

## A Call for Human Resource Development Scholars to Reinvigorate the Study of Cultural Syndromes and Individual Dimensions

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### ABSTRACT

*During the 20th century, there was significant growth in the development and understanding of the nuances of identity, behavior, and personality. As globalization has increased, scholarly attention to cultural attunement and cross-cultural studies has also increased. However, despite significant research in the latter half of the 20th century in the areas of the culture syndromes of collectivism and individualism, and the related individual factors of allocentrism and idiocentrism, the development of this body of research has largely plateaued. Human resource development scholars have long touted the importance of their research to be of the nature to benefit practice directly. There is an opportunity to reinvigorate the study of the attributes of these constructs, specifically in the field of human resource development. The body of literature on these individual and cultural dimensions offers promise to enhance organizations' ability to be strategic in their business development efforts.*

**KEYWORDS:** collectivism, individualism, allocentrism, idiocentrism, human resource development

### Introduction

As globalization continues to increase (Altman & Bastian, 2023), the mixing and blending of cultures, perspectives, and practices require many workers to broaden their understanding of culture-informed behavior related to teams, leadership, and communication. Culture is a multidimensional construct (Oyserman & Sorenson, 2009) “that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 3). According to Kluckhohn “culture is to society what memory is to individuals” (as cited in Triandis, 2001, p. 908). Regardless of whether the work is strictly domestic or transnational, workers need to be prepared to work with others who are different from themselves. To this point, Pant (2016) discovered that even within the same organization, in the same country, workers with different ethnic backgrounds approached deadlines differently through a culturally-informed lens.

Research in the fields of organizational behavior (Scott, 2020; Stefanovska & Tanushevski, 2016), human resource development (HRD) (Harvey et al., 2011; Marquardt & Berger, 2003; Tri, 2022), industrial organizational psychology (Conte, 2024; Cascio & Aguinis, 2008), and human resource management (Stofkova & Sukalova, 2020; Cooke et al., 2020) has demonstrated commitment to responding to globalization. This paper aims to examine how one field, HRD, has an opportunity to reinvigorate a line of research that has largely plateaued in recent years. Despite HRD's abundant work in cross-cultural research, the field has done little to advance the study of the cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1996). A concept that has been heavily researched since Hofstede's 1980 seminal work, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*, where he introduced the dimensions of collectivism and individualism.

### Human Resource Development

Human resource development has rich multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary roots, including but not limited to economics, psychology, sociology, industrial relations, management, and education (McLagan, 1989; Jacobs, 1990; Werner, 2014; Swanson, 2022). One of the underpinnings of HRD scholarship is to reveal opportunities to enhance individual and group experiences through translational research, which means the findings are applied to interventions and solutions (Woolf, 2008). Human resource development differs from human resource management in several areas. While they are both concerned with enhancing organizational functions related to the employees, the scope differs. Both disciplines are concerned with the well-being of the employee in relationship to their employer, with commitments to training, development, career development, and job design (McLagan, 1989); however, the most significant difference is human resource management's scope includes areas not represented in human resource development, such as labor relations, employee assistance, and compensation and benefits (Bratton et al., 2021; McLagan, 1989; Stewart & Brown, 2019). Human resource development is more myopic, focusing on the development of the person. Its roots trace back to field training initiatives at the beginning of the 20th century to respond to industrial needs (Dinero, 2005). In contrast, human resource management focuses on the management of staff. It emerged from personnel administration in the early 20th century (Kaufman, 2008).

Born out of this strategy to upskill and enhance employees and organizations (Ruona & Gibson, 2004), HRD has refined its direction to target individual and organizational needs. Despite its early start as responding to industry needs for skilled workers, in early 2000, it emerged to be more concerned with a broadening from merely preparing workers at an individual level (Goldstein, 1974; Wexley & Latham, 2002; Yorks & Barto



(2013), toward increasing organizational effectiveness (Phillips, 1999). According to Ruona and Gibson (2004), it was the “growing realization that people are an organization’s primary source of competitive advantage” (p. 49) that resulted in broadening the focus to the whole system. Many fields of study have embraced this perspective (e.g., industrial and organizational psychology, human resource management). However, COVID-19’s great resignation (Washington Post Live, 2021; Beilfuss, 2021) could be viewed as a referendum of sorts on organizations and their leaders’ efficacy in integrating people-first practices.

The field of HRD has evolved mainly because of the leadership of the Academy of Human Resource Development. The Academy encourages the “systematic study of human resource development theories, processes, and practices;” the dissemination of “information about HRD; to encourage the application of HRD research findings; and to provide opportunities for social interaction among individuals with scholarly and professional interests in HRD from multiple disciplines and from across the globe” (Academy of Human Resource Development, n.d.). As such, the Academy has identified eight HRD-specific domains of focus: organization development, training and development, career development, critical HRD, diversity, equity and inclusion, cross-cultural HRD, evaluation, and strategic HRD.

A systematic review of the four Academy of Human Resource Development journals, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *Human Resource Development International*, *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, and *Human Resource Development Review*, was completed to examine how the topics of collectivism and individualism have been addressed, precisely because of the Academy’s commitment to cross-cultural HRD studies, as well as the Academy’s ambition to provide research that translates into practice. The review of the cross-cultural literature reflects the Academy’s commitment to enhancing the quality of global work. HRD scholars (e.g., Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002a; Cesh & Crocco, 2020; McLean & McLean, 2001; Johansen & McLean, 2006) have diligently examined many cross-cultural frameworks and topics. Journal topics range from national HRD (McLean, 2004, 2006; Metcalfe, 2011; Rao, 2004; Scotland, 2004), colonialism (Lee, 2017; Syed & Metcalfe, 2017), adult learning (Grover & Keenan, 2006; Papuni & Bartlett, 2006), cultural intelligence (Moon et al., 2012; Zhang, 2013), leadership (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002b; Ghosh, 2020; Xu & Zhao, 2023), and intervention-specific studies such as training (Burba et al., 2001; Littrell & Salas, 2005; Osman-Gani & Zidan, 2001; Wright & Nasierowski, 1994), talent management and development (Lucas et al., 2018; Swailes, 2016). However, only a limited number of authors (e.g., Lucas et al., 2018; McAtavey & Nikolovska, 2010; Mizzi & Rocco, 2013; Rurkkhum & Bartlett, 2018) have examined the dimensions of collectivism and individualism.

Of the articles, the work by McAtavey and Nikolovska (2018) most closely aligns with ambitions to draw upon the collectivist and individualist dimensions of research to deliver a practitioner-specific application aimed at “building effective teams” and a framework for “managers to diagnose and provide

solutions to dysfunctional teams (p. 307). However, outside of this work, very little has been done in the four academic journals to advance the integration of this body of work into practice. There is an opportunity for HRD scholars to provide leadership in moving beyond obstacles and challenges associated with the syndromes and begin to deliver concepts and even models to operationalize the extensive research on collectivism and individualism. With the cross-cultural development market forecasted to grow by \$1.74 billion between now and 2028 (Technavio, 2024), critical interventions could likely emerge from the rich scholarship foundation of the collectivist and individualist dimensions.

### Overview of Collectivism and Individualism

Collectivism and individualism are differences that influence how a person may engage with others, what they prioritize, how decisions are made, what they value, or how they integrate into groups (Cheng et al., 2020; Hofstede, 2011). Some may consider collectivism and individualism as aspects of identity, but that is an inaccurate overgeneralization. Alternatively, and more accurate than the concept of identity, Triandis introduced the term *syndromes* (1996) to explain these dimensions, as they are “networks of associated features, such that curing one feature is likely, through spreading activation, to make other features salient in working memory” (Oyserman & Sorensen, 2013, p. 25). These are the cultural circumstances people are often born into, heavily influenced by the ecological aspects of the location where the individual was raised, such as climate, geography, and resources. “Ecology shapes culture, which includes child-rearing patterns, which influences personality” (Triandis, 2001, p. 911). If the ecology changes, the culture will change over time, as will patterns in personality (Triandis, 2001).

Another way to think of it is the nature or quality of the allocation of behavior in response to specific situations (Jiao & Zhao, 2023). “The perceptions and behavior of people in collectivist cultures are different from” those in individualist cultures (Triandis, 2004, p. 90). Collectivist cultures “are likely to define themselves as aspects of groups,” giving priority to “in-group goals” (Triandis, 2001, p. 907), whereas individualists are “autonomous and independent from their in-groups” (909).

These dimensions often reflect the culture an individual is raised within. Collectivist countries include China, Japan, and Indonesia, whereas individualist countries include Canada, Germany, and the United States (generally aligned with Western countries). However, exceptions exist, such as Mexico and Chile. Both are considered Western countries, but their tendencies align with the collectivist dimension (Krassner et al., 2017). It is essential to remember that location does not always give way to collectivist or individualist practices. Even within a country, subcultures can have different perspectives. Take, for example, Belgium. Belgium is, like all countries, comprised of different subcultures. One notable subculture grouping is around the language spoken - Flemish and French. Subcultures reflect the variance of group behaviors, such as how groups respond to deadlines (Pant, 2016). It is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon;



an important fact is that not all individualist or collectivist cultures possess the same characteristics (Triandis, 2004). Work by Triandis (1995) and Katgicibasi (1997) found dimension variation among collectivists, as well as individualists.

**Allocentrism and Idiocentrism**

Triandis et al’s., (1985) work on collectivism, individualism, and personality resulted in the evolution of allocentrism and idiocentrism. In a technical report studying the difference between Hispanic and Mainstream naval workers, Triandis (1983) proposed allocentric and idiocentric frameworks. Collectivism and individualism are constructs specific to regional and/or country cultures (Triandis, 1989), whereas allocentrism and idiocentrism are personality-like traits (Lay et al., 2012; Triandis et al., 1994) at the individual level. “Allocentrism is defined as greater emphasis on the views, needs, goals, and concerns of the ingroup than of oneself,” whereas “idiocentrism is greater emphasis on own views, needs, goals and concerns than on the views, needs, goals, and concerns of others” (Triandis, 1983, p. 16). These definitions align with the dimensions of the collectivist and individualist construct.

Delineation has been necessary because, despite the dimensions aligning with collectivist and individualist constructs, the constructs have surplus meaning beyond the individual (Triandis, 1983); “when measuring collectivism and individualism at the level of individuals, we should use these terms to distinguish such measurements from studies where cultural data are used” (Triandis et al., 1995, p. 462). Numerous studies demonstrate correlations among the dimensions (e.g., Carpenter & Radhakrishnan, 2000; Lam et al., 2002; Lay et al., 1998; Triandis et al., 1995). However, an important aspect of the allocentrism and idiocentrism constructs is that an individual may possess features of both depending on the situation they respond to, drawing upon one tendency more than another. Triandis et al.’s work exposed the situational nature of these dimensions (1995).

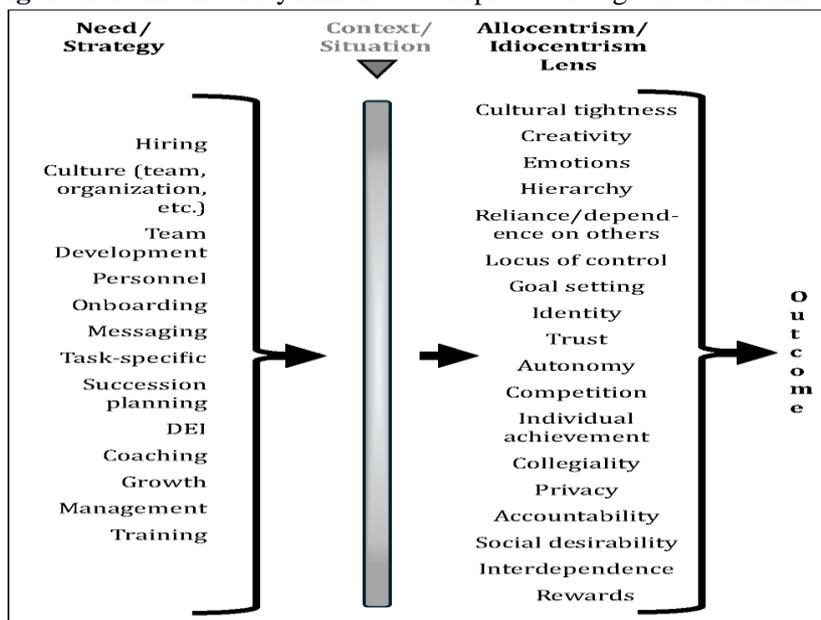
Triandis and colleagues’ work has cast a framework for further investigation of the core elements to determine if there are core constructs to these orientations that can be utilized in various domains, including the workforce. For a historical review of the research that informed the evolution of the allocentric and individualistic dimensions, see Triandis, 1983 for a robust literature review.

**Opportunity to Further Explore Construct Applications**

Regardless of the perspectives of the collectivist and individualist syndromes or the allocentrism and idiocentrism dimensions, figure 1 (right side) lists items often cited when studying these constructs. This list was created after a review of non-HRD-specific journals, including the works of Adler (1991), Berry et al. (1997), Bryne (1993), Hofstede (2001, 2011), McAtavey and Nikolovska (2010), and Triandis (1995, 2004). Each characteristic can have a positive or negative valence (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998), which helps determine the nature of the preference and quality of behavior as it relates to the subjective task/strategy/etc. (left side). Also included in the Figure is the situational nature of issues, as recognized by Triandis (1995). This situational or contextual factor is essential because individuals do not strictly abide by allocentric or idiocentric perspectives.

While the Figure does not offer solutions or modeling, it is relevant in that it offers a point of view as to a path forward in building models and conclusions about organizational factors, such as fit, once empirically tested. One example is the need to hire a person that will bring a team together. In addition to skills and experiences, there is also value in determining one’s orientation or preference toward team cohesion. It is important to acknowledge that not everyone who applies for a job truly wants that job or under the terms and conditions set forth by the employer. Once the context/situation is identified, candidate attributes as they relate to the dimensions could help improve the quality of the screening process.

**Figure 1: Items that May Enhance Workplace Strategic Decision Efforts**





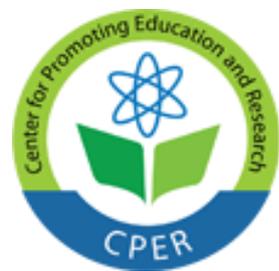
Conceptually, Figure 1 provides several different paths of study. Possible approaches include single- and multi-item analysis to determine if certain items fit better with specific workplace strategies. Mediation and moderation models can also be built to understand and predict specific behaviors grounded in the dimensions. Additionally, another path is to examine the items against personality factors. Triandis (2001) found evidence of relationships between the syndromes and aspects of personality. One benefit of discovering elements tied to personality is that they appear to benefit from more empirical attention. Commercially, the personality testing industry is estimated to be nearly \$2 billion a year (Goldberg, 2023). Also, from a workplace practice perspective, personality provides practitioners with a path to build workplace interventions and solutions.

## Conclusion

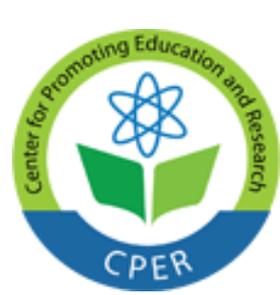
A commitment to cross-cultural development is essential for preparing and adjusting the workforce to both market and person-to-person demands. The concepts of individualism and collectivism (Lukes, 1973) offer promising frameworks that may further our ability to improve efficacy in several different workplace strategies, including but not limited to hiring people based on cultural and job fit. Research to date on collectivism and individualism demonstrates patterns and correlations from these constructs (Triandis et al., 1995; Wheeler et al., 1989) and continues to offer opportunities to HRD and any other research field to identify possible solutions to common workplace challenges. Even if further studies do not offer contributions to practice, the fact that the studies continue to pursue ideas provides this body of research the opportunity to conclude that these constructs may or may not be viable paths to consider in predicting behavior.

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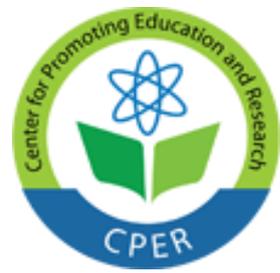
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