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“IN EVERY FALLING LEAF
THERE IS SOME PAIN”



A DISCUSSION OF INDIVIDUALISM, COLLECTIVISM, AND THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Individualism and collectivism are two concepts that I have struggled with throughout my studies. My issue has not been the concepts contained in these theories; it has been the characterization of Westerners as predominantly individualistic. I have been frequently reminded of ways that Western families operate collectively, regardless of their ethnic or cultural orientation. The description provided by Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011) helped me understand why Westerners have earned this label. According to the authors, individualistic cultures do focus on their families, but simply do not tend to extend their attention beyond this level. Collectivist cultures, in contrast, expand that focus to include their communities. Matsumoto and Juang (2008) state that this expanded focus is provided as an exchange for the loyalty of each individual member, which may be true, but brings up memories of mafia and gangland movies. I found a slightly different characterization of collectivism in an article on suicide by Range, et al. (1999). In it, the authors describe a Western response to suicide as wondering what was wrong with the person who attempted the act. Conversely, a collectivist response wondered who in the community had influenced the person to make the attempt.

Individualism and collectivism involve the interactions of systems such as would be found in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. The ecological model seems to me to have been inspired by general systems theory, which states that a human being exists within, and is influenced by, internal biological subsystems and external environmental suprasystems. The original ecological model focused its attention on four external systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The chronosystem was later added as a fifth element. The microsystem describes the initial systems with which an individual comes into contact, such as the immediate family. Each system past that juncture describes larger and larger external systems ranging from extended family to cultural values. The chronosystem describes how these systems have patterned themselves over time.

At first glance, the concept of collectivism and the ecological model seem supportive of one another. The ecological model attempts to outline all aspects of the human experience, drawing the viewer's attention to how the elements interact with one another to influence the development of a human being. Truly, per the model, a person's development cannot be separated from the shaping guidance of any

component. However, there are differences that identify the ecological model as a design derived from a Western perspective.

One simple difference is that a collectivist culture might not consider the individual as the center of any explanatory-exploratory model, which is precisely where the ecological model places the individual. Additionally, the ecological model, while focused on the external systems, acknowledges the internal systems of the individual, such as biology and personality. A collectivist culture might take issue with this, giving rise to a second difference. A potent example of these differences can be seen in healthcare. Ubuntu is a dominant, collectivist South African ideology. Broadly, if any one person in a community behaves inappropriately or is physically ailing, the whole community is considered ill and health is restored only when all members are well (Krog, 2008; Washington, 2010). In contrast, an individualistic culture would consider the health of the individual as independent of the state of the community. As often experienced within the Western medical model, curing the ailing person would primarily be a task focused only on the patient, and particularly on his or her biology. Social advocates within an individualist culture might consider using the ecological model to explain how one person's well-being can impact, and be impacted by, the external systems within which she or he resides. In this way, the ecological model could be used to create a type of collectivism.

A third potential difference rests within the analytical features of the ecological model's design. Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011) describe the model as the embodiment of a theory that is closer to a philosophical guide than a practically applicable template. This can be an

issue in a Western culture that has embraced empirical evidence and scientific experiments. Despite this Western concern, it is still an analytical perspective of systems that will have an effect upon an individual's development. It assigns groups of people to different layers and interjects time as a context for patterns.

When I consider this last difference, I am reminded of my status as a Westernized outsider within my husband's community. My husband is Native American. Time, extended family, and cultural values are not viewed in the same manner that I have experienced. Initially, I was inclined to examine his culture from an etic perspective, applying concepts inherent to the ecological model and individualistic approach. While it was comforting to my sense of culture shock to use the familiar tools of analysis, I was failing to notice my husband's emic perspective and, frankly, missing the validity of his culture's worldview. Based on this experience,

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it seems to me that an apples-to-apples type of analytical comparison assumes a universality of experience that expects every culture to have its own version of an apple. My husband's culture did contain some parallel concepts, but it also contained concepts of which I had

no knowledge, nor had I ever conceived. This tells me that the design of the ecological model misses important concepts related to human development that are unique to each culture.

In summary, the individualistic approach meshes well with the ecological model. Three similarities are: a.) the individual is placed in the center of the nested systems; b.) the sub-systems of the individual are viewed within the context of the human being who marks the point of intersection between internal and external influences; and c.) the design of the model employs analytical tools that isolate system components into different hierarchical layers, placing the immediate family closest to the individual and thereby more likely to be considered as important to the individual. The three differences rest in the collectivist aspect of the model. They are: a.) the community, or other culturally relevant subject, is not the center of the model; b.) the sub-systems of the individual may be more dependent on the health of the community than the health of the person, making their placement in the hierarchical design questionable; and c.) the hierarchical and analytical aspect of the model's overall design reflect a predominantly Western approach to understanding the overall context of the human experience.

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