Is Equality Perceived as a Solution to Societal Problems?

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This research explored cross-cultural perceptions of equality as a solution to societal problems. 370 participants from Canada, China, and the United States were asked whether they believed that equality between individuals and between groups would reduce the magnitude of societal issues. Findings revealed that Chinese participants viewed individual equality as beneficial, but not group equality. Alternatively, Americans did not value equality but valued superiority. We discuss the results in the context of cross-cultural differences in individualist and collectivistic orientations.

Do individualists and collectivists agree that equality is the answer to society’s problems? Would they also agree that equality between individuals is just as important as equality between groups? The virtues and benefits of equality have long been known to researchers (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pittinsky & Montoya, 2009) and social issue advocates (e.g., Carrier, 1999; White, 2007). However, it may be that the populaces from different cultural orientations do not hold such values or differ in the degree to which they value equality (Hofstede, 1980) and the extent to which equality is seen as important in a functioning society (Kim, 1994). In this research, we explored cross-cultural views on equality and the degree to which equality was viewed as beneficial for society.

Research has made a distinction between individualistic and collectivistic societies. According to Hofstede (1991), individualistic societies are defined by their orientation toward the individual as a unique entity with loose connections to the group. Individualists base
their identity on autonomy and personal accomplishment (Hofstede, 1980), and tend to be found in Western cultures (e.g., Canada, United Kingdom, United States; Hofstede, 2001). Distinctions within individualistic cultures provide a clearer picture of the values held by such societies, as individualistic cultures can be categorized by their vertical versus horizontal orientations. In vertical, individualist societies (e.g., United States, Canada, United Kingdom), individuals focus on improving their social status via competition and achievement. In contrast, in horizontal, individualist societies (e.g., Sweden, Australia), individuals are oriented toward perceiving themselves as equal to others. In such societies, rather than being motivated by competition, individuals are concerned with their ability to be self-reliant (Triandis & Singelis, 1998).

Alternatively, collectivism stresses an individual's place in a structured relational network and the interpersonal bonds within that network. Such societies are marked by an orientation toward the in-group in which group members share common goals and values with other group members (Oyserman, 1993; Schwartz, 1990; Triandis, 1995). Collectivistic cultures tend to be found in Eastern countries (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea; Hofstede, 2001). In support of this distinction, research has found that collectivistic cultures depict in-groups as a complex network of interrelated individual members (Ho, 1993; Hwang, 1999; Lebra, 1976), whereas individualistic cultures emphasize the group's depersonalized nature (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994).

As with individualists, collectivists can be understood based on their horizontal, versus vertical orientations. In a vertical collectivist society (e.g., China, Japan), individuals focus on the preeminence of collective interests relative to the costs of personal interests. Chen, Meindl, and Hui (1998), for example, found that individuals with a vertical collectivist orientation selected allocation systems that adversely affected themselves, but only did so if it supported group interests. In contrast, in horizontal, collectivist societies (e.g., Israeli kibbutz), individuals emphasize an interdependence with other ingroup members and orient toward equality with other in-group members (Erez & Earley, 1987). In line with this, Chen et al. (1998) found that those with a horizontal-collectivistic orientation in China preferred a reward system that created interpersonal interdependence.

Is Equality Good for Society?

Collectivists. The aforementioned cultural differences point to the notion that some cultures may value equality more than others. Research notes that collectivists emphasize equality (equal output for each individual regardless of any individual's input) with in-group members,
but emphasize equity (outputs are proportional to inputs) in dealings with out-group members. Collectivists, for example, tend to define interactions with in-group members based on equality (Kim, 1994; Morris & Leung, 2000; Triandis, 1995). In contrast, however, Leung and Bond (1984) found that when collectivists were asked to allocate money to out-group members, they followed the equity principle in dealings with out-group members. Such a preference likely results from the collectivist's association with a heightened in-group/out-group distinction (e.g., Earley, 1993; Hsu, 1970; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). This distinction creates a situation in which collectivists view in-group members as individuals, but out-group members based on their group membership. In this way, equality is then advocated for inter-individual interactions, but equity is valued in intergroup interactions.

**Individualists.** Additional considerations are required when considering equality in individualistic cultures. People from individualistic cultures tend to prefer equity, rather than equality in their relations with others, as their focus is on rewards based on individual efforts and distinctions based on achievement (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Kim, 1994; Shweder & Bourne, 1982). In fact, individualists may be disinclined toward equality because it does not allow for opportunities to distinguish themselves and to stand out from the group (Goncalo & Kim, 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Leung and Bond (1984), for example, noted that group members who divided group rewards equally among other in-group members were rated more negatively by American participants than by Chinese participants.

Further, individualists judge others as a function of their ability to accomplish goals (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990) and value those who endorse an equity-based allocation system (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002). In this way, individualistic societies do not primarily value equality, but rather value those who distinguish themselves. Interestingly, such a preference for equity and achievement likely holds for both interindividual and intergroup interactions. Data collected in Western cultures indicate that individuals in both the intergroup context (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the inter-individual context (e.g., Leung & Park, 1986) are motivated to demonstrate their abilities relative to comparable others. Put another way, individualists are more oriented toward valuing cues of relative authority and status (i.e., status superiority of one person or group over another individual or group).

The present research explored cultural differences in whether equality is viewed as beneficial to society. To this end, Americans (as an individualistic culture), Canadians (as an individualistic culture), and Chinese individuals (as a collectivistic culture) were asked whether there would be fewer problems if groups/individuals were treated equally.
Because it was expected that Americans and Canadians would both value achievement and effort more than equality, we also asked participants for their evaluation of superior groups/individuals.

Given the observation that the Chinese culture places emphasis on equality in in-group dealings, we expected Chinese participants, compared to American or Canadian participants, to perceive inter-individual equality as more capable of reducing societal problems. However, in American and Canadian societies, the focus on achievement indicates treating all groups equally should not be viewed as a means of problem reduction. Rather, in Western cultures, achievement and superiority were hypothesized to be important to the evaluation of others.

METHOD

Participants

We collected data from 370 participants from Canada (63 men and 60 women, $M_{age} = 32.26$), China (60 men and 60 women, $M_{age} = 33.64$), and the United States (63 men and 64 women, $M_{age} = 34.46$).

Procedure

Participants were recruited in the greater Boston area (American sample), greater Ottawa area (Canadian sample) and Great Kunming city and surrounding areas (Chinese sample). Participation response rate was approximately 65% in the United States and Canada, and 80% in China. As part of a larger study on individuals’ attitudes toward international relations, experimenters approached potential participants in one of several public places (e.g., cafeteria, café, tea-shop, public library, discotheques). After the person listened to a short explanation of the aim, time and context of the study, a questionnaire in the appropriate language was administered to the participant. The questionnaire was initially written in English and was later translated to Chinese. The Chinese version was checked by a professional linguist before administration to Chinese participants.

Participants were asked four questions with respect to their views on equality. Participants were asked whether individuals and groups were (a) more worthy of trust based on superiority, and (b) whether there would be fewer problems if equality existed in the society. The order in which the individual and group questions were asked was counterbalanced across participants. A seven-point response scale was used ($1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree$).

RESULTS

To ensure that scores could be compared across countries, responses within each country were standardized (Leung & Bond, 1989; van de
Montoya, Huang, Lynch & Faiella  IS EQUALITY PERCEIVED?  43

Vijver & Leung, 1997). $T$ scores were computed using the equation, $T = (X - M) / S$, in which $X$ was the score to be standardized, and $M$ and $S$ were respectively the mean and standard deviation of the corresponding country dataset. Standardization of the scores eliminated cross-country differences in grand means and standard deviations eliminated unwanted sources of error, such as methodological artifacts (i.e., response sets; van de Vijver & Leung, 1997).

We conducted a 3 (Nation: United States, Canada, China) x 2 (Category: group, individual) x 2 (Assessment: fewer problems, status superior are trusted) mixed ANOVA. The three-way interaction was significant, $F(2, 367) = 4.80, p < .05, MSE = 1.51, \eta^2 = .02$. To probe the interaction, we conducted two two-way interactions by investigating the levels of the Assessment variable separately.

![Figure 1](image.jpg)

**FIGURE 1** The Perceived Societal Benefits of Equality as a Function of Nation and Category

**Fewer problems.** The main effect for nation was significant, $F(2, 367) = 9.12, p < .05, MSE = 0.96, \eta^2 = .04$, but the main effect for Category was not, $F(1, 367) = 0.00, p = .93, MSE = 0.95, \eta^2 = .00$. For nation, the China vs. U.S./Canada contrast was of primary theoretical interest; however, we included the second contrast (U.S. vs. Canada) in the analysis in order to fully represent the three-level factor. Orthogonal contrasts revealed that Chinese participants, compared to a combination of American and Canadian samples, felt that there would be fewer problems if equality were more prevalent, estimate $= .32, p < .05$. The
American and Canadian samples did not differ, estimate = .09, p = .30. Importantly, there was a Nation x Category interaction, $F(1, 367) = 9.44$, $p < .05$, $MSE = 0.95$, $\eta^2 = .04$. The relation between nation and category is displayed in Figure 1.

With respect to the Nation x Category interaction, inspection of the means indicates that views of group equality as a way of solving problems did not differ by nation, $F(1, 367) = 0.12$, $p = .88$, $MSE = 1.00$, $\eta^2 = .00$. However, there was a simple effect for individuals, $F(2, 367) = 19.39$, $p < .05$, $MSE = 0.90$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Contrasts reveal that the Chinese participants valued equality (to a greater extent than a combination of American and Canadian samples, $t(367) = 6.14$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.64$. The American and Canadian samples did not differ, $t(367) = 0.96$, $p = .33$, $d = 0.10$.

**FIGURE 2. The Perceived Trustworthiness of Superiors as a Function of Nation and Category**

Superior groups are trusted. The interaction between nation and category is illustrated in Figure 2. Neither the main effect of nation, $F(2, 333) = 2.00$, $p = .13$, $MSE = 0.88$, $\eta^2 = .01$, nor the main effect of category was significant, $F(1, 333) = 0.04$, $p = .84$, $MSE = 1.10$, $\eta^2 = .00$. Relevant to our interests, there was a Nation x Category interaction, $F(1, 333) = 4.97$, $p < .05$, $MSE = 1.10$, $\eta^2 = .03$.

Inspection of the specific contrasts revealed that whereas Americans endorsed the notion that superior groups were more worthy of trust compared to superior individuals, $t(110) = 2.78$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.53$, Chinese individuals endorsed the notion that individuals with superior
status and authority were more worthy of trust compared to superior groups, $t(110) = 1.92$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.36$. Canadians' endorsement of the notion of superiority for individuals did not differ from their evaluation of superior groups, $t(115) = 0.37$, $p = .70$, $d = 0.07$.

**DISCUSSION**

Whereas there is near-universal agreement in the literature regarding the importance of equality in reducing intergroup and inter-individual conflict, we explored whether individuals from different cultures held a similar belief. The goal of this research was to explore the extent to which equality was viewed as an answer to societal problems. Comparisons of participants from two individualistic (United States and Canada) and one collectivistic (China) country revealed that viewing individuals and groups as equal was generally not perceived as a potential solution. Rather, equality was primarily viewed as beneficial for Chinese participants only when considering inter-individual interactions. Alternatively, Americans, given their relative focus on achievement and power, placed a stronger emphasis on superiority over equality.

The cross-cultural differences varied by how collectivistic and individualistic cultures view fairness among in-group and out-group members. As discussed earlier, implementation of the equity and equality principles varies for people of collectivistic and individualistic cultures (Leung & Bond, 1984). The Chinese emphasis on intra-group dynamics (Oyserman, 1993; Triandis, 1995) explains why the Chinese sample viewed equality among individuals as more beneficial to society than equality between groups. Since people of individualistic cultures apply their standard of fairness (equity) more universally across in-group and out-group members (Fadil, Williams, Limpaphayom & Smatt, 2004), individualistic participants did not report a difference between equality of groups and equality of individuals.

Further, the fact that Chinese participants viewed equality as a solution to societal problems was consistent with Yuki's (2003) expansion of social identity theory. Yuki proposed that collectivist cultures were more focused on the relations between individuals within the ingroup, and that individualistic cultures were more focused on membership within a specific group. One implication of this conceptualization is that collectivists, due to their focus on upholding mutually beneficial relationships with other in-group members, were generally more trusting than individuals of those they view as an "individual" (Yuki, Maddux, Brewer, & Takemura, 2005).

Finally, and consistent with expectations, Americans and Canadians responded similarly on most of the dimensions measured. This was unsurprising given their common orientations, specifically, that both the
U.S. and Canada are seen as vertical individualist societies (Triandis & Singelis, 1998) and that both nations cluster together on a number of cultural values, even relative to other Anglo countries (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012). However, our results also indicated that Americans and Canadians did not trust superior groups and individuals similarly. In other words, whether the other was superior in relative social status or authority, such as government officials, did differ depending on whether participants were considering a group or individual. Americans believed superior groups were more trustworthy than superior individuals. In contrast, the Canadian sample did not differentiate between superior individuals and superior groups. One possible explanation for this difference comes from the work of Kincaid and Cole (2008), who found that Canadians, compared to Americans, believed that their province was not trusted by the federal government. This reduced trust likely contributed to Canadians lowered trust in group compared to Americans.

In general, responses across cultures revealed that individuals do not universally subscribe to equality. In some cases, equity is preferred, particularly in cultures that value achievement. The level of trust in a superior entity affected a variety of outcomes and is viewed as a possible solution to societal problems.

REFERENCES


