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SUMMARY

Individualism and collectivism (IC) are considered the key cultural dimensions that distinguish between many cultural spheres. Individualism entails that the self is socialized to be construed as separate and distinct from others (independent self-construal). In contrast, collectivism entails that the self is socialized to be construed as overlapping in identity with others, especially with one's ingroup (interdependent self-construal). Self-construal theory suggests that these differences in self-construal are fundamental, leading to wide-ranging implications for the way one perceives and thinks about oneself, others, the way one responds in a social situations, and how one prioritizes goals and appraises values (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010; Oyserman & Lee, 2008; Oyserman et al., 1993; Singelis, 1994; Triandis, 1995a; Triandis et al., 1988).

The aim of this dissertation is to gain insights into whether and how these variations in IC (via independent and interdependent self-construal) might have an impact on the processes requiring making sense of the self and others. We used three approaches to operationalize culture. First, we used country as a proxy (Country IC). Second, we measured individual self-construal (Individual IC). Third, we manipulated self-construal (Situational IC).

Previous work theorizes that independent self-construal leads to a relatively higher likelihood to use one's thoughts and feelings as the primary reference points for making inferences of others' perspective. Conversely, when the self is construed to be interdependent with other people, the immediate reference point is more likely to include the thoughts and feelings of others with whom one has social connections. This in turn could lead to collectivism being associated with more accurate and faster taking of another person's perspective (the attentional hypothesis). However, construing the self as a separate entity from others (individualistic self-construal) could lead to better distinction between one's and another's perspective. This could, in turn, lead to individualism being associated with better mitigated egocentric bias (the tendency to conflate what oneself sees with what another sees) (the representational hypothesis) (Wu & Keysar, 2007). In *Chapter 2* we measured internalized cultural orientations (Individual IC) and primed participants with either individualism or collectivism (Situational IC) and then measured their performance in perspective taking. The participants primed with collectivism were significantly faster in perspective taking, but only than those in the control group (who were not primed) and not faster than those primed with individualism. Concerning Individual IC, being predominantly collectivistic

did not lead to faster perspective taking. These findings gave more support for the attentional hypothesis than for the representational hypothesis.

The consequences of IC should theoretically extend beyond visual perspective taking. In *Chapter 3* we investigated whether these independent vs. interdependent differences had consequences for how accurate and fast one makes inferences of the mental states of another person (theory-of-mind, or ToM). Students from individualism-representative (the Netherlands) and collectivism-representative (Vietnam) countries (Country IC) answered an Individual IC measure and were randomly assigned to an individualism-primed, a collectivism-primed, or a control condition (Situational IC) before performing a ToM task which measured the ability to understand thoughts and beliefs (cognitive ToM) and feelings (affective ToM). On the Country IC level, the differences were too large to be attributable to cultural differences and highlighted the challenges that researchers conducting cross-country experimental research face. Individual IC did not predict ToM accuracy or reaction time. Regarding Situational IC, when primed with individualism, the accuracy of Vietnamese participants in affective ToM trials decreased compared to when primed with collectivism and when no prime was used. Furthermore, Dutch participants were least accurate in affective ToM, while Vietnamese participants were fastest in affective ToM. These findings suggest that collectivism might render a selective higher attention to other people's affective states (as opposed to cognitive states).

Culture and self-construal should also influence how one makes inferences of others' emotional states, especially for detecting negative emotions that signal social disruption such as anger. Individualism recognizes the unique, independent position of an individual within a group while collectivism puts the group above the individual (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995b). Expressing one's emotions is thus a way to realize one's independent sense of self. In contrast, collectivism encourages the adjustment to social groups and the maintenance of interpersonal harmony (Ishii & Eisen, 2017; Kim & Markus, 1999). Consequently, anger detection might have a stronger association with collectivism than with individualism. Yet the question is whether collectivism leads to heightened perceptual sensitivity to the distinction between neutral and angry expressions or to a stronger response bias to seeing anger more often. In *Chapter 4*, we again used a multilevel approach to culture. Dutch and Chinese participants performed a signal detection task where they had to categorize ambiguous facial expressions as "angry" or "not angry". On the Country IC level, individualism-representative Dutch participants had higher perceptual sensitivity (i.e., more astute at

discriminating different stimulus types) than collectivism-representative Chinese participants; whereas, Chinese participants were *more* biased towards categorizing an expression as "angry" than the Dutch (i.e. stronger liberal response bias). In both groups, collectivism on the Individual IC was associated with a bias towards recognizing an expression as "not angry" (i.e. stronger conservative response bias). Cultural priming (Situational IC) affected neither perceptual sensitivity nor response bias.

Finally, individualism and collectivism differ in how one construes the relations between the self, ingroup (high-affiliation) and outgroup (low-affiliation) members (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2010) which can influence one's emotions in situations where people of different degrees of affiliation are present. Collectivism encourages emotional restraint while individualism encourages a wider range of emotional experience and expression (Butler et al., 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Safdar et al., 2009). People from collectivistic cultures also tend to distinguish more strongly between ingroup and outgroup than those from individualistic cultures. In *Chapter 5*, event-related brain potentials were recorded while participants were exposed to stimuli that evoked different valences across social situations varying in the degree of affiliation. Individualism-representative Dutch and collectivism-representative Chinese participants viewed pictures that induced positive and negative emotions while sitting alone, while being accompanied by a culturally similar person, and while being accompanied by a culturally dissimilar person. The electro-cortical activities in the Dutch participants showed large differences between responses to positive vs. negative pictures while this was not the case for the Chinese participants, suggesting stronger emotional restraint in the Chinese group. There was also a smaller effect of situation.

In sum, *Chapter 4* showed that individualism and collectivism measured on the *country level* was linked to differences in making inferences of others' emotional states and regulating one's own emotional states. Participants from a collectivistic country seemed to perceive higher costs for missing emotions that signal that social expectations are not met or that interpersonal harmony is undermined, leading to a tendency to see these emotions occur more often than in actuality. The investigation in *Chapter 5* concludes that participants from a collectivistic country also seemed to have a tendency to restrain their emotional arousal while those from an individualistic country did not. Together, these results gave partial support for that people from different countries adjust their emotional experience in a way that follows the individualism-collectivism model.

In *Chapter 2, 3, and 4*, individualism and collectivism measured on the *individual level* indicated individuals' internalized cultural orientation seemed to have very little effect on the processes involved in taking other people's perspective (perspective taking) and making inferences of their mental states (ToM). However, internalizing collectivism to a high degree did lead to a tendency to underestimate the occurrence of emotions that signal social disruptions. Together, these results suggest that the individual differences in these processes could not be adequately explained by self-construal theory alone.

In *Chapter 2, 3, and 4*, collectivism on the *situational level* was associated with faster visual perspective taking (than control), suggesting that momentary focus on others' perspective and construing the self as overlapped with others seemed to have led to heightened attention to others' perspective. When primed with individualism, participants from a collectivistic country became less accurate in making inferences of emotional states compared to when primed with collectivism. Momentary salience of collectivism, however, was not linked to any differences in detecting negative emotions that signal social disruption. Together, these results suggest that by making individualistic and collectivistic concepts salient influenced subsequent perspective taking and mental state inferencing, but not emotion detection.

Finally, in *Chapter 6* the results described in the previous empirical chapters are discussed in light of the aims of the dissertation. Additionally, theoretical implications as well as recommendations for future research are presented.