



# Differences Between Individualism and Collectivism in Perceptions of Implied Competition

Qingyang Luo<sup>(✉)</sup>

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100032, China  
851485906@qq.com

**Abstract.** The cultural differences between individualism and collectivism are reflected in people's perceptions of interpersonal interactions. We suggest that individualism and collectivism can influence the level of competition people perceive from ingroup, intergroup, and outgroup interactions. Our study proposes that people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to perceive implied competition from ingroup interactions, people from individualistic cultures are more likely to perceive implied competition from intergroup interactions, and the perceived competition will negatively affect future cooperation. This paper aims to provide a more balanced review of individualism and collectivism, particularly that people in collectivism not only value ingroup harmony but also embed a stronger sensation of ingroup competition. While individualism, despite valuing competition more than collectivism, focuses more on inter-group competition.

**Keywords:** Individualism-collectivism · Competition · Intergroup Relationships

## 1 Introduction

Conceptual and perceptual differences between collectivism and individualism have been popular themes in social psychology. Several articles have been published regarding the variations in the competitiveness of collectivists and individualists, indicating that individualists are more likely to enjoy competition than collectivists. Although much is known about the cultural differences between individualism and collectivism in values, I found there is a notable tendency in collectivistic culture to sense competition from ingroup members that is rarely explained by past studies.

Therefore, I analyzed how cultural backgrounds influenced people's perception of competition among ingroup, intergroup, and outgroup members, then investigated whether the extent of perceived implied competition affects the possibility of future cooperation. This study is based on past research findings about group vigilance in collective cultures but furthers the topic by paying more attention to how individualism and collectivism influence people's ability to sense implied competition and how it affects further cooperation.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Cultural Variation

Decades of research regarding collectivism and individualism have described collectivism as harmonious and individualism as more competitive. Traditionally, it has been argued that people from individualistic cultures enjoy competition more than people from collectivistic backgrounds, and individualists aim more at individual goals, while collectivists emphasize completing group goals more [1]. Some recent studies distinguished different types of competition from a cross-cultural perspective. Houston and Lesmana indicated that both general competitiveness (which rates how much enjoyment is perceived when competing against others) and hypercompetitiveness (which rates how much people regard competition as a way to increase feelings of power, self-worth, and superiority) are significantly higher for individualistic participants [2].

Some studies focusing on China, a representative country of collective culture, point out that independence and group consciousness can differ within collective cultures based on the history of agriculture [3]. This agriculture theory to explain regional divergence inside a country can be applied to explain the cultural variation between the eastern and western societies.

However, several studies point out that the general idea of characterizing collectivistic culture as valuing cooperation and good intentions towards the group is overgeneralized. Studies have found that collective culture embeds people with both more cooperative and competitive opinions by showing collectivists are more vigilant against ingroup members and more likely to interpret friendly behavior as sabotage [4].

### 2.2 Implied Competition and Cooperation

I believe that collective culture and individualistic culture influence people's default sense of implied competition. Studies have shown that people in collective culture show a tendency to perceive more competition in their social relations and they tend to interpret negative intentions from their group members [4]. However, the tendency of seeing ingroup rivalry has not been compared with the competition individualists tend to sense in group conditions.

A cross-culture study found that places with more danger or with sedentary farming history usually have lower relational mobility, which means people in those places tend to have lower interpersonal trust and intimacy [5]. The lack of interpersonal trust can cause people to impute ingroup members' behaviors as trying to compete.

Cooperation can be affected by various factors, including different beliefs about what indicated cooperation, distrust, and the affective states of group members [6, 7]. Also, between-group competition radically increases the level of within-group cooperation [8], which indicates the possibility of cooperation between ingroup individuals declined when ingroup competition exceeds intergroup competition. However, there are not many studies that examine how people's sense of competition affects ingroup cooperation and future collaboration.

In sum, I propose 3 hypotheses: (i) collectivist cultures embed a stronger sense of competition when perceiving ingroup interactions; (ii) people from individualist societies

will be more prone to derive implied competition out of the intergroup condition, and (iii) the extent of implied competition is negatively associated with future cooperation.

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Participants

The study tests whether there are cultural differences in perceptions of competition by comparing the study results from high school students in the United States and China. I chose these two countries because meta-analysis studies showed that Americans and Chinese differed significantly in the value put on ingroup responsibility [9]. To make sure the participant size for each culture is large enough to reveal the difference in cultural variation, a total of 240 high school students (120 Chinese and 120 American) ranging in age from 16 to 18 years participated. The gender distribution for each country's participants is equal to reduce differences in individualism and collectivism related to gender [10]. This study concentrated on two local high schools with enrollments under 3000 and homogenous student demographics to assure meaningful comparisons across comparable groups of high school students. All participants are born and raised in their own country to make sure their cultural background is not influenced by their experience of living in a diversified cultural environment.

#### 3.2 Design

In this study, I designed scenario comics for participants to read and to rate the implied competition between two groups of characters in the comic. All comics have the same neutral background settings (e.g. library bookshelves) and the same still images with the characters' original faces removed. The dialogues are put into the dialog box above the characters in both Chinese and English transcripts. The dialogues create a scenario where characters gather into groups A and B(both with 5 students), then chat with each other and ask about each other's grades. The grades are shown in percentile ranking, which makes it understandable to both Chinese and American students. I also picked 20 different faces (10 Chinese and 10 American) for the characters' faces in the comics. All these faces were pretested by researchers to make sure all of them look neutral and do not create specific impressions (e.g. smart, mean) when people look at them.

The scenarios are divided into 3 conditions: (i)ingroup condition: the nationality of characters in both groups is the same as the participant; (ii)intergroup condition: the nationality of characters in group A is the same as the participant while the nationality of characters in group B is different from the participant; and (iii)outgroup condition: the nationality of characters in both groups is different from the participant.

#### 3.3 Experiment Procedures

Participants from each country are randomly assigned to read a comic showing one of the three conditions. Participants are given a short introduction to this comic first, which includes background information like the characters' nationality to make sure participants have enough information to consider comic characters with the same nationality

as ingroup members. The faces of the comic characters will be randomly selected from the pretested faces for each participant's comic based on the condition design.

After the participants finished reading the comic, they will be asked to complete a survey including questions to rate from 0–10 about how much competition they have perceived between characters of two groups in the comic and the likelihood of characters between two groups will engage in future cooperation. To ascertain whether participants hold stereotypes towards cultures, the questionnaire also includes some questions to measure the cultural stereotypes towards Chinese and American to provide directions for future studies.

### 3.4 Ethical Conduct

All participants provided their informed permission before being included in the study. According to the relevant committee on human experimentation, the entire study was carried out by the declaration of ethical standards.

## 4 Result

The experiment has not been done in real life yet, but the result section exemplifies a predicted pattern and an alternative pattern that may appear in real life. As shown in Fig. 1, when sensing implied competition in ingroup conditions, Chinese participants perceived a higher competition level than American participants (China 6.03 vs. the United States 4.23). For Chinese participants, the highest competition level is perceived in ingroup conditions, while the intergroup condition exhibits the highest level of competition for American participants. It can also be seen in Fig. 1 that the U.S. participants ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 0.831$ ) have a generally higher perception of competition level than Chinese participants ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.539$ ).

As shown in Fig. 2, Chinese participants ( $M = 7.16$ ,  $SD = 1.041$ ) predicted a higher possibility for future cooperation between characters in the comic scenarios than

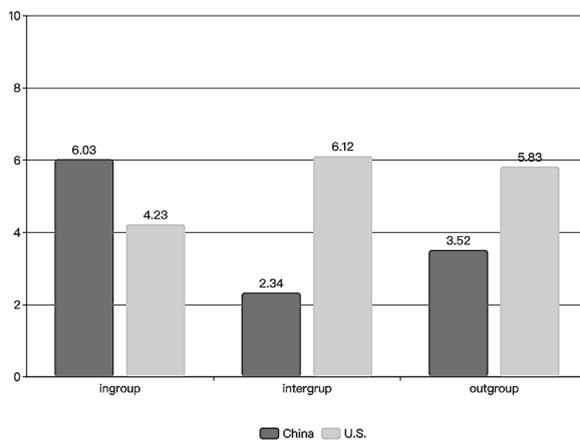
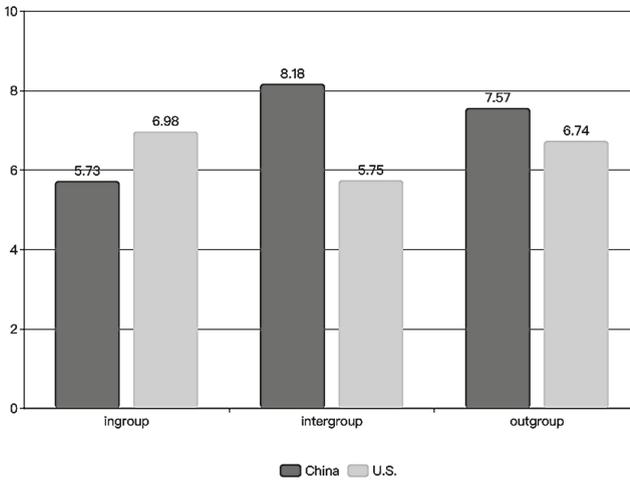


Fig. 1. Perceived implied competition [self-painted]



**Fig. 2.** Likelihood of future cooperation [self-painted]

American participants. ( $M = 6.49$ ,  $SD = 0.532$ ). Also, the competition level perceived is negatively associated with the likelihood of future cooperation.

An alternative to the result could show no significant difference in all three kinds of conditions for all participants. If this result was shown, it probably means that cultural variation is not the major factor that influences people's perception of competition.

## 5 Discussion

This study found that people from collectivistic cultures tend to sense stronger competition in ingroup conditions, while people from individualistic cultures tend to sense stronger competition in intergroup conditions, and cooperation is affected by the perception of competition.

The study is consistent with past research regarding the competitiveness that has been greatly valued in individualism, but I also find that competition becomes more notable for collectivism in within-group situations [1]. The higher sensitivity of ingroup competition of collectivism might inherit from the history of collaboration in planting and shared access to living resources. The custom of group working enables people to notice what resources other people are using, thus providing a possibility to compete with others.

However, one limitation of the study is that the participants are all students, and whether the competition perceived in academic settings can be generalized into workplace settings or other aspects of life requires future studies to testify.

Further, the ratings when both groups of characters are Chinese are slightly higher compared to ratings when both groups of characters are Americans. This difference might reflect how stereotypes of different cultures can influence the results. Even though our study generates a questionnaire to test the level of stereotypes towards different cultures, the questionnaire about stereotypes might be insufficient to fully understand

how stereotypes are influencing people's perception of competition. Also, stereotypes differ from country to country, so future studies need to be conducted to conclude a more generalized conclusion about collectivism.

## 6 Conclusion

The perceptual differences between collectivism and individualism are important to understand the influences of culture and society on people. Studies on differences between collectivism and individualism mostly focus on the value variation but rarely looks into the perception of competition among different group relations. Our study found that those from collectivistic cultures perceive more rivalry in intragroup situations, whereas people from individualistic cultures perceive more competition in intergroup situations, and the perception of competition influences cooperation. In conclusion, the study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of collectivism and individualism. I want to emphasize that harmony, cooperation, and selflessness are not the only significant features of collectivism. Competition is also existing inside collectivistic groups in the meantime.

## References

1. Houston, J., Harris, P., Moore, R., Brummett, R., & Kametani, H. (2005). Competitiveness among Japanese, Chinese, and American Undergraduate Students. *Psychological Reports*, 97(1), 205-212. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.97.1.205-212>
2. Houston, J., & Lesmana, C. (2012). Competitiveness and Individualism-Collectivism in Bali and the U.S. *North American Journal Of Psychology*, 1, 163-173. [https://scholarship.rollins.edu/as\\_facpub/78](https://scholarship.rollins.edu/as_facpub/78).
3. Talhelm, T., Zhang, X., Oishi, S., Shimin, C., Duan, D., Lan, X., & Kitayama, S. (2014). Large-Scale Psychological Differences Within China Explained by Rice Versus Wheat Agriculture. *Science*, 344(6184), 603-608. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1246850>
4. Liu, S., Morris, M., Talhelm, T., & Yang, Q. (2019). Ingroup vigilance in collectivistic cultures. *Proceedings Of The National Academy Of Sciences*, 116(29), 14538-14546. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1817588116>
5. Thomson, R., Yuki, M., Talhelm, T., Schug, J., Kito, M., & Ayanian, A. et al. (2018). Relational Mobility Predicts Social Behaviors in 39 Countries and Is Tied to Historical Farming and Threat. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3769543>
6. Keller, J., & Loewenstein, J. (2011). The Cultural Category of Cooperation: A Cultural Consensus Model Analysis for China and the United States. *Organization Science*, 22(2), 299-319. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1100.0530>
7. Tanghe, J., Wisse, B., & van der Flier, H. (2009). The Role of Group Member Affect in the Relationship between Trust and Cooperation. *British Journal Of Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2009.00643.x>
8. Puurtinen, M., & Mappes, T. (2008). Between-Group Competition and human cooperation. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 276(1655), 355-360. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2008.1060>

9. Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M. (2002). Rethinking individualism and collectivism: Evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(1), 3–72. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.128.1.3>
10. Green, E., Deschamps, J., & Páez, D. (2005). Variation of Individualism and Collectivism within and between 20 Countries. *Journal Of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 36(3), 321-339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022104273654>

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

