

Thoughts on Individualism, Collectivism, and Culture

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Abstract: This article aims to explain through narrative a response to the experiences I had while attending a conference in South Africa. It is a work of cultural import to show that the social work professional values are expressed both in an individualist and collectivist society. The insights I reached were that everyone could use some aspects of collectivism to help bridge the gap that exists in society today politically, socioeconomically, and racially.

Keywords: collectivism, individualism, social welfare, self-construal

My visit to a collectivist culture was an insightful experience. Last spring I traveled to South Africa to attend the 40th Annual Symposium of the International Association for Social Work with Groups. The theme of the conference was “Bridging the Divide: Group Work for Social Justice.” It took place in Kruger Park, near Johannesburg in South Africa. What better place for a symposium about bridging the divide and social justice? As most of us have heard and read about *apartheid* and a nation that worked together with a great and charismatic leader, Nelson Mandela, I was extremely interested in seeing this country firsthand and experiencing a culture that successfully embraced equality and the ability to overcome so many socioeconomic, racial, and political barriers to arrive at its present state. I do not plan on undertaking a narrative of how this country accomplished what it did but rather to report on my experiential observations and compare them to the culture and attitudes I’ve experienced here at home in the US. I will, however, touch on the historic factors of the society. I also want to examine some characteristics of the culture that may be helpful in this country.

My story begins with my arrival in South Africa. As I was overloaded with luggage and walking alone, several people offered to help me with my baggage. I was surprised but realized that these were sincere efforts to assist me. My next experience was meeting some of the participants in the conference. These were social work professionals from North America, Asia, and Europe. Some were disabled, and there were people who were reaching out to help them as well. The participants as well as the citizens who worked at the facility were all gracious and helpful to the disabled members of our group. When I arrived in Kruger Park, where the conference took place, I got lost while carrying my luggage, and I was looking quite forlorn. As I passed workers, they asked if I needed help. My nature is to be self-sufficient and independent, so at first I refused. I could hear the workers speaking pleasantly to each other and performing their tasks in a relaxed atmosphere as they worked. Eventually, when I became totally exasperated, I accepted help. The person (helper) carried my luggage and was extremely cordial, and even though she didn’t know where to find my bungalow, she asked and got help from others. It became a community effort to help me find my hut. That was my initiation into the new land where I had arrived. Speaking to the natives of South Africa, I heard about the interrelatedness of some of the animal species in the park. For example, zebras and wildebeests are socially very compatible. They graze together and their senses help each other. Zebras have good eyesight while wildebeests have exceptional hearing. Elephants often knock over trees and thereby allow smaller browsers (kudus) to retrieve the leaves that they would not normally be able to access.

They help each other survive against the predators in the park (Siyabona Africa, n.d.).

Learning about the interdependence of the animals was helpful, but after visiting the SizaBantwana (a Christian-affiliated organization) in the Bushbuckridge and Hazyview districts of the Mpumalanga Province, I learned about the collectivist culture of the people in South Africa. SizaBantwana operates an aftercare program for children who are orphaned, homeless, living in child-headed families, and/or terminally ill. Education and economic opportunity are considered by SizaBantwana to be the most important ways for a community to grow and thrive. The women volunteers prepare hot meals and arrange activities for the children before the children leave for whatever place they call home. The facility presently cares for 661 orphaned children (International Association for Social Work with Groups, 2018). These women are without remuneration and go to the facility each day and care for these children even though they, too, are poor. They arrive each day to set up activities and cook a hot meal for the children. This meal may be the only one that the children get for the day. Some of the children do not even have a pair of shoes. The children lack comfort and care, including physical touch. We (convention participants) were invited to do face painting with the children and play music with them on makeshift drums (old paint cans). We all participated in the activities. As the day waned, the children left the facility and we watched them as they said their farewells and journeyed on foot to their homes. It was a poignant moment to see these children walk away knowing how precarious their futures would be.

That experience prompted me to continue my exploration of the comparison and contrasts to the culture that I have grown up with and that I assume as a cultural norm. In the US, the majority population is imbued with a spirit of individualism from early in their lives. That is, the interest of the individual takes precedence over the group (Watson, 2014). Social workers cherish this ability and try to help our clients do the same. Independence is considered a virtue in our society. Socially, economically, and politically, these values are seen as essential. They help people to succeed in their profession and possibly raise their socioeconomic status. In contrast, the South African culture takes on the cultural value of collectivism. This phenomenon exists when the interests of the group are a priority over the interests of the individual (Watson, 2014). In other words, it has to do with social welfare, and that is a fundamental tenet of the social work profession. Social welfare is defined by Morales and Sheafor (2004) as:

Society's dominant philosophies into social policies, to be carried out by a system of human services agencies and delivered by human services professionals in order to meet the socially related needs of individuals, families, groups and communities through programs offering social provisions, personal services, and/or social action. (p.7)

This definition adheres to the mission of social work that is to enhance human wellbeing and help everyone meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 2002). According to Watson (2014), the South African critique of individualism is “apartheid in the heart” (p. 135). This term refers to those—no matter what race, creed, or color—who deny their dependency on human interaction. It is considered a form of isolation and hardship. During apartheid, the government turned native groups, such as the Xhosas and Zulus, against each other. Of course, White and Black groups were also separated. The racial divides

still exist, but the democracy is striving for groups to share more commonalities.

Historically, people from groups outside of their clan are usually viewed with suspicion and distrust. The San people were the first inhabitants noted in South Africa, known as foragers and hunters. They, along with the pastoralist Khoisan, were the original inhabitants of South Africa. The San people have the lowest social status and are collectivists among their own tribe. They were banished from their land in the 1770s and the land was given to the new settlers. The history of these groups is bellicose and the San group has virtually disappeared. They were enslaved by settlers and fought against the Khoisan (Marks, 1981). The original tribes have been incorporated into the Bantu population. As the settlers from Holland and England came in the 1800s, pure racial types were assumed superior and the Bushman population became a subjugated group and the object of apartheid (Marks, 1981). The Bantu and San population became subsumed into the Bushman tribe. In post-apartheid South Africa, the Afrikaners (Dutch and European White descendants) maintain an identity of privilege and superiority to the Black South Africans. They have lost their status politically but ascribe to “identity politics” (Verwey & Qualye, 2012). This general separateness would preclude collectivism between racial groups as the cultural divide remains in place. The economic divide also attests to this phenomenon.

Between 1996 to 2001, the economic divide had increased. The poverty discrepancy gap had gotten wider while the country’s economy had improved (Schwabe, 2004). Since then, Millennium Development Goals (through the UN) have seen the government pledge to improve public services and bring equity to its poorer populations in Limpopo, Eastern Cape, and Kwazulu-Natal (United Nations Development Programme, 2015).

According to Dersso (2017), the South African constitution accommodates for the ethno-cultural differences in its society. It considers the interests and identity of differing groups in the consideration of national integration. This does not account for the economic gaps. In another article by Haj-Yahia (2011), confrontation of unequal groups is frowned upon. In the collectivist society of South Africa, individual loyalty begins with the extended family, then the tribe, cultural/ethnic group, and nationality. They are, therefore, committed emotionally, morally, economically, socially, and politically to their collective. Priority is given to their collective over themselves or any other group. Confrontation by those who are considered strong against those considered weak is “taboo.” Women are supposed to submit to their husbands/families and children to their elders, although the government is trying to strive for women’s equality (Haj-Yahia, 2011).

The practitioners working with South African people are able to use the techniques that are used in an individualist society but must consider the collectivist context of those they are treating. The implication for practice is to be respectful of the differences and aware of their own cultural competency not allowing it to interfere with the culture of the clients.

In the US, there is more of a deficit in our human interaction and the divide building between racial and socio-economic groups is overwhelming our society. Although “rugged individualism” given to us by our Puritan forefathers exists, it is based on a continuum and seems to be lower in our minority groups that prefer to adhere to cultural norms of their specific

group. Majority members of society certainly would benefit from empathizing with our less fortunate neighbors and reaching out with efforts to help provide the basics of life. An understanding and respect of cultural and ethnic differences would help with our polarized situation. Important values in the collectivist society are “harmony, preserving the honor and prestige of the family of origin, extended family, ethnic group and nation. Ethnic affiliation also determines the individual’s status in the society” (Haj-Yahia, 2011, p. 336).

Another aspect of these differences between individualism and collectivism is how people communicate. In individualist cultures, people are frank and to the point when it comes to communicating no matter how hurtful the message, whereas in a collective culture, hurting someone’s feelings is reprehensible (Watson, 2014). As well, in collectivist societies, people in families or groups are protected in exchange for loyalty. We see remnants of this phenomenon in some subcultures here in the United States. Again, some people from Asian, Southern European, and African American cultures adhere to this philosophy. Overall, in mainstream America there is pride in independence and resentment if someone asks for help and it is deemed unworthy by the value system at hand.

Yet another feature of difference between individual and collectivist societies is self-construal: that is, independent or interdependent self-concept. Independent self-construal of the person is as an “autonomous, bounded, unitary agent” (Eaton & Louw, 2000, p. 210). The contrasting self-construal is the interdependent being who is flexible and changes with their “context and relationships” (p. 211). Those from collectivist cultures see themselves as part of others. Through their research, the authors viewed the South African interdependent self-construal as an integral part of their culture; this was less so for Anglo-Americans. When the people at Kruger Park were helping me, they became the helpers, not the workers in the village. In another incident, the person who was helping me with Internet connection (for my presentation) at the conference did so until he found a solution to my problem. He never gave up, as if it were his own presentation. His enthusiasm was discreet, but he kept reassuring me that it would work. He was a native of South Africa. It appeared to me that he too had a collectivist outlook and interdependent self-construal. One of my guides told me how he began picking up garbage in his neighborhood and encouraged his neighbors to do the same. He very proudly proclaimed that his neighborhood was now clean and well-kept. He expressed pride in his endeavors.

Conclusions

As I pondered my experiences in this culture very different from my own, I realized that what made me feel comfortable in South Africa was identifying with a culture that is conducive to the values that I hold as a social worker. I can see the advantages of interdependence among people. The animals at Kruger Park gave me the first indication of how interdependence helps to protect and save species in their natural environment.

The staff at Kruger Park was very accommodating and followed through on requests with pleasant responses. It was important for them not only to help but also to bring satisfaction to those with whom they were engaged. They saw situations through with the hope of the outcome being positive even if it didn’t impact them. I saw the women volunteers in SizaBantwana

unselfishly helping the children in need, even though they had their own needs as well.

I don't believe that the US should or could become a collectivist society, but interdependence and empathy in social, political, and racial areas of our lives should bridge the divide and allow us to respect and embrace the concept of social welfare, as defined by our social work colleagues. I don't think we can be sustained as a society with the great divides that now face this country. Individuals are opposed to each other and each faction does not want to face our interdependence or acknowledge the others' point of view. Although hate groups reinforce the groups' interdependence, they oftentimes are based on hatred of "the other." According to Buddeberg (2018), this concept is the moral "responsibility for the other human being[s]" to oppose (p. 148).

In summary, my visit to South Africa was both insightful and revelatory. I had never experienced a collectivist culture. I realized that many of the collectivist patterns were aligned to my social work values. I also realized that we could gain a great deal from examining and adopting the social welfare aspect of this collectivist society.

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