

## Individualism and Collectivism

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In individualist cultures people view themselves as having an independent concept of self, whereas in collectivist cultures people view themselves as having an interdependent concept of self. Individualists' concept of self does not include other people, i.e., the self is independent of others, whereas collectivists' concept of self includes other people, namely, members of family, friends, and people from the work place. People in Western cultures (e.g., the U.S., Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, etc.) have an independent concept of self, and they feel a more pronounced social distance between themselves and others, including their immediate family. People in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and so forth have an interdependent concept of self, and social distance between an individual and his or her parents, spouse, siblings, children, friends, neighbors, supervisor, subordinate, and so forth is small (see Figure 2).

The concept of self can be viewed as *digital* (for individualists) or *analogue* (for collectivists). Individualists view themselves in a much more definitive way—"This is me, but that is not me." For example, they are likely not to think of their parents, spouse, children, even the closest members of the nucleus family, as a part of themselves. There is no overlap between their selves and others'. In other words, their view of themselves is digital. On the other hand, collectivists view people in their family (e.g., parents, spouse, children, siblings, and so forth), as a continuation of their selves. For example, a mother or father is likely to think of a child as a part of his or her self, and even adult children who have their own children constitute part of their self. Similar closeness is felt for other relatives, friends, and coworkers. Thus, they have an analogue self.

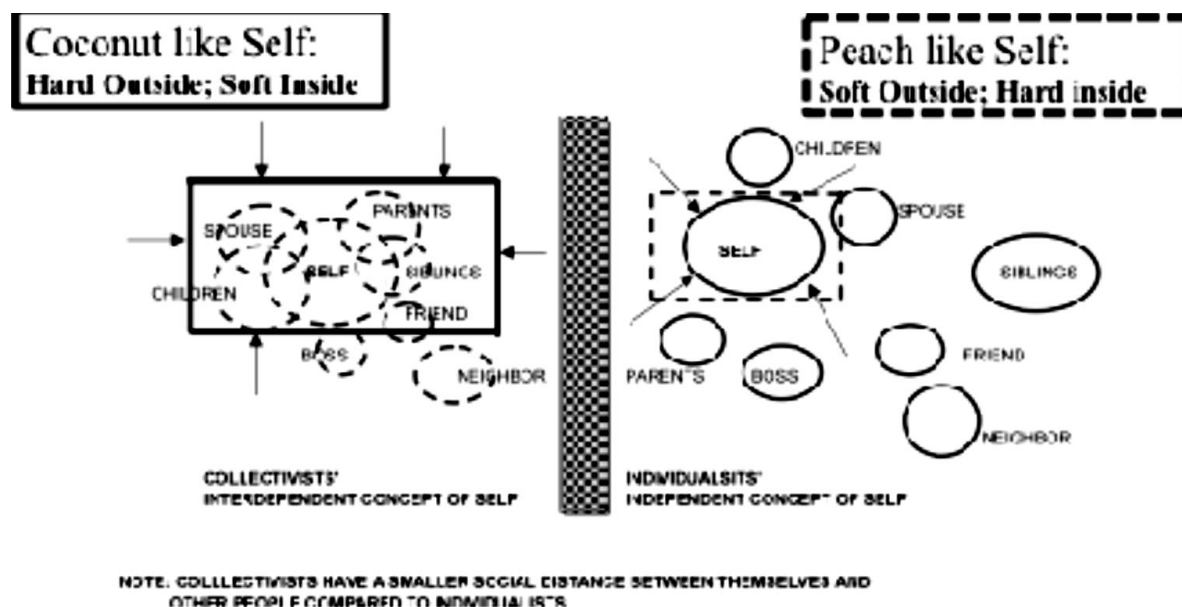


Figure 2

The boundary of independent self is sharply and rigidly defined (shown by solid line), whereas interdependent self has a less rigid and amorphous boundary (shown by a dashed line). This is a consequence of the holistic view of the world held by people in collectivist cultures. In this view, the self is thought to be of the same substance as other things in nature, and cannot be separated from the rest of nature. Therefore, the relationship between the self and other people or elements in nature is much closer, and people not only share interdependence but also feel an emotional attachment to members of their extended family and friends. On the other hand, people in individualist cultures usually view the self as independent of other elements of nature. An individualistic person, therefore, takes more control over elements of nature or situations around himself or herself, and feels less emotional attachment to others.

Collectivists share material resources as well as nonmaterial resource like time, affection, fun, etc. with people they share their selves with. This resource sharing is a characteristic of interdependent concept of self as well as a socialization mechanism that bolsters interdependence among a group of people. Interdependence is reflected in the correspondence of one's own outcomes, both positive and negative, with the outcomes of others, and the feeling of involvement in other's lives. Festivals are often social occasions that offer the opportunities for people to get involved in each other's lives and also to help each other out by sharing resources they have. A myriad of communication principles is guided by the interdependent concept of self as it provides a cognitive framework. The resource sharing behavior also provides a behavioral framework guiding people's daily behavior toward each other through the regular exchange of resources and celebration of family events and achievements of each other.

People in China, India, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, and so forth, for example, are likely to have an interdependent concept of self, where the self is shared with many members of the extended family, family friends, and others. Analyzing the words used for relationships, we find that in most Indian language we have single words not only for members of the nucleus family, i.e., father, mother, brother, and sister, but also for members of the extended family. Paternal grandfather (*dada*), maternal grandfather (*nana*), paternal grandmother (*dadee*), maternal grandmother (*nanee*), maternal uncle (*mama*), paternal uncle (*chacha*), maternal aunt (*masi*), paternal aunt (*bua*, *foofee*), and so forth. Having a single word indicates the value attached to the concept in the culture, and clearly, the extended family is quite important in India, thus presenting face validity that people in India have the interdependent concept of self. The kinship terms often differentiate on both sides of the family, and also mark age and gender explicitly. This is true for other Asian and African languages also.

The solid line around the interdependent self in Figure 2 schematically captures the idea that it is difficult to get to know collectivists because their interpersonal needs are met by the people with whom they share the self. But if one were to succeed in breaking that hard shell, one becomes a part of the collective. Therefore, collectivists can be likened to a coconut, hard from outside and soft inside. On the other hand, individualists have a softer boundary around their self, which makes them approachable and friendly. However, there is only so close one

can get to an individualist. It is almost like there is a concrete barrier that cannot be broached. Behind this barrier people hide their proverbial skeletons. Thus, individualists are likened to peaches, soft from the outside but hard on the inside. This schematic helps understand why individualists are extremely friendly to talk to in a cocktail party, which should not be misconstrued as friendship. On the other hand, collectivists may not be as easy to be friends with, despite their high sociability, but once a relationship is established, they are found to go out of their way to be of help.