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# Distinguishing Meaningful Dimensions of Cultural Variability and Stereotypes: Focus on Individualism-Collectivism

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*Teaching about cultural differences in order to promote intercultural competence is widely considered to be an essential component of foreign language classes. However, some JALT members have expressed concerns that research into cultural differences—contrary to its objective to improve intercultural understanding and mitigate stereotypes, actually promotes the opposite. The*

*goal of this paper is to elucidate scholarship that establishes clear guidelines for responsibly using concepts describing cultural differences—in other words, how language educators can promote among their students insight into diverse norms, attitudes, and values that tend to exist between cultural groups without promulgating stereotypes. This is accomplished first by elucidating Adler's guidelines for differentiating generalizations about cultural differences from stereotypes. Then, research is reviewed that demonstrates how the definition and applications of the cultural syndrome of individualism-collectivism reflect each of Adler's guidelines and therefore, when applied appropriately, should not encourage stereotype formation but instead counteract it.*

異文化間能力を養成するために文化の違いについて教えることは外国語の授業において重要な事柄であると考えられている。しかし文化の違いについて教えることは、異文化間理解を深めステレオタイプを少なくするというその元々の目的とは逆に、ステレオタイプを助長してしまうのではないかと心配する声がJALTの会員の中からも出てきている。そこで、この論文の目的は、文化の違いを記述する概念を正確に理解し応用するための明確なガイドラインを確立した研究について説明すること、つまり語学教員がどのように、文化集団間に存在する傾向にある多様な規範や態度、価値観などに関する知識や物の見方を、ステレオタイプを助長することなしに学生に教えることができるかについて明確にすることにある。そのためまず最初に、アドラーが提唱した文化の一般化とステレオタイプの違いについて説明する。そして、これまでになされた個人主義／集団主義についての定義およびいかにこれらの概念が文化の違いを分析するために使用されたかについて

での研究の概観をし、それらの研究がいかにかアドラーのガイドラインを反映したものであるか示す。そしてその結果これらの研究がステレオタイプを助長するものではなく、逆に減少させるものであることを論証する。

## Introduction

A primary goal of current approaches to foreign language education is promoting intercultural competence (Greenall, 2003; Richards, 2003), or the ability to communicate effectively with members of other cultural groups through understanding their values, as well as developing skills to navigate intercultural differences in both verbal (Fujioka, 2003; Kawate-Mierzejewska, 2003; Kite, 2003; Poole, 2003) and nonverbal communication styles (Fujimoto, 2003; Komisarof, 2002). However, in promoting intercultural understanding, what do we tell our students about cultural differences? An accurate understanding of such differences that reflects current research about the nature of culture and its effects on human thought and behavior is essential in order to teach students about diverse cultures and ultimately promote intercultural competence.

Although a central goal of intercultural and cross-cultural research is to improve understanding of cultural differences, the author of this paper has noted that among others, Guest's (2002, 2003) articles in JALT publications and presentations at JALT conferences have expressed the opposite sentiment—i.e., research describing intercultural differences in values and communication styles tends to create stereotypes—thus impeding such understanding. While this unintended result is certainly possible, stereotypes can be avoided when cultural research is executed and its results are interpreted with intellectual rigor and integrity. The goal of this paper

is to elucidate research that establishes clear guidelines for responsibly utilizing concepts describing cultural differences—in other words, how language educators can promote student insight into diverse norms, attitudes, and values that tend to exist between cultural groups without promulgating stereotypes.

## Cultural syndromes and individualism-collectivism

According to Phinney (1996), cross-cultural psychologists and cultural anthropologists, who have generated a great deal of the culture research that is cited by language educators in the classroom, commonly attempt to “identify the specific components that may account for observed cultural differences; that is, to unpack culture, to peel off its layers, like the layers of an onion, to explain cross-cultural differences in terms of specific antecedent variables” (p. 920). Current approaches to researching culture often favor cultural syndromes as such variables (Matsumoto, 2000; Triandis, 1996), which are, according to Triandis (1996), patterns

...of shared attitudes, beliefs, categorizations, self-definitions, norms, role definitions, and values that [are] organized around a theme that can be identified among those who speak a particular language, during a specific historic period, and in a definable geographic region. (p. 408)

One cultural syndrome is individualism-collectivism, which Matsumoto (2000) defined as “the degree to which a culture encourages, fosters, and facilitates the needs, wishes, desires, and values of an autonomous and unique self over those of a group” (p. 41). Matsumoto et al. (1997) wrote that individualism-collectivism is arguably the most important of all meaningful dimensions of cultural variability, due to its utility in describing a broad array of

intercultural differences in values, attitudes, norms, and behaviors. For example, secondary and tertiary students from collectivist cultures typically maintain harmony in the classroom by speaking primarily when personally called upon by the teacher, as well as avoiding debates, which might threaten the face of the teacher or classmates; conversely, those in individualist cultures commonly speak up in response to general invitations from the teacher and exchange ideas frankly with a lower face consciousness toward their peers and instructors (Hofstede, 1986; Skow & Stephan, 2000). Understanding and adapting to such mainstream norms is important for Japanese students engaging in intercultural contact with individualists (either abroad or in Japan) in order to facilitate favorable evaluation by their professors and positive intercultural relationships with foreign students. As previously stated, the goal of this paper is to differentiate stereotypes from concepts describing meaningful dimensions of cultural variability. Due to space limitations, a review of only the literature pertaining to individualism-collectivism will be considered, although similar distinctions could be made between stereotypes and other concepts describing cultural variability that are central to the field of intercultural communication, such as E. Hall's (1976) high and low context, or those found in the work of Hofstede (1991) and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000).

### **Distinguishing stereotypes and cultural generalizations**

Stephan and Stephan (1996) succinctly defined stereotypes as “the traits attributed to social groups” (p. 4). However, stereotypes serve many functions that differentiate them from mere neutral descriptions of other groups' traits (Adler, 1997; Brislin, 1993; Stephan and Stephan). According to S. Hall (1997), stereotypes “*reduce* everything about [a] person to

those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* [the traits], and fix them without change or development” (p. 258). Moreover, S. Hall added, “Stereotyping . . . sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant,’ . . . the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable,’ what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’” (p. 258). Finally, stereotyping promulgates inequalities of power through assuming a group's superiority or inferiority.

Humans constantly create categories to reduce complex reality to manageable dimensions, which allows us to organize, remember, and retrieve information, and in turn make sense of the world and produce meaning (Adler, 1997; Brislin, 1993; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Cultural syndromes such as individualism-collectivism provide categories that describe cultural differences. Various scholars (Brislin; Matsumoto et al., 1997; Triandis, 1995) have suggested that concepts such as individualism and collectivism that outline cultural differences can be essential tools to process information about human diversity. This leads to the critical question: How can stereotypes be differentiated from useful categories describing cultural diversity?

Adler (1997) provided such guidelines by distinguishing between stereotypes and cultural generalizations. She explained that generalizations, as opposed to stereotypes, can be helpful to understand and act appropriately in new situations when they are:

1. Consciously held. People should be aware that they are describing a group norm rather than the characteristics of a specific individual.
2. Descriptive rather than evaluative. A [generalization] should describe what people from this group will probably be like and

not evaluate these people as good or bad.

3. Accurate. The [generalization] should accurately describe the norm for the group to which the person belongs.
4. The best first guess about a group prior to having direct information about the specific person or persons involved.
5. Modified, based on further observation and experience with the actual people and situations. (p. 75-76)

Moreover, as time goes by, such generalizations may be modified or discarded completely, as information about individuals with whom one has actual contact supersedes the generalization. In the following sections, cultural research is reviewed that demonstrates how the definition and applications of individualism-collectivism reflect each of these tenets.

### **Following Adler guideline #1: Distinguishing ecological- and individual-level research**

Adler's (1997) first guideline was to make generalizations about group mainstream norms consciously, remaining aware that individuals may diverge from them. Hofstede (1991), who numerically rated the strength of individualism-collectivism in fifty-three countries, demonstrated this principle. However, Guest (2002) accused Hofstede of promoting stereotypes by categorizing cultures as individualist or collectivist. What Guest and similar detractors have failed to realize is that measures of cultural variability such as individualism-collectivism can be attempted at two levels: ecological (i.e., country) and individual (Hofstede, 1991, 1996; Triandis, 1995). Moreover, Hofstede's ecological-level research was not intended to be universally applied to individual members of a culture (Hofstede, 1991,

1996), but to compare, as Hofstede (1991) explained, the “*central tendencies* in the answers from each country” (p. 253). Hofstede (1991) continued, “The ‘average person’ from a country does not exist, only an average tendency to respond among the members of the group of respondents” (p. 253). He also cautioned: although Americans as a group scored higher in individualism than the Japanese, some Japanese individuals might score higher in individualism on his instrument than the average American score. Therefore, Hofstede's rating system did not preclude the possibility that individuals would deviate from the cultural tendencies that he described.

Analysis of culture on the ecological and individual levels has utility—consequently, both are meaningful points of inquiry in intercultural research. Individual-level analysis creates profiles of people closer to their full complexity, while ecological-level research helps to identify mainstream cultural patterns. Ecological-level research is helpful when we have limited information about another cultural group—in other words, it can serve as the basis of Adler's (1997) “best first guess” about possible cultural differences (guideline #4), which can be modified according to one's experiences during intercultural contact. For example, Japanese students studying in the United States could assume that their teachers will expect them to volunteer their opinions in class, even those that might be contrary to the instructor's. However, if they also follow Adler's (1997) first guideline (i.e., to be consciously aware that generalizations describe a group norm rather than the characteristics of all individuals), then they can also remain open to the possibility that some teachers might deviate from this norm. In other words, the students maintain the awareness that they hold ecological-level generalizations about American classroom culture which are useful at the elementary stages of



intercultural contact, but are meant ultimately to be refined with more differentiated knowledge once they interact with their American instructors.

### **Following Adler guideline #2: Being descriptive, not judgmental**

Stephan and Stephan (1996) clarified that stereotypes are categories utilized not only for information retention and processing, but also to help “people to maintain their self-esteem and justify their social status” (p. 3). As previously described, S. Hall (1997) detailed the hegemonic and marginalizing functions of stereotypes. Hence, there is an evaluative function, in which stereotyped groups are placed in a hierarchy—typically beneath the status of one’s ingroup. Adler’s (1997) second tenet, i.e., generalizations should be descriptive rather than evaluative, clearly differentiates generalizations from stereotypes. In other words, the statement that Japanese students tend to behave as collectivists in university classrooms by waiting for the teacher to call upon them, rather than risking standing out by volunteering their opinions, consists of a neutral description of a cultural pattern, it does not imply a negative judgment of such characteristics.

### **Following Adler guideline #3: The evolving concept of individualism-collectivism**

Guest (2002) asserted that intercultural studies “do not accurately portray complex cultural realities but instead reduce them to simplistic binary constructs or essences” that lead to stereotyping (p. 602). This constitutes a specious oversimplification. Individualism-collectivism is not currently conceived of or applied by leading scholars in a binary manner—i.e., indicating that a person or a culture is uniformly individualist or collectivist.

As detailed in the remainder of this section, the notion in Adler’s (1997) third guideline—that generalizations should accurately describe the norm for the group to which the person belongs—has pushed culture researchers to refine models of individualism-collectivism that go far beyond simple binary categorizations of people or cultures.

### ***The polythetic nature of individualism-collectivism***

Triandis (1996) suggested a polythetic definition for individualism and collectivism in which four basic attributes (i.e., the meaning of the self, structure of goals, determinants of social behavior, and types of relationships formed) are utilized to identify them—much like a bird is identified from a few major attributes, such as the existence of feathers and wings. Sixty other attributes can be found in collectivist or individualist cultures, which, in the same way that additional features including colors or beak shapes are used to categorize bird species, decide what “species” of individualism or collectivism is present. Of these species, vertical-horizontal individualism-collectivism is considered one of the most important (Triandis, 1996). Horizontal collectivist and individualist cultures emphasize equality, while vertical cultures value power in the case of collectivism and achievement in the case of individualism. For example, the Israeli kibbutz, with the tradition of interchangeable roles performed by all members in maintaining the kibbutz, represents a horizontal collectivist culture; India, particularly in respect to the caste system, tends to be vertical collectivist; the United States, with its emphasis on money and possessions as status symbols, leans towards vertical individualism; and Sweden reinforces horizontal individualism with its high taxes that reduce income inequality. Collectivism and individualism also vary in terms of the primary group with which people identify, such as family,

coworkers, friends, or neighbors (eight groups in all) (Hui, 1988; Triandis, 1995; Triandis et al., 1988). According to Matsumoto et al. (1997), “People act differently depending on with whom they are interacting and the situation in which the interaction is occurring. A person could have collectivist tendencies at home and with close friends and individualist tendencies with strangers or at work” (p. 746). Collectivist tendencies also depend on which behavior is being studied, e.g., paying attention to the views of others, feelings similar to others, or competing with others (Triandis et al., 1988).

In order to avoid simplistic generalizations, when educators teach about mainstream cultural patterns as individualist or collectivist, it is important to qualify such descriptions in terms of contextual variables; in other words, instructors should be specific about which types of situations and with whom people tend to act or think as individualists or collectivists. For example, asserting during a lesson, “Japanese are collectivists,” is categorical and consequently inaccurate, as this statement is not universally true about all Japanese individuals in all contexts. However, explaining that Japanese university students *tend* not to directly disagree with their teachers *in front of large groups of classmates* due to collectivistic tendencies towards interpersonal harmony maintenance is far more flexible, specific, and as a result, likely to be accurate when encountering real Japanese people (Komisarof & Komisarof, 2001).

### ***The coexistence of individualism and collectivism at the ecological and individual levels***

Individualism-collectivism differs from binary concepts in another manner: it is not used to categorically label entire

cultures or its members; rather, on both the ecological and individual levels, individualist and collectivist tendencies coexist. According to Triandis (1998), they

can coexist and are simply emphasized more or less in each culture, depending on the situation. All of us carry both individualist and collectivist tendencies; the difference is that in some cultures the probability that individualist selves, attitudes, norms, values, and behaviors will be sampled or used is higher than in others. (p. 18)

Moreover, an individual’s personality can be thought of as a profile of the four vertical-horizontal individualism-collectivism tendencies across a series of tested or observed situations, e.g., vertical collectivist 10% of the time, 30% vertical individualist, 5% horizontal collectivist, and 55% horizontal individualist. By looking at the distributions of these scores among a sample of individuals that is representative of a culture, the culture can be characterized primarily as fitting one of the four tendencies while simultaneously noting the degree to which these themes coexist—which they do in most societies (Triandis, 1996). Adding to this complexity is the fact that culture can be shared not only at the national level but also at subcultural ones; diversity in psychosocial dimensions of cultural variability has been found according to gender, geographic region, socioeconomic class, generation, life stage, religion, organization, and vocation, among others (Hofstede, 1991; Matsumoto, 2000). These findings suggest tremendous intracultural diversity in individualism-collectivism—which, when communicated to students, can help counteract tendencies to think categorically about how other cultures differ (e.g., all Americans are individualists who frankly express their opinions). Moreover, educators can incorporate the research of Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000), who demonstrated how people

embracing opposing values can achieve synergy by utilizing principles of Dilemma Theory, i.e., incorporating elements of seemingly irreconcilable values to create more effective, inclusive corporate policies. This model, which suggests that individualism and collectivism are potentially synergistic precisely *because* they are different, further smashes the notion that interculturalists think, according to Guest (2002), in terms of “binary opposites that produce false dichotomies” (p. 615).

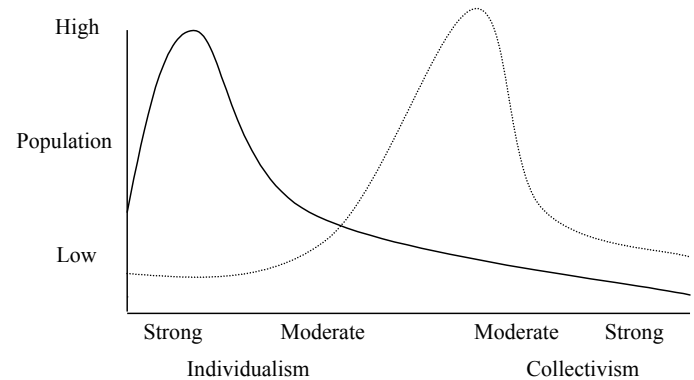
### **Balancing intracultural diversity and cultural patterns**

The research previously reviewed detailed great intracultural diversity in preferences for individualism or collectivism. How can such intracultural diversity be recognized without rendering meaningless the existence of predominant intracultural predilections toward individualism or collectivism? For example, how can both the mainstream American tendency towards individualistic norms, values, and behaviors described by Hofstede (1991) coexist with the collectivistic tendencies observed among various subgroups, such as Japanese Americans (Brislin, 1993)? Moreover, how can measurable, consistent cross-cultural differences in individualistic or collectivistic patterns be reconciled with such intracultural diversity? In other words, if Americans demonstrate such abundant diversity in preferences towards individualism-collectivism, how can we say that American culture is individualist, and then meaningfully compare it to “collectivist” Japan, which also incorporates such diversity?

According to Yashiro et al., (1998), such a balance can be visually conceptualized as in Figure 1. The vertical axis represents the population of a cultural group (in this case Japan and the United States are depicted), while the horizontal axis depicts the continuum from strong individualism on the left to strong collectivism on the right. The positions of both populations were plotted in accordance

with the mean scores for individualism-collectivism computed by Hofstede (1991), i.e., 91 for the United States and 46 for Japan.

**Figure 1. Bell curves representing cultural patterns in individualism-collectivism**



*Note:* The solid line on the left represents the USA and the dotted line on the right represents Japan.

As Figure 1 illustrates, Americans are most commonly strong individualists, with a comparatively smaller population characterized by weaker forms of individualism, as well as various grades of collectivism. Japan’s cultural patterns can be similarly depicted, with the majority tending to demonstrate moderate collectivism, but subgroups tending towards either strong collectivism or various grades of individualism. Finally, the distance between the peaks of the bell curves constitutes the difference between the groups on the ecological level—in this case strong individualism vs. moderate collectivism. This distance, and hence intercultural differences between the

mainstreams from each group, is visibly less than the intracultural diversity for each group (as represented by the width of each bell curve from start to finish) (Triandis, 1998). However, such rich intracultural diversity does not diminish the coexistence of intracultural mainstream patterns and intercultural differences in predominant individualism-collectivism preferences. In other words, both Americans and Japanese as groups can demonstrate diverging mainstream patterns—with Americans commonly favoring strong individualism and Japanese moderate collectivism—yet individuals within both populations can be found who are representative of any point on the continuum from strong individualism to strong collectivism. As Matsumoto (2000) elucidated:

Culture describes average, mainstream tendencies of a group of units; it does not describe accurately all aspects of behavior for all units in the group. Individual units will harbor that culture's values, beliefs, behaviors, and the like, to differing degrees; that is, they will exhibit individual differences in their adherence or conformity to culture. (p. 25)

Therefore, describing ecological-level cultural patterns in individualism-collectivism and stating that people in a culture *tend to* follow such patterns is not the same as stereotyping, since such generalizations implicitly allow for divergence from the mainstream. If students understand this distinction and utilize it accurately when communicating with others, then they can avoid facile and ultimately inaccurate ideas about the behavior, attitudes, and values of cultural groups—including their own.

## Conclusion: Following Adler guidelines #4 & 5

In her fourth and fifth guidelines distinguishing cultural generalizations from stereotypes, Adler (1997) advised utilizing generalizations as flexible “best first guesses” about another culture’s members prior to direct intercultural contact; afterwards, such hypotheses can be modified based on experiences with the target culture. Thus, students can utilize their knowledge of individualism-collectivism to identify meaningful ways in which cultural groups tend to vary from their own and reduce uncertainty about what *could* occur during intercultural interactions. At the same time, however, in order to avoid creating or reinforcing stereotypes with their knowledge of individualism-collectivism, they need to remain open to new information, i.e., keep generalizations flexible and primed to evolve with each intercultural experience. Japanese students studying in the United States, for example, could follow Adler’s fourth suggestion by balancing assumptions that American students might demonstrate individualistic classroom behaviors and challenge their opinions during discussions with the anticipation of encounters with peers who are exceptions to this norm. Moreover, as Adler recommended in her fifth guideline, with further intercultural contact, they can continue to refine their understanding of the subtleties of individualism among American students, i.e., by grasping in which contexts students commonly behave as individualists by debating ideas and when they do not (for example, during small group discussions vs. those involving all class members).

In conclusion, if students are taught to follow Adler’s five guidelines, i.e., use non-categorical, nonjudgmental, and flexible generalizations about predilections towards individualism-collectivism in other cultures, then teaching about cultural



differences is not conducive to the formation of stereotypes, but rather to their mitigation and reduction. By doing so, educators can assist their students in developing their intercultural competence—the raison d'être for teaching intercultural communication within a foreign language curriculum.

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