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INDIVIDUALISM-COLLECTIVISM AND SOCIAL CAPITAL AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Mai Beilmann and Anu Realo

University of Tartu

Abstract. Contrary to a widely held belief, a strong positive association between individualism and social capital can be observed at the cross-national level of analysis (Realo and Allik, 2009). The present study examines the relationship between social capital and individualism-collectivism at the individual level using nationally representative sample of adults from *The Estonian Survey of Culture and Personality* (N = 1,451). Results suggest that only one component of individualism—mature self-responsibility – but also peer- and society-related forms of collectivism, exhibited positive associations with social capital. Thus, although the positive relationship between individualism and social capital seems to hold in some respects at the individual level, the relationship between social capital and different components of individualism-collectivism appears rather multi-faceted.

Keywords: individualism, collectivism, social capital

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1. Introduction

The concept of social capital is currently one of the trendiest terms in the social and behavioral sciences. It has been widely used in disciplines as diverse as sociology, economics, political science, and psychology for about the last twenty years (Halpern 2005, Realo and Allik 2009). Many believe that social capital is the much sought answer to the question of what it is in a community that brings people together for common purposes, a question much older than the social sciences themselves.

The concept first drew wider attention when Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman adopted it independently from one another for the theoretical explanations of their empirical findings. Bourdieu (1985) defined social capital as "the

sum total of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual (or a group) by virtue of being enmeshed in a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 248). Coleman (1988) claimed that social capital facilitates certain actions of individuals within the social structure.

Since then, social capital has been treated in two ways in the literature and research: both as an individual asset and as a feature of communities and nations. Originally, both Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman focused on individuals (or small groups) as the unit of analysis. The concept of social capital was later extended to the level of larger groups by Robert Putnam (Portes 2000). In Putnam's interpretation, it became an attribute of communities and nations. In *Bowling Alone,* which quickly made social capital one of the most frequently cited concepts in the social sciences, Robert Putnam (2000) claims that the basis of social capital is that social networks are valuable. After all, collective action strongly depends upon social networks and the trustworthiness of fellow citizens. Cooperation and coordination for mutual benefit are facilitated by reciprocity and trust.

Despite the fact that the exact meaning of social capital is still widely debated, it seems that most authors agree that social trust or trustworthiness constitutes the core of social capital (Paxton 2002, Portes 1998). According to Paxton (1999), social capital involves at least two important components: objective associations between individuals (i.e. individuals are tied to each other in social life) and a subjective form of association (the ties between individuals must be trustworthy and reciprocal). For Putnam (2000), too, social capital "refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19).

Social capital is considered important in many regards, as higher levels of social capital have been associated with many desirable outcomes, such as faster social and economic development, greater effectiveness of political systems, and better health (for a review, see Portes 1998). At the same time, low levels of social capital may have much less desirable consequences. And, like all other forms of capital, social capital is, unfortunately, not evenly distributed. Putnam (2002) has argued that, given that it has accumulated most among those who need it least, social capital may, in fact, conceivably be even less equitably distributed than financial and human capital. The results of international research show this to be the case (Cox 2002, Offe and Fuchs 2002, Skockpol 2002, Wuthnow 2002). Indeed, previous research has shown that social capital at the individual level is dependent on many socioeconomic factors, such as age, gender, education, and income (for a review, see Kaasa and Parts 2007), indicating that many acquired as well as attributed properties of individuals may affect the quality of social capital at their disposal.

Most importantly, however, Putnam (2000) alerted us to the fact that, in most Western countries, many national-level indicators of social capital have shown signs of decline over the past few decades. He interprets this as a major shift in social cohesion: the erosion of practically everything that holds society together.

Although Putnam himself does not blame increasing individualism for the decline in social capital, many theorists have seen the growth of individualism as a threat to the organic unity between individuals and the community.

1.1. Increasing individualism, decreasing social capital – a national-level approach

There is nothing particularly new about the concern about rapid changes in society and in its prevailing value systems. Throughout history, critical thinkers have lamented about the downfall of traditional values. Over the last couple of centuries, individualism has often acted as one of the main enemies of traditional values and social cohesion. The claim that individualism will destroy valuable relationships between many people and, at the same time, the organic unity between individuals and the community has a long and rich history (see Allik and Realo 2004, Realo and Allik 2009). The fear that social capital and individualism are somehow antithetic has possibly even strengthened as social capital in developed Western countries has declined and individualism increased as Putnam (2002, 2000) demonstrated (although he did not claim that individualism was responsible for the decline in social capital). After all, it is tempting and, indeed, convenient to blame every social malaise on the vaguely defined concept of individualism.

When looking at the empirical evidence about the relationship between individualism-collectivism and social capital at the national level, it becomes evident that individualism may actually foster social capital. It might well be the case that Durkheim (1969) got it right from the beginning when claiming that individualism forces individual members of society to become more dependent on each other and each other's actions. Rothstein (2002) believes that we should distinguish between egoistic and solidaristic individualism because the latter kind of individualism may be a necessary condition to make people accept, respect, and support people with different values. Similarly, Realo and colleagues (2002) have argued that the growth of individuality, autonomy, and self-sufficiency may be perceived as a necessary condition for the development of interpersonal cooperation, mutual dependence, and social solidarity. Indeed, at the national level, it has been shown by different authors that countries with a higher level of social capital (where people believe that most people can be trusted) are also more individualistic, emphasizing the importance of independence, personal accomplishments, and freedom to choose one's own goals (Allik and Realo 2004, Hofstede 2001, Realo et al. 2008, Realo and Allik 2009). However, as far as we know, the relationship between individualism-collectivism and social capital has not been investigated at the individual level. This article aims to begin to fill this gap and to test whether the relationship between social capital and individualism-collectivism follows similar patterns at the individual level of analysis as it has been shown to do at the cultural level.

1.2. Multifaceted nature of individualism-collectivism

When studying the relationship between social capital and individualism-collectivism, it is important to keep in mind that individualism-collectivism is actually a multifaceted and ambiguous construct, the use of which has been profusely criticized in recent years (Kagitcibasi 2007, 2005, Bond 2002, Fiske 2002, Miller 2002, Oyserman et al. 2002, Voronov and Singer 2002).

The concepts of individualism and collectivism became popular in psychology after Geert Hofstede (1980, 1983) found individualism versus collectivism to be one of the most distinctive dimensions of cultural variation. The concepts were then widely elaborated in further research. Whereas social capital, an originally individual-level concept, was extended to group-level analysis, the concepts of individualism and collectivism, which were originally used as characteristics of culture, are now also applied at the individual level to describe individual differences within nations (Realo and Allik 2009, Schimmack et al. 2005). Nevertheless, the use of these concepts might be a little different after the transition between the two levels of analysis. It has been recognized that, at the cultural level, individualism might be the polar opposite of collectivism (Triandis and Suh 2002), whereas at the individual level of analysis, the two constructs have been found to be orthogonal to each other (e.g. Gelfand, Triandis, and Chan 1996, Realo et al. 2002).

Recent theorizing and empirical research suggests that, at least at the individual level, it can be analytically very productive to look at individualism-collectivism as higher order values that are multidimensional in nature. Following this, there have been several attempts to identify the *core themes* related to individualism and collectivism (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier 2002, Realo et al. 2002). Nevertheless, to date there has been no definite consensus among cross-cultural researchers about such core themes or the measurement of individualism-collectivism (see Realo and Allik 2009, for review).

In the current paper, we will employ the conceptualization of collectivism proposed by Realo and colleagues (1997), who demonstrated the existence of at least three interrelated, yet clearly distinguishable, subtypes of collectivism focused on the relationships with family members (*Familism*), peers (*Companionship*), and society (*Patriotism*). Familism is understood as a dedication to one's family life, putting its interests above personal aspirations; companionship is seen as the close-knit relationship between an individual and his or her group of peers; and patriotism is defined as a dedication to serving the nation, the surrender of personal comforts for the national cause. Individuals and social groups may be more collectivistic in regard to one category of social relations and less collectivistic in regard to some other type of social relations.

Individualism, on the other hand, is understood in the current paper as the combination of autonomy, mature self-responsibility, and uniqueness (Realo et al. 2002). Autonomy is defined as a person's capacity for independent thinking, judgment, and survival; mature self-responsibility is understood to be a personal

responsibility which accompanies the sense of being a causally effective agent; and uniqueness is seen as a person's awareness of being unique and different from others.

2. The aim of the study

The relationship between social capital and individualism-collectivism presents an intriguing research question, which so far has been posed for empirical inquiry only at the cultural level of analysis. This article takes the research on that fascinating question back to the individual level, where the research on social capital, in fact, once started. We will explore the relationship between individualism and collectivism and social capital in a nationally representative dataset from Estonia. As it has been found in previous studies that social capital is dependent on age and education (– there is an optimum of social capital levels in mid-life and more education also means more social capital (Christoforou 2005, Glaeser, Laibson, and Sacerdote 2002, Halman and Luijkx 2006, Van Oorschot and Arts 2005, Van Oorschot, Arts, and Gelissen 2006) –) we will consider this inter-dependence in our analysis.

Nevertheless, we believe that selected measures allow us to examine whether the positive relationship between social capital and individualism holds also at the individual level. Hence, we expect three components of individualism to be positively correlated with social capital. However, considering that individualism and collectivism are not polar opposites at the individual level, we also suspect that some of the three collectivism components might be positively related to social capital as well. After all, focus on peers and society, which is central for the two subtypes of collectivism, is fundamentally important also for the social capital: it is very likely that people, who find the relationships with peers and fellow citizens more important (i.e. score high in *Companionship* and *Patriotism*), also trust other people more and find it more important to make up their mind about social and political issues. Relying on the findings of Realo and colleagues (2008), who demonstrated that Familism is negatively correlated with social capital at the cultural level, we do not expect to find a positive link between Individualism-Collectivism and *Familism*.

3. Method

3.1. Data

The Estonian Survey of Culture and Personality (ESCP). For empirical analysis we used the sample from a large study of cultural value dimensions and ethnic identity in Estonia in 2002. The project's principal investigators were the second author of the present article, Jüri Allik, and Aune Valk from the University of Tartu. The questionnaire consisted of several parts of which only the social capital

and individualism-collectivism measures are relevant to this study. The data set included 1,451 ethnically Estonian respondents (812 females and 693 males), with a mean age of 43.9 years (*SD* = 17.6), ranging from 15 to 74 years. From the sample of 1753 respondents only those respondents were included who filled in the questionnaire in Estonian (302 questionnaires were in Russian) to avoid problems with the comparability of tests in different languages. On average, respondents had completed 11.8 years of full-time education (*SD* = 3.1). Specifically, 31% of the respondents had post-secondary (non-tertiary), 24% upper secondary, 20.5% lower secondary, 14% first stage tertiary, and 1.5% second stage of tertiary level of education. Nine percent of the respondents had not completed lower secondary education. The sample was randomly selected from the National Census and was representative of the Estonian-speaking population in Estonia in terms of place of residence, age, gender, and educational level. The survey was carried out by *TNS Emor*, the foremost marketing research and consulting company in Estonia.

3.2. Measures

Social Capital. The following individual-level indicators measuring the core aspects of social capital were available from our data:

(1) Trust: "Do you agree that most people can be trusted?" (1="I don't agree at all that most people can be trusted" … 4="I fully agree that most people can be trusted");
(2) Honesty: "Do you agree that most people are honest?" (1="I don't agree at all that most people are honest" … 4="I fully agree that most people are honest");
(3) Interest in politics: "How much are you interested in politics?" (1="Not at all interested" … 4="Very interested");
(4) Participation in organizations: "Are you a member of any of the following organizations?" (A list of 16 different types of organizations was given to respondents. The measure was computed based on total number of organizations in which respondent participated. It ranged from 0 to 7.);
(5) Voluntary work: "Have you worked as a volunteer for any of the following organizations?" (A list of 16 different types of organizations was given to respondents. The measure was computed based on total number of organizations which respondent mentioned. It ranged from 0 to 11.);
(6) Relations with relatives: "How often do you meet with/ speak on phone with/ send text messages/ send e-mails to your close relatives?" (1="Never" … 6="Almost every day");
(7) Relations with friends: "How often do you spend your time with friends?" (1="Never" … 6="Almost every day");
(8) Relations with neighbors: "How often do you speak with your neighbors?" (1="Never" … 6="Almost every day");

(9) Relations with colleagues: "How often do you do something together with your colleagues (outside the working time)?" (1="Never" … 6="Almost every day").

However, the final social capital index was composed of three indicators – trust, honesty, and interest in politics – because the preliminary analysis demonstrated that the other six items of social capital were not meaningfully related to each other and hence did not measure the same unitary concept of social capital. The results of an exploratory factor analysis are shown in Table 1. The overall standardized Cronbach alpha of the 9 items was .44.

As a result, the final social capital index was computed on the basis of the average of the standardized scores of the three abovementioned items that had loadings of .40 or above on a single unrotated factor. The Cronbach alpha of the 3-item measure was .59 with an average interitem correlation of .30. The alpha coefficient did not increase when any of the other items were added.

The ESTCOL Scale (Realo, Allik, and Vadi 1997) measures three interrelated, yet distinguishable, subtypes of collectivism, focusing on the relationships with family, peers, and society. These subtypes share a common core, which is super-ordinate to these particular forms of collectivism. The scale consists of 24 items and participants were asked to indicate their response on a 5-point Likert-type agreement-disagreement scale. Across all respondents, the Cronbach alphas of the Family-, Peer-, and Society-related collectivism subscales were .75, .65, and .84, respectively.

The Three Component Individualism Scale (Realo et al. 2002) measures three distinct aspects of individualism, focusing on autonomy (10 items), mature self-responsibility (7 items), and uniqueness (7 items). Some statements were oppositely worded so that agreement with the statements indicated low individualism. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the items on a 6-point Likert-type agreement-disagreement scale. The Cronbach alphas for the Autonomy, Self-Responsibility, and Uniqueness subscales were .80, .65, and .77, respectively.

Table 1. Unrotated Factor Loadings of the Social Capital Items Included in the Survey

Item	Factor loadings
Trust	**.77**
Honesty	**.78**
Interest in politics	**.42**
Participation in organizations	.39
Voluntary work	.35
Relations with relatives	.23
Relations with friends	.02
Relations with neighbors	.21
Relations with colleagues	.11

Note. N = 1451; Factor loadings over .40 are shown in boldface. The first unrotated factor explains about 20% of the total variance.

4. Results

We used correlation analysis to test the relationship between social capital and three subtypes of individualism and collectivism (see results in Table 2). The correlations between social capital and the components of individualism are quite intriguing as only mature self-responsibility was positively associated with social capital (r = .19, p < .000). The correlations between the other individualism components – Autonomy and Uniqueness – and social capital were negative, r = –.08 and –.14, respectively (p < .001). On the other hand, all three components of collectivism were positively associated with the social capital index (although the correlation between Familism and the social capital index is not statistically significant), most notably Patriotism (r = .35, p < .000) but also Companionship (r = .19, p < .000). Thus it seems that people who accept responsibility for themselves and for their actions (mature self-responsibility), have tight and supportive relationships with their friends and neighbors (Companionship), and are dedicated to and ready to serve their nation (Patriotism) also have higher levels of social capital.

The second data column of Table 2 shows the correlations when controlling for age and education. The correlations are reduced, some to non-significance, but the general pattern is the same.

Finally, we also repeated our analyses with different kinds of social capital indices which included, additionally to our three social capital items, the measures for participation in organizations, voluntary work, and heterogeneity of the social circles of the respondent. As said above, these items did not form a unitary construct of social capital with Cronbach alphas being as low as .41, for instance. However, it may be worth mentioning here that correlations between individualism and collectivism subtypes and social capital indices consisting of more than three items repeat the general pattern of our analyses with the three-item index of social capital.

Table 2. Correlations between the Social Capital Index and Individualism-Collectivism Scores

Scores of Individualism-Collectivism	Social Capital Index	
	r	$r_{AGE+EDU}$
Individualism (Three Component Scale of Individualism, Realo et al. 2002)		
Autonomy	–.08**	–.08**
Mature Self-Responsibility	.19***	.17***
Uniqueness	–.14***	–.02
Collectivism (ESTCOL Scale, Realo et al. 2007)		
Familism	.04	–.02
Companionship	.19***	.16***
Patriotism	.35***	.24***

Note. N = 1451; $r_{AGE+EDU}$ = correlations controlling for age and level of education
*** p < .000 ** p < .001

5. Discussion

At the cultural level of analysis, individualistic values appear to contribute to social capital and social capital appears to be conducive to individualism (Allik and Realo 2004, Realo and Allik 2009). Countries where people belong to a large number of different voluntary associations and where people believe that "most people can be trusted" are more individualistic, not collectivistic as some political scientists and activists seem to think (Realo et al. 2008).

It is often emphasized that a correlation at the aggregate level of analysis (culture, nation, etc.) may be smaller, larger, or even have the opposite sign when compared to the same relationship at the individual level of analysis (Ostroff 1993). It also seems to be the case with the relationship between individualism-collectivism and social capital as the results at the individual level demonstrate clearly that different subtypes of individualism and collectivism do have a rather different and sometimes opposing effect on social capital. Our findings suggest clearly that the relationship between individualism-collectivism and social capital are likely to be far more faceted at the individual level when compared to culture-level findings.

When differentiating between the types of individualism, we found that social capital was positively related to only one component of individualism – mature self-responsibility. If mature self-responsibility is understood as a personal responsibility which accompanies the sense of being a causally effective agent (Realo et al. 2002), it is actually a very logical outcome that people who think of themselves as subjects whose actions can have an effect on their own and other people's lives are more willing to take responsibility and get involved in actions which help to increase social capital in society. Indeed, it seems very likely that mature self-responsibility is a highly significant component of the new solidaristic individualism advocated by Rothstein (2002).

Nevertheless, the other two dimensions of individualism do not have a similar affect on social capital. According to our results, neither autonomy (defined as the capacity for independent thinking and judgment) nor uniqueness (defined as a person's awareness of being unique) is likely to create more social capital in society. Recognizing one's autonomy and uniqueness may be a good thing in many respects but, according to our findings, they do not lead to more trusting relationships or to greater cooperation between individuals. The prerequisite for greater involvement in society is mature self-responsibility. It seems that people who acknowledge that they have to take responsibility for their actions are also more willing to take responsibility for establishing more trusting social relationships.

On the other hand, there is good reason to believe that, at the individual level, certain dimensions of collectivism can actually promote social capital. Close-knit relations between an individual and his or her group of peers and patriotic mindedness were also positively related to social capital. The only measure that was not significantly correlated with social capital was Familism. These results are

partly in accord with recent culture-level findings which have shown that Familism is correlated negatively with social capital, whereas institutional collectivism practices exhibit positive associations with social capital, including general trust (Realo et al. 2008). Realo and colleagues (2008) concluded that, in those countries where people have a lower level of general trust and civic engagement, individuals are also more familistic and that social capital increases as the radius of trust widens to encompass people outside the immediate family and other kinfolk alone. Thus, we can conclude that the culture-level finding that two subtypes of collectivism, Familism and institutional collectivism practices, are related to social capital in an opposite manner seems to hold also at the individual level of analysis.

There are, of course, some debatable issues concerning the measures and methods we used. As argued above, individualism and collectivism and social capital are rather broad and abstract concepts that have been defined and measured in many different ways (cf. Realo 2003, Realo and Allik 2009). Our selection of possible measures for individualism and collectivism was driven by our theoretical views. For social capital, however, our choice of measures was restricted by their availability – we are, thus, fully aware of the fact that the selected measurement of social capital may fail to capture some relevant characteristics of the construct.

Participation in different associations, commitment to voluntary work, and heterogeneity of social circles of the person are all very important social capital measures for the theoretical reasons. However, statistically those measures failed to fit in the same index with some other equally important measures of social capital, such as trust and honesty. Nevertheless, the good news is that although the participation in different associations, commitment to voluntary work, and heterogeneity of social circles of the person were not included in the social capital index, the correlations between those items and individualism-collectivism followed the same general trend as the correlations between individualism-collectivism and social capital index. This gives us reason to believe that using social capital index, which consists of more than our three items, would not change the results drastically.

It is also important to mention here that the content and meaning of social capital is probably rather culture specific. Therefore it should not be surprising that the classical social capital measures which form a solid index in USA (Putnam 2000) may not form a homogeneus index in some other cultures. When computing the social capital index, we first encountered great difficulties because different social capital measures in our dataset were not measuring the same thing: relationships with friends and neighbors and trusting other people, for example, were rather unrelated concepts for our respondents. We conclude from that that it is important to always keep in mind that social capital is a culture specific construct which also needs culture specific measures.

Another concern that deserves greater attention is the problem of extrapolating from culture-level findings to individual-level hypotheses. As Mõttus and colleagues (2010), when examining aggregate culture-level personality scores,

correctly observe, there are many known cases where the relationship between selected variables is different or even completely opposite to theoretical expectations based on findings at another level. And there is little in the way of solid theory to rely on when moving between different levels of analysis. Although the findings at the individual level presented in the current paper replicate some culture-level findings, there are also some significant differences (such as two subtypes of individualism being negatively correlated with social capital) and the job of investigating the differences between the results at the two levels has only just begun. More research is needed to explore the relationship between social capital and individualism-collectivism at the individual level using both different measures and culturally diverse samples.

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Address:
Mai Beilmann
Department of Sociology
University of Tartu
Lossi 3
51003 Tartu, Estonia
E-mail: mai.beilmann@ut.ee

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