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Individualism/collectivism and teachers' perceptions of children in primary school

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The cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism is linked to the priorities that people from different cultures have: personal goals are stressed more in individualistic cultures, and the group goals more in collectivistic cultures. This paper reports a study in which we sought the connection between primary school teachers' orientation towards individualism/collectivism and their subsequent perceptions of 'different' children. We used questions deriving from the four categories model, of horizontal/vertical cultural individualism/collectivism and the descriptions of children. We were interested whether there is a connection between individualistic and collectivistic orientation in primary school teachers and their perception of children.

Collectivism – Individualism

Individuals tend to believe that the way they see the world is the same as way the majority see it. Because of this, they think that their psychological theories are universal (Triandis, 1996). The weights given to specific variables in predicting psychological phenomena are different in different cultures. Bond and Smith (1996, in Strung and Chang, 1999) found that the level of conformity was greater in groups that are considered to be more collectivistic (interdependent) than individualistic (independent). Personal goals are stressed more in the individualistic culture and group goals more in the collectivistic one. The western culture is considered to be more individualistic, autonomy being one of the leading values, whereas eastern cultures are regarded as more collectivistic, emphasizing family values, interdependency and collective work (Triandis, 1989).

Triandis (1994) defined four categories that describe individualism and collectivism:

- *self-concept*: independent (individualism) or interdependent (collectivism)
- *priority of goals*: personal over group priorities (individualism), or collective goals over individual (collectivism)
- *relationships*: individualistic persons consider the advantages and disadvantages of associating with others (individualism) or the connections to the members of the collectivity are emphasised (collectivism)
- *values*: the importance of personal attitudes and desires (individualism) or of the norms and duties of their collectives (collectivism)

Hofstede (1980, in Strunk and Chang, 1999) understood individualism and collectivism as a unidimensional phenomenon: individuals are viewed as being either individualistic or collectivistic. Some others argue that individuals can react differently in different situations. Even dominantly individualistic individuals can have a relatively flexible repertoire, including more collectivistic actions as well.

Triandis (1995, in Strunk) as independent and reflects the belief that everyone is equal – *horizontal individualism*.

A second dimension focuses on the self as independent, but people are considered different – *vertical individualism*.

A third dimension focuses on a different model proposed by Chang (1999): he distinguished four relatively distinct facets: One focuses on the self as interdependent and reflects the belief that everyone is equal – *horizontal collectivism*.

A fourth dimension focuses on the self as interdependent but people are seen as different – *vertical collectivism*.

As an illustration, there are these different dimensions.

Horizontal individualism: ‘One should live one’s life independently of others.’

Horizontal collectivism: ‘If a co-worker gets a prize, I would feel proud.’

Vertical individualism: ‘It is important to me that I do my job better than others.’

Vertical collectivism: ‘I would do what would please my family, even if I detested that activity.’

Even though the phenomenon of individualism and collectivism can be observed in the level of culture as a whole, different orientations towards individualism or collectivism can be measured also within one culture – as a personal characteristic.

Teachers’ perception of ‘different’ children

Robertson (1989) argues that most teachers have middle class values. These values affect their assessment of events and decisions to act (Musek, 1993). Children who do not behave in accordance with the teacher’s standards risk being seen by the teacher as inferior, regardless of their abilities. Teacher’s expectations can act as self-fulfilling prophecies (Papalia, 1990): students live up to (or down to) the expectations that others have of them.

Objective

The purposes of our study was:

- to examine the possible connections between primary school teachers’ individualistic/collectivistic orientation and their perception of ‘different’ children in their classrooms
- the ratings of teachers’ individualism/collectivism for themselves and for the society in general.

Our study was a part of a joint project ‘Partnerstvo – Partnership’ at the Faculty of Education, University of Primorska, in which faculty representatives (teachers, assistants), school representatives (teachers, management) and students collaborated in conducting research of common interest.

Our participants were 49 primary school teachers and 52 children, who had been chosen by these teachers as ‘different’.

Measures

Collectivism and individualism

The Individualism-Collectivism Scale (deriving from Triandis I-CS) is a 24-item measure of horizontal collectivism 'HC', vertical collectivism 'VC', horizontal individualism 'HI' and vertical individualism 'VI'. Six items are used to measure each dimension, each of them rated across a 5-point scale. One rating was made for the individuals themselves, and a second rating was done for their view of society in general.

'Different' children

Descriptions of children – four categories were devised:

- positive characteristics: clever, bright, curious, anxious to learn, good self esteem
- negative characteristics: aggressive, impatient, underestimate schoolmates, impolite, quarrelsome
- body characteristic (handicaps, disabilities and illnesses, allergies, diabetes, etc)
- neutral characteristics

Results and Interpretation

'Different' Children

Table 1: Categories of children, chosen as 'different' by 49 teachers

	Boys	Girls	Unknown
Positive characteristics	1	3	1
Negative characteristics	21	6	8
Body (handicaps, illness)	2	3	2
Neutral characteristics	3	0	2
Total	27	12	13

*Levels of Collectivism and Individualism in Teachers***Table 2: Levels of collectivism and individualism in teachers**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Devn	Std. Error Mean
horizontal individualism in an individual	49	14	29	22.12	2.98	0.43
horizontal collectivism in an individual	49	15	28	20.69	3.30	0.47
vertical individualism in an individual	49	8	25	16.80	3.80	0.54
vertical collectivism in an individual	49	13	28	21.43	3.16	0.45
horizontal individualism in the society	49	11	26	19.63	2.78	0.40
horizontal collectivism in the society	49	6	22	17.55	2.75	0.39
vertical individualism in the society	49	11	29	22.14	3.65	0.52
vertical collectivism in the society	49	7	24	17.49	3.14	0.45

Table 3: T-test of levels of collectivism and individualism in teachers and in society

	Mean	Std. Devn	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig
Pair 1 horizontal individualism in individual/society	2.49	4.20	0.60	4,151	48	0.000
Pair 2 horizontal collectivism in individual/society	3.14	3.52	0.50	6,243	48	0.000
Pair 3 vertical individualism in individual/society	-5.35	3.72	0.53	-10,055	48	0.000
Pair 4 vertical collectivism in individual/society	3.94	4.61	0.66	5,979	48	0.000

There were statistically significant differences between teachers' perception, in all levels of individualism and collectivism, for themselves and for society in general. Teachers estimated higher levels of horizontal individualism, horizontal collectivism and vertical collectivism for themselves. However, there was a much higher estimate of vertical individualism for society. This can be explained by the vertical individualism describing the competitive attitude, and this might be seen as least favourable to display as a primary school teacher.

Connections between the Levels of Collectivism and Individualism and the Categories of 'Different' Children in Teachers

Table 4: Levels of Collectivism and Individualism in different categories of 'different' children

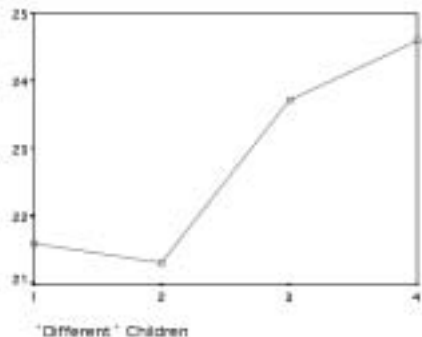
Chosen by		N	Mean	Std. Devn	Std. Error	Mini	Maxi
horizontal individualism in an individual	positive characteristics	5	21.60	4.393	1.965	18	29
	negative characteristics	35	21.31	2.587	0.437	17	27
	body (handicaps. illness)	7	23.71	1.799	0.680	20	25
	neutral characteristics	5	24.60	.548	0.245	24	25
	Total	52	21.98	2.790	0.387	17	29
horizontal collectivism in an individual	positive characteristics	5	23.80	3.114	1.393	20	27
	negative characteristics	35	20.86	3.318	0.561	15	27
	body (handicaps. illness)	7	21.43	2.149	0.812	20	25
	neutral characteristics	5	21.60	3.130	1.400	19	25
	Total	52	21.29	3.189	0.442	15	27
vertical individualism in an individual	positive characteristics	5	16.20	3.493	1.562	13	22
	negative characteristics	35	18.11	3.297	0.557	13	25
	body (handicaps. illness)	7	15.43	2.299	0.869	13	20
	neutral characteristics	5	14.60	5.367	2.400	8	23
	Total	52	17.23	3.584	0.497	8	25
vertical collectivism in an individual	positive characteristics	5	20.60	4.506	2.015	13	24
	negative characteristics	35	21.66	2.711	0.458	13	28
	body (handicaps. illness)	7	21.57	4.577	1.730	13	26
	neutral characteristics	5	23.40	3.715	1.661	18	26
	Total	52	21.71	3.232	0.448	13	28
horizontal individualism in the society	positive characteristics	5	19.80	4.087	1.828	13	23
	negative characteristics	35	19.54	2.174	0.367	16	23
	body (handicaps. illness)	7	18.71	4.271	1.614	11	24
	neutral characteristics	5	19.60	2.302	1.030	17	23
	Total	52	19.46	2.668	0.370	11	24
horizontal collectivism in the society	positive characteristics	5	18.80	3.114	1.393	15	22
	negative characteristics	35	17.83	2.358	0.398	12	22
	body (handicaps. illness)	7	16.43	1.813	0.685	14	20
	neutral characteristics	5	18.40	2.191	0.980	16	22
	Total	52	17.79	2.371	0.329	12	22
vertical individualism in the society	positive characteristics	5	23.40	3.847	1.720	20	28
	negative characteristics	35	22.43	2.973	0.503	19	27
	body (handicaps. illness)	7	24.00	3.742	1.414	19	28
	neutral characteristics	5	20.60	6.731	3.010	11	28
	Total	52	22.56	3.605	0.500	11	28
vertical collectivism in the society	positive characteristics	5	19.40	2.510	1.122	17	23
	negative characteristics	35	18.03	2.662	0.450	14	24
	body (handicaps. illness)	7	16.29	3.729	1.409	12	21
	neutral characteristics	5	16.80	3.633	1.625	12	22
	Total	52	17.81	2.931	0.406	12	24

Table 5: ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
horizontal individualism in an individual	Between	71.609	3	23.870	3.521	0.022
	Within	325.371	48	6.779		
	Total	396.981	51			
horizontal collectivism in an individual	Between	38.673	3	12.891	1.289	0.289
	Within	480.000	48	10.000		
	Total	518.673	51			
vertical individualism in an individual	Between	89.974	3	29.991	2.547	0.067
	Within	565.257	48	11.776		
	Total	655.231	51			
vertical collectivism in an individual	Between	20.673	3	6.891	.646	0.589
	Within	512.000	48	10.667		
	Total	532.673	51			
horizontal individualism in the society	Between	4.809	3	1.603	.215	0.886
	Within	358.114	48	7.461		
	Total	362.923	51			
horizontal collectivism in the society	Between	19.987	3	6.662	1.199	0.320
	Within	266.686	48	5.556		
	Total	286.673	51			
vertical individualism in the society	Between	37.855	3	12.618	.969	0.415
	Within	624.971	48	13.020		
	Total	662.827	51			
vertical collectivism in the society	Between	35.677	3	11.892	1.419	0.249
	Within	402.400	48	8.383		
	Total	438.077	51			

The results show statistically significant differences between the four categories of 'different' children, and the levels of horizontal individualism at the individual level. There was a statistical significance tendency in the level of vertical individualism at the individual level. These two measures are presented in the two following diagrams pictures.

Diagram 1: Levels of horizontal individualism in the categories of chosen 'different' children

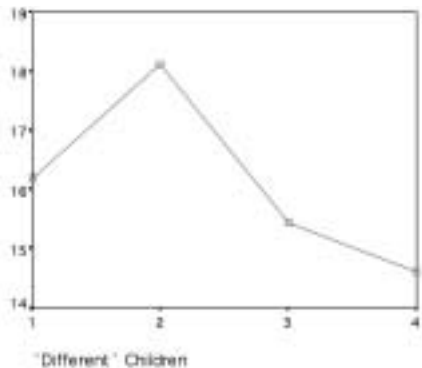


Legend:

- HI... horizontal individualism in an individual
- 1... chosen by positive characteristics
- 2... chosen by negative characteristics
- 3... chosen by body (handicaps. illness)
- 4... chosen by neutral characteristics

The highest level of horizontal individualism was established for the category of children, firstly chosen by their neutral characteristics, followed by children with body handicaps or illnesses; less horizontal individualism was present for the other two categories of children.

Diagram 2: Levels of vertical individualism in the categories of chosen 'different' children



Legend:

- VI... vertical individualism in an individual
- 1... chosen by positive characteristics
- 2... chosen by negative characteristics
- 3... chosen by body (handicaps. illness)
- 4... chosen by neutral characteristics

Teachers with higher levels of vertical individualism more often described as different those children with negative characteristics; in the other three categories the level of vertical individualism was lower. Vertical individualism, stressing the importance of competitiveness, could be linked to the focus on the more negative characteristics of children or on disturbed children.

Table 6: Correlations – ‘different’ children: characteristics and the levels of collectivism and individualism

		horizontal individualism in an individual	horizontal collectivism in an individual	vertical individualism in an individual	vertical collectivism in an individual	horizontal individualism in the society	horizontal collectivism in the society	vertical individualism in the society	vertical collectivism in the society
POS	Corr	-0.045	0.0259	-0.095	-0.113	0.042	0.141	0.077	0.179
	Sig	0.752	0.063	0.504	0.424	0.769	0.320	0.588	0.204
NEG	Corr	-0.346	-0.196	0.357	-0.024	0.044	0.025	-0.052	0.109
	Sig	0.012	0.164	0.009	0.864	0.756	0.863	0.715	0.441
BODY	Corr	0.247	0.017	-0.200	-0.017	-0.112	-0.228	0.159	-0.207
	Sig	0.077	0.902	0.155	0.903	0.431	0.103	0.259	0.141
NEUTR	Corr	0.309	0.032	-0.242	0.172	0.017	0.085	-0.179	-0.113
	Sig	0.026	0.821	0.084	0.223	0.904	0.549	0.205	0.424

* Correlation is significant at the 00.05 level (2-tailed)0.

** Correlation is significant at the 00.01 level (2-tailed)0.

There were no statistically significant links between the individualism/collectivism dimension and the category of children chosen for their positive characteristics. The only connection was shown with horizontal collectivism. This might be explained by the collective orientation of the teacher, being attentive for the group (classroom) needs, acting in this way and also being attentive to the positive aspects on classroom life – and doing this on ‘positive’ children.

There were the statistically significant links between horizontal and vertical individualism and the selection of different children by negative characteristics – individualism seemingly playing an important role. This could be explained by the fundamental attribution error (i.e. the tendency to explain other people’s behaviour with their dispositional characteristics) in teacher’s attributions, which is more common in individualistic cultures (Strunk and Chang, 1999).

There was no statistically significant correlation between individualism and collectivism and the category of children chosen because of illness or handicap, except possibly with horizontal individualism.

There was a statistically significant correlation between horizontal individualism and the selection of different children by neutral characteristics.

Conclusions

- *More than half the ‘different’ children were chosen for their negative characteristics*

- *There were twice as many boys as girls chosen as 'different'*
- *Higher level of individualism was connected to the orientation towards negative or neutral characteristics of children and also there was a tendency to connect this with bodily characteristics of children*
- *In higher level of collectivism there was a tendency towards choosing children by their positive characteristics*

Our results confirmed the link between teachers' individualistic or collectivistic orientation and their perception of children. Since individualism was more connected to the focus on negative characteristics and collectivism with the positive characteristics, collectivistic values should be encouraged. There is also research evidence that teachers who are group oriented tend to have more success in managing interpersonal relationships in the classroom (Pergar, 1994).

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