

The Impact of Collectivism on Creative Self-Efficacy in Japanese Learners

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Abstract

During 25 years of observing Japanese students in the English language classroom a pattern began to emerge in the students. When asked to do something that required creative skills a percentage of the class was inevitably stumped by the task and looks to their fellow classmates before producing something that resembled what others had done. Japan is widely seen as a collectivist society which led to the question of whether or not a collectivist self-identity had an impact on creative self-efficacy. Fifty Japanese participants from various ages and social standings were given a survey that contained qualitative and quantitative questions. The data were compared and both sets of data were consistent with the other. A Pearson's correlation test was done on the quantitative results. The test showed a strong negative correlation between collectivist self-identity and creative self-efficacy.

Key Words: collectivism, Japan, creative, self-efficacy, identity.

Introduction

I first arrived in Japan in 1992. From that time until the present I have been teaching English as a second language to Japanese people from every demographic imaginable. Over those 25 years, I began to notice a pattern in some of my students. Before I describe the pattern, I want to emphasize that I only saw this in some, not all. However, the prevalence caught my attention and peaked my curiosity enough to study the phenomena. What I noticed was that whenever I gave my students an assignment that required them to be creative; some of them were unable to complete the assignment. They would either freeze-up, panic, or try to find out how others were doing the assignment before proceeding.

This type of reaction occurred again and again over the 25 years of my teaching practice and was observed in almost every age group from elementary school to the elderly. This continuous observation led to the question of what might be causing this behavior and how it could be addressed in order to improve learning outcomes in the English language classroom. I began to define what I was observing as low creative efficacy and wondered if it was being influenced by collectivism since Japan is widely seen, even by Japanese people, as a collectivist society. To put it clearly, the thesis question that drove this research was how does a collectivist self-identity impact creative self-efficacy?

Before describing the research method, results and implications I would like to put my observations into context by presenting several examples that support the idea of identity's effect on behavior, collectivism and Japan, a description of creativity, and finally, language as a creative process.

Background

There is a plethora of information in the fields of behaviorism and psychology on how identity and behavior are interlinked. Berzonsky, for example, made three general identity categories and, based on those, predicted behavioral tendencies. In 2010, he wrote about a specific experiment he had done involving 1078 Polish people from adolescence to early adulthood. In his study, he successfully predicted that, based on the identity category that best described each individual, he could successfully establish a correlation between his three categories and the types of values people adopt, what sort of personality traits they would display, and most importantly, how they engaged in the decision-making process (Berzonsky, Cieciuch, Duriez, & Soenens, 2011).

In another example of how identity affects behavior, Akutsu examined the correlation between collectivist identity and bargaining behavior. He hypothesized that the impact of group identity on bargaining behavior is stronger in Japan, which he describes as a collectivist culture, than in the U.S., which he describes as an individualistic culture. He went on to state that the individualism/collectivism dimension of culture interacts with the group identity effects, however, bargaining behavior is not notably different between the two cultures when group identity is collapsed (Akutso, 1998).

Finally, we can see previous notions of the relationship between identity and behavior in Kekes' work, once wrote the following.

A man possesses constancy only if he regularly acts in accordance with a deliberate pattern. That is, a pattern he first recognizes as an ideal and then gradually transforms himself so as to have his life reflect it. To have constancy is to be steadfast in adhering to one's deliberate pattern as it is transformed from a distant ideal to one's second nature and true self (Kekes, 1983).

Kekes is describing a pattern of self-identification that dictates deliberate behavioral choices, which eventually become habitual. This idea runs parallel to my own hypothesis that collectivist self-identity in Japanese students influences creative self-efficacy. One problem we face with this question is that some would argue about whether or not Japan was indeed a collectivist society.

Japan as Collectivist

In the US, there is a well-known proverb that states, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." In contrast, Japan offers a different perspective with its own well know proverb, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down". (出る釘は打たれる). Each can be said to represent the core values of their respective societies. If we assume that the squeaky wheel and the protruding nail are both metaphors for individual expression, then we can also see how each country's proverb suggests how one should deal with individualism. Frager explains that when Japanese social behavior is discussed, there is often an importance placed on social forces and the pressure towards conformity. Almost all talks about Japan also focus on the importance of group membership. Frager calls Japan a culture in which social standards rather than personal values determine behavior (Nealy, 2013).

It is important to note that what is being described is the average, rather than the absolute of each individual in Japanese society. Hofstede put it best when he said that characterizing a national culture, or in the case of this study, national ideology, does not mean that all people in that nation have all of the characteristics being assigned to that culture. Common elements are being described as oppose to absolute characteristics of every individual (Hofstede, 1980).

Collectivism pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong and cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003). According to Hofstede, people are born into collectivities which may be their extended family, or their community. Everybody is expected to look after the interest of the in-group and to have no other opinions and beliefs than the opinions and beliefs of their in-group (Hofstede, 1983).

Based on Hofstede's research, on the scale of individuality and collectivism Japan falls somewhere in the middle (Hofstede, 1983) which lends credence to the idea that collectivism might have an impact on Japanese learning and creativity.

Definition of Creativity

There are several definitions of creativity. For the sake of this study two definitions will be used. The first states that creative people are characterized by an active, lively, inventive, own and independent approach to the seeking of solutions in complex situations and tasks (Sramova & Fichnova, 2008). The second definition is one I formulated myself in order to have a

framework by which I could evaluate creative-self efficacy. It is characterized by information synthesis, own decision making, imaginative thinking and problem solving. These five skills are what was considered when thinking about the impact of collectivism on students' ability and willingness to be creative. Having said that, the participants of this research were asked to define creativity. The results of this research are based on what they think it means to be creative.

Under the heading of creativity one can also find language. Researchers such as Gass and Selinker have long seen language as a creative process.

The process of acquisition is seen as one of creating a body of implicit knowledge upon which the utterances in the language are based. Acquiring a language is a creative process in which learners are interacting with their environment to produce an internalized representation of the regularities they discover in the linguistic data to which they are exposed (Gass & Selinker, 1994).

It is the notion of language acquisition and use as a creative process that also contributes to this study's quest to find out if there is a correlation between collectivism and creativity.

Methodology

The study was done using mixed methodology. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered either online or as a printout for participants to fill in. The questionnaire was originally written in English then translated to Japanese. Qualitative data were collected using open ended questions while quantitative data were gathered using Likert scale questions. A type of narrative analysis was done on the quantitative data to establish patterns and themes in the participants' response and to understand the implications. The qualitative findings were then compared to the quantitative data in order to corroborate the results of both. Quantitative data were analyzed using a Pearson's correlation test to measure the strength of association between collectivist self-identity and creative self-efficacy.

In the quantitative portion of this research, the responses were given a score of 5 to 1. A score of 5 signifies the respondent strongly identifies with the group category while a score of 1 indicates that they do not identify with the group category. Those listed below that are marked with an asterisk were given a reverse weight so that they corresponded with how strongly or weakly the participant identified with the category in question. The questionnaire items are listed below:

Collectivist Self-Identity (Quantitative)

1. I think about what others would do before making a big decision.
2. I always speak my mind even if it goes against the other people's opinions. *
3. I enjoy being unique and different from others. *
4. When shopping for music and clothes I always choose items that are "all the rage".

Collectivist Self-Identity (Qualitative)

1. Do you think of yourself as a group oriented person? Why or why not.

Creative self-efficacy (Quantitative)

1. I'm sure I can deal with problems requiring creative thinking.
2. Many times, I have proven that I can find out solutions for any difficult situation.

3. I'm good in proposing original solutions of the problems.
4. I am very good at creating things.

Creative self-efficacy (Qualitative)

1. I think I have a lot of creative ability. Why or why not.

Data Collection

Data from a total of 50 Japanese participants aged 19 to 71 were collected. The survey was conducted over a one-month period between June and July 2012. Participants were recruited by Japanese acquaintances, who distributed the survey's URL to their Japanese associates. This method of data collection is often referred to as the snowball technique or snowball sampling. Bryman suggests that the problem with this approach is that the sample collected in this way is seldom representative of the population (Bryman, 2008). While this may be true in other cases, the issue was less problematic since the population being tested was no more clearly defined than that they be Japanese people. In support of my decision to use snowball sampling, there have been other researchers, such as Lopes et al, who have found snowball sampling to be useful for minimizing selection bias (Lopes, Rodrigues, & Sichieri, 1996).

Research ethics

All participation in this study was voluntary. No one was tricked or coerced into participating. The participants were only partially informed about the nature of the research. They were told that the survey was for a graduation thesis on the relationship between collectivism and creativity. They were not told who initiated the study nor were they given an in-depth explanation of the research questions. All participation was done anonymously. None of the data collected was shared with anyone except research staff and the faculty of Linköping University, Sweden.

Results

In this section I will present the quantitative and qualitative results of the study. The quantitative results will be presented in a straight forward showing of numerical data. Given the nature of the qualitative data, I would like to offer some explanation along with the presentation of the findings in order to keep the results in context.

Quantitative

Collectivist self-identity

Likert scale Questions

Overall there was a mean score of 2.39 on the Likert scale with a standard deviation of .68.

Creative self-efficacy

Likert scale Questions

Overall there was a mean score of 3.56 on the Likert scale with a standard deviation of .52.

Pearson's correlation

There was a -.45 correlation between Collectivist self-identity and creative self-efficacy with a P value of .001

Qualitative

Collectivist self-identity

“Do you think of yourself as a group oriented person? Why or why not”.

Results

70% Negative Association

30% Positive Association

Some of the reasons cited by the participants for not being collectivist were the inability to find ways to fit in, feelings of resistance towards the group, and preference for freedom. Negative feelings often emerged when the participants wrote about being separate from the group.

“If you mean being in a group just to be in a group, that is not who I am. I change jobs many times, I change schools many times, I enjoy being by myself but it doesn't mean I hate people.” This respondent defended the position of not being in a group as if that decision was considered by others to be antisocial. This suggests that, for this respondent, there are social pressures for belonging in a group.

In other responses where people identified with not being group-oriented words like resistance, loss of self, and rejection were used. One respondent wrote, “I am weak, being alone is easier.”

Of the respondents who identified themselves as not being group oriented, only 60% gave a reason. In almost all cases there was some sort of negative attachment to their position. This includes a fear of losing self, experience with being ostracized, and the group being bothersome.

I should note here that there were a few respondents who mentioned that they were “not especially” group oriented. Use of the phrase “not especially” connotes the idea that the respondents do not think that they are any more group oriented than most people. I interpreted these answers to mean that the respondents did not have a strong collectivist self-identity since they did not see themselves as being especially collectivist.

Now, let us take a look at the opposite side of the collectivist identity spectrum. Although we had a negative association attached to not being group oriented by the participants who did not have a strong collectivist identity, the reverse was true of those who strongly identified with being collectivist. Their reasons were security, support, acceptance, pride, human nature, and having more fun in a group. For example, one respondent wrote:

“When I am in the group I feel extremely safe. If I imagine myself without a group I begin to feel uncertainty.”

This answer was striking not only because it highlights the overall attitudes of the participants who identified as being strongly collectivistic, but it also echoes the negative images seen in the group who did not identify with being collectivistic. Just like them, this respondent described separation from the group in negative aspects. Belonging to the group means acceptance while not belonging to a group equals uncertainty.

Creative self-efficacy

I think I have a lot of creative ability. Why or why not.

Results

57% Negative Association

35% Positive Association

9% Unsure

Creative self-efficacy refers to how much belief the individual has in his or her own ability to do something creative. On the survey the participants were asked to respond to the following statement: "I think I have a lot of creative ability. Why or why not." 57% said no, 35% said yes, 9% were not sure. The question itself was designed to determine, whether or not the respondents believed in their own ability to actually create something. Some of the answers given for why they could not were as follows:

- "I want to have ability but it's difficult. I lack the ability to make things real."
- "No I don't think so because I can never think of anything when I am supposed to draw or do some crafts."
- "I don't think so. There are so many geniuses in the world, I am not that confident."

For those who answered yes to this question some of the reasons given were

- "I think so. I can easily call forth images of things."
- "I believe I have a decent imagination. I also think some part of me has the spirit of a shokunin (master craftsman) but I don't know if it's anything special to brag about."
- "The difference between creativity and creative ability is do you take action or not. To think might be easy but to take action is different from just thinking therefore I think I do have creative ability"

Discussion

This study was conducted as a way of finding out just how deeply collectivism impacts upon creative self-efficacy. In particular, I was less concerned with the term collectivism in the general sense and more concerned with the notion of the collectivist identity. I believe there is a difference. On the one hand collectivism, when applied generally, describes a certain aspect of social behavior and psychology. It can be used as a catchall descriptor of a group of people. On the other hand, the collectivist self-identity can exist independent of what may or may not be characteristic of society at large. The individual is collectivist because he or she believes him or herself to be collectivist.

When we look at studies like the one done by Noguchi (Noguchi, 2007), we see that research of this type tries to establish the collectivist nature of the whole group and then tries to determine how that collectivist nature impacts on creative ability. What these studies fail to do is look deeper at the role of identity on the outcome of creativity. I have to admit that on the outset of this project I was also of the mind that socially inherent collectivism was the dominant factor in how often and to what degree individuals within Japanese society identify with being cognitively creative and see themselves as having the ability to physically do something creative.

It never occurred to me, until later in the research, to focus more on identity rather than purely on the notion of collectivism itself.

So, is Japan a collectivist society? Perhaps. The bigger question is how does the individual's belief in that influence their creative outcome? If you believe that creativity is the ability to think divergently then it would seem that a collectivist identity would cancel out divergent thinking. A majority of the participants themselves defined creativity as the development of the unknown, freedom of expression, and the ability to imagine. All three of these would seem to be hampered by a collectivist self-identity.

If we look at the data, we can see that there is indeed a negative correlation between collectivist self-identity and creative self-efficacy. This means a stronger collectivist identity tended to also show a weaker creative aspect. However, when we take a deeper look at the reasons people gave for not being creative there was hardly any mention of collectivism or social pressure. Instead, it seemed on the surface to be purely a matter of self-confidence. Those who did not identify with being creative did so because they did not feel they had enough ability or talent to be creative. There were however, a few who did cite not wanting to stand out as a reason for their perceived lack of creativity.

What does it all mean for the classroom?

My experience tells me that the first priority of education should be to eliminate as many barriers to learning as possible so that the learner can come to the experience with readiness. In essence that is what this study has really been about. In a Japanese course, how does a strong collectivist identity affect the learning process? Does it hinder it or is it insignificant? Based on the evidence presented in this study we cannot say that the collectivist self-identity is insignificant. In the qualitative analysis 30% of the participants identified strongly with being collectivist. This figure was corroborated by the quantitative data. If the notion exists, then it must have some bearing on the behavior of the individual. Also, of those who did identify with being non-collectivist there was still a strong negative association with this position. Again, this would logically influence behavior.

What this points to is the notion that it is not the idea of collectivism as social phenomena alone that curriculum designers and educators should be concerned with. Instead, focus should also be placed on individual identity within the given society because understanding the dynamics of identity within the context of the group will allow for deeper insight on how to eliminate barriers to learning. Furthermore, the identity of the individual should take precedent over any generalized notion as the greater force on the behavior of the learning. I do not mean that we should dismiss collectivism all together. What I am saying is that we consider it as one of the influential factors of identity rather than solely as the influential factor of creative outcome.

Limitations

The notions of collectivism and creativity are constructed concepts. This could also have a large bearing on the outcome of the study because what I see as being collectivist and what the participants see as being collectivist may not have been the same thing. The same is true for creativity. Still, while these constructs exist and color behavior, it is the individual identity that seems to have the greater power over outcome.

Language also introduced another limitation. The survey was translated from English into Japanese. Although every effort was made to avoid the group effect, whereby the participants might answer out of defensiveness or in response to what they perceived as expectation, I failed

to take into account the subtlety of the Japanese language and the culture behind it. Because of this it is possible that the participants were aware of the fact that the survey was done by a foreign person and answered accordingly.

Another linguistic limitation was in the word creativity itself. There are two ways to write the Chinese characters for creativity. One indicates use of imagination and the other indicates the actual creation of things. Although both characters are often used interchangeably the translator selected the character that indicates the creation of things. This, of course, may have biased the answers that were given.

Finally, Greater understanding of the correlation between collectivist identity and creativity could have been gained with the use of in depth interviews and deeper narrative analysis. A questionnaire can only provide a small glimpse into the minds of the participants. Given the lack of time and resources a questionnaire was the only option available for this study.

With the limitations listed above the findings of the study are, by themselves, inconclusive since it is unclear how far bias has contaminated the data. Still the data does have some value because it allows for a deeper understanding of how Japanese people view themselves in the context of collectivism and creativity. This is the seed necessary for the development of more hypotheses and further research on the topic.

Conclusion

All of this research was done in order to ponder obstacles and solutions for the Japanese creativity classroom. Since the descriptor “collectivist” appears again and again it is absolutely crucial that these issues be considered when thinking of the best way forward in education. As stated in the discussion, focus on collectivism alone is not enough. Individual identity also plays a key role as well. Based on the findings of this research I can now proceed to hypothesize that it is more important for curriculum designers to focus on building programs that look to address the various identities within the class as a whole, if that curriculum hopes to achieve creative learning for the entire group.

With regard to collectivism, I would like to conclude by emphasizing again that by understanding the role that collectivism plays on the identity and behavior of the Japanese learner we can better understand how to build curriculum that addresses this and even utilizes it for the betterment of the classroom. What is certain is that based on the qualitative, quantitative, and deduced findings of this study the matter warrants further investigation.

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