

Influence of Individualism-Collectivism on Learning Barriers and Self-Efficacy of Performance Ratings in an Introductory Life-Span Development Course

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Abstract

The influence of individualism-collectivism on perceived learning barriers and self-efficacy of course performance was examined. Subjects included 103 students enrolled in an Introduction to Life-span Development course. Participants were administered a survey at the end of the fourth week of the semester that contained demographic measures, an index of individualism-collectivism, as well as items assessing learning barriers and self-efficacy. Results indicated associations of individualism-collectivism with learning barriers and self-efficacy of performance ratings. In general, these results suggest that students' personal orientation of individualism or collectivism may influence social cognitions and behaviors that support academic achievement.

Introduction

Understanding how students' personal characteristics may aid or hinder learning is an important pedagogical concern in any discipline. Indeed, identifying learning barriers (e.g., Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001; McWhirter, 1997) and enhancing students' self-efficacy of scholarship (e.g., Andrew, 1998; Chemers et al., 2001; Lane & Lane, 2001; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) are important ways to help students achieve positive academic outcomes. Research in the scholarship of teaching and learning has also suggested one's personal orientation of individualism versus collectivism may influence various classroom behaviors such as asking questions (e.g., Fassinger, 1995; Hwang, Francesco, & Kessler, 2003), and suggested that students with a collectivistic orientation may be less involved and perform poorer in large lecture courses. Recognizing that perceived barriers, self-efficacy, and individualism-collectivism are each suggested to impact upon students' learning, the present research examines the association of individual-collectivism with learning barriers and students' self-efficacy regarding academic performance in a large, introductory life-span development course. Noting that students high in collectivism may find individualistic learning environments more challenging than others (e.g., Hwang et al., 2003), it was hypothesized that collectivists would report greater problems with learning barriers that involved their learning style. Further, given that the ideals of individualism (i.e., independence, personalized goals and desire to gain self-recognition) are often supported in university life in the United States (e.g., Hwang, et al., 2003), the expectation was that students high in individualism would express greater self-efficacy with regard to their academic performance.

Method

The sample was comprised of 84 women and 19 men enrolled in an Introduction to Human Development class at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. With regard to ethnicity and age, participants were predominantly white (87 Caucasian, 1 Native American, 11 Hispanic, 10 Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1 listed as Other), and ranged in age from 18 to 55 years ($M = 21.58$, $SD = 6.28$). Students were predominantly freshmen and sophomores (freshmen = 36, sophomores = 37, juniors = 23, seniors = 5, post-baccalaureate = 2).

Procedure and Measures:

Participants were administered a survey at the end of the fourth week of the semester. The survey contained demographic measures, an index of individualism-collectivism, as well as self-efficacy and learning barriers ratings.

Individualism-collectivism was assessed using the *Subjective Individualism and Collectivism* scale (Triandis, 1995, Instrument 1, pp. 206-207). Individualism refers to an emphasis on independence and personal aspects, versus a collectivism orientation where there is greater emphasis on interdependence and group aspects. This measure consists of 32 items that assess vertical and horizontal aspects of both individualism and collectivism. Item responses were recorded using a rating scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1), to *strongly agree* (7). Following the suggestion of Triandis (1995, pp. 203-204) in treating individualism-collectivism as a continuous variable, the four distributions, representing vertical and horizontal aspects of both individualism and collectivism, were trichotomized and each variable was provided a score so that 1 represented minimum collectivism and 3 represented maximum collectivism. The scores then were summed to create a continuous measure of individualism-collectivism with a range of 4 to 12.

Learning barriers were assessed using an expanded *Perception of Barriers Scale* (POB; Luzzo & McWhirther, 2001). This modified instrument included items that asked if financial issues, social relationships, social stereotypes, scholastic preparation, personal characteristics, and aspects of the educational environment were barriers to learning. Responses for the learning barriers scale used a rating scale that ranged from *strongly agree* (1), to *strongly disagree* (5).

Self-efficacy ratings included measures assessing self-description as a student, expected grade, as well as the importance, difficulty, perceived control, ability to overcome learning barriers, and likelihood of success in attaining one's educational goal in the course. Responses were recorded on Likert-type scales. Scalar dimensions of each rating scale are found in Table 2.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analyses indicated students' average expected grade for the course was a "high B", and no correlation between ethnicity and the individualism-collectivism index was observed. Other analyses, however, indicated associations involving participants' age, gender, year in college, expected grade and self-efficacy ratings. Therefore in subsequent statistical investigations these demographic characteristics were controlled via partial correlational analyses. Results of analyses examining relationships between learning barriers and the individualism-collectivism index are shown in Table 1. Of note in these analyses is that with the exception of negative family attitudes ($r = .25$, $p < .05$), students higher in collectivism were more likely to report greater endorsement of learning barriers referencing learning style (absolute r s $> .18$, p s $< .05$).

Similar partial correlational analyses were used to examine relationships involving the individualism-collectivism score and self-efficacy ratings. As shown in Table 2, the

individualism-collectivism index was found to be significantly associated with self-ratings of type of student ($r = -.20, p < .05$), as well as the likelihood of overcoming learning barriers and success in attaining learning goals ($r = -.22, p < .05$, and $r = -.27, p < .05$; respectively).

Conclusion

Similar to other research (e.g., Hwang et al., 2003), individualism-collectivism was found to be associated with aspects of learning that have significant impact on scholastic performance. As hypothesized, students expressing a collectivist orientation reported greater problems with learning barriers referencing learning style. Further, as expected, students with a greater collectivist orientation perceived themselves to be poorer students, having less control and less likely to overcome learning barriers and succeed in attaining the educational goal they had set for the course. In general, these results suggest that students' personal orientation of individualism or collectivism may influence social cognitions and behaviors that support academic achievement. Thus professors need to be aware of the unique orientations students bring to the classroom, and strive to create learning environments both in and outside the classroom where individualists and collectivists have equal opportunities for scholastic success.

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Table 1. Learning Barrier Items' Mean, Standard Deviation, and Partial Correlations with Individualism-Collectivism, Controlling for Age, Gender, Expected Grade, and Year in School.

Learning Barrier	Mean	SD	Individualism-Collectivism
<i>Interpersonal-reference</i>			
Negative family attitudes	4.66	0.68	.25*
Support from significant-other	4.62	0.82	-.19*
<i>Learning style-reference</i>			
Not knowing how to study	2.98	1.26	-.20*
Not having confidence	3.16	1.33	-.21*
Study habits	4.62	0.82	-.18*
Coping with stress	2.87	1.25	-.24*
Learning style	3.31	1.26	-.18*
Knowing how to overcome barriers	3.64	1.18	-.22*

^a Item's rating scale ranged from *strongly agree* (1), to *strongly disagree* (5).

* $p < .05$ one-tailed.

Table 2. Self-Efficacy Items' Mean, Standard Deviation, and Partial Correlations with Individualism-Collectivism, Controlling for Age, Gender, Expected Grade, and Year in School.

Variable	Mean	SD	Individualism-Collectivism
Type of student ^a	5.07	0.84	-.21*
Importance of attaining goal ^b	6.27	0.85	.31*
Difficulty in attaining goal ^c	4.01	1.03	-.15
Perceived control in attaining goal ^d	5.92	1.17	-.18*
Likelihood of overcoming barriers ^e	7.90	1.29	-.20*
Likelihood of success in attaining goal ^e	7.96	1.62	-.27*

^a Response scale range was *poor* (1), *average* (4), *excellent* (7); ^b Response scale range was *not at all important* (1) to *very important* (7); ^c Response scale range was *very difficult* (1) to *very easy* (7); ^d Response scale range was *absolutely no control* (1) to *complete control* (7); ^e

Response scale range was *no chance* (0) to *sure bet* (10).

* $p < .05$ one-tailed.

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