivism on the other. People in collectivist societies not only attain their identity in terms of a group, but they also learn a relatively complex culture consisting of much shared meaning (Hall, 1979).

The Chinese term guanxi is an example of an idea that is best explained within the framework of collectivism. Guanxi has been defined as relationships, but its meaning is more complex. Guanxi refers to a network of relationships which Chinese people use and build throughout their lives. The amount and quality of guanxi determines how much face, or stature, a person has in the eyes of others. There is also a reciprocal effect, when someone does a favor for another person in expectation of having the favor returned at some point in the future.³ Non-Chinese people are able to understand the concept of guanxi more clearly by first understanding the nature of a collective society. As the concept of guanxi demonstrates, making connections between I-C and other concepts provides for a deeper and more detailed understanding of how individualism and collectivism affect culture in daily life.

Specific Areas of Applicability in Organizations

In a recent study of negotiation situations, individualists and collectivists behaved in accordance with their “socially prescribed self” (Gelfand and Realo, 1999, p. 732). In intergroup negotiations, accountability affected the behavior of individualists and collectivists

³ Often the distant future in Western terms.

differently. Accountability enhanced competitive processes and reduced outcomes among individualists. The opposite effect was observed in the behavior of collectivists, who used more co-operative processes and saw an increase in outcomes as a result of accountability in negotiations (Gelfand and Realo, 1999).

A study by Oetzel (1998) concluded that “cultural I-C” was an important factor. Oetzel examined communication in both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. He found that “cultural I-C” determined turn taking, conflict, and competitive tactics. European-Americans used more competitive tactics, took more turns, and initiated conflicts more often than Japanese in heterogeneous groups, and used competitive conflict tactics more often than Japanese in homogeneous groups.

I-C affects cooperation in organizations in several ways. Cultural values related to I-C have a direct effect on the level of cooperation, the mediation of cooperation mechanisms, and interactions between such cooperation mechanisms and culture. For individualists, cooperation mechanisms must appeal to individual rationality and individuality. Collectivists will respond to cooperation mechanisms that appeal to collective rationality and sociality. Focusing on the moderating effects of culture on cooperation mechanisms can reduce misunderstanding and increase learning and adaptation to other cultures (Chen, Chen, and Meindl, 1998). Mutual adaptation can also lead to cultural synergy in multicultural groups, which produces many benefits (Adler, 1991).

A manager on an international assignment who has a management style incompatible with his or her employees would be detrimental to the interests of the organization (Ramamoorthy and Carroll, 1998). In international business, human resources managers,

especially those establishing greenfield starts⁴, are often culturally-different from their employees. Such managers are also responsible for training newly-arrived expatriates. Therefore, intercultural training is essential for human resources managers. A study by Ramamoorthy and Carroll (1998) found that I-C dimensions have a definite impact on human resources management (HRM) practices. In the study, collectivistic employees were less likely to prefer (1) equitable reward allocation practices or (2) test-based or merit-based hiring and promotions than individualist employees.

Managers must understand differences in the way incentives affect motivation and creative performance in different cultures. Differences in values between individualistic and collectivistic cultures may determine the effectiveness of different reward structures on employees and creative performance. In a study using the U.S. as a representative of individualist cultures and Japan as a model collectivistic culture, Eisenberg (1999) found that managers in each country used different kinds of strategies to motivate their subordinates. He found that each culture had reward types and appraisal which carried different meaning, information, and motivational impact. Each of the above examples illustrates the need for organizations to be aware of the I-C nature of their employees, especially those working abroad. Intercultural training is a wise first step in developing such awareness.

Potential Misuse of Individualism and Collectivism

The application of individualism and collectivism to training must be done with care. According to Oetzel (1998), relying solely on I-C to explain communication behavior can be

⁴ Defined by Hofstede (1997) as a method of international expansion in which a “corporation sets up a foreign subsidiary from scratch,” sending a small team who hires locals and gradually builds the business. Although he claims that the cultural risk is low, observation of one such venture in Taiwan provided evidence to the contrary. In the observed case, the organizational culture was quite strong, and often at odds with local culture.

inaccurate and insufficient. The I-C construct may oversimplify and overgeneralize culture if it is not presented in a way that provides disclaimers for the fact that generalizations do not apply to every individual.

Renwick (2000), an experienced trainer, suggested that I-C theory should be used only if presented in a way that increases understanding. Generally, intercultural training does not introduce new terms to trainees, because this causes confusion rather than enlightenment. Therefore, for a trainer to successfully use I-C theory, he or she must present it using terms and examples trainees can easily understand. An example of how this rationale is incorporated into the training done at the Community Services Center is that although the I-C construct informs the trainers and training design, the word collectivism itself is not often used. Instead, group-orientation or “the importance of the group” are used.⁵

Another warning against the overuse of I-C was given by a Chinese scholar, Lu (1998), who claimed that much of the research on the I-C construct is culture-bound because it is a Western framework with Western-defined meanings (Lu, 1998). More work must be done to understand how Chinese and other non-Western peoples conceptualize and experience their worlds. The current understanding of such cultures, along with most of social science, is from a Eurocentric perspective.

Conclusions

With the ever-increasing numbers of people working internationally, intercultural training will continue to be an important part of modern business. The concepts of individualism and collectivism, if used carefully, can be effectively applied to intercultural

⁵ In Japan as well, collectivism has a connotation too close to Communism (Triandis, 1995).

training. Theory has been effectively applied to training for many years, and can be used to develop expertise in trainees. Theory can also be used to train intercultural knowledge and skills. Specifically, when used in intercultural training, the dual constructs of individualism and collectivism are effective in presenting different perspectives, providing a framework which contextualizes behavior, proscribing appropriate behavior, predicting the behavior of others, and assisting the understanding of related concepts. Several areas in which the use of I-C theory in training were outlined, including use in negotiations, conflict, co-operation, human resources management, motivation, and reward structures.

Warnings against misuse of the construct were mentioned. If not used carefully, I-C theory may lead to overgeneralization and confusion. However, such dangers do not outweigh the potential benefits of using the constructs correctly. This paper is based on impressions and observations in one culture. Future research should focus on evaluating training by investigating both trainers' and trainees' experiences. The present author is currently conducting research on trainees' satisfaction with training. Perhaps the I-C construct (its presence in training) is a variable in our understanding. Oetzel's work on self-construal is continuing and is linked to I-C. Overall, individualism and collectivism provide a theoretical framework that can be extremely useful for intercultural trainers and trainees, leading not only to increased efficiency but also to better understanding.

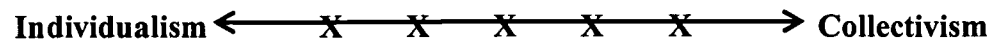


Figure 1. The individualism/collectivism continuum.

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