

## Stability of Collectivism and Individualism in Vietnamese Americans and Mexican Americans

**Daniel Miguel Campa, Verónica Benet-Martínez**  
**Contributor: Angela-MinhTu Nguyen**

*Department of Psychology  
University of California, Riverside*

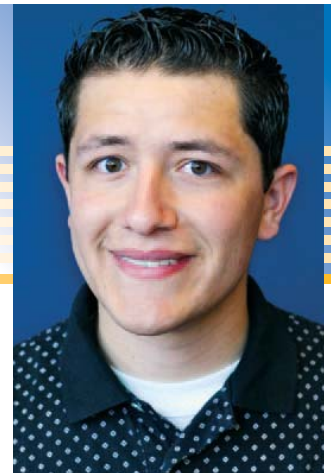
### ABSTRACT

Collectivism involves placing the goals of the group higher than the needs of the individual, while individualism emphasizes the individual's goals. Researchers once thought that as ethnic minorities spend more time in the US, they lose their ethnic culture (collectivism), replacing it with American culture (individualism); however, current acculturation theory purports that ethnic minorities can be both American- and ethnically-oriented. We hypothesized that, contrary to previous beliefs, collectivism does not decrease and individualism does not increase across generations. We examined changes in collectivism and individualism across generations for 248 Vietnamese American and 222 Mexican American undergraduate students, using a self-report measure of individualism and collectivism. Results indicated that neither value differed across generations. That is, supporting current theory, holding one culture's value does not necessitate giving up another culture's value; collectivism and individualism are compatible. Implications and future directions are also discussed.

### FACULTY MENTOR

**Verónica Benet-Martínez**  
*Department of Psychology*

Daniel Campa joined our lab in 2008, first working with then-graduate student Que-Lam Huynh and later with Angela-MinhTu Nguyen. He has a strong interest in cultural issues, particularly their application to academic settings. Using Angela's datasets and with her help, Danny gathered evidence demonstrating that it is possible to be bicultural, endorsing values of both the ethnic or heritage culture and the dominant or mainstream American culture. Specifically, he conducted a literature review on changes vs. stability in collectivism and individualism over time, formulated hypotheses, analyzed data, interpreted results, and formed conclusions. Not only is Danny outstanding in his intellectual ability, research skills, initiative, and intrinsic motivation, he is also a pleasure to work with and always eager to volunteer for assignments as they arise.



AUTHOR

**Daniel Miguel Campa**

*Psychology*

Daniel Campa is a graduating senior with a major in Psychology. He has been an undergraduate research assistant in Verónica Benet-Martínez's Biculturalism & Personality Lab for one and a half years. His research interests include different aspects of culture and the impact and role they have in the school setting. He plans to continue his research topics next year, as he attends a graduate program for School Psychology at the University of Washington. His experience in the lab has been invaluable to his preparation for his education after UC Riverside. He would like to thank Angela-MinhTu Nguyen, Que-Lam Huynh, as well as everyone else who has shown support. Research is significant in the field of Psychology, and Daniel has come to appreciate its importance, and one day hopes to be a college professor at a research university.

## INTRODUCTION

In every society, individuals have goals and desires that they wish to fulfill in their lives. In some cultural groups, individuals may selflessly set aside or be asked to sacrifice these desires in order to contribute to the greater needs of the group (Thurnwald, 1933). Hui and Triandis (1986) define collectivism as a higher concern for others and the placement of emphasis on the success of the group over one's own success. It is not the individual who is perceived as achieving a goal, but rather, any individual success is only a stepping-stone to the eventual goals of the group (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). On the contrary, Hui and Triandis state that individualism consists of a sense of independence, and placing individual goals ahead of the goals and needs of the group. There may be many factors that relate to collectivism and individualism, and in the present study, one of interest is generation status.

Ethnicity is used to group Americans based on their race, culture, and country of origin (Phinney, 1996). Phinney states that ethnic groups are those not considered to be in the dominant White majority. It is common to see collectivistic values in certain ethnic groups. Ethnic minority groups that seem most likely to work towards collectivistic goals are probably those that must stick together for survival. Differences in collectivistic attitudes have been seen across several nationalities (Hofstede, 1980). Hofstede (1997) claims that while mainstream American culture is believed to hold individualistic values higher than collectivistic values, some members of collectivistic ethnic minority groups may also hold more individualistic values than other members of their own group. Triandis, Brislin, and Hui (1988) posit that there exist differences in attitudes toward individualism in individualistic cultures, and within-group differences can also be found in collectivistic cultures. These differences are important within collectivistic groups because they are helpful in explaining modernization and the influence of individualistic values of mainstream society. Triandis *et al.* (1988) state that individuals are more likely to change their attitudes from collectivistic to individualistic, rather than in the reverse direction, because U.S. mainstream culture heavily emphasizes individualism. Because there are a large number of different ethnic

groups residing in the U.S., there are more possibilities for understanding within-group differences and the balance of collectivism and individualism.

Recently, a study was conducted examining the importance of cultural involvement for Vietnamese Americans (Pham & Harris, 2001). Researchers were interested in the relationship of cultural involvement and acculturation strategies using an adapted form of the Acculturation Attitudes Scale (Berry, Kim, Poer, Young and Bujaki, 1989). It was predicted that individuals with less education, fewer years in the US, and less involvement with American culture would predict marginalization. It was also thought that more involvement with Vietnamese culture would predict separation. The final relevant hypothesis suggested that more involvement with American culture and less involvement with Vietnamese culture would predict assimilation. Separation refers to an individual rejecting mainstream culture while maintaining a strong sense of ethnic identity; while assimilation is the adoption of mainstream culture and abandoning one's own ethnic culture (Berry, 2003). Marginalization is the refusal of involvement with either culture. Results showed only the first two hypotheses were supported while the third was not. The idea that little involvement with American culture leads to separation implies a strong retention of Vietnamese culture and its values. Also, it is possible that since more involvement with American culture did not lead to assimilation, one's ethnic culture would not decrease over time. Furthermore, if less involvement in both cultures predicts marginalization, then more or equal involvement with both cultures can possibly predict successful integration—possession of coexisting attitudes and values from two different cultures.

Interdependence is seen more in immigrant families than families with members born in the U.S. (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993). Delgado-Gaitan examined this in a study involving both Mexican immigrants and U.S.-born Mexican Americans and their relationships and interdependence with immediate and extended families. In this study, the term "interdependence" referred to the idea that certain family members are expected to contribute to and support the family in more significant ways compared to others. Both samples' behaviors were measured for frequency

of family visitation, the lending of money to family, assistance with daily needs, proximity of extended family, and the relationships shared with these members. The author examined the frequency of and the reasons for participants' trips from California to visit or meet with family in Mexico. Second-generation families appeared to visit Mexico only for weddings or funerals—and it was usually only parents who made the trip. In the immigrant families, the entire family frequently traveled to Mexico, on significant occasions as well as for friendly visits. In terms of interaction with extended family, both groups were reported as keeping close and frequent contact with family members locally as well as those in Mexico. Although later generation individuals seem to perform less collectivistic behaviors, there were no significant differences in the frequency and amount of contact each generation had with their families. The behaviors may slightly vary, but the basis for the attitudes and remain more stable.

It is necessary to consider acculturation theory, as it posits that individuals of immigrant or ethnic groups can successfully adapt to mainstream culture, while at the same time retaining their own group's values and traditions (Berry, 2003). Berry introduced the concept of integration, an acculturation strategy, in which an individual can coexist both as an American-oriented and an ethnically-oriented person. Using this theory, it can be assumed that an individual who is successfully integrated can hold attitudes of both mainstream culture and their own ethnic culture. In other words, integrated individuals can hold both individualistic and collectivistic attitudes.

In the present study, there are two ethnic groups of interest: Vietnamese Americans and Mexican Americans. Both of these groups have members who were born and have lived their entire lives in the U.S., and others who emigrated from their home country. According to Nguyen and Williams (1989), a gap in the levels of measured collectivism between Vietnamese American adolescents and their parents increases with the amount of time spent in the US. This study implies that members of this ethnic group enter the US with collectivistic values, which tend to decrease across generations. In a study by Chandler (1979), Mexican American adolescents were found to have stronger feelings of close attachment towards their

families, and a greater reliance on their families than their White counterparts. We believe that Vietnamese Americans and Mexican Americans are appropriate groups to include in this study because they have proven to be representative examples of groups that hold collectivistic values. The goal of this study is to determine whether collectivistic and individualistic attitudes of participants from the two mentioned ethnic groups change across generation status. We predict that collectivism and individualism will not show significant differences between first generation students and later-generation students.

## METHOD: STUDY 1-VIETNAMESE AMERICANS

### Participants

Participants were 248 Vietnamese American undergraduate students. They ranged in age from 17 to 33 years ( $M = 19.35$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ). The sample was 51.24% female, and 58.61% were born in the US (i.e., second-generation). Those born elsewhere (i.e., first-generation) had lived in the US for an average of 12.78 years ( $SD = 3.79$  years). The sample consisted of 47.52% first-year, 23.97% second-year, 16.94% third-year, 10.74% fourth-year, and 0.83% fifth-year students.

	Female	Male	Mean Age	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Total
1st	68	39	19.78	39	25	21	15	100
2nd	63	78	19.04	76	33	20	11	142

*Table 1. Demographics of Vietnamese American Sample*

### Measures

To assess collectivism, we administered the 8-item collectivism subscale of the Individualism-Collectivism Scale (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). A sample item is "I would sacrifice an activity that I enjoy very much if my family did not approve of it." Each item is rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). We computed the mean score for this subscale, with a higher score indicating higher collectivism. In this sample, the internal consistency reliability for the collectivism subscale was acceptable ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

To assess individualism, we administered the 8-item individualism subscale of the same Individualism-Collectivism Scale (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). A sample item is “It annoys me if I have to sacrifice activities that I enjoy to help others.” Each item is rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). We computed the mean score for this subscale, with a higher score indicating higher individualism. In this sample, the internal consistency reliability for the individualism subscale was acceptable ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

### Procedure

We recruited participants from the psychology department’s subject pool. Before beginning the study, a research assistant read a verbal consent script to participants. After giving informed consent, participants completed the above measures as well as a demographics survey, which requested information such as gender, age, country of birth (and year of emigration if applicable), and generation status. The survey packet took approximately 30 to 50 minutes to complete. Upon completion, a research assistant debriefed participants. Participation fulfilled a course requirement for introductory psychology courses.

### Results and Discussion

In Study 1, using data collected from Vietnamese American participants only, we conducted analyses to examine whether collectivism differed based on generational status. Based on an independent-samples *t* test, there were no significant differences between U.S.-born participants ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ) and participants born outside the U.S. ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ) on collectivism,  $t(242) = 0.41$ ,  $p = .68$ . Also, there were no differences between U.S.-born participants ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) and those not born in the U.S. ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) on individualism,  $t(242) = 1.15$ ,  $p = .25$ . A small correlation was found between individualism and collectivism in this sample,  $r = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ . In other words, individualism and collectivism were not completely independent from one another, and later-generation participants were not less collectivistic or more individualistic than first-generation participants.

## METHOD: STUDY 2-MEXICAN AMERICANS

### Participants

Participants were 222 Mexican American undergraduate students. They ranged in age from 17 to 25 years ( $M = 18.82$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). The sample was 72.15% female, and 81.74% were born in the US. Among those born in the US, 78.22% were second-generation, 8.38% were third-generation (i.e., at least one parent born in the US), and 13.41% were fourth-generation or later (i.e., at least one grandparent was born in the US). Participants born elsewhere (i.e., first-generation) had lived in the US for an average of 14.44 years ( $SD = 4.52$  years). The sample consisted of 68.04% first-year, 21.46% second-year, 8.22% third-year, and 2.28% fourth-year students.

Generation Status	Female	Male	Mean Age	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Total
1st	27	13	19.13	28	5	5	2	40
2nd	100	38	18.72	94	32	10	2	138
3rd	12	5	19.12	10	4	2	1	17
4th	19	5	18.71	17	6	1	0	24

Table 2. Demographics of Mexican American Sample

### Measures and Procedure

Participants completed the same measures used in Study 1. However, all references to Vietnamese language or culture were changed to Spanish language or Mexican culture. In this sample, the internal consistency reliability for the collectivism subscale was acceptable ( $\alpha = .68$ ), and the internal consistency reliability for the individualism subscale also was acceptable ( $\alpha = .68$ ). The procedure was the same as that used in Study 1.

### Results and Discussion

Similar analyses were performed on data collected from Mexican American participants. In this group, no significant correlation was found between individualism and collectivism,  $r = .09$ ,  $p = .163$ . There were no significant differences among participations of varying

generational statuses on collectivism,  $F(3, 215) = 0.40$ ,  $p = .76$ . In a second analysis of variance, we found no significant differences among individuals of varying generational statuses on individualism,  $F(3, 215) = 0.37$ ,  $p = .77$ . In other words, individualism and collectivism were not found to be related, and individualistic values did not increase and collectivistic values did not decrease for later-generations.

## CONCLUSION

In the present study, we analyzed participants' self-reported data with the goal of determining whether individuals of various generational statuses had different levels of collectivism and individualism. Consistent with our predictions for both Vietnamese American and Mexican American participants, no significant differences were found; participants were found to be bicultural and hold both individualistic and collectivistic attitudes.

Vietnamese Americans are a special group to study because they are one of a specific group of peoples who came to the U.S. to seek refuge. While some emigrated voluntarily, others were forced to do so. When compared to other Asian Americans, Vietnamese Americans have been found to perceive the most prejudice from others, use their native language the most, and experience acculturative stress at higher levels (Sodowsky, Lai, & Plake, 1991). Sodowsky, Lai, and Plake believe this to be especially true for refugees. In their study, the level of stress is compared among participants of different generational statuses. Across ethnic groups, differences in perceived prejudice and frequency of native language use were found between first- and second-generation students, but no differences were found between second- and third-generation students or third- and fourth-generation students. These findings imply that first-generation students were more likely to feel they were outsiders to mainstream society. It was also concluded that political refugees who immigrated to the U.S. had higher perceived prejudice, higher acculturative stress, and more frequently used their native language than voluntary immigrants. This implied that even after acculturation, they maintained a strong sense of ethnic identity, which included values like collectivism. Although

collectivism was not included as a variable in their experiment, it was of importance to compare the trends of other behaviors or attitudes held by ethnic minority groups—groups known to have collectivistic values.

One possible explanation for the lack of differences found among Mexican American participants is the geographical restrictions. The students who participated attended the University of California, Riverside, which is located in southern California, a diverse region with fairly large populations of minority groups. According to Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997), the proximity of Mexican American groups to Mexico may cause them to feel a weaker need to assimilate and may make them more likely to integrate mainstream culture with their own ethnic culture. If this were the case, it is possible that while adopting some aspects of mainstream culture, they retained some traditional values, which could include collectivistic attitudes. Also, a reason why Latinos maintain a strong sense of collectivism is a continuous recognition that family needs always come first (Chavez, 1992). The retention of collectivistic attitudes could also apply to later generations; although they might spend more time living in the U.S., the proximity to Mexico makes the retention of Mexican culture less difficult.

Collectivism and individualism, based on this study's findings, appear to be somewhat stable in terms of generational status. However, this study has limitations that are common to other studies: use of a student sample and geographic region. To address these limitations, the present study can be replicated at other institutions and in different areas in the U.S. Another method to improve this study is to perform a cross-sectional study using parents and grandparents of a student sample to compare the attitudes of multiple generations within one family. Although the findings support our hypotheses, the present limitations to the study have presented opportunities for future research. For example, performing similar studies using samples of students in locations less diverse than Southern California can possibly yield opposing results. Overall, our results have shown that collectivism and individualism do not change across generations and remain stable for Vietnamese American and Mexican Americans.



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