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**MATCHING LEARNING
ENVIRONMENTS AND CULTURE :
INDIVIDUALISM/COLLECTIVISM AND
THE CASE OF SPORT AND PHYSICAL
EDUCATION**

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Matching Learning Environments and Culture: Individualism/Collectivism and the Case of Sport and Physical Education.

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Abstract

This paper is derived from a larger study concerned with the socio-cultural environment of sport and physical education programmes in Singapore. The data reported here examine the dimension of Individualism/Collectivism (IC), which has been identified as a relevant facet of national culture (Hofstede, 1980). Evidence tends to suggest that Individualism correlates significantly with success in high level sporting contexts. On the other hand, Singaporean values are more usually associated with the concept of Collectivism. The degree of match and dissonance between the national culture and the psycho-social environment of international sport is seen as offering a powerful explanation for the status and relative success of various sport and physical activity programmes. The paper concludes with the identification of some implications for more effective curriculum development in sport and physical education programmes and suggestions for future research.

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Nicholas G. Aplin and J.E. Saunders

Introduction

The influence of value systems is being recognized, with increasing frequency, as an important factor in the development of schemes for excellence. For example, the beliefs, ideologies, expectations and values of a culture have been identified as being closely associated with the economic factors which account for industrial success (Porter, 1990). Furthermore, on an international basis, it has been observed that the competitive edge goes to those who can turn cultural differences of these types into economic advantages (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1993). As it has been proposed that top-level sport and work (business) are analogous, in that they are both built on the achievement principle (Rigauer, 1981), so it may be argued that the same values that influence achievement in the broad economic sense are also operating in the same way in sport and physical education. In the light of such findings it may be proposed that the potential for achievement in sport, as in business, is to some degree predetermined by the values of the members of national cultures and the sub-groups thereof, and that, an investigation of national sporting potential should acknowledge the impact of values.

The definitions of values and culture, which will be used here, follow those outlined by Hofstede (1980). Values are derived from the mental programming of people which operates at three distinct yet related levels of uniqueness. Firstly at a universal level (the least unique), secondly at a cultural level and thirdly at the psychological or individual level (the most unique). Mental programmes at the universal level are mostly inherited and, theoretically, are shared by everyone. Those at a cultural level are learned and shared by members of groups or categories of people. And mental programmes at an individual level (some of which are learned some of which are inherited) help to define the individual personality. The focus here is on the cultural and individual levels, and the

distinction between them which helps to explain why individuals do not always conform to cultural norms.

At both the individual level and the cultural level there are tensions in the group-individual dimension of values. Triandis (1986) refers to 'allocentrism' versus 'idiocentrism' at the individual or psychological level, and 'collectivism' versus 'individualism' at the cultural level.

Culture is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one human group from another. It includes systems of values, which are the building blocks of culture (Hofstede, 1980).

It is the aim of this presentation to examine the possible role of one particular work-related value in the attainment of sports excellence. It is argued that the state of equilibrium between individualism and collectivism (IC) at the cultural level may have a bearing on the achievement of international sporting success. No attempt will be made to examine allocentrism and idiocentrism at this stage.

Values in work and values in sport.

Hofstede (1988) defines values as broad preferences for certain states of affairs over others. Values are ends rather than means and are mutually linked to form hierarchies or systems. Values are now normally seen as the criteria individuals use to select and justify actions and to evaluate people and themselves (Schwartz, 1992). In the context of this study it can be proposed that IC is a work-related value referring specifically to the influence of interpersonal relationships on the way people operate or act within the context of an achievement situation. IC is one of five dimensions along which cultures may be measured (Hofstede, 1991), the others being:

1. Power Distance;
2. Uncertainty Avoidance;
3. Masculinity/Femininity;
4. Long-term Orientation.

IC basically belongs to the category of cultural or institutionally organized values, although it may correspond to an individual's personal

priorities also. Often work is viewed as 'serious' whilst sport is seen as 'non-serious', so for the purpose of establishing a relationship between work and sport, only formal types of work and sport activities are considered.

Individualism/Collectivism in the Singapore Context

The national competitiveness of Singapore is currently influenced by the interaction of individualism and collectivism. Collectivism (also known as communitarianism) represents an ideology which stresses that people are integrated into strong cohesive ingroups, ie. natural groups like the family, friends, co-workers, team-mates. Members of the family or group learn to think in terms of 'we' and 'us'. Relationships are created and exist over long periods of time; ingroups are defined through tradition (Triandis, 1988). An examination of a sports team would expect to uncover strong elements of collectivism beyond those associated with mere teamwork. The extended histories of soccer teams and their supporters offer examples of very well defined ingroups within which the members are readily identifiable to outsiders. By definition, members of ingroups demonstrate total, long-term loyalty to the team and the ingroup. Evidence of mutual social behaviour amongst players away from the training/playing arena is another example of identification with an ingroup.

Individualism, on the other hand, represents a system where the links between people are less defined. Children learn to think of themselves as 'I' and to think of others in terms of their individual characteristics; not according to their group membership. In all sports it is possible to identify elements of individualism and though there may be a conflict of interests involved (one player asserting his judgement rather than following the team strategy) it is conceivable that the ultimate success of the team may not be harmed and may indeed be enhanced if the remaining players accept the divergence. Individualism also exists in sport in the sense that an athlete may pursue a professional career with different teams and show only brief acceptance of the values, goals and expectations of each. Fandi Ahmad, who has played for a number of different soccer teams in Singapore, Malaysia and Europe, is an individualist in this sense.

In Singapore it might be relatively easy to recognize that the observed behaviour of individual people is associated with one particular end of the IC continuum. At a cultural level, however, there is some

confusion as to where Singapore is located on such a continuum. Singapore is normally aligned with 'collective' nations like Japan, Taiwan and South Korea and yet is also perceived to be one of the most westernized (ie. individualist) of the South East Asian economies. Hofstede (1980), in fact, assigned Singapore a low individualism index (IDV) in comparison with 50 other economies. These data were collected between 1968 and 1972, so in view of the dramatic rise in prosperity in Singapore during the past twenty years it is reasonable to expect a shift towards individualism. Table 1 shows a sample of the scores taken predominantly from America, Europe and the South East Asian region and indicates the relative position of countries used in Hofstede's survey. Note that a high individualism index of 89 (Great Britain) would correspond to a low collectivism index of 11 and so on.

Table 1. Individualism index (0-100) for fifteen selected countries

Rank	Country	IDV score
1.	USA	91
3.	Great Britain	89
6.	New Zealand	79
10	Sweden	71
14.	Switzerland	68
15.	W.Germany	67
20.	Spain	51
22.	Japan	46
32.	Philippines	32
36.	Malaysia	26
37.	Hong Kong	25
39=.	SINGAPORE	20
39=.	Thailand	20
44.	Taiwan	17
47.	Indonesia	14

The main distinctions that were drawn between individualism and collectivism by Hofstede (1980) are outlined in Table 2. He examined key differences that exist in general norms, the family, the school, the workplace and in politics. More recently Triandis et al. (1985) and Hui and

Triandis (1986) elaborated these distinctions by highlighting the relationship of the IC dimension to ingroups in particular. See Table 3.

Table 2 IC according to Hofstede (1980)

COLLECTIVIST SOCIETIES	INDIVIDUALIST SOCIETIES
'We' consciousness	'I' consciousness
Collective identity	Autonomy
Emotional dependence	Emotional independence
Group solidarity	Individual initiative
Sharing	Right to privacy
Duties and obligations	Pleasure seeking
Need for stable and predetermined friendship	Financial security
Group decision making	Need for specific friendships
Particularism	Universalism

Table 3: IC according to Triandis, Leung, Villareal and Clark (1985) and Hui and Triandis (1986)*

COLLECTIVISM within an Ingroup	INDIVIDUALISM
Emphasis on implication of own behaviour for others	Share with immediate nuclear family
Sharing resources	Less willing to subordinate personal goals
Emphasis on harmony	Confrontation within ingroup may be good*
Being controlled by shame	Being controlled by guilt*
Sharing good and bad outcomes	Feel personally responsible for successes and failures
Feeling that one is part of the life of the ingroup	Experience some degree of separation and distance from ingroups
Sense of common fate*	Person fate*
Ingroup is centre of psychological field*	Person is centre of psychological field*
Ingroup is extension of the self*	Self is distinct from ingroup*

Lately it has been argued that, there has been a clear shift from collectivism to individualism, particularly amongst younger Singaporeans (Goh, 1988). The tension between apparently conflicting values creates a dilemma. Although excessive individualism in itself may be seen as

undesirable, the system of meritocracy tends to encourage self-advancement. The solution to this dilemma, it is proposed, is to see individualism and collectivism as complementing each other rather than representing incompatible ends of the same scale.

".....the problem is not simply that of displacing individualism with communitarianism, which would be rather a difficult task to achieve anyhow, especially in the short run. Rather the solution seems to be the attainment of an equilibrium between individual and community interests. It would indeed be unrealistic to expect pragmatic Singaporeans to change their individualistic behaviour overnight, especially when the reward system is still based on individualism rather than communitarianism."

Quah, 1991.

The national values, which were formulated in 1991, focus on the inherent collective tradition of Singapore but also acknowledge the need for equilibrium by recognizing the individual.

1. Nation before community and society above self
2. Family as the basic unit of society
3. Community support and respect for the individual
4. Consensus not conflict
5. Racial and religious harmony

This interpretation of the needs of people as individuals and as members of groups has also been applied to work organizations. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993) explain that 'individualism versus communitarianism' represents one of a number of necessary 'tensions' or 'dilemmas' which have to be resolved in order to achieve economic success. It is therefore suggested that the process of attaining sports excellence, which resembles the case of economic development in as far as it is concerned with achievement, also requires a balance between individualism and collectivism.

Individualism/Collectivism in the context of Sport

International sporting success shows a strong relationship with individualism (Aplin and Saunders, 1993), but as yet there are no indications of a trend in direction of causality. Intuitively the feeling is that individualism is one of the antecedents of success. The majority of Olympic sports, for example, are geared to individuals. These sports require considerable personal sacrifices and often the athlete divorces himself from other members of his immediate ingroups in order to train and compete. Of course acceptance and support from ingroup members is implied as well but the main focus is at the individualistic level. The example of the work achievement situation seems to suggest an alternative hypothesis however.

Research by Hofstede (1980) indicated that there is a strong relationship between national wealth (high per capita gross national product, for example) and individualism (IDV). Indeed based on the GNP figures for 1988 and Hofstede's IDV scores from the period of 1968-72 the correlation is significant with $r = .77$ (0.0001). Furthermore he asserted that it is more plausible that wealth causes individualism rather than the reverse. Triandis et al. (1988) proposed that GNP is both an antecedent and a consequent of individualism. Countries which have achieved rapid economic development tend to experience a shift towards individualism, which in turn stimulates more creativity, innovation and hence economic advancement. World Bank Development Indicators reveal that in 1980 Singapore (as a middle-income country) had a GNP per capita of US\$4430, by 1990 (as a high-income country) the figure had risen to US\$11160. By comparison, New Zealand had moved from US\$7090 in 1980 to US\$12680 in 1990. Hofstede (1991) comments that, although the trend is for countries that are wealthy, urbanized and industrialized to be represented as individualist, there are exceptions and Singapore (according to the 1970 IDV scores) is one of a number of newly industrializing economies that have retained considerable collectivism. This does bring into question the validity of IC as a unidimensional, bipolar concept. Moghaddam (1987) argues that, from the perspective of environments in the third world, individualism and collectivism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This might, in fact, explain the inconsistency in people's perceptions of Singapore's relative position on an IC continuum.

The development of sport in Singapore has been largely dependent on the continuing success of the economy and the stability of the decision making process. In the past there was little evidence to suggest that sporting success had matched the economy in any way. That state of affairs may now be changing. It may be proposed that whilst the development of the economy and the emphasis on education have been prioritized, the drive to achieve sports excellence is receiving a timely boost with the injection of increased financial aid. The path to international sporting success for Singapore probably lies in the pursuit of titles in individual sports, not so much in team sports where the physique of Asian athletes is perceived to put them at a disadvantage.

IC elements within the Sports Environment

Based on a combination of the findings of Hofstede (Table 2) and Triandis et al. (Table 3) it can be suggested that an awareness of IC elements may be beneficial in efforts to maximize the functioning of the sporting environment.

Table 4. Factors exemplifying the shift towards individualism.

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Individual freedom to set personal long-term goals.2. Encouragement of personal initiative in setting training targets.3. Developing internal locus of control as an aid to self-motivation.4. Emphasis on competition and individual achievement.5. Failure not seen as a source of shame but as a natural part of sport.6. Individual taking personal responsibility for attainment of objectives.7. Training and competition taking priority over family responsibilities.8. Training schedules to fit individual as well as team requirements.9. Acceptance of distance and separation from ingroups.10. Self as the central focus of attention during competition.11. Confrontation methods used to solve interpersonal problems.12. Emphasis on risk taking strategies in achievement situations.13. Self-reliance.14. Emotional detachment.15. Equality of opportunity. |
|---|

Conclusion

It was proposed in the introduction that IC represents a single dimension and that the achievement of international sporting success rests on the existence of equilibrium between individualism and collectivism. It is therefore necessary to point out that the factors in Table 4 should not be seen as abandoning elements which are seen to relate to collectivism. In the school environment it is important to retain elements of collectivism, particularly in the Physical Education programme and the Extra Curricular Activities programme where competition requires much lower levels of personal commitment in terms of preparation, time sacrifice and effort for example.

IC is just one of a number of work-related values that have been identified as influencing the attainment of sporting success. Of at least equal importance is the related factor of power distance, which correlates negatively with IC. In tandem these factors seem to provide the stimulus for further examination of the impact of the cultural environment on achievement situations like sport.

As a final note it should be acknowledged that the impact of values on sport will only be felt when a combination of other important factors is capable of supporting the development. So it seems that as greater emphasis is being placed on sports excellence in Singapore (finance, administration, legislation etc.) so the possibilities are increased that the benefits of a shift along the individualism/collectivism continuum will be experienced.

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