



Reading Between the Signs: Collectivism/Individualism

In “individualistic” cultures, like that of the United States, the individual is seen as the basic unit of identification. Independence and self-reliance are valued, as is creativity. The group is strengthened when each member is self-sufficient. Although individualists may join groups, doing so is not mandatory. Group membership may be temporary and evolve with changing life circumstances. Personal freedom is highly valued, and people who succeed by dint of their own efforts are much admired.

The majority of world cultures, by contrast, can be described as “collectivistic.” Members of these cultures strongly identify with the group (e.g., extended family, work group, close friends) and work for its continued survival. Group members share many ideals and values and view themselves as distinct from nonmembers. Individuals often subordinate their personal aspirations to the objectives of the “group. In other words, the goals of the group are the individuals’ goals as well. American Deaf culture qualifies as a collectivistic culture with its reciprocal system of sharing resources, duty to exchange information, and strong feelings of loyalty to the Deaf community.

Directions: Read the list of statements below. Put an I next to those that characterize an individualistic point of view and a C next to those that demonstrate a more collectivistic orientation.

- _____ 1. A significant distinction is made between insiders and outsiders
(those who are considered members of the culture and those who are not).
- _____ 2. One’s status in the group depends on one’s individual achievements.
- _____ 3. Group members feel responsible for each other.
- _____ 4. Heroes are respected for having achieved success through their own efforts and hard work.
- _____ 5. Children are often given choices to encourage them to begin to identify their own preferences.
- _____ 6. Decisions are made with the welfare of the group in mind.
- _____ 7. People identify with a few groups, and these attachments are long term and highly defining.
- _____ 8. People vote independently.
- _____ 9. A hero is respected for having helped other members of the community.
- _____ 10. Rules for group membership are rigid.
- _____ 11. The worst form of punishment would be ostracism from the group.
- _____ 12. One’s status depends on one’s connections with others.
- _____ 13. People are encouraged to be self-reliant and independent.
- _____ 14. Group membership is flexible and does not completely define its members’ identities.
- _____ 15. Introductions stress connections to others.
- _____ 16. Introductions stress elements of personal identity.
- _____ 17. Dependence on others is viewed negatively, as a sign of weakness.
- _____ 18. People mistrust those who identify with a group too strongly.