

Working with cultural differences: Individualism and collectivism

by Janet Gonzalez-Mena

Imagine a caregiver watching a 2-year-old struggle to put on her own shoes. The caregiver is silently cheering because this little girl has never shown any inclination toward learning self-help skills since she arrived in this infant-toddler centre. She always waits passively until someone helps her, but today is different. When she sees her mother coming up the walk, she runs to get her shoes, then sits on the floor by the door and tries to put them on. The caregiver stands back so as not to interfere. When the mother comes in the door and sees what her child is doing, she glares at the caregiver, rushes over, squats down, takes a shoe out of her daughter's hand and proceeds to put it on herself.

The caregiver is annoyed, and so is the mother.

How can this incident be explained? Why are these two adults unhappy with each other? The caregiver would tell you that she is trying to encourage self-help skills so that each child in her programme makes strides toward becoming an independent individual. The mother would say that independence is last on her list of priorities. Her daughter is just a baby and needs help. By helping her she lets her daughter know that she is vitally connected to others. When the caregiver stresses independence, she gets in the way of the lessons the mother is trying to teach.

A framework for understanding differences

It's a small incident, but it illustrates a huge gap in thinking about what's best for children in general and for this little girl in particular. A way to make sense of these differences is to put them in a theoretical framework as did Patricia Greenfield (Greenfield, 1994).

On one end of a continuum is individualism and on the other is collectivism. The caregiver in the scene above represents someone with a more individualistic orientation, and the mother represents a more collectivistic orientation.

How do these two orientations differ? For one thing, the perceptions of the nature of infancy are different. The individualist looks at babies and sees the need for them to discover themselves as separate people who have boundaries. Babies have to learn that they are not connected to everything in the universe. Becoming an individual is an important childhood task and must be taught. Further, the individualist sees only a small spark of independence, and that spark must be fanned so it won't go out. The goal is to get children to stand on their own two feet, and eventually take charge of their own lives. The fear is that children will grow up overly dependent if the spark dies. The teacher in the scene above operates out of the individualist orientation, and she assumes that everyone shares the priorities of moving infants and toddlers toward

independence and individuality. It annoys her to see mothers helping children who can help themselves.

The collectivist has a different perspective on the nature of infancy and the tasks involved. The goal is for babies to see themselves first and foremost as a member of the group rather than a separate self. The vital connections last a lifetime, not just until adulthood. The lessons in connectedness must start early as babies are born with a raging flame of independence. If that flame is fanned children will grow apart from the group and lose touch with the permanent ties that bind them. The fear is the child will be too full of "self" to understand the responsibilities and obligations that come with being part of a group. Living outside the group is a lonely life that no mother would ever wish on her child. The mother in the scene above is distressed to see her daughter left alone to put her shoes on. The mother's goal is to teach her child that she is never alone but is part of a group, a collective, that helps each other. At two she may not be very helpful to others, but with constant lessons in interdependence, one day she will learn to put others first and see herself as a group member more than an individual.

In a project called 'Bridging Cultures' (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield & Quiroz, 2001) researchers in California documented points of contrast between the individualist orientation and the collectivist one as they occurred in public school classrooms. They came up with a number of contrasting concepts, some of which I have adapted here to fit infants and toddlers in child care. For example, an individualist tends to foster personal achievement and encourages children to say, "I did it all by myself!" In contrast, a collectivist downplays individual achievement and focuses instead on group success. The message, both spoken and unspoken, is: "Help others before helping yourself" and "Don't put yourself in

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the spotlight!" An individualist promotes self-expression and individual thinking. The messages are "What do you think?" "Speak up!" "Say how you feel." "Use your words." An individualist stresses personal choice. The messages are, "Pick the one you want." "You have the power to decide for yourself." The overall message, spoken or unspoken, is "Be your own person." In contrast, the collectivist tends to teach adherence to norms, respect for authority, harmony, and group consensus. The messages, spoken or unspoken are, "Be good." "Be respectful." "Obey." "Don't just think of yourself." "Don't be selfish."

The emotional side of accepting the framework

If caregivers tend more toward an individualistic orientation, and in my experience many do - either by upbringing or by their training to become early childhood educators - collectivism may not be appealing. Indeed the very idea may be extremely uncomfortable, especially when it hits close to home. When I approached American infant specialist, Magda Gerber, with the idea that collectivism is a valid way of rearing children, she bristled and replied sternly, "Janet, that's communism!" (Gerber, 1990). Magda fled from communism to the United States in the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Her personal history gave her a strong repulsion to anything at all related to that particular political system. She wasn't able to separate the worldview from the politics and oppression. I had a problem with collectivism myself when it hit close to home, but my problem wasn't political. My mother-in-law, an immigrant from Mexico,

was a strong collectivist though she never called herself that. We had countless arguments over the years. They became heated when we disagreed about the child we shared - my son, her grandson. I saw her as smothering, and she saw me as too stand-offish. I tended to blame my mother-in-law's personality for what I perceived as naive child rearing practices. She was just too stubborn to listen to me!

Neither Magda nor I were aware that collectivism is a lot bigger and more varied than just a political system or a mother-in-law's personality. According to Triandis, 70% of the world's cultures can be thought of as collectivistic (Triandis, 1989).

Although the opening scene is rather limited in scope, it shows a simple example of a child caught between a parent who has collectivist tendencies and a caregiver who is a strong individualist. Some children wouldn't have a problem because they can easily adjust to the differences between home and child care - and even a third set of differences at grandma's house. But for some infants and toddlers who are in the beginning stages of identity development, a clash between home and child care can have a powerful effect. Little things, like the shoe episode at the beginning add up. Such a small incident could easily be passed over as insignificant and even a number of those incidents could easily be disregarded because they aren't part of the curriculum - or are they?

From my point of view caregiving is definitely curriculum. All the interactions that occur during the essential activities of daily living take up hours and hours of an infant's or toddler's life. Learning occurs in the context of caregiving activities, as adults and children come together and form relationships. Eating, nappy changing, sleeping, toileting, washing, dressing, and grooming are times that infants and toddlers learn who they are and where they belong. Caregivers must pay close attention to both

identity development and cultural ties; they must be particularly wary about jeopardizing the child's connections to family. Caregivers need to know just what each family wants for its children and respond accordingly. Putting children into conflict when the important adults in their lives disagree about what's good for them can use vital energy needed for growth, development, and learning.

Of course both collectivists and individuals want their children to relate to others, learn respect, be able to express themselves, and stay within the bounds of safe and acceptable behaviour. It's how the lessons are taught, what has priority, what is emphasised and to what degree that can cause dissension. Timing makes a difference too. Lessons one group believes should be learned in infancy are put off until much later in the other group or never occur at all. Some learnings in both groups are believed to happen naturally and never even become lessons. Look at the example of self-help skills such as self-feeding. The individualist starts in infancy; the collectivist may figure the child will naturally learn those skills eventually, so there is no need to teach them except by example.

The dangers of dualistic thinking

Although the way to understand the differences in orientation is to contrast them, doing so puts them into an either/or framework. In reality, although some people are on the far ends of the continuum, most are not.

When individualism and collectivism are made into opposites, it's difficult to figure out how to work with the differences when they arise. What are individualistically-minded caregivers to do when faced with the behaviour and ideas they encounter in families with collectivistic tendencies? For example, what can the caregiver in the opening scene do? She can first become aware that the shoe incident brought up a point of contention that probably goes a lot deeper than the

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incident itself. If she respects the mother she will suspend judgment and instead seek to understand why the mother behaved as she did. Ideas of right and wrong around caregiving routines depend on the perspective, and for the caregiver to judge the mother wrong based on her own perspective puts their relationship in jeopardy. Instead she needs to accept the possibility that the mother has a valid reason for her behaviour, even if she doesn't understand what it is. An attitude of respect helps the two build their relationship so they can talk about their differences. They can't figure out what to do until they truly understand each other.

Further dilemmas arise when the caregiver who wants to be culturally sensitive is faced with standards and regulations that get in the way. A goal must be to incorporate culturally responsive care into policies and practices, if it isn't already built in. Caregivers, supervisors, and policy makers must work to resolve any conflicts between definitions and visions of quality and mandates around parental goals and voices when such conflicts occur.

But what about the caregiver who has little to do with policy making and defining quality care? Further, how can a fulltime caregiver who is busy all day everyday possibly learn all about every culture she might one day encounter? To even know one's own culture and be able to talk about it is a challenge worthy of an anthropologist. Even caregivers who grow up biculturally or study anthropology, can't possibly

know all the cultures they might encounter in their career as caregivers.

Nobody expects caregivers to become cultural experts. The secret is for caregivers to focus on the process of communicating with families they serve. By increasing their ability to communicate in open-minded ways they can learn more about those families, their babies and where differences in perspectives might lie.

A final note: when I try to make a case for understanding collectivism for those who see themselves on the individualistic end of the continuum, I'm not asking anyone to give up what he or she believes in. I'm still more of an individualist myself than a collectivist. I am instead pointing out the advantages of suspending judgment long enough to expand one's own picture in order to incorporate new ideas. My goal is to move beyond either/or thinking and learn to look for ever larger pictures. It's a big world. There's room enough for all our diversity.

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