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Abstract

This study was designed to determine whether individualistic and collectivistic values have an effect on mate preferences. It was hypothesized that (i) Asians will be more collectivist and Caucasians will be more individualist in their respective orientations, (ii) participants classified as more individualist will have a stronger preference for potential mates who are socially exciting and have professional status, and (iii) participants classified as more collectivist will have a stronger preference for potential mates who are kind, considerate, domesticated, and have a liking for children. The individualist and collectivist values were measured using the Individualistic and Collectivistic Scale, while the mate preference dimensions (kind, socially exciting, domestic, professional status, and “likes-children”) were measured using the Marital Preference Questionnaire. A total of 50 female participants completed the questionnaires. The results supported the first hypothesis as a significant correlation was found between race and individualist and collectivist attitudes. The second and third hypotheses were partially supported, as no significant relationship was found between individualism and professional status, or collectivism and the kind dimension. However, significant relationships were found between individualism-socially exciting, collectivism-domestic and collectivism-“likes-children”.

Introduction

In the study of contemporary cross-cultural psychology, two fundamental values that differentiate between Eastern and Western cultures are individualism and collectivism. Individualism is a cultural product of the West, including Western Europe, North America, and Australia, while collectivism is more representative of the non-Western societies of Asia, South America, and Africa (Ghorbani, Bing, Watson, Davison, & LeBreton, 2003). Both constructs concern the relationship between the individual and the group, and each can be reflected in many domains of social functioning, including mate preferences (Hofstede, 1984; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

Individualism emphasizes the importance of the individual and the virtues of self-reliance and personal independence, with concern for other people's needs and interests accorded a low priority (Hui & Triandis, 1986). It focuses on the rights of the individual on individual goals, and on promoting one's self-interest (Lalonde, Hynies, Pannu, & Tatla, 2004). Individualists often regard relationships as competing with personal needs and group pressures as interfering with personal goals (Fiske et al., 2002). Their view of the self is inclined to be more stable and autonomous (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

For collectivists, the basic unit of survival is the group (Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1994). Collectivism emphasizes interdependence and group goals (Hui & Triandis, 1986) and is always aware of their implications for others. Family integrity and unity are primary values (Gibbons, Richter, Wiley, & Stiles, 1996; Lalonde et al., 2004). Collectivists have a

sense of duty towards their group, desire social harmony, and conform to group norms (Ghorbani et al., 2003; Green, Deschamps, & Paez, 2005). In the present study, the distinct values and attitudes of individualism and collectivism will be represented by Western Caucasian and Asian Chinese cultures respectively.

Mate preferences

Cultural values, attitudes, and behaviour associated with individualism and collectivism are important in mate selection (Buss, 1998). Buss and associates (1990) studied the qualities important in a potential mate among late adolescents and young adults in 37 different societies. The preferred mate attributes were found to differ between individualist and collectivist cultures. Collectivists regarded chastity and good housekeeping as important qualities, while an exciting personality was of greater importance to individualists. The collectivist emphasis on family integrity and conformity may have led to decreased concern about individual traits, such as appearance (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), and about a mate being socially exciting. Gibbons et al. (1996) found that of the five characteristics accounting for mate preferences, collectivist adolescents prefer their mate to be kind, domestic, and have a liking for children, while individualist adolescents ranked appearance as more important.

Differences also exist between men and women with respect to traits preferred in a mate (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995; Torromé & Sprecher, 2003). Men are inclined to prefer attractive mates who are good housekeepers, while women prefer a mate with sound earning capacity and sufficient resources (Hatfield & Sprecher,

1995). In order to avoid such gender differences and isolate the effect of cross-cultural preferences in mate selection, the present study includes only female participants.

The focus of this study is the effect on mate preferences of individualistic and collectivistic values, with the Individualistic and Collectivistic Scale (ICS) used to assess the extent to which Asian and Caucasian participants have these values. In addition, the Marital Preference Questionnaire (MPQ) serves to identify the traits participants most desire in a potential mate. It was hypothesized that (i) Asians will be more collectivist and Caucasians more individualist (Ghorbani et al., 2003), (ii) participants classified as more individualist will have a stronger preference for potential mates who are socially exciting and have professional status, and (iii) participants classified as more collectivist will have a stronger preference for potential mates who are kind, domestic, and “likes-children” (Gibbons et al., 1996).

Method

Design

The study was carried out by means of questionnaires and had a within-subject design. The independent variables were the extent of individualism and collectivism. The dependent variable was the preference rating for the particular traits of a potential long-term mate as defined by the five subscales in the MPQ: kind, socially exciting, domestic, professional status, and “likes-children”.

Participants

Of the 50 unmarried female participants in this study, 25 were Asian Chinese and 25 were Western Caucasians. All were volunteer family and friends of researchers. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, with a mean of 20.78 years and a standard deviation of 1.36.

Materials

Basic materials consisted of the ICS and the MPQ. Demographics were also recorded, including the age, race, religion, and cultural identity of the participants. These details provided a control mechanism designed to explain any main effects that such characteristics may have had on the data.

The MPQ comprised 22 items which measure the five dimensions of mate selection: kind, socially exciting, domestic, professional status, and “likes-children”. The items were selected from the original 76-item MPQ devised by Gough (1973). They were chosen to represent a broad array of traits that may be desired in a potential mate. Responses were according to a scale from 0 = “very undesirable” to 4 = “very desirable”. The scores were separated into the five respective dimensions and the overall scores ranged from 0 to 20 for all the dimensions, except the “likes-children” dimension, which ranged from 0 to 8.

The Individualistic and Collectivistic Scale (ICS) was a 32 item questionnaire designed to measure individualism and collectivism. Each item was rated in terms of a frequency scale ranging from 1 = “never” to 5 = “always”. The individualist and collectivist scores were separately calculated and ranged from 0 to 75 for individualist and 0 to 85 for collectivist.

Procedure

Ethical approval was sought and obtained for the study to proceed. Prior to distributing the questionnaires, the participants received an information sheet detailing what they will experience during their participation (see Appendix A). They also filled out a consent form to confirm their voluntary agreement to participate (see Appendix B). Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, the experimenter emphasized that honest answers were required, and that answers were not considered as right or wrong. To preserve anonymity, no names were put on the questionnaires.

The questionnaires were given out in a package consisting of the ICS, the MPQ, and the demographics sheet in this particular order (see Appendix C). The experimenter administered the questionnaires and ensured that no participants discussed the contents. The questionnaires took approximately 25 minutes to complete, after which the participants were debriefed concerning the purpose of the study. Completed questionnaires were sealed in an unmarked envelope to protect their confidentiality.