

How Cultural Factors Influence Empathy Levels in Specific Contexts: A Comparison Between Individualism and Collectivism

Hongyi Zhu*

Business School, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

* Corresponding Author Email: a1838274@student.adelaide.edu.au

Abstract. As one of the opposite cultures, people who live under individualistic and collectivistic cultures always have diverse ideologies. Basic on this, this article aims to explore the empathy difference between these two cultures. The first part of the essay provides a literature review to clarify different terminology and points out the hypothesis. Secondly, an experiment was designed to interview culturally diverse respondents. This essay selected China and Australia to represent collectivism and individualism. To get a more prosperous answer, the interviewees in this experiment are mainly undergraduates or above. The interview is scheduled mainly in two parts, one is to quote GLOBE methods to test whether the experiments are representative of individualism/collectivism. In addition, the various emphases were measured based on the progressive test. The final comparison showed that people from collectivist backgrounds have a more significant role in empathy when they encounter things and show slightly more compassion for different things than people from individualistic backgrounds.

Keywords: Individualism; Collectivism; Empathy; Cultural influence.

1. Introduction

The range of human endeavours in which empathy features is impressive. Empathy is prominent within philosophy: it features in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of history, ethics and aesthetics. It has a crucial role in the human sciences, particularly within what is known as ‘the phenomenological tradition’. Empathy has a place in developmental, social, and clinical psychology [1]. It also features increasingly in the developing cognitive sciences [1]. Generally, empathy is considered as the minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can anyone be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, to some degree, susceptible [2]. As strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to the other and beget correspondent movements in every human creature [2]. Recently, some scholars have argued that empathy is on the wane, especially after the war in Ukraine [3]. Facing this situation, this essay aims to find why empathy shows different forms in various cultures.

One of the most widely used frameworks for describing and studying cultural differences concerns how individuals define themselves and their relationships with others, particularly the groups or collectives to which they belong [4]. In most Western cultures, such as the United States, the core of self-definition is based on individual autonomy and separation from others. In contrast, in Eastern cultures, such as the People's Republic of China, self-concept is defined primarily based on social embeddedness and interdependence with the ingroup of others [4]. This distinction is thought to be a cultural property. In this regard, individualism and collectivism represent this cultural difference, respectively.

Some researchers show that collectivism has more expression than individualism in empathy, but there still have gaps in research and no substantial evidence [5]. Essentially, this paper aims to compare the empathy variance between Australians and Chinese to investigate how cultural factors affect the manifestation of empathy. To assess the belief that "people in the collectivistic culture are more likely to show compassion", this essay split the existing research and experiments into different subdivisions. There is also an interview designed in this paper to evaluate the argument.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Characteristics and contrast of two doctrines

Individualism values uniqueness, freedom and autonomy [6]. People from individualistic countries care more that individuals comprise a world for themselves and are centred on themselves as self-sufficient unitary beings [6]. In addition, individualism emphasises unique ability and performance as criteria for promotion and compensation in the company [7]. By contrast, in teams composed of highly collectivistic individuals, members give more emotional, informational, and appraisal support to one another than do members of teams composed of those low on collectivism [4]. As part of a group, people who live in collectivist culture tend to be humble and work together to advance the group's interests [8].

Furthermore, in collectivist cultures, from birth onwards, people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts, and grandparents), which provides them with support and protection [9]. Based on the characteristics of collectivism, which attaches more importance to the relationship between people and believes that people need to depend on each other [9]. This report has made a basic inference that collectivism is relatively easier to show empathy. However, more evidence is still required to support the view.

2.2. Comparing collectivism and individualism in those two countries

GLOBE analysis is one of the most doyens of cultural research. GLOBE thus produced 18 culture scores for each country: nine dimensions 'as is' and nine dimensions 'should be' [10]. Moreover, the higher the country's score, the closer the government is to collectivism [11]. By calculation, the average point for Chinese is 82.78 and 80.36 for Australian [11]. Based on this, in general, compared with Australia, China is a collectivist country, while Australia is an individualistic country.

A cross-cultural study was conducted to explore how collectivism and individualism were presented to 4-5 years old Chinese and Australian children [12]. In the experimental questionnaire, Chinese parents show a discipline style of education, focusing on "management and guidance", "care for children", and other collectivist characteristics [12]. In contrast, Australian parents are democratic, emphasising "equality", "emotional support", "individuality", etc which highlights a solid individualistic style [12]. Parents' educational styles are aligned with their cultural values. After completing the scale test of children's personality development, the experimental results show that Chinese children are better than Australian children in the prosocial dimension, compassion and altruism, shame and guilt, aggression and resistance traits. In terms of empathy, Australian children are better than Chinese children in the intelligence and emotionality dimension, enterprising alone, cheerful and lively [12]. It can be found that children in a collectivist cultural background show a more obvious tendency toward altruism and empathy.

2.3. Research hypothesis

With the analysis above, this paper hypothesises that people with a collectivistic ethnicity show more empathy than those with an individualistic one. In addition, Australia and China are representative countries of individualism/collectivism, respectively.

3. Methodology

3.1. Designing the questionnaire

The questionnaire is designed into three parts: the Individualism and collectivism test (I-C test), empathy degree and scenario simulation. Firstly, although most articles straightforwardly associate the state with individualism/collectivism, this research also introduces a test for further study of the sample selection. There are two reasons why it is necessary to further segmentation. Firstly, accelerated global communication via the Internet and international travel increases the risk of sample

error. Secondly, this questionnaire is designed as an interview, so the sample size could not be big enough. In this aspect, one sample error can push the experimental results in the opposite direction. Facing this situation, this research uses three dimensions to give another assurance based on the GLOBE method. Namely personal, societal and company sizes.

In addition, Paul Rozin introduces an acceptable method for disgust-sensitive tests. In Rozin's study, the degree of disgust is divided into different questions, including the degree of disgust when seeing a bowel movement left unflushed in a public toilet, while walking through a tunnel under a railroad track, and when smelling urine [13]. For the empathy experiment, the questionnaire was divided into questions about how respondents feel about different things when they die, from small words to the death of a sibling. In this way, it is possible to rank people's perceived compassion according to the results of each experimental population.

3.1.1 Variables (participants' characteristics)

This study interviewed ten people, and most of the respondents were teachers or students. Both Chinese and Australian respondents have three people who are involved in teaching. The variables are that there is a manager and engineer for Chinese respondents and one student and an academic community worker for Australian respondents.

In the first part of the questionnaire, Chinese respondents show an average of 6 points on the I-C test, and Australian respondents have 5.7 points on the I-C test. As discussed above, the I-C test is a component of the question, such as 'do you agree that children are proud of their parents' achievements in this society?'. In addition, the answer distinguishes between agree general and disagree. 'Agree' means one point, 'generally' representing 0.5 points, and there is no point with disagree. Basic on that, a higher point means a greater degree of collectivism. In this case, the result of I-C test for experimental are same as the hypothesis above, which is that Chinese people show more collectivism.

3.2. Response collection

The interviews are collected via email and personal contact information. Because the sample is expected to be sufficiently rich, almost all the people interviewed for this article have college degrees or above. For sample selection, to screen out high-quality responses, the interviews used in this report were almost 500 words and above. The author utilised a coding table to divide the different answers into various groups.

4. Results

4.1. A study of Australian respondents

4.1.1. Understanding of empathy

All Australian respondents have almost the same answer, which means empathy is an emotion of another's feeling (Appendix 1). When asked whether society will improve with increased empathy, more people believe that a modest amount of empathy will make the world better than simply if an organisation gets better with empathy. People who are against striving for greater empathy does not believe empathy can make for a better society because they reckon people will use empathy to do bad things and mislead the public's feelings. The following question offers the answer to the drawback of blindly increased empathy. Firstly, an increasing sense/absorption of the fear of others and other negative emotions will increase people's psychological burden. In addition, if one person's mood affects others, it will affect more people, and hinder the progress of work. The British strike provides a good example. Indeed, those who call for higher wages/more holidays for the platelayer are to be feared because they are thinking of others. Still, superfluous workers involved, or other industries helped to join the march could lead to partial social paralysis.

4.1.2. Does empathy inherent or learned

Three of five interviewees mentions that empathy is both inherent and learned. Part of empathy is born and can be improved by the outside environment. Although almost half of the experimental believe that empathy is innate, none think it is right to rely solely on feelings of heart to make decisions. All interviewees approve that emotions of kindness are an acceptable catalyst of behaviour, but rational assessment is crucial.

4.1.3. Power of influence by others

This study divides the influence into “news” and “real situations” to compare inner impulses and practical considerations. By contrasting those two conditions together, it is easy to analysis how human rationality vigorously participates in real life and the internet. It can be found that all people will feel the urge to help and feel sad about the misfortune on the news. By contrast, when the question asked whether they would offer a hand in real life, no one said they would assist the unfortunate person before judgement.

4.2. A study of Chinese respondents

4.2.1. Understanding of empathy

There is one old Chinese word that is repeated half a time in the definition of empathy, which is called “Huan wei si kao”. The translation for this word means thinking transpositional consideration. Besides, four out of five respondents stand that society will improve if everyone’s empathy is increased. There are two reasons why empathy can increase the degree of social civilisation. One is that social conflicts will be reduced by the influence of selfishness. Secondly, it is necessary to encourage the rich and the powerful to think more about ordinary people to achieve greater happiness. On the other hand, all respondents point out that increased empathy blindly will illustrate some problems. The negative influence of empathy will represent in three respects. Recently, more and more video makers have earned money by selling miserable experiments or videos. Most of these experiences are fake, such as a woman portraying herself as a divorcee with three children or losing her arm in a car accident. In this aspect, giving these scammers help will not make society better, it will enhance the amount of these scammers. Besides, happiness will be reduced when people get more empathetic because empathising with others always makes one feel powerless to help others. Finally, assisting others in an unsuitable situation will illustrate an opposite result, called the spotlight effect (references). In this regard, attention is drawn to a group of people suffering, but the majority of people who are equally or more complex are not taken care of at the same time. In this situation, helping only a small group of people will lead the rest of the suffering into greater injustice and anger, which will not improve society.

4.2.2. Does empathy inherent or learned

For the question about how empathy generates, nearly 70% of experimental believe that empathy can be caused by nurture and the environment. In this aspect, an infant's emotions should be equivalent to the animal's primitive emotions. If empathy builds up without experience and cognition, this emotion cannot be achieved. Empathy should be based on experience and cognition. Without relevant experience and cognition, empathy cannot be achieved. Respondents also provide a sense of the role and impact of empathy in real life. The exact words for those experimental are empathy can serve as a level of understanding, but most decisions should be made considering more about other factors.

4.2.3. Power of influence by others

In the situation of asking respondents to observe an unfortunate event indirectly, no one can read or hear bad news and keep calm. Although this kind of emotion can evoke the feeling of empathy, this kind of sympathy does not cause a strong impulse to help. Still, most people combine empathy with unfortunate experiences and try to avoid these negative events from happening. Based on this

situation, two of seven respondents said they would offer assistance before consideration. The rest of the experimental prefer denied help or think calmly before helping to various degrees.

4.3. Progressive experiment

4.3.1. Australian respondent

Table 1 ranks the weight of the experiment by the percentage of people who feel empathy. For instance, there are three people who feel empathy when animals are being killed, representing 60% in table 1.

Table 1. Australian respondent

Question	Mosquitoes	Animals	Strangers	civilization
Weight (total 5)	0	60%	80%	100%

For the first question, “how did you feel when people kill mosquitoes”: although the reason why they do not feel empathy is different, no one showed any sympathy. Furthermore, three of five experimental mentioned that it is crucial for them to observe that animals were killed, even though they eat meat. Thirdly, interviews show that people will feel pity and sad when they watch a strange die in a video/movie. The experiment also mentions that this empathy always evokes from the victim's family and regret of the death. Finally, everyone was angry at the death of a fellow citizen. The feeling is not only for empathy but also for anger, fear and others-oriented emotion. It can be found that there is precise graduation, and it can be more shown explicitly by ranking.

4.3.2. Chinese respondent

Table 2 shows the degree how which empathy changes in various questions. It can be found that the experimental empathy change of the respondents was progressive from zero.

Table 2. Chinese respondent

Question	Mosquitoes	Animals	Strangers	civilization
Weight (total 7)	0	71%	86%	100%

For the first question, most people feel vengeful pleasure when a mosquito is killed. In any case, the respondents think mosquitoes as a pest do not deserve sympathy. When questions asked whether they feel empathy when animals are being killed, the respondents were accompanied by empathy and pity. In this regard, although most respondents showed empathy, the intensity was not noticeable. Furthermore, 86% of experimental shows empathy when a stranger is being killed. Empathy will be generated from different aspects of this situation. Firstly, the strength of empathy will be influenced by the power distance of others. Generally, a person weaker than the respondent will often elicit substantial sympathy, and a person more potent to the respondent will elicit a grateful mood. Besides, how the victim is informed can also affect the intensity of empathy. On the other hand, the difference between the response for questions three and four is how rationality is being utilised. Rationality will be utilised when strangers are being killed before acting through compassion, but there is an unquenchable urge to retaliate when the dead person is familiar with the experiment.

To compare the empathy power in various situations, Respondents summarised the reasons for the change in empathy. In real life, the level of empathy is affected by the level of involvement in life. In this aspect, civilisation as a category that can be seen every day is likely to cause one to feel the peevisness of life, so the respondents have the most muscular empathy for the killing of their fellow citizens. Secondly, species distinctions also affect the strength of empathy because people always emotion into the victim's perspective when calculating empathy. In this regard, The feeling that such a tragic event had happened to them was assumed when the respondent brought himself into the presence of a slain sibling. Empathy for the victim was undoubtedly actively bestowed to protect oneself. On the other hand, even though people can bring their feelings to animals, the death of animals does not affect them. In this case, there is some compassion for the animal's death, but the

strength of empathy is weak because there is no activation of protective mechanisms for the respondent's own.

4.3.3. Combining both together

Table 3. Comparison

Question	Mosquitoes	Animals	Strangers	civilization
Weight (Australian)	0	60%	80%	100%
Weight (Chinese)	0	71%	86%	100%

As table 3 has shown above, Chinese interviewees showed a higher degree of empathy for animals, strangers and civilisation parts, and no one felt empathy when mosquitoes died. Table 3 is a shred of robust evidence that Chinese respondents are shown more empathy than Australians. Combining the I-C test discussed above, it is evidenced that people in collectivist countries show more empathy than individualism.

5. Discussion

5.1. The various understanding of empathy in two countries

Both nations provide nearly the same definition and understanding of empathy, and most Chinese/Australian respondents believe that society will be better if everyone's empathy level increases. Besides, the shortcomings of empathy in the two countries are almost the same, and both are oriented towards using empathy for deception and emotional damage to the self. Essentially, the Chinese respondents showed more substantial unity, particularly for social structure and contradictions. As discussed above, although understanding empathy is approximate for both groups, in terms of social construction, empathy plays a more decisive role in the Chinese people. In addition, both two countries show a similar generation of empathy and the role of rational thinking. Firstly, both two samples believe that empathy is both innate and malleable. Secondly, empathy is an acceptable behavioural catalyst for some simple decisions, but most situations require rational judgment. In the understanding of empathy, although Chinese respondents showed more belief that the role of empathy plays in social status, there is no obvious evidence that can support the hypothesis.

Previous studies have shown that the effect of empathy in real and indirect situations is not the same because listening to the news or television tends to produce less directed emotions such as compassion and anger. However, if someone is being hurt in real life, people tend to weigh more emotions, such as the possibility of success and hurting themselves. Indirectly informed information did elicit empathy in both countries, but the urge to help was not strong. When asked if it happened in real life, none of the Australian respondents said they would support the unfortunate person before making a judgment, but two out of seven Chinese respondents said they would help before making a rational judgment. In this aspect, Chinese respondents have a higher impulse to help than Australians, indicating that, in reality, Chinese empathy significantly influences judgment more than Australians.

6. Conclusion

The experimental results verified that the original hypothesis was correct: people in collectivist countries show more empathy than individualism. There are two specific differences: the first is the impact of empathy on the conduct of judgments in real life. Chinese respondents showed a stronger empathic desire to help when they saw others hurt. Besides, through the progressive experiment, Chinese respondents showed better empathy towards animals and strangers. It still needs to be acknowledged that this experiment is with limitations because of the reliability and validity of sample selection and interview conduction. Firstly, most interviewees were chosen from college or other higher education institutions, which may not represent the situation of the whole society. In addition, most of the interviews were conducted online, so emailed responses to surveys may not fully reflect

the real situation. As an essential part of social development, the role of empathy in different countries has not been appreciated. Through this article, it is hoped further in-depth research on the role of empathy in different cultures can be conducted.

References

- [1] Matravers, D. Empathy. United Kingdom: Polity Pres. 2018: 10.
- [2] Hume, D. Treatise of Human Nature. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1978.
- [3] Socjologii, P. J. Empathy! So what? University of Lodz. 2022, 18(4): 194-233.
- [4] Brewer, M. B. & Ya-Ru, C. 2007 Where (who) are collectives in collectivism? Toward conceptual clarification of individualism and collectivism. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007, 114(1): 135-151.
- [5] Jami, P. Y, & Walker, D, I. Exploring situational empathy and intergroup empathy bias among people with two opposing cultural norms: Collectivism and individualism. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 2022, 91: 282-296.
- [6] Simmel, G. Individualism. Sage Publications, 2007, 24(7): 66-71.
- [7] Danny, S. & Timothy, D. Fundamentals of management. Melbourne: Cengage. 2017.
- [8] Donatus, A. I. Culture diversity: Implication for workplace management, Journal of Diversity Management, 2007, 2(4): 1-6.
- [9] Prioste, A. Narciso, I., Gonçalves, M. M. & Pereira, C. R. Family relationships and parenting practices: A pathway to adolescents' collectivist and individualist values? Journal of Child and Family Studies, 2015, 24(11): 3258-3267.
- [10] Peterson, M. F. & Castro, S. L. Measurement metrics at aggregate levels of analysis: Implications for organization culture research and the GLOBE project. The Leadership Quarterly, 2006, 17(5): 506-521.
- [11] GLOBE. An overview of the 2004 study: Understanding the Relationship Between National Culture, Societal Effectiveness and Desirable Leadership Attributes, GLOBE, 2020. Retrieved from https://globe.bus.sfu.ca/study_2004_2007?page_id=data#data. Retrieved on January 19, 2023.
- [12] Xiao, J. S. A comparative study on the relationship between parenting style and children's personality under collectivism/individualism culture. Doctoral dissertation, Liaoning Normal University, 2008.
- [13] Bloom, P. Just babies: The origins of good and evil. Crown, 2014.