Cultural Dimension: Individualism and Collectivism

While a number of cultural dimensions have received interest from cross-cultural psychologists, the individualism and collectivism dimension has been most helpful to researches. Michael Harris Bond explains that individualism and collectivism has had a "magnetic pull on cross-cultural researchers."[14] So great has been the interest in individualism and collectivism among cross-cultural psychologists, that Çigdem Kâgitçibasi labels the 1980s, "the decade of I/C."[15] Triandis explains that the reason for the overwhelming interest in individualism and collectivism is that seventy percent of the world's population is collectivist. He notes that Central and South America, Asia, Africa, and the Arab-speaking countries tend to be collectivist, while individualism tends to be found in the USA, the nations of northern and Western Europe, and Australia and New Zealand.[16]

So, what is individualism? Individualism is characterized as a preference for a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families only.[17] People in collectivist cultures, on the other hand, give priority to ingroup goals and define the self in terms of membership in ingroups which influence a wide range of social behaviors. According to Triandis, collectivists are often, but not always, "organized hierarchically, and tend to (1) be concerned about the results of their actions on members of their in-group, (2) share resources with in-group members, (3) feel interdependent with in-group members, and (4) feel involved in the lives of in-group members. They feel strongly about the integrity of their ingroup."[18] Triandis adds that, "the behavior of collectivists tends to be self-sacrificing toward in-group members and generally exploitative toward out-group members. Even if the in-group is not exploitative, it is formal with outsiders, and when resources are scarce, it can become quite nasty."[19]

As explained in Chapter 3, Hinkle and Brown envision individualism and collectivism as a continuum, with cultures falling somewhere between

14. Bond 1994: 69.
15. Kâgitçibasi 1994: 52.
16. Triandis 1990: 48.
17. Hofstede 1983: 336–337.
18. Triandis 1994b: 165.
19. Ibid.: 166.

either dimension.[20] Likewise, Geert Hofstede does not consider individualism and collectivism to be a mutually exclusive dichotomy, but speaks of the degrees and levels of individualism and collectivism.[21] Finally, biblical interpreters have also acknowledged this aspect of individualism and collectivism.[22] For example, Philip Esler presents a section titled, "The individualism/collectivism spectrum" in his reading of Galatians.[23]

Finally, Triandis acknowledges that the individual members of a cultural group must be considered. Therefore, he differentiates between "allocentric" and "idiocentric" individuals. Allocentric individuals are those with "other-directed" personalities, while idiocentric is the designation given to the individuals with "self-directed" personalities. While allocentric individuals are more commonly found in collectivist cultures and idiocentric individuals are more commonly found in individualistic cultures, this is not always the case. In fact, there are allocentric individuals present in individualistic cultures and idiocentric individuals in collectivist cultures. Here again, Triandis speaks of points on a spectrum and not a rigid dichotomy.

The Addressees of Hebrews: Individualist or Collectivist?

Sociologist Daniel Bell notes that "the fundamental assumption of modernity, the thread that has run through Western civilization since the sixteenth century, is that the social unit of society is not the group, the guild, the tribe, or the city, but the person."[24] Correspondingly, the fundamental assumption before the sixteenth century was that the group was society's

20. Hinkle and Brown 1990: 65–67.

21. Hofstede 1984: 148–175. See also Triandis 1990: 43.

22. While the dimensions of individualism and collectivism are commonly described in terms of a continuum, critics still tend to envision "mutually exclusive monolithic categories." For example, Louise Lawrence has recently argued that "cultures do not have to subscribe to strictly individualist or collectivist patterns. It is more helpful to think of cultures being plotted somewhere along a scale of these two orientations." She further asserts that "to imagine that whole cultures or societies may be classified in terms of mutually exclusive monolithic categories as either individualistic or collectivist is simplistic and misreads the ethnographic and anthropological record." While Lawrence accurately identifies that problem of imagining "mutually exclusive monolithic categories," her criticism does not fairly represent the study of individualism and collectivism. Lawrence 2003: 250.

23. Esler 1998: 46–47.

24. Bell 1979: 16.

social unit. Philip Cushman likewise observes that "most historians place the emergence of the self in the modern era, beginning in the sixteenth century, although some have seen the beginnings of this form of the self as early as the twelfth century. There have been many configurations of the Western self over the course of the last 2,500 years, and most of them have resembled more the communal self of non-Western cultures than the highly individualist self of our current era."[25] For both Bell and Cushman, individualism as we know it did not emerge until the sixteenth century. Both classicists and biblical interpreters have integrated variations of this critical observation into their understanding of the individuals and groups of the ancient Mediterranean world.[26] For instance, in her book, *Roman Honor: A Fire in the Bones*, Carlin A. Barton presents a thorough description of honor and shame and the competitive nature of Roman culture.[27] Riet van Bremen begins his analysis of Hellenistic family structures by noting that, "the interest of the family group overruling that of the individual is a historical constant until recent times," and continues by placing an emphasis upon collective mentality and "family-thinking."[28] Likewise, John Pilch describes first-century Mediterranean individuals and social groups in terms of their collectivism: "The vast majority of the people described in the Bible represent collectivist personality types. Individualist personality types are rather rare in the Bible and the Mediterranean culture in general."[29]

While the examples from Bell and Cushman emphasize that the Western individualist self was not present before the sixteenth century,[30] others have additionally stressed that modern Mediterranean cultures tend to be collectivist. For example, Triandis explains that modern, traditional Greeks tend to be allocentrics:

> Traditional Greeks have been found to depend on ingroups (family, friends, and those concerned with my welfare) for protection, social insurance, and security. They readily submit to ingroup

25. Cushman 1995: 357.

26. For examples, see Esler 1994: 29–30; Malina 1996a: 41–61; Malina and Neyrey 1991: 67–96; Neyrey 1998a: 53–56.

27. Barton 2001.

28. van Bremen 2003: 313.

29. Pilch 2001: 171.

30. For an example of the debate concerning individualism in the twelfth-century, see Morris: 1972; Bynum 1980: 1–17; Morris 1980: 195–206; Morris 1982: 82–109.

> authorities and accept their control; they are willing to sacrifice themselves for the ingroup. They relate to ingroup members with great intimacy; they achieve to glorify the ingroup. They perceive the self as weak but the ingroup as strong. They view themselves largely (74% in surveys) as having *philotimo* (as being polite, virtuous, reliable, truthful, self-sacrificing, tactful, and diligent). They believe that social control (e.g., severe punishment) is desirable. They value ingroup success, honor, kindness, and dependability. They define *freedom* and *progress* as societal (e.g., national) constructs rather than as individual constructs. Their supreme values are good social relations and social control within the ingroup. By contrast, Americans value achievement and efficiency. Among Greeks behavior toward the ingroup is consistent with what the ingroup expects; behavior toward everyone else (e.g., strangers) is characterized by defiance of authority, competition, resentment of control, formality, rejection, arrogance, dogmatism, and rejection of influence that have outgroups as a source.[31]

In the case of Hebrews, were the addressees collectivists or individualists, allocentrics or idiocentrics? The text offers data which indicates that the addressees were likely allocentric individuals in a collectivist culture. The author never addresses an individual member of the ingroup, not does he refer to any interpersonal behavior. In fact, the only behavior mentioned by the author is intergroup rather than interpersonal in nature. In 3:13, 10:24, and 12:13 he urges the addressees to care for one another in a variety of ways. In each example, the text suggests that this behavior is based upon a mutual ingroup membership, rather than upon interpersonal relationships. In other words, the addressees are instructed to "encourage one another," not because of interpersonal relationships, but because there is a commitment and loyalty to the group. According to the definitions provided by Triandis, the addressees likely possessed "other directed" personalities and therefore were allocentric individuals.

There are, then, three questions which must be considered when attempting to determine whether the addressees of Hebrews were nearer to individualism or nearer to collectivism. First, if the origins of the Western individualistic self can be traced back to the period between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, is it possible that the first-century addressees of Hebrews were individualist? Second, if modern traditional

31. Triandis 1990: 56.

Greeks still tend to be more collectivist than individualistic, is it likely that ancient Mediterranean individuals were individualistic? Third, if there is no evidence of interpersonal relationships in the text, is it likely that the addressees were idiocentric individuals? Based upon the conclusions that individualism did not exist as we know it in the first-century and that modern Mediterranean cultures continue to be more collectivist with allocentric members, it may be assumed on a *prima facie* basis that the addressees of Hebrews were nearer to collectivism than individualism, though this assumption will be tested against the data.

The Addressees of Hebrews: Comparative or Non-Comparative?

The discussions of "individualism and collectivism" and "comparative and non-comparative" social groups are intimately connected. By definition, collectivist cultures tend to be comparative and competitive. Allocentric members of collectivist cultures tend to place great loyalty and commitment on the ingroup, while treating outgroup members with hostility and contempt.[32] While there is empirical evidence of groups which tend to be both collectivist and non-comparative (e.g., some juries, some book clubs, etc.), examples of this are quite rare. It is not surprising, then, that the first-century Mediterranean world is commonly described in terms of its competitiveness.

As noted above, Carlin Barton provides a helpful description of the competitive nature of the ancient Mediterranean world.[33] Likewise, in his 2005 article, "Paul and the Agon: Understanding a Pauline Motif in its Cultural and Visual Context," Philip Esler provides a thorough explanation of the comparative and competitive nature of first-century Mediterranean culture.[34] Esler notes that both modern and ancient Mediterranean cultures are characterized by fierce competition between males (unless they are members of the same ingroup) in any social interaction. For this reason, "Anthropologists have taken to referring to the competitive cultures of the Mediterranean of this type as 'agonistic,' a usage obviously dependent on the Greek ἀγών . . . the word of general application for all the sporting

32. Triandis 1994b: 166.
33. Barton 2001.
34. Esler 2005b: 363–365. See also Malina 2001: 36.

events of the stadium."[35] After his analysis of the etymology of ἀγών, Esler concludes that the "semantic shift from *agon* meaning 'contest' to *agon* meaning 'assembly' graphically reveals that the Greeks could not even come together in the outside on a patch of grass without wanting to compete with one another!"[36]

Confirmation of the competitive nature of Mediterranean culture can be found throughout Greek and Roman literature. In fact, Aristotle provides a theoretical treatment of this subject in *Rhetorica* (1370b–1371a; 1384a; 1387a–b). He explains that "We compete with our equals" (1384a). He also explains the competition between those "who are after the same things":

> Envy is pain at the sight of such good fortune as consists of the good things already mentioned; we feel it toward our equals; not with the idea of getting something for ourselves, but because the other people have it. We shall feel it if we have, or think we have, equals; and by "equals" I mean equals in birth, relationship, age, disposition, or wealth . . . So too we compete with those who follow the same ends as ourselves: we compete with our rivals in sport or in love, and generally with those who are after the same things; and it is therefore these whom we are bound to envy above all others.[37]

Esler explains that to understand this competitiveness, one must take into account two aspects of Mediterranean culture: the role of honor and the prevailing understanding of "limited good." Both honor as the core cultural value and the understanding of limited good require individuals and groups to understand themselves to be in direct competition with other individuals (members of other groups) or groups for finite resources. Because honor—in spite of variations in how honor is embodied in different contexts—is something for which individuals and groups compete, and because one's honor or the honor of the group, may be challenged, there is an underlying competitiveness inherent in first-century Mediterranean culture.[38] Honor, along with all other desirable goods, was considered to

35. Esler 2005b: 363.

36. Ibid.: 363.

37. Aristotle *Rhet.* 1387b–1388a.

38. Much has been written concerning the role of honor and shame in the ancient Mediterranean culture. For a recent discussion see Barton 2001; and Horden and Purcell 2000: 485–529.

exist in finite portions. George Foster explains the concept of limited good as "one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply, as far as the peasant is concerned."[39] Because every desirable thing was considered finite, competition was required.[40]

Based upon the discussion of comparative and competitive culture and the type of data referred to by Esler, it may assumed on a prima facie basis that the addressees of Hebrews were likely competitive, though this assumption will be tested against the data. As noted above, groups are more likely to engage in intergroup comparison if they are collectivist by nature and possess a comparative ideology. It is in this case that social identity theory is most appropriate in analyzing group processes.[41] Because the addressees of Hebrews were likely allocentrics (and members of a collectivist culture) and likely possessed a comparative (even competitive) ideology, social identity theory is an appropriate framework for analyzing the group. I will, then, relate the theory to the text throughout the next four chapters.

Cultural Dimension: Temporal Orientation

As noted above, the author of Hebrews places significant emphasis on time. He begins the text by explaining that "in many and various ways God spoke to the fathers through prophets" (1:1), but now "he has spoken to us by a Son" (1:2). He repeatedly refers to past or antecedent expressions of faithfulness (cf. 11) and to the future promised "rest" (cf. 3:7—4:13). Because of the interest of the author of Hebrews in time, a thorough reading of the text must include this important dynamic.

Cross-cultural social psychologists understand temporal orientation to be a dimension of culture. In other words, all cultures have some type of temporal orientation and, therefore, cultures may be compared and contrasted on this important dimension. Because it is likely that the temporal orientation of the author and the addressees of Hebrews was different from

39. Foster 1965: 296.

40. For a short treatment of the relationship between competitiveness and limited good in ancient Mediterranean culture, see Esler 1998: 47–48. See also Foster 1967a: 296–300; Foster 1967b: 300–323. Kennedy 1966:1212–25; Malina 2001: 81–107; Neyrey 1998b: 122–127; Piker 1966: 1202–11.

41. Hinkle and Brown 1990: 67–68.

that of most modern interpreters, the dimension of temporal orientation (and a model of present temporal orientation) serves as an appropriate conceptual framework within which to consider issues of time.

In 1961, anthropologists Florence Rockwood Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodtbeck warned that "far too little attention has been given to the full range of major variations in the *time* orientation."[42] Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck quote an emphatic statement by Oswald Spengler: "It is by the meaning that it intuitively attaches to time that one culture is differentiated from another."[43] Since Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's warning that "far too little attention" has been given to the consideration of temporal orientation, there have been what anthropologist Nancy D. Munn called, "endlessly multiplying studies of sociocultural time." Munn explains that the proliferation of studies concerning time is both a cause and a product of insufficient theoretical attention. Munn further asserts that with the exception of Alfred Gell's 1992 publication, *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Construction of Temporal Maps and Images*,[44] "anthropological reviews or summaries of the field are both sparse and relatively superficial despite the importance of the topic."[45] In an attempt to address her own challenge, Munn provides a thorough overview of the cultural anthropology of time.[46] Similarly, Barbara Adam thoroughly surveys perceptions of time from the perspective of sociology.[47]

Social psychologists and cross-cultural psychologists have also contributed to the discussion of time, notably in the area of culture and temporal orientation.[48] James M. Jones finds that there are critical distinctions between future and present temporal orientations and an awareness of the nature of both perspectives is necessary for appropriate cross-cultural understanding. According to Jones, a future temporal perspective is a function of two things:

> (1) strength of the belief in the conditional probability that if a specific act (say, studying hard) is performed in the present, the

42. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1973: 13.
43. Spengler 1926–28: 1/130 as quoted in Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1973: 14.
44. Gell 1992.
45. Munn 1992: 83–123.
46. Munn 1992.
47. Adam 1990; Adam 1994: 503–526.
48. For a thorough introduction, see McGrath and Tschan 2004.

> probability of some future goal state (say, getting a good job and having a successful career) will be greater, and; (2) strength of the tendency to value goals whose attainment can only occur in the future.[49]

The present temporal perspective, on the other hand, is based upon two different premises:

> (1) The present time perspective supports the idea that the probability of achieving a distal goal is not greater as a result of present behaviors than it would be as a result of future behaviors initiated when the goal becomes more proximal. This might be recognized as characteristic of the *mañana* cultures. Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow. If putting off until tomorrow does not materially alter the probability of successful goal attainment, there is little reinforcement for anticipatory goal behavior. (2) In the present time perspective, it is quite clear that proximal goals are more important than distal ones. In some cultures it is a generally held value that enjoying today is more important than worrying about enjoying tomorrow.[50]

Jones concludes that "***what differs between the two perspectives is not the instrumentality of behavior, but the location of the goals in temporal extension***."[51] According to Jones, future oriented cultures locate their goals in the distant future and interpret their present behavior in light of the distant goals, while present oriented cultures have proximate goals and understand the future as an outcome of the present. Similar to the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism, temporal orientations are not understood to be binary opposites, but rather, cultures tend to emphasize one temporal orientation over another. For example, members of individualist cultures are commonly understood to have the future as their first temporal preference, the present as the second temporal preference, and the past as the third preference.

49. Jones 1988: 23.
50. Ibid.: 25.
51. JIbid.: 36, emphasis original.