



Individuals in mind, mates by heart: Individualistic self-construal and collective value orientation as predictors of group creativity[☆]

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that groups with individualistic norms are more creative than groups with collectivistic norms (Goncalo & Staw, 2006). This conclusion, however, may be too unspecific, as individualism–collectivism denotes a multidimensional continuum and may affect people's self-construal and values. This study analyzed to what extent these dimensions differentially impact upon group creativity. After manipulating self-construal and value orientation, 58 triads engaged in a brainstorming task. Groups with collectivistic value orientation generated more ideas than groups with individualistic value orientation. Furthermore, there was an interaction between value orientation and self-construal on originality: ideas were more original when group members combined collectivistic value orientation with individualistic self-construal. Thus, groups should integrate elements of both individualism and collectivism to ensure high creativity.

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Introduction

Creativity – the generation of ideas that are both original and appropriate (see Amabile, 1996; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999) – is often the result of a fruitful collaboration among several people, as examples such as The Beatles, the discovery of the structure of the DNA by Watson and Crick, or the collaboration among the French impressionists suggest (see e.g., Farrell, 2003). Indeed, groups are often used to generate ideas, be it business solutions (e.g., West & Anderson, 1996), research hypotheses (e.g., Dunbar, 1995), or new designs (e.g., Sutton & Hargadon, 1996). For this reason, the study of which factors facilitate or hinder group creativity is important, and recent years have seen an increase in empirical studies examining creativity in groups.

One of the more important findings that emerged in this field is that high levels of group harmony and collaboration may not always be beneficial for creativity. For example, Beersma and De Dreu (2005) found that groups were more creative after completing a hostile negotiation than after completing a more cooperative negotiation. Nemeth and Ormiston (2007) reported that a change in group membership (replacing an “old” group member with a newcomer) reduced levels of

harmony and cohesion in groups, but increased their creativity. Goncalo and Kim (2010) discovered that group members primed with individualism and approving of reward systems based on equity (instead of equality) generated more and more novel ideas. Most notably is perhaps the finding reported by Goncalo and Staw (2006): They found that groups primed with individualism were more creative than those primed with collectivism. All these authors argue that harmony, cohesion, and collectivistic values may harm creativity because they lead to conformity. Competition, lack of comfort, and individualism are supposed to stimulate creativity because they lead to differentiation and unique (and thus more original) contributions.

While this line of reasoning is plausible, we suggest that it is too simplistic. Indeed, other evidence indicates that group members collaborating closely to achieve common goals are more creative than groups that do not (e.g., Bechtoldt, De Dreu, Nijstad, & Choi, 2010; Taggar, 2002). To solve this apparent contradiction in research outcomes, we focus on the individualism–collectivism (I–C) dimension that seems to be at the core of the underlying mechanism. We argue that I–C denotes a multidimensional continuum, comprising both a dimension of self-construal and values. We present evidence that it is the combination of individualistic self-construal and collectivistic values that is highly beneficial in terms of group creativity.

Individualism versus collectivism

Culture refers to “a pattern of shared basic assumptions” that for group members denote “the correct way to perceive, think, and feel” (Schein, 1992, p. 12). These assumptions are passed on to new group

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members because they have proven successful to adapt to external conditions and ensure group viability (Schein, 1992). As such, culture forms group members' identity, their values (standards for what is considered right and important) and norms (benchmarks for "correct" behavior). Conceptually, culture may be considered to reside both in groups and individuals. On the individual level, which we focus on, the three elements of culture – identity, values, and norms – "correspond to some of the primary building blocks of psychology" (Brewer & Chen, 2007, p. 139), namely self-construal, motivation, and cognition.

While different cultures may be conceptualized along a variety of content-related and structural dimensions (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006; Hofstede, 2001), the one that has received most scholarly attention is individualism–collectivism (Bond, 1994; Brewer & Chen, 2007; Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). On the collective level, including larger societal entities, I–C has been described as a stable characteristic differentiating between nations (Hofstede, 2001). Individuals, however, can more flexibly align their I–C depending on situational cues (e.g. Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Goncalo & Staw, 2006; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Singelis, 1994). Consequently, I–C on the individual level is less stable a characteristic than on the collective level.

In brief, I–C denotes to what extent people's ideas about themselves are affected by their interrelationships with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman et al., 2002). Individuals with collectivistic or interdependent self-construal refer to their group memberships and interrelationships with others to define themselves. Additionally, they feel that their "true self" varies depending on the social context. Vice versa, self-representations of people with individualistic or independent self-construal emphasize unique aspects of their personality and more strongly rely on features of their personal identity rather than their social identity (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

However, people's self-construal is but one component of I–C. Brewer and Chen (2007) suggested that in addition to self-construal, people's beliefs (cf. cognition) and values (cf. motivation) are part of their I–C. Beliefs denote people's convictions concerning agency, i.e. about "what makes things happen". Specifically, these cognitions address the question if independence or interdependence is necessary for success (e.g. "In the long run, the only person you can count on is yourself"; Brewer & Chen, 2007, p. 151). People's values in the realm of I–C represent people's locus of obligation: People with individualistic values predominantly pursue their personal preferences, whereas people with collectivistic values feel obliged to group welfare and conform to group norms (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2002).

In the current paper, we distinguish between individualistic versus collectivistic self-construal and values, and we treat them as individual-level constructs that can be primed by contextual parameters. We operationalize I–C self-construal as people's focus on either their personal (individualistic) or social (collectivistic) identity. Furthermore, we operationalize values as a motivational state susceptible to incentives, making people primarily pursue their self-interest or group interest.

Individualism–collectivism and group creativity

Goncalo and Staw (2006) argued that collectivism, with its emphasis on interdependence and conformity, stifles individuals' spark of originality. As generating original ideas implies to deviate and stand out from the group, it violates collectivistic norms at the core. Therefore, generating ideas that do not deviate greatly from the group's normative position might appear more socially desirable in collectivistic groups. Indeed, tolerance towards dissenting group members has been shown to be lower in collectivistic groups as compared to individualistic groups (Hornsey, Jetten, McAuliffe, & Hogg, 2006). Vice versa, in individualistic groups, which value autonomy and uniqueness, people should be less hesitant to differ from the majority. Accordingly, in the experiment of Goncalo and Staw (2006), individualistic groups, as compared to

collectivistic groups, generated more original ideas. Notably, to install individualistic or collectivistic norms within groups, Goncalo and Staw (2006) manipulated people's self-construal rather than their values (Brewer & Chen, 2007): before generating ideas, group members reflected on how they likened to others. In individualistic groups, people were focused on their dissimilarity, whereas in collectivistic groups, people considered their similarity to others. Given this, a more precise interpretation of Goncalo and Staw (2006) would be that individualistic self-construal fosters creative performance, which is in line with other findings (Wiekens & Stapel, 2008). But the results of Goncalo and Staw (2006) are mute as to the question about the relation between individualistic beliefs and values on the one hand and group creativity on the other.

Group members with individualistic values prioritize their self-interest to group interest and try to outperform others in the group, whereas group members with collectivistic values prioritize collective interest and seek cooperation. This distinction resembles the construct of social motivation, denoting people's preferences for the distribution of outcomes between themselves and others (De Dreu and Nijstad, 2008). People with pro-self motivation strive to maximize individual gains (cf. individualistic values), whereas people with pro-social motivation aim to increase joint outcomes (cf. collectivistic values). In a series of experiments, Bechtoldt et al. (2010) found increases in group creativity when group members were high in pro-social motivation rather than pro-self motivation, that is, when they had a collectivistic value orientation.¹ Additionally, pro-social motivation positively affected group climate: in comparison to pro-self groups, pro-social group members perceived more task-oriented controversy than personal criticism. Group climate was characterized by mutual acceptance and common goal orientation. Accordingly, group members were less hesitant to spontaneously express their ideas because neither did they fear personal derogation nor ridicule in pro-social rather than pro-self groups. Thus, fellow group members had a higher variety of ideas to pick up and elaborate upon, resulting in more fluency and originality in groups with collectivistic value orientation.

At first blush, these results appear inconsistent with those reported by Hornsey et al. (2006). In a scenario study, these authors analyzed to what extent participants approved or disapproved of a hypothetical group member expressing dissenting attitudes. Participants primed with collectivism were less tolerant in this regard than participants primed with individualism. However, Hornsey et al.'s (2006) manipulation of I–C addressed both participants' self-construal and value orientation.² Therefore, it is unclear which of these two components – self-construal or value orientation – decreased collectivistic participants' tolerance towards dissent. Also, the results exclusively derived from participants' evaluation of written information about another individual but not from interacting group members.

The current study

Taken together, the evidence presented by Goncalo and Staw (2006) and Bechtoldt et al. (2010) suggests that the I–C subcomponents of self-construal and values may have different effects on group creativity. In the current study, these dimensions were therefore independently manipulated, to assess their independent as well

¹ The necessary precondition of this effect was high epistemic motivation. Epistemic motivation denotes people's willingness to reach a thorough understanding of the world, including the task at hand (De Dreu et al., 2008b; also see Lundgren & Prislun, 1998; Lunn, Sinclair, Whitchurch, & Glenn, 2007). Group members with high epistemic motivation feel committed to their task and expend efforts to reach the best possible outcome.

² In the collectivistic condition, participants read that "being a member of the UQ student group is important in defining their sense of self" (Hornsey et al., 2006, p. 60), which targeted on participants' self-construal. Additionally, they read that "students also focus on achieving goals that will benefit the larger student group, in preference to their own personal goals" (p. 60), which targeted on their value orientation.

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