

Do Increasing Levels of Education Contribute to Individualist or Collectivist Orientations? Evidence from the U.S. General Social Survey

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ABSTRACT

While prior research has examined the connection between civic engagement and collectivist views, the present study considers to what extent years of education have been associated with more collectivistic views. This study analyzed data from the 2021 United States General Social Survey. Results suggested that more years of education was associated with believing that the government should do more for Black people and that the government should do more overall (in a scaled average of individualism/collectivism). Specific demographic factors were associated with more collectivist or individualistic views. Implications for program and policy development within higher education are considered.

Keywords: individualism/collectivism, higher education, General Social Survey

Prior research has demonstrated a connection between civic engagement and collectivist views. First, the benefits of civic engagement in higher education range from undergraduate students' increased levels of academic and life skills development (Astin & Sax, 1998), to higher grade point averages (GPAs; Newell & Sexena, 2018), to increased levels of civic engagement post-baccalaureate and into adulthood (Myers et al., 2019). Further, research suggests young people are more politically engaged now than in the past (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2023). Previous literature has also illuminated a connection between civic engagement and efficacy beyond college: Collins et al. (2014) identified an association between civic engagement, bonding social capital, and collective efficacy among residents who engaged in issues relevant to their housing. Finkelstein (2010) also found that those who reported more collectivist views had greater interest in volunteer opportunities related to altruism and increasing social connections, whereas those with more individualist perspectives were more interested in volunteering for career-oriented benefits. A study in Italy on psychological adjustment during COVID-19 suggested that a collectivistic orientation was associated with higher rates of perceived risks of infection but predicted a lower level of psychological maladjustment (Germani et al, 2020). Together, prior research demonstrates a connection between civic engagement and collectivist views and how this connection can benefit communities overall.

Research has also examined individualism and collectivism as they relate to experiences for individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Law et al. (2019) found that individuals who endorsed the belief that institutions should be active in social justice were also more likely to report less acceptance of microaggressions. Chang et al. (2020) revealed that people of minoritized ethnicity scored significantly higher than their White peers on vertical collectivism, in which the self is strongly endorsed as part of a collective. These authors also found that minoritized students reported more family obligations than white students, and that students' anxiety about burdening others and/or being judged for seeking help prevented undergraduate students from seeking assistance (Chang et al., 2020). Research has further suggested that African American undergraduate students enrolled at a Predominantly White Institution identified collectivism as a key component of African American culture (Carson, 2009). For international students, individualistic tendencies have been associated with individuals' abilities to enter and leave social groups (Rivas et al., 2019). Conversely, international students with higher collectivistic tendencies may await instructions rather than ask a question (Rivas et al., 2019). Thus, prior research suggests that individualist and

collectivist orientations not only can be based on differing identities and experiences but can also result in different behavioral choices and outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

The present analysis rests on the theoretical basis of individualism versus collectivism. Parsons and Shills (1951) suggested two primary orientations for one's pursuit of life goals: self-orientation and collectivity-orientation. Self-orientation is the "pursuit of private interests", and collectivity-orientation is the "pursuit of the common interests of the collectivity" (p. 60), or individualism and collectivism. Triandis (1995) discussed individualism as an emphasis on individual or shared goals, where individualism reflects a focus on the self and emphasis on one's own judgements and goals, while collectivism reflects a focus on cooperation and the needs or goals of a group or larger society. Ho and Chiu (1994) considered individualism as valuing individual achievement and autonomy and collectivism as valuing interdependence and collective responsibility.

While all individuals and societies reflect both of these orientations, the degree to which each is reflected varies by society and individual (Kâğitçibaşı, 1997). For example, Western societies, such as the United States, lean more toward individualist orientations that emphasize individual goals and needs. Chiou (2001) examined individualism and collectivism among college students, finding that students in the U.S. were more individualistic than students in Taiwan or Argentina. Additionally, these orientations are often shaped by race/ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status. According to Singelis et al. (1995), ethnic minorities and those of lower socioeconomic status tend to have a more collectivist orientation.

Individualist and collectivist orientations are shaped by many important factors, including culture, family, and societal norms (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). Research has considered how individualism and collectivism inform both individual and group behaviors, with measurements considering constructs and their relationship to social desirability (Triandis et al., 1998). Educational experiences and learning experiences have the potential to shape individualist and collectivist orientations. The present study seeks to examine to what extent more years of education are associated with the development of more individualist or collectivist orientations among individuals in U.S. society.

METHODS

Instrument and Sample

The publicly available General Social Survey (GSS; Davern et al., 2021) has been examining social change in the United States since 1972. I employed the 2021 cross-sectional survey, which contacted 27,591 households via mailing, and a total of 4,032 individuals responded via the web survey or via phone. Responses were collected from December 1, 2020 to May 3, 2021 in both English and Spanish and employed differing survey panels, such that not all recipients received every survey question. The present analysis dropped missing data such that only respondents who had answers to all independent and dependent variables of interest were included ($N=2,334$). I obtained necessary institutional review board approval for the analysis.

Variables

Table 1 provides an overview of descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables employed in this analysis. The dependent variables included four measures of whether the government should be doing more to help people in the U.S., and a mean-based scale of the four items ($\alpha=0.84$). These GSS items (or a former version of them) have been previously used by researchers to measure individualism and collectivism (Celinska et al., 2007; Cohen & Liebma, 1997; Marchant Shapiro & Patterson, 1995). Specifically, the questions asked participants: "Some people think that Blacks have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to help improve their living standards. Others believe that the government should not be giving special treatment to Blacks. Where would you place yourself on this scale...?" (reverse-coded: government should help = 5, no special treatment = 1); "Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard living of all poor Americans (...), other people think that it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself (...), where would you place yourself on this scale...?" (reverse-coded: government should help = 5, people should help themselves = 1); "Some people think that the government in Washington is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private businesses. Others disagree and think that the government should do even more to solve our country's problems. Still others have opinions somewhere in between. Where would you place yourself on

this scale...?” (reverse-coded: government should do more=5, government does too much=1); and “In general, some people that that it is the responsibility of the government in Washington to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills. Others think that these matters are not the responsibility of the federal government, and that people should take care of these things themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale...?” (reverse=coded: government should help=5, people should care for themselves =1).

Several demographic characteristics served as independent variables. These items included: age; years of education (0-20, including 1st through 12th grade, and 1-8 years of college); sex (male = 1, female = 2); married (recoded into married = 1 or not married = 0); born in the United States (yes = 1 or no = 2); and dichotomous race variables (1 = yes or 0 = no) for: White, Black, Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander (collapsed categories), Other, and Hispanic.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N=2,334)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Age	0.00	1.00	-1.97-2.15
Years of Education	0.00	1.00	-5.33-1.89
Sex (Male = 1, Female = 2)	1.55	0.50	1.00-2.00
Married (yes =1, no = 0)	0.50	0.50	0.00-1.00
Born in the United States (yes =1, no =2)	1.11	0.31	1.00-2.00
Race: White (yes =1, no = 0)	0.82	0.39	0.00-1.00
Race: Black (yes =1, no = 0)	0.12	0.32	0.00-1.00
Race: American Indian or Alaskan Native (yes =1, no = 0)	0.03	0.17	0.00-1.00
Race: Asian or Pacific Islander (yes =1, no = 0)	0.04	0.21	0.00-1.00
Race: Other (yes =1, no = 0)	0.01	0.09	0.00-1.00
Race: Hispanic (yes =1, no = 0)	0.04	0.19	0.00-1.00
Help Blacks	2.98	1.46	1.00-5.00
Help poor	3.34	1.25	1.00-5.00
Government should help	3.17	1.29	1.00-5.00
Help sick	3.66	1.26	1.00-5.00
Individualism/collectivism (alpha = .84)	3.28	1.09	1.00-5.00

ANALYSES

I used OLS regression to analyze whether years of education were associated with more individualist or more collectivist orientations. I included five models, one for each of the dependent measures, as well as for the scaled measure of the four separate dependent measures ($\alpha = .84$). All models used a clustering command (SVY in Stata) as delineated by the Davern et al. (2021) GSS codebook. I also evaluated all five models for possible issues of multicollinearity by considering the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each variable in the five models, and results ranged from 0.873 to 1.460, within recommended limits (Menard, 2001). A stepwise model was not used to safeguard against coincidental significance, as detailed by Smith (2018).

Results

I examined whether years of education and other demographic characteristics were associated with more individualist or more collectivist orientations. Table 2 provides regression estimates for the association between each independent variable and the measures of individualist and collectivist orientations. For helping Blacks, several demographic variables were positively associated with respondents believing that the government should do more, including: more years of education ($B = 0.24, p < .001$), identifying as Black ($B = 1.05, p < .001$), and identifying race as Other ($B = 0.79, p < .01$). However, two demographic factors were negatively associated with helping Black people, or put another way, that Blacks should receive no special treatment. These demographic factors included those of an older age ($B = -0.17, p < .001$) and identifying as being married ($B = -0.24, p < .01$).

Table 2: Regression Estimates for the Association Between Education and Measures of Individualist or Collectivist Orientations (N=2,334)

	I Help Blacks		II Help Poor		III Gov. do more		IV Help sick		V Individ./ Collect.	
	Coef.		Coef.		Coef.		Coef.		Coef.	
	(S.E.)		(S.E.)		(S.E.)		(S.E.)		(S.E.)	
Age	-0.17	***	-0.19	***	-0.14	***	-0.16	***	-0.16	***
	(0.04)		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.02)	
Years of Education	0.24	***	0.01		0.05		0.03		0.08	**
	(0.04)		(0.04)		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.03)	
Sex (Male = 1, Female = 2)	-0.07		0.04		0.03		0.01		0.01	
	(0.07)		(0.06)		(0.06)		(0.06)		(0.05)	
Married (yes =1, no = 0)	-0.24	**	-0.22	***	-0.32	***	-0.28	***	-0.26	***
	(0.07)		(0.06)		(0.06)		(0.06)		(0.05)	
Born in the United States (yes =1, no =2)	-0.07		0.06		0.13		0.11		0.06	
	(0.12)		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.10)		(0.08)	
Race: White (yes =1, no = 0)	-0.25		-0.25		-0.20		-0.04		-0.18	
	(0.17)		(0.16)		(0.15)		(0.13)		(0.10)	
Race: Black (yes =1, no = 0)	1.05	***	0.37	*	0.40	*	0.35	*	0.54	**
	(0.18)		(0.17)		(0.16)		(0.14)		(0.11)	
Race: American Indian or Alaskan Native (yes =1, no = 0)	-0.15		-0.13		-0.04		-0.07		-0.10	
	(0.20)		(0.18)		(0.20)		(0.16)		(0.13)	
Race: Asian or Pacific Islander (yes =1, no = 0)	0.09		0.12		0.01		0.04		0.07	
	(0.20)		(0.17)		(0.18)		(0.17)		(0.12)	
Race: Other (yes =1, no = 0)	0.79	**	-0.22		-0.70	**	0.47	*	0.08	
	(0.30)		(0.29)		(0.24)		(0.23)		(0.14)	
Race: Hispanic (yes =1, no = 0)	0.18		0.31		0.34		0.32	*	0.29	*
	(0.23)		(0.20)		(0.20)		(0.16)		(0.12)	
R-squared	0.15		0.09		0.08		0.06		0.13	

Notes. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. All continuous variables are standardized. Model I: Help Blacks; Model II: Help poor; Model III: Government should do more; Model IV: Help sick; Model V: Individualism/collectivism scale (alpha = .84).

For helping the poor, identifying as Black was positively associated with believing the government should do more ($B = 0.37, p < .05$). Conversely, being older ($B = -0.19, p < .001$) and being married ($B = -0.22, p < .05$) were negatively associated with helping the poor. Put another way, older adults and married individuals were more likely to believe that poor people should help themselves.

For whether the government should do more or if the government was doing too much, identifying as Black ($B = 0.40, p < .05$) was positively associated with believing the government should do more. Conversely, three demographic factors were negatively associated with the government doing more and were more likely to believe that the government was doing too much. These demographic factors included those of an older age ($B = -0.14, p < .001$), being married ($B = -0.32, p < .001$), and identifying as Other for race/ethnicity ($B = -0.70, p < .01$).

For helping the sick, identifying as Black ($B = 0.34, p < .05$), identifying as Other for race/ethnicity ($B = 0.47, p < .05$), and identifying as Hispanic ($B = 0.32, p < .05$) were each positively associated with believing the government should do more. Older age ($B = -0.16, p < .001$) and married status ($B = -0.28, p < .001$) were once again negatively associated with the dependent variable, in that these respondents were more likely to believe that people should take care of hospital and doctor bills themselves.

For the four-item scaled measure measuring overall individualistic versus collectivistic views ($\alpha = 0.84$), more years of education was positively associated with believing that the government should do more ($B = 0.08, p < .01$). In addition, two demographic factors were positively associated with believing that the government should do more to help people: identifying as Black ($B = 0.54, p < .001$) and identifying as Hispanic ($B = 0.29, p < .05$). Respondents of an older age ($B = -0.16, p < .001$) and those who were married ($B = -0.27, p < .01$) were more likely to report more individualistic views, or beliefs that the government is doing too much and that people should help themselves.

Limitations

The present analysis has several limitations. The research question and variables of interest examined in this study relied upon existing survey data which had preset questions and available responses. While this study assessed individualism and collectivism based on established measures other researchers have used in the past (Celinska et al., 2007; Cohen & Liebma, 1997; Marchant Shapiro & Patterson, 1995), there are other ways to measure individualism and collectivism. For example, the current survey items of interest only asked participants about the status of Blacks and no other racial/ethnic groups. Furthermore, the present analysis is limited by the manner in which demographic factors were measured, such as considering using the binary of sex and limited categories to define race/ethnicity. While the General Social Survey is designed to be representative of the population within the United States (Davern et al., 2021), voluntary participation may have contributed to selection bias within the available data set. Other threats to validity may include regression to the mean. Future research should seek to address these limitations.

DISCUSSION

This study considered to what extent more years of education are associated with the development of more individualist or collectivist orientations among individuals in U.S. society. Results suggested that additional years of education were positively associated with more collectivistic views in the individualism-collectivism 4-item scale. In addition, views that the government should do more to help Black individuals within U.S. society was also positively associated with more years of education, where each additional year of education was, on average, associated with a 0.24-unit increase in more collectivist attitudes toward this policy. These findings suggest that engagement in higher levels of education may make people in society more aware of issues facing Black individuals (both historically and presently) and may encourage collectivist views that the government should enact policies and programs to help. While the connection between civic engagement and more collectivist views has been established (Moorman & Blakely, 1995; Zaff et al., 2008), the present study suggests that more years of formal education is associated with more collectivist views overall. As Hurtado (2019) posited, civic learning within higher education matters, and offers opportunities to counteract policies designed to undermine the public (Krugman, 2023). Furthermore, the present analysis builds on Ho and Chiu's (1994) conceptualization of individualism as valuing individual achievement and autonomy and collectivism as valuing interdependence and collective responsibility, in that more years of formal education has been associated with more collectivist views.

Results also suggested that several other factors were associated with the development of more collectivist orientations, including being of younger age, being Black, and being Hispanic. While these findings replicate previous research which has found that certain demographics are associated with more collectivistic views (Carson, 2009; Chang et al., 2020; Rivas et al., 2019), these findings have implications for institutions of higher education in terms of how to ensure majority-identified individuals learn about differential experiences. Researchers have demonstrated what does and does not work when it comes to diversity training, suggesting that bias training does not work but rather meaningful policy implementation such as playful programs related to hiring, training, mentoring, and work-life balance can have real impacts (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022). It is critical for institutions of higher education to therefore develop and implement meaningful policies to enhance diversity (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022).

The time is now to ensure all individuals have access to experiences in higher education than can develop their ability to engage civically for the betterment of their own lives and society. To be sure, one cannot force individuals to obtain more education and financial costs pose real barriers to pursuit of higher education. Yet there are tangible steps to be taken. Despite current attacks from state legislators on diversity, equity, and inclusion, research demonstrates that diversity and equity work are paramount for our institutions and their members to thrive (Long & Bateman, 2020). Institutions of higher education can develop meaningful ways to recruit more diverse students (Shook, 2022) and safeguard their success through meaningful interventions for retention and persistence toward student success (Kuh et al., 2007).

Through collaborative action, institutions of higher education can work toward meaningful collectivism.

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