

# Individualism and Collectivism

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss two very different cultural worldviews. In particular, we'll look at:

1. Individualism
2. Collectivism
3. Worldviews in Conflict

## 1. Individualism

In terms of whether the needs and interests of an individual have the highest importance, or whether the needs of the group should come first, views will differ by culture.

The first view is called **individualism**, and it is a worldview that holds the individual as primary. Meeting individual needs is seen as more important than preserving group harmony.

### IN CONTEXT

The United States could be classified as a highly individualistic culture, and you can see all kinds of expressions of individualism within our culture. For example, there are people moving across the country or leaving home at an early age, people living alone, and the focus on self-improvement.

In fact, you'll even find that when people are competing in a sport, they certainly want the team to win, but they might not feel totally successful unless they beat their own personal best. It's that sense of individual achievement that puts the United States closer to the highly individualistic end of the spectrum, honoring the freedom of the individual.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Individualism

A worldview which holds that an individual's interests, beliefs, and goals are more important than preserving harmony of the group to which that individual belongs.

---

## 2. Collectivism

Conversely, **collectivism** is a cultural worldview that holds preserving group harmony as the primary focus, more so than meeting individual interests or needs.

The group could be your employer, your family, your community, but it is what's primary in a collectivist society. Subcultures in the United States may ascribe more to collectivism than the overall belief in individual achievements. Countries or cultures can fall anywhere on this scale between collectivism and individualism.

## IN CONTEXT

A number of Mediterranean countries, as well as Asian countries like China and Japan, might fall more towards the group harmony and collectivism end of the scale. Of course, this is not absolute and doesn't apply to every individual in a given culture. It's a broad way of looking at a culture, and the assumptions and expectations that are generally considered right or proper in that culture.

In a culture that is highly collectivist, criticism of one individual would reflect on the whole group.

➦ **EXAMPLE** If you were to take someone aside in a workplace, or if you were to talk with this person in any kind of critical way in a place where others could overhear, this would be considered a disrespectful thing to do because the whole group would feel as though it were being criticized. You would thus want to take the person aside and talk to them out of earshot of everyone else.

Similarly, decisions are not made as quickly because they affect the entire group.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You want to make a decision, and you're coming from a point of view that makes you feel that you need to decide right away. This is important, and you might even be stressing what's in it for you, which is something that we tend to do in our culture here.

If you're interacting with people who view things through the lens of collectivism, you're not going to get as far. You may run into some misunderstandings, and even be considered arrogant and disrespectful, because what's important to a culture that values group harmony is how any decision will affect the entire group.

In a collectivist culture, there would need to be a lot of preliminary discussions based on how a decision will impact the community as a whole.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Collectivism

A worldview which holds that preserving the harmony of a group is more important than the interests, beliefs, and goals of any individual member of the group.

---

## 3. Worldviews in Conflict

If you are in a situation in which there is a conflict or misunderstanding based on these two different approaches, particularly in the workplace, it is best to negotiate by looking at how any decision could benefit the group as a whole.

You want to look at the bigger picture, as opposed to simply what's in the outcome for you, which could be a common pitfall for business people who come from a more individualistic point of view.

It's also important to know the people you're working with in a more personal way. Get to know them, and find out what's going on in their lives.

This is because in a culture that really regards the group spirit and group harmony as more important than individual needs, people become very involved in each other's lives, even within the workplace.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Personal work life is very integrated in a collectivist environment, and you may find management even doing something as personal as making a visit to a hospital to see an employee whose family member was in an accident or was ill. As a result, there could be a very strong loyalty to the company.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about two different cultural worldviews: **individualism**, in which the needs of the individual are the primary focus, and **collectivism**, in which the needs of the group are the most important. You now understand that when you are involved in a **conflict between these two worldviews**, it's best to consider how a decision can benefit the entire group as opposed to just yourself because finding an outcome that satisfies everyone is the goal of conflict resolution. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Collectivism**

A worldview which holds that preserving the harmony of a group is more important than the interests, beliefs, and goals of any individual member of the group.

### **Individualism**

A worldview which holds that an individual's interests, beliefs, and goals are more important than preserving harmony of the group to which that individual belongs.