

Are Collectivist Societies Better at Managing National Crisis?

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ABSTRACT

Based on the cultural psychology literature, we investigate which type of society is more effective in response to national crisis by comparing four aspects of individualistic and collectivistic states – sense of unity, conspiracy theories, political policy, and technology advancement. Our analysis suggests that the stronger psychological sense of unity and lower impact of conspiracy theories in collectivist societies leads to stronger support for government policies, resulting in more efficient response to national crisis in the short term. However, these features in collectivist nationals may suppress creativity and technology advancement, which compromise their effectiveness in combating national crisis in the long run.

During the human history, nations have experienced various catastrophes, including the World Wars, human-made (e.g., Chernobyl nuclear power plant) and natural (e.g., tsunamis, tornados, and earthquakes) disasters, economic crises (e.g., the Financial Crisis of 2008 and the Great Depression), not to mention the ongoing global pandemic. Such crises cause devastating losses to the countries and may take several generations to recover from. National differences affect countries' responses to such catastrophes. The cultural psychology literature highlights how societal values impact the efficiency and effectiveness of each countries' efforts to combat national crises (Biddlestone et al.2020). Specifically, individualistic nations (such as the United States, Spain, and Italy) prioritize individual needs above the group good and promote personal freedom over group norms, whereas collectivist societies (such as South Korea, China, Taiwan, and the United Arabian Emirates) prioritize group needs above individuals' needs (Markus and Kitayama 1991). People in collectivistic societies demonstrate greater compliance and adherence to social norms and to meeting social obligations (Miller et al.1990), which are critical features of responses to collective crises (Murray et al. 2011).

This differences between individualistic and collectivist societies have been manifested in their responses to COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, individualism has manifested as the belief that people can and should make their own choices about their health or safety, with minimal interference from anyone else, even from the government. Collectivist societies have demonstrated greater adherence to public health protocols. According to Devlin, Fagan, and Connaughton (2022) from the PEW Research Center, as of 2021, a majority of countries have commended China, a traditionally collectivist state, for its handling of the pandemic through collective preventative policies and actions. In contrast, in the PEW report, the United States, an individualistic society, ranked the lowest out of the 5 most advanced economies in terms of the effective handling of the pandemic. In fact, according to Rajiv Kumar, the former secretary General of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, institutional collectivism shows negative association with both COVID-19 morbidity and mortality (Kumar 2021). The apparent success of collectivist societies during the COVID-19 pandemic raises questions about future national or global crises: to what extent are collectivist societies more effective in response to national crises? In this paper, this question is examined by comparing the impact of four aspects of individualistic and collectivistic states—sense of unity, conspiracy theories, public policy, and technology advancement—on the effectiveness of national responses to crises in the short and long run.

Collectivism fosters a sense of unity so that citizens feel a sense of collective action and power in combating national crises. According to Gelfand et al. (2020), synchrony, or a sense of unity, increases people's sense of altruism and ability to cooperate, and creates a greater sense of trust and belonging towards their group members. They found that engaging in synchrony "leads groups to overestimate their own formidability and to see their foes as less threatening" (3). When individuals in a collectivist society experience the benefits brought by group action and synchrony, their teamwork is boosted, and their foes and potential obstacles are lessened in scale. Due to the benefits of synchrony, collectivism can be used as a tactic to boost group morale and unity. An example of this process is the Estonia dance festival. Even in an individualistic society, Estonians who participated in the collectivist and synchronist behavior associated with the festival reaped the benefits of collectivism. Specifically, hundreds of thousands of Estonian people attended the traditional Song and Dance Festival to protest Soviet control. As shown in a documentary produced by Kaileen Mägi from Nikon Europe, when Estonians congregated in thousands, they felt that the threat of Soviet control was lessened, as "[the soviets] can't erase or can't kill all of them." Collectively, Estonians used their dance festival as a non-violent form of protest that preserved Estonian culture and supported Estonian's fight for freedom. This clearly demonstrates how collectivist actions even within individualistic cultures can effectively combat threats through a sense of collective power created by synchrony. Research teams from the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at NanJing University (Xiang et al. 2019) and the School of Psychology at the University of Kent (Biddlestone et al. 2020) show that compared to individualism, collectivism is negatively related to feelings of powerlessness during a national crisis. Jolley and Douglas (2013) find that less feelings of powerlessness are associated with more effectiveness and efficiency in national efforts combating climate changes and Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, in collectivist states, citizens have a greater sense of belonging and feel that their efforts are more meaningful in a national crisis.

This sense of unity created through synchrony and collectivism suppresses conspiracy theories, mitigates negative cultural and social responses to the government's collective actions, and generates more understanding and support for the greater good, making group efforts to combat national crises more effective. Biddlestone et al. (2020) point out that compared to collectivists, individualists are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories because of individualists' desire for uniqueness and the traits of narcissism and Machiavellianism that arise in these societies. Jolley and Douglas (2014) point out that the social and public health implications of individualists' belief in conspiracy theories are reduced engagement with public health policies, mainstream politics, and environmental initiatives. Not limited to COVID-19, individualism's stronger association with conspiracy theories is evident in almost every major crisis in the United States and has caused a loss of public support in combating these crises. For example, in an article in *The Washington Post*, Michael Miller discusses that many Americans who believe that President Kennedy's assassination was a part of a greater plot, and Josh Zumbrun writes in the *Wall Street Journal* about conspiracy theories in the 1960s: people thought that unemployment rates were part of a communist plot while the US government struggled to implement recovery policies (Zumbrun 2016; Miller 2021). In collectivist societies, conspiracy theories and the associated dissent are minimal due to the reluctance to disagree with the majority or violate group norms, as mentioned in the previous discussion of the psychological benefits of collectivism. In fact, Gelfand et al. (2020) show that "Minority participants in the synchrony condition also repeated their arguments fewer times than in the control condition after making an initial argument" (4). Given the lower levels of dissent in collectivist societies, governments are more able to mobilize their populations in collective efforts to respond to national crises in a more efficient manner.

Together, the stronger psychological sense of unity and the lower impact of conspiracy theories in collectivist societies relative to individualistic societies leads to stronger support for government policies for combating national crises. For example, China and other collectivist states have enforced strict lockdowns and rules for protecting communities during the COVID-19 pandemic; the U.S. and other individualist states have taken a softer approach, making resources like screening and vaccines available for the public if they chose to

use them. According to Ip (2022), the chief economics commentator at the *Wall Street Journal*, visitors to China may find themselves “confined to a dystopian bubble in constant fear of being quarantined,” as cities with populations of 5 million or more screen every inhabitant using PCR tests in three days, and “Tianjin tested its entire population of 14 million in 4.5 hours.” Cyranoski (2020) explains that before governmental interventions in China, scientists expected that each infected person would transmit the virus to more than two other people; however, after governmental intervention, “the number of people each infected individual gave the virus dropped to 1.05.” Thus, the coercive and extreme public policies implemented by some collectivist governments during Covid-19 pandemic seem, in the short run, to have been effective in mobilizing resources and people in the face of crises. In contrast, individualistic societies like the United States have taken a less rigid approach, funding various COVID-19 programs to provide opportunities for Americans to get vaccinated and tested (The White House). Consistent with this notion, Gelfand et al. (2021) show that collectivist countries (e.g., Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea) have been able to contain the spread of Covid-19 more efficiently and effectively than more individualist cultures (e.g., the United States, Spain, and Italy).

Despite these benefits that collectivism may bring during national crises, there are also some limitations of collectivist cultures, such as the suppression of creativity, which may compromise collectivist nations’ effectiveness in combating national crises in the long run. From a psychological perspective, Gelfand et al. (2020), show that groups that act synchronistic ally, “wrote less creative stories than groups that marched at their own pace” (3). Due to the conformity enforced in collectivist cultures, individual thought is suppressed, and consequently novel technologies and entrepreneurship are reduced. The lack of innovation in collectivist nations is also seen at the World Economic Forum, where the Top 3 most innovative countries in the world are all individualistic: Switzerland, Sweden, and the United States (Buchholz 2021). In contrast, individualist cultures are associated with innovation and technology advancement (Thornhill et al. 2009), productive entrepreneurship, and economic growth (Cai et al. 2019). The association between individualism and innovation is supported by the research by Goncalo and Staw (2006), two prominent researchers from Cornell University and University of California at Berkeley, which shows that individualistic societies promote uniqueness and individual value and thrive in innovation because norms are ignored, and creativity and unique ideas are endorsed. Due to these differences in creativity and entrepreneurship, collectivist nations often lose out on the technological breakthroughs needed for economic growth and effective reactions to crises. With COVID-19 vaccines for instance, the Chinese Sinovac Biotech LTD’s vaccines, “didn’t produce sufficient levels of neutralizing antibodies to protect against the Omicron Variant” (Hong 2021), whereas the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are 90% effective at preventing the disease (Mallapaty 2021). This makes it clear that while collectivist states have an advantage in their ability to mobilize resources and people, they lack the innovation and inventiveness that drives effective technological responses to crises, which are crucial for long run solutions.

Recent and past national crises have revealed valuable insights into how collectivist and individualistic cultures respond at both the governmental and individual levels. Exploring the differences and advantages of different responses to crises could reveal insights into how governments and societies can minimize unnecessary death and loss in future crises. Despite the moral argument for individualistic societies’ promotion of freedom and choice, there is no doubt that those ideologies present challenges to effectively mobilizing a population to engage in a group effort to combat a national threat. Public outcries and rebellions are more likely in individualistic states, and these can thwart the efforts of governments and produce counterproductive results, such as the resistance to public health protocols in individualist countries. In contrast, collectivist cultures’ emphasis on the needs and demands of the group allow these societies to adopt and enforce policies more easily. Public policies are more effective due to the psychological effects of group work. However, collectivist societies’ limited ability to foster creativity and innovation, reduce their ability to develop technological responses to disasters, ranging from vaccines to weapons. Therefore, in the short run, collectivist societies’ quick and effective responses may seem to be more effective responses to national crises; however, in the long run, individu-

alistic societies may outperform the collectivists because they develop long-term solutions using new technologies. Under normal circumstances, the positive dissent and the promotion of uniqueness in individualistic societies fosters innovation and economic growth. However, when it comes to times of crisis, nations should embrace collectivism to boost group unity and lower resistance to government recovery policies.

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