The Collectivism/Individualism Dimension: Raising Awareness for Technical Communicators and Educators

For submission to:
Technical Communication

Fall 2007
ENGL 5377-270
Dr. Kirk St. Amant

Submitted by Bobbie Latham
Tuesday, December 11, 2007
Introduction

The United States is known as an individualistic society; one in which the person and the bottom line are of utmost importance. Collectivist cultures, on the other hand are societies that are focused primarily on an extended family or group (Hofstede, 1980; Mead, 1967; Triandis, et al. 1990). All actions are to further the group and not the individual person. Barry Thatcher examined a group of South American workers in regards to various communication levels and found that Collectivism is responsible for much frustration on the part of technical communicators from the United States. In Thatcher’s article, Cultural and Rhetorical Adaptations for South American Audiences (1990), he explains how individuals from a collectivist society display more individualist characteristics when in a one-on-one situation when the material presented is unknown, thus making communication very personal. It is easy to evaluate cultural information needs by assuming that a standard approach is the best practice, but technical communication practices for groups of various cultured members should not be standardized to the entire group but carefully personalized to the culture of each individual in the group upon initial presentation of new information. In this article, I will first examine the literature surrounding the collectivism/individualism dimension, and second define collectivism and individualism, describe ingroups and outgroups, and suggest considerations of these factors for technical communication educators and technical communicators.

Literature Review

Bhawuk and Triandis (1996) believe that “knowledge acquisition and application take place through the assimilation of principles and theories” (p. 18). Understanding the theory and how it relates to technical communication practices is tantamount to communicating with people from various cultures. Glenda Hudson (1990) suggests “we must learn ways to promote multicultural views of technical communication and to advance the progress of global awareness” so as to "prepare to communicate, generate, structure, and convey information” (p. 135). While these suggestions relate directly to technical communication practices, Robert Haight (1991) warns that knowledge of culture should not be “limited to descriptions of behaviors and customs” foreign to learners/technical communicators because although the information is useful, “its isolated presentation trivializes the cultures examined” (p. 157). Knowledge of theory and practice are required for technical communicators to not only be aware that cultural factors may play a role in communication but may also halt communication altogether. One cultural factor that may be the cause for failure to communicate involves Hofstede’s (1980) individualism/collectivism dimension.

One of the most important ways in which cultures differ emerges in the individualism/collectivism dimension (Hofstede, 1980; Mead, 1967; Triandis, et al. 1990). Each individual is born into a type of family. The family unit is the first group of which we are a member (Hofstede, 2005). Those who are born into and grow up with a large family in which many people reside (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) as an extended family are seen as a collectivistic group while those who are born into a two-parent (and possibly other children) family but rarely socialize or communicate with extended family members are seen as individualistic (Hofstede, 2005). Individualistic people think of themselves as “I” and collectivists think of themselves as “we,” (Hofstede, 2005; Triandis, 1995; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). These distinctions are important to technical communication practices in that we tend to create stereotypes of others based on our own cultural identity. If we hail from a
collectivist culture, we form opinions of others based on whether or not they are a member of our group. If we hail from an individualist culture, we form opinions of others based on what it can do for me as an individual. These two very different dimensions of the “I” and “We” may impact technical communication in the way people from various cultures relate to each other in the workplace. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) indicate that this dimension has garnered much attention from both intercultural and cross-cultural psychologists and that “individualism and collectivism can explain some of the basic differences and similarities concerning communication behavior between clusters of cultures” (p. 59). Technical communicators should be aware of cultural differences and adjust communication strategies and practices to accommodate the various cultured people with whom they will communicate. Awareness begins by defining the Collectivism/Individualism dimension.

Collectivism/Individualism Defined
Collectivism is a situation where people feel they belong to larger collectives that care for them in exchange for their loyalty, and in return those same people remain loyal to the group (Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Darwish and Huber (2003) best describe collectivism as societies that:
- Emphasize loyalty to the group (while the group in turn cares for the well-being of the individual).
- Exhibit emotional dependence on groups and organizations.
- Have less personal privacy.
- Believe that the group decisions are superior to individual decisions.
- Show Interdependence.
- Have an understanding of personal identity as knowing one’s place within the group.
- Have great concern about the needs and interests of others.

Collectivist cultures include those people who show few individual characteristics. The group’s wishes are the focus of both personal and professional action. Collectivistic cultures emphasize the needs, goals, and views of the group over the individual and include shared beliefs rather than individual beliefs. In the work environment, credit or blame is placed on the group as a whole and is deflected from any one individual.

An important value in a collectivist culture is that of saving “face” (Varner & Beamer, 2005). Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) define face as “the claimed sense of favorable social self-worth and the estimated other-worth in an interpersonal situation (p. 188). Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2002) explain that face is associated with “identity respect, disrespect, dignity, honor, shame, guilt, status, and competence issues” (p. 145). Many collectivist cultures will not deliver bad news or give criticism for fear of losing face. An example of losing face is when an employee makes an error that loses money for the company. The company loses face because the error is often attributed not to the individual but to the group. The concept surrounding saving face is important for technical communicators in how they communicate with members from a collectivist culture.

Individualistic cultures include those people who “are concerned with themselves and close family members only” (Darwish and Huber, 2003). Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) best describe individualistic cultures as societies that:
- Emphasize the importance of the individual identity over group identity.
- Emphasize individual rights over group rights.
• Emphasize individual needs over group needs.
• Promote self-efficiency, individual responsibility, and personal autonomy.
• Expect the individual to look out for him or herself.

Individualistic cultures include those people who show many individual characteristics. The individual’s wishes, wants, and needs are the driving force behind any action taken at work, home, and/or school. Individualists are comfortable earning personal credit for successful projects as well as taking the blame for failure to meet project goals (Varner and Beamer, 2005). Individualist cultures save face by directly confronting the person and/or situation in which a problem is evident. The responsibility is the individuals and as such, the individual is quick to try to control the situation. Individualists “direct the course of action, and in so doing to protect their own dignity and self-respect even at the expense of others (Lustig & Koester, 2006).

Hofstede (1991) first presented the collectivism/individualism dimension as a general viewpoint of organizational culture based on a large-scale study of a multinational corporation. While his description of this dimension generalizes to the family, language, personality, the state, and school, his views on the workplace apply best to technical communicators. He charted the key differences between collectivists and individualists in relation to the workplace.

**Table 1. Key Differences between Collectivist and Individualist Societies: Workplace**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collectivist</th>
<th>Individualist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupational mobility is lower.</td>
<td>Occupational mobility is higher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees are members of ingroups who will pursue their ingroup’s interests.</td>
<td>Employees are “economic men” who will pursue the employer’s interest if it coincides with their self-interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring and promotion decisions take an employee’s ingroup into account.</td>
<td>Hiring and promotion decisions are supposed to be based on skills and rules only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The employer-employee relationship is basically moral, like a family link.</td>
<td>The employer-employee relationship is a contract between parties on a labor market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management is management of groups.</td>
<td>Management is management of individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct appraisal of subordinates spoils harmony.</td>
<td>Management training teaches the honest sharing of feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup customers get better treatment (particularism).</td>
<td>Every customer should get the same treatment (universalism).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship prevails over task.</td>
<td>Task prevails over relationship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is important to note that cultures may exhibit elements of both the collectivistic and individualistic dimensions and not only exist on the extreme ends of the dimension.

In comparison to collectivistic cultures, individualistic cultures focus on the self and view group wishes as secondary. This comparison is important so that we may view both collectivism and individualism as a line on which a culture may appear from one extreme to another. Both collectivistic and individualistic cultures form groups. Collectivist cultures give precedence to the group whereas individualistic cultures place self as the main priority. Important to the
collectivism/individualism dimension is the discussion of ingroups and outgroups and the role these groups play in technical communication.

**Ingroups and Outgroups**

All cultures contain groups to which people become members. There are groups that form within the family, at school, and at work. Individualists and collectivists alike are members of groups. These groups are called ingroups and outgroups. Triandis (1988) defines ingroups as “groups of individuals about whose welfare a person is concerned, with whom that person is willing to cooperate without demanding equitable returns, and separation from whom leads to anxiety” and outgroups as those “with which one has something to divide, perhaps unequally, or are harmful in some way, groups that disagree on valued attributes, or groups with which one has a conflict” (p. 9). The difference in the perspective of the individualist and the collectivist lies in whether or not group membership is temporary or permanent.

**Ingroups**

Individualists may be a member of many ingroups (e.g. family, co-workers, clubs, peers) and are not emotionally tied to the ingroup (Darwish & Huber, 2003). Varner and Beamer (2005) explain that individualists may lose interest with a group and find a different group for membership. They explain the separation of the individualist from a group is caused by personal goals no longer being met (p. 123). Individualists move on and look for groups that will provide greater membership benefits. For example, Mary is a member of the Red Hat Club. Mary moves to another town across the state. The benefits of being a member at-a-distance are not enough that Mary continues her Red Hat Club membership. She severs all ties to the group. For individualists, ingroup membership is temporary.

Collectivists are usually born into an ingroup (family ties), may have membership in only one or two ingroups, and be emotionally tied to those groups (Darwish & Huber, 2003). Ingroups included members who are concerned about each other’s welfare and share common interests and traits (Tajfel, 1982; Triandis, 1988). Collectivist ingroup membership is not a matter of choice. Varner and Beamer (2005) explain that “group membership may not be subject to choice” and the “responsibilities of membership come before the rights of the individual to expect their needs to be met” (p. 123). For example, the Smir family wants their son, Johan, to take on a work position in the family business. Johan has entertained ideas of taking a position within a different company across town. When Johan learns of his family’s wishes for a work position, he automatically agrees with the family and abandons all thoughts of taking a different position. In this example, the family’s wishes prevail over the wishes of the son. For collectivists, ingroup membership is permanent.

Ingroups are interesting in regards to the treatment given to those inside and outside of the ingroup. Hofstede (1984) explained that along with collectivism/individualism comes particularism/universalism. He stated that particularism/universalism as “whether or not values systems should take particular relationship systems of the actor into account (such as family or friendship ties)” (p. 152). Individualists tend to be universalists and usually treat all people the same and particular relationships do not count. They abide by universal or standard laws and/or guidelines and no one is above using those guidelines based on relationships. On the other hand, collectivists tend to adhere to particularism in that everyone is treated differently based on social
structure or position in or out of the ingroup (Hofstede, 1984). Guidelines and laws are secondary to the relationship.

Universalism is rooted in equality and particularism is rooted in inequality. Thatcher (1999) found that South Americans “emphasized ingroup solidarity when together but particularism when alone and facing unfamiliar situations” (p. 185). The technical communicators in Thatcher’s study hailed from the United States (historically seen as an individualist culture) and treated all members of the South American team equally and attempted to discuss each work element. The South American workers (historically seen as a collectivist culture) discussed within the group and attempted to come to consensus but reacted differently when not in a group. Each worker focused only on those job elements that applied to them and not those of the entire group. They showed particularistic tendencies when not with the ingroup (Thatcher, 1999).

Lustig and Koester (2006) explain that particularism and universalism is useful in understanding how business practices vary because of culture. They suggest that “Universalistic cultures prefer to make business decisions based on a consistent application of the rules, whereas particularistic cultures choose instead to adapt the rules to specific circumstances and relationships” (p. 310). The impact of particularism/universalism to technical communicators is that communication strategies will differ with groups and among individuals.

Outgroups

Outgroups include any person who is not a part of the ingroup. Outgroups are groups with which the ingroup disagrees or may have had past conflict (Triandis, 1995). Individualists may see outgroups as those people with whom they have conflict (co-workers in the same company but part of a different division within the company) or those with whom their company is competing. For example, Jane works for Play Station and Lisa works for Xbox. They compete for customers in product sales. Jane and Lisa see each other as members of an outgroup. Using this same example, Xbox receives information that Jane is a very effective salesperson. Xbox offers Jane a position with the company. Because the benefits are more attractive, Jane accepts the job with Xbox. Jane and Lisa no longer see each other as a member of a separate outgroup but as co-workers as part of the same ingroup. Individualists see those who do not benefit them directly as outgroups, whether they are associated through family, school, or work.

Triandis’ definition of outgroups applies more to the collectivist culture. Those outside of the family or corporation ingroup (who may contain similar members across both ingroups) are seen as the outgroup. People within a collectivistic culture who commit “crimes of honor” within the ingroup are disowned and relegated to the outgroup. Triandis (1995) best explains relegation to the outgroup as any situation where there are “insults, improper behavior, or conflict over property” (p. 10). For example, “crimes of honor” may involve a family member killing a female family member because of premarital sexual relations (Triandis, 1995). Another less harsh example of a collectivist outgroup may include those people who are attempting to sell a product to the family corporation from a collectivist culture. Members of the collectivist ingroup will see the product sellers as the “others” and may view them as very different and hard to understand (Darwish & Huber, 2003).

Outgroups are seen as homogeneous entities and predetermine that stereotyping will increase (Jain & Triandis, 1990). Jain and Triandis (1990) determined that ingroups will form stereotypes
of outgroups because “it is easier to see others as being more or less alike” and “it is so much simpler to deal with others as if they were alike” (p. 143). An example of a stereotype of an outgroup may include two co-workers, Jen and Steve, working in separate company departments who have a conflict. Jen thinks Steve is lazy because work that is sent from his department is never completely finished. Because Jen sees Steve as lazy, Steve’s department is seen as lazy. Jain and Triandis (1990) explain that workers are more likely to stereotype and evaluate unfavorably the whole department based on the behavior of one member of that department.

Ingroups and outgroups are important to studies in intercultural technical communication. They provide clear lines of definition for those who educate others and work with people from collectivist and individualist cultures.

Suggestions for Educators
Those faculty members teaching technical communication may find that most textbooks offer only a brief overview chapter on intercultural communication. While faculty must teach many technical communication elements and syllabi are packed full of useful activities, students do not gain the amount of cultural awareness that is needed in today’s technological society. Companies need employees who adapt to a changing workplace and can reflect and analyze communication elements quickly for different cultures around the world. Most companies now include virtual international offices and need employees who can communicate with not only employees from other countries but also the customers from around the world. Who better to teach students of change in an international/intercultural workplace than technical communication educators?

The following are suggestions for faculty teaching technical communication courses and how to integrate intercultural communication within each lesson. The overreaching theme of these suggestions is that faculty should incorporate intercultural materials into all lessons.

Assessing Audience
Students are taught to identify audience needs. Many complete and audience and use profile. Many assignments pertain to identifying needs of an audience within the student’s own culture. Adding a focus audience from a different culture will allow students to see how an audience from two different cultures will respond to a product. For example, the audience and use profile assignment includes assessing the American view of a Mercedes automobile. By adding a second audience referring to the Japanese view, students will see that the Mercedes is viewed differently by these two different cultures. This, in turn, will raise awareness that not only are American audiences not the same, but many cultural factors come into play when assessing audiences from other cultures. Another positive outcome may be that students become aware of their own stereotypes and biases toward the cultural audiences being assessed.

Collectivist/individualist cultures will be assessed by following guidelines provided for dealing with ingroup and outgroup communication. Ingroups prefer those seen as members of outgroups (the U.S. student in this case) to use words such as “we” and “they.” Ingroups also prefer indirect and ambiguous text within documents. The audience and use profile of the Japanese view of Mercedes should include sensitivity to the Japanese rhetorical needs. The audience and use profile will be very different for U.S. and Japanese audiences.
Technical Documents

Students are taught to use a template for letters, memos, and proposals. For individualist cultures, these templates work well. For collectivistic cultures, templates fall short. Hudson (1990) explains that “an effective style of presentation in one country may be totally inappropriate in another” (p. 139). When students are taught to be mentally agile and adapt to the changing needs of various cultures, “they abandon the older, file-cabinet models and develop new, increasingly dynamic and responsive models for organizational communication” (Praetorius, 2007).

Within the lesson for writing memos, ask students to analyze a memo from a U.S. company and a memo from a Chinese company. The two memos should be compared and differences discussed aloud in class. Students in the class from other cultures may share some experiences and describe how they did not feel comfortable with certain documents. After the discussion, ask students to create a memo for an American company and then ask that a separate memo be written for a Chinese company. Part of the assignment should be to research Chinese rhetorical preferences. The same exercise may be repeated for other documents such as proposals and instructions and procedures.

Because China is a collectivist culture, relationships are vital to successful communication. Students should be aware of this preference and situate the text to compliment the Chinese company of past successes. Because the U.S. is an individualist culture, direct and to-the-point communication works well.

The Approach

The above suggestions all offer an approach to integrating cultural considerations into technical communication courses. The approach you take is vital to the success of each activity. Faculty should define specific situations not only for audience and use profiles but also for writing technical documents. Defining terms like collectivism/individualism and ingroups/outgroups will afford students a beginning awareness of those terms. The situation should include a collectivist culture and an individualist culture. If time allows, the situation may also include a description of ingroups and outgroups. Students would then write to both types of cultures focusing on various preferences of those types of cultures.

An example of a lesson that may include a specific situation for a collectivist and individualist culture would be to write a memo to an XX Company in Japan (high collectivist culture). The purpose of the memo is to ask for a meeting to describe your company’s product (the Instigator). The product is a cellular phone that allows the caller to view and hear the person they are speaking with. The goal of the memo is for XX Company to agree to a meeting to view the product.

While the above are suggestions for making students aware of collectivist and individualist culture preferences, the same may applied to other cultural factors/dimensions. Awareness comes from analyzing and comparing various cultural factors. Integrating these factors into each lesson within the technical communication classroom may see students become more successful in the intercultural workplace.
Suggestions for Technical Communicators
The technical communicator’s goal is to inform an audience based on specific needs. It is the responsibility of the technical communicator to understand how cultural differences affect the way people recognize, manage, and react to information. If a group of ten people are seated around a conference table and they hail from many different cultures, is there a way to standardize communication so all members of the meeting receive the same message?
Communication is effective only if it conveys the information to everyone; no matter the culture from which they come. In the example described above, each meeting attendee needs the same information, but the way in which they receive and learn that information may be totally different.

Technical communicators who are aware that there are separate rhetorical preferences in different cultures find that it is easier to recognize and adapt communication to specific needs. Technical communicators, therefore, should develop a resource guide to help in becoming aware of these various cultural factors. The following steps are suggestions that will provide a basic foundation for successfully communicating with collectivist and individualist cultures.

1. Understand that collectivist and individualist cultures view relationships differently.
   Within a work environment, there may be many company ingroups. Individualists will join and then separate from company ingroups (such as a group of friends who are also co-workers in a specific department). Their relationship is a temporary relationship because employees terminate from positions or have conflict and find a different group. Collectivists, on the other hand, may be an employee in the company because that is what their family ingroup needs (because of salary, benefits, etc.). It is harder for collectivists to form quick friendships and their interaction in a department group will not happen quickly. Getting to know collectivists may take a long time. Technical communicators must be aware that the relationship process for collectivists is important to effective communication, and once the relationship is established, it is permanent.

2. Individualists and collectivists will react differently to bad news such as failed projects or work errors. When given bad news or questioned about work errors, individuals will usually respond with direct and confrontational language. They want to know where responsibility lies for the failure or error. Collectivists will deflect blame to a group of people and will refuse to designate just one person as the cause for the failure. Communication concerning failed projects or work errors may cause some discomfort for technical communicators because many questions may go unanswered and the cause for the failure may never be found.

3. Communication needs are different for individualists and collectivists based on following a set of guidelines or rules. Individualists will adhere to a universal set of rules or guidelines and apply those guidelines consistently when communicating information. The guidelines are followed in group and individual communication situations. Conversely, collectivists tend to apply guidelines differently depending on whether they are in a discussion with their ingroup or are communicating individually. When communicating in the ingroup, collectivists will attempt to come to a consensus in relation to guidelines. When communicating with others outside the ingroup – or individually – the collectivist
will discuss only those guidelines that apply directly to him/her. Technical communicators should be aware that collectivists will communicate information differently depending on whether the discussion is taking place as a group or in a one-on-one situation.

While these suggestions are not exhaustive, they do provide technical communicators with a basic understanding of relationship, reaction to conflict, and communication needs of collectivists and individualists.

**Conclusion**
The communication needs of groups made of members from various cultures are varied. When the group members come from collectivistic cultures, group consensus is required, while communication needs as individuals may be quite different. Technical communicators will do well to understand not only the needs of the group but also of each individual. One’s own culture may influence how those communication needs are evaluated and technical communicators need to be aware of and resist standardizing communication needs based on their own culture. Technical communication is used to present information to an audience based on need. These needs may be different depending on if the person is in a group or individual setting. Awareness of cultural factors, such as collectivist/individualist characteristics, is a key element to presenting this information to others no matter from which culture they are a member.
Works Cited


