TUTORIAL 4.7

The Concept of Self

This tutorial focuses on one of the foundational concepts of any culture, the concept of self. The way people think about 'who they are' varies greatly between cultures. So we will take a look at the two 'poles' of this concept, individualism and collectivism.

Introduction

Culture is a complex concept, with many dimensions and facets, but one of the most important building blocks of any culture is the 'concept of the self'. One of the most significant ways in which cultures differ is in how they view this concept. Later we will look at some other foundational cultural concepts - societal obligations, the concept of time, and who is in control. These are all significant concepts in shaping many cultural differences.

Not everything that people do can be explained by these fundamental concepts, but they are often the source of the beliefs or values that are behind a wide range of thought and behaviour. If you come to understand the way people of another culture view these fundamental areas, it will help you to understand why people think and behave the way they do. And if you discover more about how these concepts are viewed in your own cultural community, it might give you more insight into why *you* think and behave the way you do.

The concept of self is how a person feels that they fit into their society or community. At one end of the scale, a person thinks of themselves as an individual - everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. This is called an *individualistic* view, and cultures that are generally this way are called individualistic cultures. At the other end of the scale, a person views themselves as an integral part of a group - family, community, society - and so they have multiple obligations and close connections with others. This is called a *collectivist* view, and cultures that are generally this way are called collectivist cultures.

We will describe both of these views and give some examples of each to illustrate them.

The concept of self in practice

It is a common experience for people living in a cross-cultural situation to come up against things that they feel are "just not fair" or "just not right". Sometimes that is true - there *are* going to be things that are wrong in every culture - but sometimes our reactions can stem from not understanding the fundamental values of another culture. Once we come to understand them, we may even agree with those underlying values, such as 'the importance of family', for example. But because these values motivate different behaviors in another culture, we probably won't easily recognize them for what they are. In fact it can be almost impossible for us to see some things from the other person's point of view unless we dig deeper and try to understand the underlying values involved.

The concept of self is one of these deep concepts that motivate behavior - so we have to try to understand how another culture differs from our own in this area if we want to understand people's behavior. We will take a look at an example to try to illustrate how the concept of self can play out in a real situation.

Imagine that your local community group has decided to make a community garden area. For six weeks, you and the three other people working with you have been working on fencing, a garden shed, and some large garden beds. On your team, Mia had the most free time, so she did 40% of the work. You and Kieran each did 25% of the work and Ethan did 10% of the work. Now the work is finished. A local business that had donated materials has also benefited from advertising using the garden project. So this business has decided to give the four of you a cash payment of $20,000 for your work. How do you think this money should be distributed?

How did you make your decision - what was it based on?

Because of my cultural background, which is *individualistic*, I would divide the money according to how much each person worked. So if I was dividing the money, Mia would get $8000, you and Kieran would each get $5000, and Ethan would get $2000. This would definitely seem to me to be the 'right' and the 'fair' thing to do.

In a *collectivist* culture, the money in this situation would often be divided equally - each person on the team would get $5000.

People in collectivist cultures will prioritize the good of the group over any individual's good, even if it is their own. This is because they believe that the best way to guarantee personal survival or security is to make sure that the group thrives and prospers. If the individual prospers and the group does not, then ultimately that does not work out well for the individual anyway.

If I came from a collectivist cultural background, it would be more important and comforting to me if everyone in my group could benefit as much as possible from the cash offered for the garden work. So each person would get $5000. No matter how much or how little each person was able to work, the whole group would benefit equally from the exercise of building the garden. If Ethan, who was only able to do 10% of the work, only got $2000, I would worry about his financial well-being. And if he suffered from financial need, then he might not be able to help in the future and we would all suffer.

Individualism and collectivism

The example of the community garden illustrates how different concepts of self can influence real life situations. Now we will look at more theoretical descriptions of the two poles of the concept of self - individualism and collectivism. Remember that no culture is exclusively individualist or collective - and there are distinct individuals within each type of culture. But most cultures and people tend to be *more* one than the other.

Individualist:
The individual identifies primarily with self. They would seek to satisfy their own needs before those of the group. The well-being of the group is only guaranteed by each individual looking after and taking care of themselves and being self-sufficient. Independence and self-reliance are greatly stressed and valued. People only have loose connections with others. In general, people tend to distance themselves psychologically and emotionally from each other. A person might *choose* to join groups, but group membership is not essential to a person's identity or success. Individualist characteristics are often more closely associated with men and with people in urban settings.

Collectivist:
The individual identifies primarily as a part of a group. A person's identity is in their membership and role in a group, such as their family or work team. The survival and success of the group guarantees the well-being of the individual. You protect yourself by considering the needs and feelings of others. Harmony and the interdependence of group members are stressed and valued. Group members are relatively close psychologically and emotionally, but distant toward non-group members. Collectivist characteristics are often associated with women and people in rural settings.

Influences on everyday life

The way that people view their identity has a broad impact on the way people of that culture function on a day to day level. Below are some examples of behaviours from an individualistic, and then from a collectivist culture.

These behaviours would point toward a culture being more individualistic:

- People give parties for a wide circle of friends. A party means, generally, superficial contact with a lot of people. Collectivists would tend to associate more intensely with a few people.
- Many kinds of individual awards are given, e.g, school awards and sporting awards, etc. This kind of award singles out an individual above everyone else.
- People are promoted based on production, results, sales figures. Rewards are based on what you do, rather than on who you are (which is more collectivist).
- Contracts are used in business. Because in an individualist culture people are after personal rather than group benefit, contracts keep people honest. In a collectivist culture people will be honest based on mutual accountability (if they are not honest, the group will punish them).
- People feel a need for autonomy. Individuals need their independence and react negatively to being controlled too much by others.
- People change jobs frequently. Their loyalty is to themselves rather than to an organization.
- People believe that directness and even conflict is often a good thing because it 'clears the air'. Collectivists avoid conflict because it could damage group harmony.
- Short-term relationships are common. Long-term relationships tie the individual down; also individualists move a lot, are less loyal to a place or other people.
- It's okay to stand out or to be different to other people. Collectivists prefer self-effacement and harmony with others.
- It's common for parents to ask their children what they want to wear or what they want to eat or what they want to do. Fostering independence and taking responsibility for self is encouraged from a young age.
- Self-help books are popular (instead of "helping others" books). The individual is responsible to look after themselves.
- People would often ask 'what can I bring' to a dinner invitation. In a collectivist culture, the host would provide for everyone, and then expect to be provided for in turn later on.

These behaviours in a culture would point toward it being more collectivist:
- People answer the phone by giving the name of the organisation. Giving *your* name would be more individualist.
- Intergroup rivalry and competition is strong. Within a group, collectivists stick together; so therefore they can be very competitive with other groups.
- People adhere to tradition. Because the older, more senior people are listened to, the more traditional ideas are often promoted.

- There is a need for affiliation. People are defined by what they belong to, and who their group is, not by individual characteristics or achievements.
- Face saving is important. Saving face - not embarrassing or humiliating someone - maintains harmony, which is the glue that keeps the group together
- Decisions are made by consensus. There must be agreement so no one feels left out (as opposed to 'majority rules', which leaves the minority out).
- The language has very specific words for relationships between people, for example, one word for mother's brother, another for father's brother. The need to be more specific about relationships is more important to collectivists.
- Marriages are arranged or agreed upon by family members rather than just the man and woman involved. These arrangements keep the group, and family, happy (which in turn keeps the individual happy).

Individualist and collectivist cultures

It isn't a good idea to generalize about the culture of specific countries, because there may be many different cultures represented in any one country - as is the case in Australia. However, in the diagram below, countries are placed on the scale of individualism and collectivism according to their general culture. The more individualistic cultures are higher on the diagram.
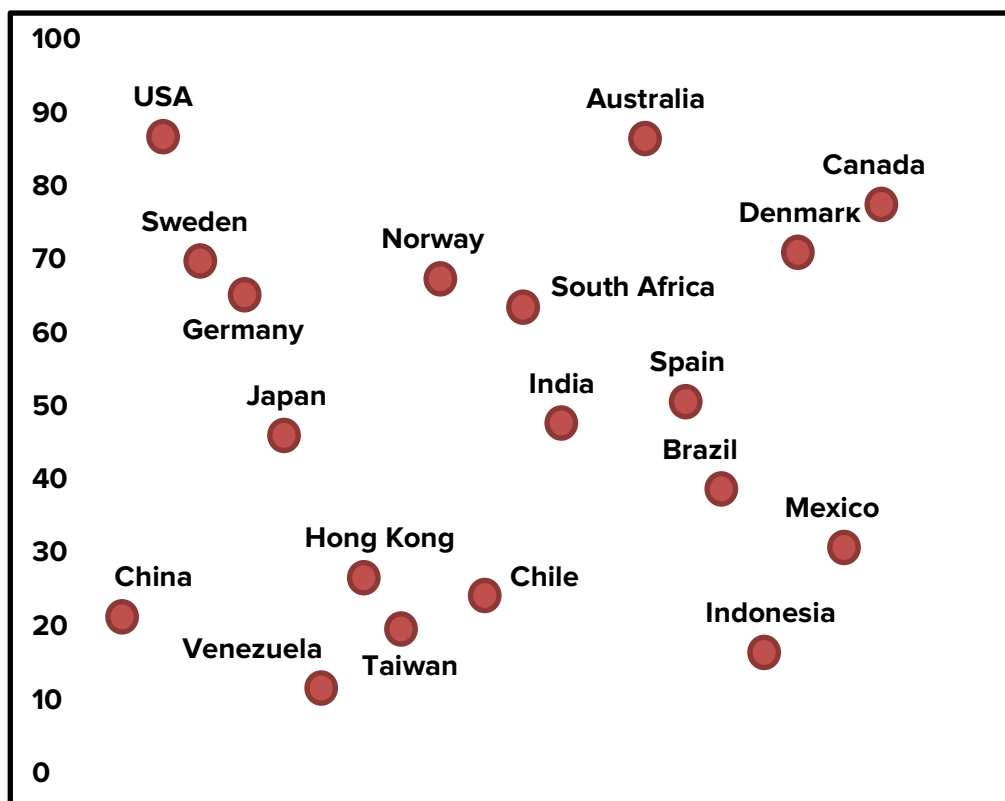
❓ DISCUSSION POINTS
The Concept of Self

1. Have you thought much before about the way you view the concept of self and where that concept comes from?
2. What are some of the major factors that you think might have contributed to your personal concept of identity - of who you are and how you fit in with the community around you?
3. Do you think that the effect that God's Word has on someone's identity - on their concept of self - can be considered a 'cultural' influence or is it something apart from culture?

➡ ACTIVITIES
The Concept of Self

1. Look at each of the following statements and decide first if you agree with the statement, then if it would be more likely to be said by someone from an individualist culture or a collectivist culture:
    o Being straight with people is always best in the end.
    o It takes a long time to make a new friend.
    o If my brother or sister did wrong, I would defend them to other people.
    o Confrontation almost always causes more problems than it solves.
    o Managers should be hired on the basis of the skills they have and previous experience in similar jobs.
    o I am embarrassed by individual recognition.
    o In the end, you can always rely on other people.
    o I expect people to judge me by my achievements.
    o If I took a job with a new company, I would be afraid that my employer might lose face.