Beyond Dichotomies: A New Cultural Continuum for Understanding Prosocial Behaviour

Hyemin Choi

Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University

Correspondence: riki22choi@gmail.com

Abstract

Because prosocial behaviour is considered a universal human trait that emerges as early as 18 months of age (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), it appears across diverse cultures. Traditional frameworks often explain these variations using the individualistic-Western versus collectivistic-Eastern dichotomy. However, such binary classifications overlook the complex interplay of cultural norms, social structures, and trust systems that shape prosociality. This paper primarily focuses on South Korea and Japan, two East Asian societies that exhibit both strong collectivist and individualist tendencies and compares them with Western societies such as Canada and the United States. Drawing on Yao and colleagues' (2017) tripartite model of dignity, face, and honour cultures and Baldassarri's (2009) distinction between generalized and institutional trust, this paper proposes a new continuum between cultural coherence and cultural diversity. At one end, prosociality emerges through communal norms, emotional bonds, and homogeneity; at the other, it arises from institutional trust, inclusion, universal norms, and pluralistic solidarity. This framework enables a more nuanced understanding of culturally specific expressions of prosocial behaviour. It also provides a novel lens through which the divergent forms of individualism and collectivism across East Asia and Western contexts can be reinterpreted.

Keywords: *individualism, collectivism, prosocial behaviour, cultural psychology, East Asian societies, coherence–diversity continuum, trust systems.*

Introduction

Prosocial behaviour is commonly defined as voluntary actions intended to benefit others, such as helping, sharing, and cooperating (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989). While prosocial behaviour is often regarded as a universal trait, cross-cultural studies have typically framed Western societies as individualistic and Eastern ones as collectivistic. According to Triandis (1989), individualism prioritizes personal goals and self-reliance, whereas collectivism emphasizes group cohesion and shared responsibility. These value orientations shape not only identity but also how prosocial behaviour is expressed across cultures.

However, such dichotomous framings often oversimplify the complex dynamics of individualism and collectivism and overlook the unique social and cultural sources from which these belief systems emerge. Japan and South Korea show relatively strong individualistic tendencies among Eastern cultures, as they report the highest individualism scores among Eastern societies in cross-national comparisons (The Culture Factor Group, n.d.).

While China is commonly included in discussions of East Asian cultures, this paper limits its focus to Japan and South Korea in order to provide a more in-depth analysis of how individualism and collectivism manifest in these two distinct societies. According to the cultural comparison tool offered by The Culture Factor Group (n.d.), Japan scores 62 and South Korea scores 58 on individualism—figures that are comparable to the United States' score of 60. These statistics challenge the conventional view that Japan and South Korea are uniformly collectivist and suggest that their expressions of individualism and collectivism differ significantly from those typically associated with Western societies.

For a more in-depth understanding of this discrepancy, it is necessary to move beyond the new and flexible definition of prosocial behaviour, which can manifest in different ways across different cultures. According to Baldassarri and Abascal (2020), prosocial behaviour arises not merely from altruism but from institutional systems that foster trust and shared goals. Their framework helps explain why expressions of prosociality differ between homogeneous societies, such as those in Korea and Japan, which have limited diversity in terms of ethnicity and language, and heterogeneous ones, which have a multicultural aspect, like those in North America.

In homogeneous communities, prosocial behaviours often emerge from shared norms, interpersonal interactions, and strong peer influence. In contrast, heterogeneous communities require individuals' voluntary choice based on universal norms for trust and cooperation, as people interact more frequently with strangers across cultural or ethnic lines (Baldassarri & Abascal, 2020). This suggests that explaining prosocial behaviour solely in terms of individualistic or collectivistic tendencies is overly simplistic, as such behaviours can manifest in diverse ways across different cultural contexts.

For instance, Western (especially North American) individualism is often agentic in nature, emphasizing autonomy and self-direction. In contrast, South Korea reflects characteristics of competitive individualism, while Japan leans toward a relationally distant form of individualism. Similarly, collectivism also takes different shapes: in Korea and Japan, it is often rooted in social pressure to maintain harmony, whereas in Western societies it manifests more as the public sphere where private individuals come together as a collective public, supported by high levels of social trust (Habermas, 1991).

Consequently, cross-cultural research must move beyond binary distinctions and instead adopt frameworks that reflect deeper cultural orientations. This paper proposes that a more productive lens for understanding the development of prosocial behaviour lies not in the traditional individualism–collectivism dichotomy. Instead, it situates prosocial behaviour within a broader continuum between cultural coherence—where prosociality emerges through emotional and communal bonds, and cultural diversity—where it is driven by institutional trust, rights-based norms, and inclusive solidarity.

By employing this alternative framing, the paper aims to offer a more culturally grounded explanation of prosocial behaviour across cultures.

Analysis

Criteria Distinguishing Individualism and Collectivism

Many socio-psychological studies have taken a binary approach in categorizing societies as either individualistic or collectivistic, and Hofstede (1980) was one of the pioneers to propose cultural dimensions based on this framework. In his work, individualism was measured based on how individuals construct their sense of self, make autonomous decisions, and perceive their sense of belonging within a community (Hofstede, 1980).

According to these criteria, Japan scored 48, indicating a moderately individualistic society; South Korea scored 18, suggesting a highly collectivistic orientation; and the United States scored 98 out of 100, reflecting a strongly individualistic culture (Hofstede, 1980). Although this study is relatively old, its influence remains substantial, and its framework continues to be widely adopted across various fields. As a result, Hofstede's cultural dimensions (particularly the individualism-collectivism dichotomy) have often become a fixed lens through which cultural behaviour is interpreted, which may hinder more context-sensitive interpretations.

Building on Hofstede's binary approach, Triandis (1989) argued that people in collectivist societies are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviours because they are motivated to make a good impression on in-group members by adjusting their public self. However, Yamagishi and Kiyonari (2000) complicated this view by showing that prosocial behaviour tends to decline toward out-group members in collectivist societies, often becoming restricted to in-group contexts.

Furthermore, although North American countries ranked high in the individualism index, they often exhibit prosocial behaviours toward strangers. According to the World Giving Index (Charities Aid Foundation, 2021), Western countries such as the United States and Canada reported significantly higher rates of prosocial behaviours (particularly donating to charities and helping strangers) compared to East Asian countries like Japan and South Korea. While around 60% of Americans reported donating money in the past month, only 18% of Japanese respondents made the same report.

These findings challenge the assumption that cultural value orientations (whether individualistic or collectivistic) directly predict social behaviours, but rather, they may be shaped by more nuanced and contextual factors, such as the trust system. For example, Irwin (2009) suggests a trust-based typology that offers a conceptual alternative, highlighting that prosocial behaviours are not determined by the dichotomous individualism-collectivism frame, but rather by the direction of people's trust.

He argues that people in collectivist societies perform prosocial behaviours through generalized trust, the belief that most others in their group are trustworthy. In contrast, people in individualistic societies exhibit prosocial behaviours through institutional trust, which is more about a structural belief that systems are in place to ensure people behave appropriately (Irwin, 2009).

By focusing on trust dynamics, this study highlights the potential for more effective, culturally responsive measures of prosocial behaviour, offering a more context-sensitive and adaptable framework than the traditional individualism–collectivism dichotomy.

Individualism in South Korea, Japan, and Western Culture

Although South Korea, Japan, and Western countries (especially the USA and Canada) exhibit individualistic aspects, their characteristics differ significantly.

In the case of Korea, individualism carries a distinctly competitive nature. Although traditionally considered a strongly collectivist society, Korea has undergone rapid individualization due to Westernization in its economy, politics, and social values, largely driven by the country's exponential development over the past few decades (Cho et al., 2010). In this process, Korean youth are required to internalize bicultural competence and adopt individualistic values, as success in academic environments and job markets increasingly depends on personal competence, achievement, and autonomy (Cho et al., 2010). Therefore, individualism in Korean society appears to stem more from a need to adapt to competitive environments than from the organic development of personal autonomy. This form of individualism, when intensified, may inhibit the growth of prosocial behaviour among Korean youth. According to The Korea Herald, the intense pressure and stress of South Korea's hyper-competitive society have left many individuals struggling to cope, as they constantly compare themselves to others based on implicit societal standards of success (Park, 2024).

Second, individualism in Japan tends to take the form of relationally distant individualism.

Takahashi and colleagues (2002) found that, compared to Americans, Japanese individuals tend to avoid imposing on others, even in close relationships, as maintaining relational distance is considered a fundamental social norm for social harmony. These behaviours are more unusual in the USA. Extending this perspective, Ogihara and colleagues (2014) demonstrated that Japanese people perceive individualism as an ambivalent concept, associating it with both positive qualities, such as independence, and negative aspects, including a lack of interpersonal connectedness. These studies suggest that individualism in Japan differs from the Western norm, as it is expressed less through personal autonomy and more through relational distance and a cultural appreciation for solitude.

Third, Western individualism is more likely to exhibit agentic characteristics. Americans tend to emphasize personal autonomy and independence, rather than viewing the self as embedded within a community (Takahashi et al., 2002). In these cultures, personal behaviours and choices are generally seen as the individual's responsibility, with a strong focus on achieving personal goals and self-reliance (Cho et al., 2010).

These findings suggest that the sources of individualistic tendencies differ significantly between Western and East Asian cultures. In countries like South Korea and Japan, individualism often emerges in response to external conditions, such as honour-based competitive environments or the need to maintain social harmony and face (Yao et al., 2017). In contrast, Western individualism is more deeply rooted in the intrinsic value of the self, emphasizing personal autonomy, self-expression, and individual rights as foundational principles.

As a result, although all three cultures may exhibit traits classified as "individualism," the underlying motivations and forms of expression differ considerably. This suggests that both the categorization and methodological approaches in cross-cultural research must go beyond simplistic labeling to capture the nuanced cultural dynamics involved.

Collectivism in East Asian and Western Cultures

Just as individualism manifests differently across the three cultures, collectivism also takes distinct forms. According to Hofstede (2011), in collectivist cultures like South Korea and Japan, individuals have a strong in-group bond, and this sense of belonging tends to require loyalty to that group. In these societies, individuals are more likely to categorize others as members of the in-group or the out-group rather than as individuals.

Hofstede (2011) argues that people in collectivist cultures exhibit more prosocial or reciprocal behaviours toward in-group members, but behaviours toward out-group members tend to be limited or cautious. This discrepancy does not merely reflect favouritism toward the in-group but stems from a system of generalized reciprocity and depersonalized trust, grounded in communal norms and social harmony (Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000).

For example, a study has shown that people in collectivist societies were more likely to wear a mask than those in Western, individualistic societies during COVID-19. According to Chung and colleagues (2022), Koreans' strong collectivistic tendencies, particularly their concern about infecting others and the cultural emphasis on non-maleficence (avoiding causing harm or trouble to others), significantly contributed to higher mask compliance compared to Western individualistic cultures. This behaviour was often driven by a voluntary desire to protect their in-group rather than external pressure.

On the other hand, the form of collectivism in Western cultures differs from the ingroup-oriented collectivism observed in South Korea and Japan. While Western societies are often conceptualized as individualistic, people in these cultures tend to exhibit more prosocial behaviour toward strangers than those in East Asian societies, where individuals are generally more vigilant toward out-group members.

In Western contexts, collectivistic tendencies are more prominent in the public sphere than in familial or close-knit relationships. Habermas (1991) illustrates this through the example of coffee houses, which served as critical public spaces where individuals from various social

strata engaged in rational discourse. These settings reflect a form of public sphere collectivism, rooted not in familial or communal obligation but in social trust and shared engagement in public discussion.

Hofstede (2011) also argues that in individualistic Western societies, expressions of collectivism often take the form of volunteering and charitable activities which are agent-based prosocial behaviours driven by individual initiative rather than direct in-group obligations. These findings offer insight into the expression and roots of Western collectivism.

It is more often manifested through voluntary or public-interest activities, driven by individuals' spontaneous motivation toward pluralistic solidarity—a collective alignment rooted in shared ideals rather than kinship ties. Miller's article (2020) clearly demonstrates this by illustrating the protest culture in the USA, as seen in the participation of various racial groups in the Black Lives Matter movement.

The article revealed how individuals from diverse racial and social backgrounds, in a predominantly individualistic culture, engaged in protests and supported one another, highlighting a form of pluralistic solidarity where prosocial behaviour extended beyond one's in-group in pursuit of shared justice and values. This stands in sharp contrast to collectivism in South Korea and Japan, which is primarily shaped by social pressure and the need to maintain harmony.

Different Aspects of Collectivism Between Korea and Japan

However, although Korea and Japan are categorized as collectivist societies, like those across Asia, the expression of their collectivistic traits differs. In the case of South Korea, collectivism tends to be vertical, grounded in strong obligations to the family, a sense of sacrifice for the group, and deference to authority, rather than equality among group members. This deeply embedded hierarchical structure has not only shaped collectivist values but has also contributed to the development of a culturally distinct form of vertical individualism in Korean society (Suh, 2007).

Therefore, collectivism in South Korea tends to place greater emphasis on joint responsibility, in-group orientation, and a sense of communal duty. While maintaining social order and harmony are also important, these aspects appear to be somewhat less central compared to Japan, a neighbouring country within the same East Asian region.

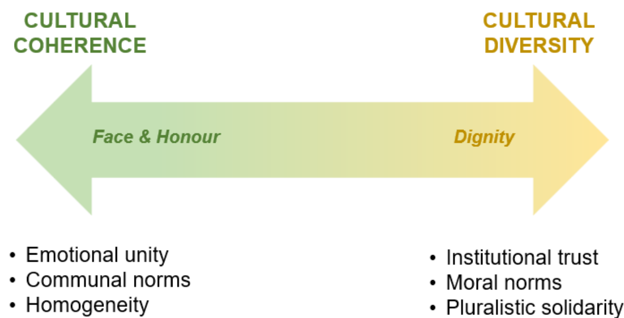
Collectivism in Japan tends to be more situational, passive, and accommodating, as Japanese individuals prioritize social harmony and face-saving over directly resolving conflicts—an approach that contrasts with the more confrontational tendencies observed in South Korea (Miyahara et al., 1998). Although the degree of difference between the two cultures may seem subtle, it leads to strikingly different outcomes, even in their political attitudes.

Lee (2008) examined the political cultures of Japan and South Korea and found that, compared to Korean citizens, Japanese citizens report a higher perception of electoral fairness, less dissatisfaction with the responsiveness of their representatives, and a greater proportion of party preference. However, the higher levels of dissatisfaction and resistance toward their political situations among Korean citizens are more closely tied to the unique characteristics of Korean collectivism.

According to Aleman (2005), the notably high levels of political activity among Korean citizens, such as protests and labour movements, are not merely expressions of discontent but reflect a strong sense of democratic engagement and communal responsibility. Such collective political actions can also be understood as a form of prosocial behaviour, as they involve individuals acting to protect or improve societal well-being, often at personal cost, and are motivated by a shared sense of responsibility.

These findings suggest that while East Asian societies are often broadly categorized as collectivistic, the internal dynamics and cultural nuances within each society can lead to profoundly different outcomes under the same conceptual umbrella. Korean collectivism emphasizes communal responsibility and obligation, whereas Japanese collectivism is more oriented toward preserving interpersonal harmony.

Figure 1. *Continuum Between Cultural Coherence and Cultural Diversity*



Note. This figure synthesizes concepts from Yao and colleagues (2017) on dignity, face, and honour cultures, and Irwin (2009) on institutional and generalized trust. Examples for each category: Emotional unity (e.g., candlelight vigils in South Korea), Communal norms (e.g., filial piety in East Asian societies), Homogeneity (e.g., ethnic uniformity in Asian societies), Institutional trust (e.g., reliance on judiciary systems in Canada), Moral norms (including inclusive norms that promote diversity and non-discrimination; e.g., human rights legislation in Western Europe), Pluralistic solidarity (e.g., multicultural volunteer networks in the United States).

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed continuum between cultural coherence and cultural diversity. The left end, cultural coherence, emphasizes emotional unity, communal norms, and homogeneity, aligning with face and honour cultures grounded in generalized trust. The right end, cultural diversity, emphasizes institutional trust, inclusive moral norms, and pluralistic solidarity, reflecting dignity cultures. This framework integrates Yao and colleagues (2017) tripartite model with Irwin's (2009) trust distinction, providing a lens for examining both broad contrasts and subtle differences among cultures along the same spectrum. The following discussion elaborates on how this continuum can be applied to interpret variations in prosocial behaviour across different cultural contexts.

Discussion

Classical frameworks that dichotomize cultures into individualistic versus collectivistic orientations offer limited explanatory power, especially in increasingly hybrid or transitional societies such as South Korea. These binary models risk oversimplifying complex social behaviours by reducing them to static traits, overlooking the interaction between internal motivations (e.g., trust, obligation, harmony) and external structural factors (e.g., competition, hierarchy, pluralism) that shape prosociality.

To address these limitations, this paper proposes a continuum between cultural coherence and cultural diversity. As illustrated in Figure 1, at one end of this continuum, prosocial behaviour is rooted in emotional unity, communal norms, and cultural homogeneity. At the other end, it is driven by institutional trust, universal norms, and voluntary solidarity across differences.

This perspective aligns with the tripartite cultural framework proposed by Yao and colleagues (2017), which moves beyond the traditional East–West dichotomy by distinguishing between dignity, face, and honour cultures. In dignity cultures, commonly associated with Western individualism, moral autonomy, and the inherent worth of the individual are emphasized. In contrast, face and honour cultures, prevalent in Eastern societies, prioritize relational interdependence, the maintenance of social harmony, and the reputation (Yao et al., 2017).

These cultural orientations can be further contextualized within Irwin's (2009) distinction between institutional trust and generalized trust as foundations for prosociality, which consequently supports the proposed continuum. Individuals who rely on institutional trust are more likely to endorse formal systems and tend to foster dignity cultures where each individual is seen as inherently valuable and morally autonomous, regardless of group affiliation.

Consequently, such values support cultural diversity, allowing for pluralistic solidarity based on inclusive moral norms.

Conversely, those grounded in generalized trust tend to uphold shared experience and in-group connection. They foster face and honour cultures, where maintaining relational harmony, mutual respect, and social standing is crucial. In turn, these dynamics contribute to cultural coherence, a state rooted in communal norms and homogeneity, where prosocial behaviours are most salient within their bounded groups.

This continuum can also explain subtle differences among cultures that lie along the same spectrum. For instance, the differing styles of political expression in Korea and Japan may stem from their placement along the face-honour dimension of the coherence continuum. Japanese people tend to rely heavily on face culture, which leads them to avoid expressing dissatisfaction or conflict. In contrast, Korean people place greater importance on communal honour and a sense of responsibility than on saving face, even though both cultures lie within the same coherence continuum.

By situating prosocial behaviour along a continuum rather than within a binary framework, this model offers a more flexible and culturally sensitive tool for cross-cultural research. It enables scholars to interpret behavioural patterns not as fixed traits but as context-dependent expressions shaped by trust systems and moral orientations.

Conclusion

This paper challenges the adequacy of what has come to be known as the traditional individualism–collectivism dichotomy as an explanation for cross-cultural prosocial behaviour. It proposes a continuum ranging from cultural coherence to cultural diversity. It offers a culturally grounded alternative that integrates emotional and structural drivers of prosociality. This continuum also helps clarify the different expressions of individualism and collectivism in societies such as South Korea, Japan, and Western countries.

In South Korea, collectivism tends to be group-oriented and emotionally expressive, rooted in communal responsibility and a shared reputation. These traits more aligned with an honour culture. In Japan, collectivism leans toward relational avoidance and harmony maintenance, with a strong emphasis on face culture and restraint. Despite both countries being culturally cohesive, their expressions of collectivism differ meaningfully.

In contrast, Western societies, particularly in North America, exhibit an agentic form of individualism anchored in dignity culture, where prosociality often emerges through voluntary participation in universal causes such as protest movements or charitable acts, grounded in institutional trust and pluralistic norms.

Nonetheless, one limitation of this analysis lies in its lack of detailed examination of the internal variations within the cultural coherence end of the continuum, specifically, the divergent orientations of face and honour cultures. While both emphasize collectivism and social harmony, their strategies for maintaining it differ significantly. Face cultures value conflict avoidance, whereas honour cultures value assertive responsibility.

Future research could further examine these nuances to better understand how culturally coherent societies manage solidarity, boundaries, and social regulation; it could also use this framework as a diagnostic tool for interpreting prosocial behaviour in multicultural settings, policy design, and intercultural communication.

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