



Culture

Autonomy and Cultural Chauvinism

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The issue of autonomy has often been connected with the individualism-collectivism dimension in cultural difference. These terms come originally from Hofstede's definitions of cultural difference. Triandis (2004: x-xi) has developed them and suggests that people from individualist cultures perceive themselves as autonomous. They prioritize such things as personal goals, self-reliance, having lots of choices and having fun. They are open to new experiences and are good at making new relationships.

In contrast, people from collectivist cultures perceive themselves primarily as group members with strong group loyalty and interdependence, and therefore consider that silence is a virtue. Face is derived from the group, and they are satisfied with very few choices.

The problem with the individualism-collectivism dimension can be seen in the following description, which is based on a range of ethnographic experience:

John often felt uneasy when mixing with his Iranian friend, Kayvan, in Iran, and having to sit for hour after hour during what seemed to him interminable weekend parties with his extended family. He was always surprised that Kayvan didn't seem to be able to just leave and do his own thing. One evening John had wanted to go with Kayvan to the cinema. Kayvan had refused to make a definite arrangement, saying that it would be impolite to discuss specific times with his family. As it happened, his uncle and aunt and two cousins had left at an opportune time; but just when John and Kayvan were about to leave, the door bell rang and it was Kayvan's brother and his family, and there seemed no choice but for Kayvan to stay and help his parents entertain them. Kayvan had once spent a month in Britain attending a course, and told John that one thing he'd experienced was a degree of privacy that he could never have at home in Iran.

One day John told Kayvan what he had learnt about individualism and collectivism. He told Kayvan that he could explain his family life on the basis of it being collectivist to always want to do things together and allowing loyalty to the group to get in the way of getting on with his own life. Kayvan at first went along with this idea and said it was certainly true that in Iran family loyalty was very important. He said he had heard that in Britain people often had a lot less to do with their wider family. John was pleased to begin to talk through these differences with Kayvan because he believed that it was important to learn as much as possible about the new cultures that one had the privilege of living in.

Kayvan was too polite to tell John that he was tiring of discussing cultural differences with him. He actually felt that the tone of the discussion was getting quite patronizing. John kept mentioning things like 'self determination' and the ability to 'make personal decisions', as though they were restricted to 'Western culture'. He didn't feel that he could explain to John that his life was more complicated than he could imagine. John only really saw him when he was with his family, with whom he derived support and was able to relax, and not have to make the sorts of decisions that John was talking about. What John didn't know about were the

immense difficulties he faced in his business, which was currently failing because of the economy. He had to make very important and difficult decisions about laying off some of his workers, and perhaps even closing down the whole business and emigrating to North America.

These were personal life decisions. He didn't want to tell John that he would have to consult his father about this, because John would probably think that that was another example of 'collectivist' behaviour. Just what *did* John expect? In Kayvan's society, often the only factor that stood between personal success and failure was one's family; so they *had* to be involved. To some degree he envied John, who had the affluence to be able to play out his 'individualist self determination' in such unimportant things as when to go to the cinema.

There is no doubt that a significant degree of cultural difference is evident here. While differences between families can exist everywhere, there are also differences between Iranian and British society on many levels, in terms of institutions, politics, economy, geography, history, architecture, language, religion, social practices and so on, to the extent that Kayvan and John will have different world views. However, the individualism-collectivism distinction does not explain this difference. John and Kayvan have very different perceptions not only about the nature of their cultures but also about John's attitude.

John expects that Kayvan lacks autonomy because of his collectivist culture, and feels assured that he is right because Kayvan does not tell him that he disapproves. Kayvan feels that John has a simplistic, one-dimensional perception that his culture is deficient because it is not able to achieve the more 'superior' values 'self determination' and the ability to 'make personal decisions'. He also feels that John is speaking from a position of power and privilege.

What is important about the difference between John and Kayvan is not the cultural features of their family lives, which can be seen as a set of practices and traditions, but the values which John imposes on them. I am interested particularly in John here because he is the one I can speak about with authority having lived his role all my life. Kayvan understands John very well; but for some reason John continues to miss the point, and I want to know why John's perceptions are clouded by two ideologies. The first is a long-standing essentialism which has been manufactured by the Centre-West, which derives both from a strong European nationalist perspective and an Orientalist desire to cast the non-Western Other as culturally deficient and therefore in need of educative colonization (e.g. Said 1978). The second is a naïve

liberal multiculturalism which denies the politics of the former and romantically pictures Other national cultures as exotic but equal (Kubota 2004: 35). The combination of these two paradigms has created a neo-Hofstedian science of cultural difference which is constrained by beginning positivistically with the notion of confining national cultural description and believes itself to be objective and neutral. Thus, Triandis (2004: x) neatly divides the world into individualist 'North Americans of European backgrounds, North and West Europeans, Australians, and New Zealanders' and collectivist 'Latin Americans, Southern Europeans, East and South Asians, Africans', without addressing the fact that this is precisely the divide between Centre and Periphery.

This to some degree explains what Kayvan feels about John. From his perspective the most important difference is connected with political positioning along a global Centre-Periphery divide. John's world view derives from a superior, Centre notion that people like him can improve things, strengthened by the resources of technology, ideas, mobility, affluence, and media. Kayvan's world view is motivated by a Periphery feeling that his positioning is not really recognized, and that he suffers from problematic and limited resources. He is always being defined by others. In every walk of life, both in personal and institutional life, there will be Centre and Periphery relationships of different types; and everyone will experience the feeling of being Periphery to some degree at some time. However, at a macro level, the world is structured politically and economically in such a way that some people, because of the hierarchical positioning of their nations, genders, perceived races or ethnicities, will be on the Periphery most if not all of the time. Kayvan may only begin to feel Periphery because of the way John is attempting to define him because he has already experienced what it

is like to be defined and positioned by economic sanctions, which, in Iran, are a factor in his work problems.

I wish therefore to suggest the following propositions for discussion, based on the interaction between John and Kayvan:

1. The notions of 'individualism' and 'collectivism', and, indeed, 'autonomy', are NOT neutral definitions that help us understand particular culture. INSTEAD, they are prime artefacts of a Centre-West discourse which construct non-'Western' societies along 'us'-'them' lines.
2. Following now established definitions of racism, it is immaterial whether or not John is aware of his complicity in this Othering. It is the impact the interaction has, not only on Kayvan as a victim, but on anyone who is witness to it, which confirms that it is an act of Othering.

References

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