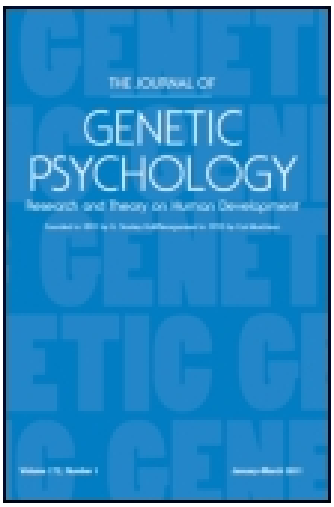

The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory on Human Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vgnt20

The Importance of Social Context in Cross-Cultural Comparisons: First Graders in Colombia and the United States

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Published online: 30 Mar 2010.

To cite this article: Colleen Pilgrim & Alba Rueda-Riedle (2002) The Importance of Social Context in Cross-Cultural Comparisons: First Graders in Colombia and the United States, The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory on Human Development, 163:3, 283-295, DOI: 10.1080/00221320209598684

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00221320209598684

The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 2002, *163*(3), 283–295

The Importance of Social Context in Cross-Cultural Comparisons: First Graders in Colombia and the United States

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ABSTRACT. The authors explored the cultural constructs of individualism and collectivism by investigating the prosocial behavior of 1st graders ($N = 202$; 110 girls, 92 boys) in countries typically classified as collectivist (Colombia, South America) and individualist (United States). Contrary to expectations, U.S. children shared more than Colombian children did. However, U.S. children were more likely to take candy from another child without permission (demonstrating individualism). Results indicated that in both countries sharing was greater with friends than with other fellow classmates, and children frequently reported friendship as the reason they shared. Findings support the importance of the social context, such as the relationship between participants, in cross-cultural research and suggest that simple dichotomies of culture often overlook complex associations between culture and behavioral differences.

Key words: collectivism, cross-cultural, friendship, individualism

RESEARCHERS HAVE SUGGESTED that societies differ in terms of whether collectivist or individualist values exist within the culture (Leung & Bond, 1984; Marín & Marín, 1991; Triandis, 1990; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Among *collectivist* societies, the in-group defines and influences the social behavior of its members. The emphasis in collectivist societies is on sharing experiences and supporting and helping in-group members, such that the "we" consciousness is stressed (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994). Identification and solidarity are demanded from individuals deemed part of the group, and the evaluation of one's actions is in terms of the consequences to the in-group.

Individualism, on the other hand, is related to the evaluation of one's actions in terms of consequences to the individual. Within individualistic societies, the emphasis is on uniqueness and independence; personal goals are considered more

important than in-group goals (Triandis, 1990). For example, the findings of an early study by Leung and Bond (1984) suggested that Chinese college students, in comparison with United States students, demonstrated their collectivist norms by allocating more rewards to another who was part of their in-group. Knight, Cota, and Bernal (1993) reported that the extent to which Mexican American mothers taught their children about Mexican culture predicted their children's ethnic identity, which in turn affected the children's cooperative and individualistic practices. Numerous other researchers have continued to examine the constructs of collectivism and individualism across many domains (Hart & Poole, 1995; Realo & Allik, 1999; Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996; Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). A general premise has been that persons raised in collectivist societies are encouraged to identify themselves with other members of the group and to sacrifice for the good of that group; persons from individualistic societies are more competitive in nature and less willing to sacrifice for the in-group. Asian and South American countries are often classified as collectivist, whereas westernized countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Europe, are often considered to be individualistic societies (Kim et al., 1994; Marín & Marín, 1991; Triandis, 1990).

The problem with this line of inquiry is that collectivism and individualism place culture into an overly simplistic dichotomy that often overlooks multifaceted social situations (Turiel & Wainryb, 1994). Wainryb and Turiel (1994) found that members in a traditional society with a higher status in that society were frequently granted personal entitlements. The authors posited that traditional cultures have been labeled collectivist because of their focus on the hierarchy and associated duties and cultural roles of the people. Others, too, have suggested that collectivism and individualism are broad definitions of culture and that other dimensions, such as the relationship context, need to be considered (Rhee et al., 1996). In fact, Triandis and Gelfand (1998) more recently proffered additional societal attributes that distinguish among different types of collectivist and individualist patterns, and they adopted a four-way typology incorporating relationship hierarchy into the collectivist–individualist dimension.

Researchers have also attributed the Western (individual) versus non-Western (collectivist) dichotomy to Westerners' desire to view others as being opposite from their idealized notion of "Western individualism" (Rosenberger, 1992). What seems more plausible is that both types of characteristics, those typically

The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their help: Sheldon Alexander; Cassandra Brower; María Eugenia; Wade Higgason; Kristen Nadai; Jim O'Neill; Sofia Perico; Brad Riedle; Ana Rueda; Poorvi Shah; Lida Uribe; and the children, parents, and school staff at Our Lady of Good Counsel, Our Lady of Victory, St. Damian, St. Edith, St. John the Baptist, St. Linus, St. Mel, St. Pascal, and the Escuela Anexa a La Normal de Señoritas.

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viewed as Western (individualist) and as non-Western (collectivist), may be found in varying degrees throughout all cultures (Spiro, 1993). Vandello and Cohen (1999) found variation among collectivist and individualist tendencies within the United States and reported greater collectivist tendencies in the Deep South and greater individualist tendencies in the Mountain West and Great Plains. In the present study, we examined whether children from two countries, the United States and Colombia, which are often classified into this cultural dichotomy (individualist and collectivist, respectively) differed in their observed prosocial behaviors with others in a manner consistent with this cultural classification.

A good indication of prosocial behavior among children is their sharing or distribution of goods, because it is a frequently occurring behavior (Damon, 1988). By also examining children's reasons about sharing, we can explore issues of reciprocity, relationships, and concern for others in their in-group (Eisenberg, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Fuchs, 1990). Eisenberg and colleagues (1990) suggested that children's prosocial moral reasoning is influenced by cultural socialization. Thus, if an overriding different socialization occurs for individualist and collectivist cultures, one would expect that children in collectivist countries would not only engage in more sharing but would also report different reasons for sharing than would children in individualist countries. Specifically, one might expect collectivist children to report more relationship reasons, because of their culture's focus on in-group harmony between members. In this study, we investigated both first graders' sharing behavior and their reasons for sharing.

As suggested previously, individualist and collectivist characteristics might vary throughout all cultures, and, thus, prosocial behavior would depend more on other contextual effects, such as the relationship of those individuals involved. Many researchers have found that friends were more likely to share, cooperate, and help one another than were nonfriends (Fonzi, Schneider, Tani, & Tomada, 1997; Han & Park, 1995; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). We, therefore, examined sharing with both friends and nonfriends in this study, which allowed us to observe whether the context of the relationship, in addition to the cultural categorization, was a good predictor of prosocial behavior.

We also recognized the importance of examining the various types of sharing that children exhibit; differences in sharing type may occur because of cultural values or friendship status. Birch and Billman (1986) found that *spontaneous sharing* (in which the sharer took the initiative and sharing occurred without any prior verbal or physical behaviors on the part of the receiver) and *passive sharing* (e.g., the receiver took candy from the sharer without his or her permission, and the sharer allowed this to happen) rarely occurred. *Elicited sharing* occurred most frequently and involved the recipient being instrumental in the sharing; for example, the receiver simply said, "May I have a piece?" or "You have more than I do," and the other child responded by sharing a piece of candy. If the cultural dichotomy construct is accurate, then one might expect that children from a collectivist country would engage in more elicited and spontaneous

sharing because of the focus on in-group harmony, whereas those from an individualist country might engage in more passive sharing.

In summary, in this study we examined the sharing behavior of first grade U.S. and Colombian children because persons within these countries are often classified as individualist and collectivist, respectively. We were interested in discovering whether Colombian children would share more than U.S. children on the basis of the individualist–collectivist dichotomy. Furthermore, we examined the contextual effects of friendship on sharing behavior. In other words, we sought to determine if children's sharing behavior differed depending on whether the other child was a close friend or simply a fellow classmate; of particular interest was whether the relationship contextual effect was similar for both cultures. We also explored children's reasons for sharing. As previously discussed, a cultural dichotomy of individualism and collectivism suggests that the Colombian children, more so than the American children, might explain their sharing behavior as resulting from a sense of relationship between themselves and the other child. Finally, we examined the type of sharing behavior to determine whether Colombian children were more likely to share without being asked to do so by their peer (i.e., spontaneous sharing). If Colombians are more collectivist, one would expect spontaneous sharing by Colombian children, because they are socialized to consider the needs of their group. Some additional individual-level variables are important to control when assessing children's sharing; therefore, we obtained sibling information, socioeconomic status, and verbal cognition scores.

Method

Participants

The participants were 202 first-grade girls and boys from the United States and Colombia, including 62 girls and 44 boys from the United States and 48 girls and 48 boys from Colombia. The mean ages of the Colombian and U.S. children were 7.0 years (ranging from 6.2 to 7.9) and 6.9 years (ranging from 6.6 to 7.6), respectively.

The U.S. children were recruited from Catholic elementary schools in communities surrounding a major urban city in the Midwest, because in Colombia the majority of the population is Catholic and there is no separation of church and state. In Colombia, the data were collected in the urban city of Bucaramanga, which is the fifth largest city in Colombia (with a population of approximately 1 million). Thus, both the U.S. and Colombian children were from urban Catholic environments. The data on parents' education and occupation, available for only the Colombian children, showed that the Colombian first graders had parents from all socioeconomic levels. We attempted to match the children's socioeconomic status by selecting U.S. children from schools in low-, middle-, and high-socioeconomic areas.

Data were collected approximately 6 months after the school year began. Parent and child consent was obtained, and only those children for whom a signed consent form was returned participated in the study.

Measures and Procedure

Dyad screening. Individuals fluent in both Spanish and English and who were native to Bucaramanga, Colombia, back translated all procedures and materials. We matched each child with a friend or a fellow classmate on the basis of a frequently used classification system (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995), which entailed showing each child an individual photograph of all of the same-gender classmates participating in the study. We administered two separate sociometric measures to ensure the reliability of the children's responses (Birch & Billman, 1986). For the first measure, all photographs of the same-gender classmates were placed on a table in front of the child. The child was asked to point to all of the classmates that he or she "plays with" and then was asked to point to all of the classmates that he or she "likes." For the second measure, all pictures were stacked into a pile and shown one at a time to the child. Each time the child viewed the picture of a classmate, the experimenter asked whether it was someone the child "played with" or "did not play with." The child was again shown each individual photograph but this time was asked whether the child pictured was someone he or she "liked" or thought was "just okay."

A *friendship dyad* was noted when two same-gender children reported liking each other and playing with each other on both sociometric measures. A *fellow classmate dyad* consisted of two same-gender children who reported liking each other but not playing with each other on both sociometric measures. Thus the classification system ruled out nonsharing that occurred because of dislike between classmates. Table 1 shows the number of friendship and fellow classmate dyads by country and gender.

TABLE 1
Number of Dyads

	Dyad type	
Country/gender	Friend	Fellow classmate
Colombia		
Girls	15	9
Boys	12	12
United States		
Girls	14	17
Boys	10	12

Sharing experiment. The two children were told that they would be asked some questions and were brought into a room where two observers were placed approximately 8 ft away from the children. In Colombia and the United States, observers were female college students who were unaware of the experimental manipulation or the purpose of the study. Upon entering the room, the experimenter told both children,

> Sit in these chairs; we're going to have a snack first. Don't disturb these people because they have work to do. Each of you may reach in the bag and take a bag of candy. You eat your candy and I will be back when snack time is over.

The wording was developed during the pilot phase of the project, and the children appeared to believe that the experimenter's request was reasonable. Both children sat in chairs next to one another facing the observers. One at a time, the children reached into a brown bag and grabbed a clear plastic bag of either 1 or 15 chocolates. It was random as to which child received 1 or 15 candies and as to who reached into the bag first. The experimenter always exited the room quickly to avoid any further conversation with the children.

Sharing behavior by the children was coded for both the amount and type of sharing (i.e., elicited, passive, or spontaneous). The majority of dyads were discontinued after the last candy was eaten. In the cases for which children saved some of the candy (e.g., placed candy in their pocket), the dyad was discontinued after 7 min. Upon completion of the dyad interaction, the experimenter returned and separated the children to ask them follow-up questions about their sharing experience. The child who had initially received more candies was asked why he or she shared or did not share, and the child who had initially received fewer candies was asked why the other child had or had not shared.

The children's responses were written down verbatim and then categorized during data analysis into the following coding system developed by Eisenberg, Lundy, Shell, and Roth (1985): (a) authority/punishment orientation (references to demands or punishment); (b) hedonistic orientation (references to expected self-gain); (c) direct reciprocity (references to benefits or costs directly deriving from reciprocity or the lack of it); (d) pragmatic orientation (references to practical nonmoral reasons); (e) needs-orientated reasoning (reference to another's psychological or physical needs for behavior); (f) relationship orientation (reference to the relationship between self and other child); (g) approval and interpersonal orientation (references to social approval and/or desire to enhance interpersonal interactions); and (h) stereotyped good/bad orientation (references to stereotyped reasons such as "it is nice to share"). Also, we found it necessary to include a ninth category because some children responded that they "did not know" why sharing did or did not occur. Finally, equity was restored so that both children left the experiment having received an equal amount of candy.

Additional measures. Some variables that could potentially affect sharing were measured so that they could be statistically controlled. Before the children par-

ticipated in the sharing experiment, we obtained a proximal measure of cognitive maturity for each child using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1981; Dunn, Padilla, Lugo, & Dunn, 1986). As mentioned, socioeconomic status was available for only the Colombian children (Hollingshead's, 1975, Four Factor Index of Social Status). The first graders had no problem reporting the number and age of each sibling in their home.

Results

Total Number of Candies Shared

Reliabilities were calculated separately for the Colombian and U.S. observers in terms of the total number of candies shared. The U.S. observers, in 52 of 53 cases, had 100% agreement with how many candies were shared. In the remaining case, the observers disagreed by one candy. The Colombian observers, in 46 of 48 cases, had 100% agreement about how many candies were shared. In the other 2 cases, they disagreed by only one candy. An average was calculated in the 3 cases for which there was a disagreement.

To determine whether an analysis of covariance should be conducted for the total number of candies shared, we examined the correlations between candies shared and the individual-level variables. We found no significant correlations between the number of candies shared and the number of sisters, number of brothers, total number of siblings, or socioeconomic status. We found a small, significant positive correlation ($r = .27$) for the Colombian Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test scores; Colombian givers who scored higher on the vocabulary assessment shared more candies than did those who scored lower (this was not found for the U.S. children). Vocabulary scores were entered as a covariate in the analyses, and because the Colombian children were on average 1 month older than the U.S. children, we also entered age as a covariate. However, neither age nor vocabulary scores were significant covariates, and therefore only the ANOVA results are reported.

We conducted a 2 × 2 (Country × Dyad Type) analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for main effects as well as an interaction. The children in the United States shared significantly more than did those in Colombia, $F(1, 97) = 23.93$, $MSE = 10.53$, $p < .001$ (Ms = 4.64 and 1.48, respectively). The results also indicated that both boys and girls in Colombia and in the United States shared significantly more with friends than with a fellow classmate, $F(1, 97) = 6.46$, $p < .01$ (Ms = 3.77 and 2.49, respectively). There was no significant interaction between the dyad type and country, thus indicating no cultural differences in sharing for friends and fellow classmates. In terms of gender differences in sharing behavior, additional ANOVAs indicated a nonsignificant main effect for gender, $F(1, 94) = 0.20$, $MSE = 10.80$, $p < .66$ (Ms = 3.17 and 3.10, females and males, respectively). Additional interactions (Gender × Country and Gender × Dyad Type) were also not significant for sharing behavior.

Reasons for Sharing/Not Sharing

We examined interrater reliability for the nine sharing categories, using three raters. At least two of the three raters agreed on the category 91% of the time. The remaining 9% of disagreements were categorized by consensus of all three coders. The responses to the question of why sharing did or did not occur are contained in Table 2. Cross-tabulations showed no significant differences between the Colombian and U.S. children in their reasons for sharing, $\chi^2(5, N = 116) = 5.03$, $p < .41$. In Colombia and in the United States, a large percentage of both boys and girls stated that the sharing occurred because of the relationship between themselves and the other child (31.3% and 45.2%, respectively). A typical answer classified into this category was that the sharing occurred because the other child was his or her friend or that he or she liked the other child.

Cross-tabulations showed a significant difference between the Colombian and U.S. children in their reasons for not sharing, $\chi^2(6, N = 86) = 15.96$, $p < .01$. The Colombian children in nonsharing dyads were more likely than were the U.S. children to give pragmatic reasons for not sharing; a typical example of a pragmatic answer is "because I need them for later." A few Colombian children said that sharing did not occur because there was a lack of a relationship with the other child; however, no U.S. child gave this answer.

Types of Sharing

We conducted analyses to examine any possible cultural or friendship differences for the three types of sharing. Each candy shared was classified as either

TABLE 2
Children's Reasons for Sharing or Not Sharing Their Candy

	Sharing				Nonsharing			
	Colombia $n = 32$		U.S. $n = 84$		Colombia $n = 64$		U.S. $n = 22$	
Reason	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Authority/punishment	1	3.1	4	4.8	4	6.3		
Pragmatic	12	37.5	31	36.9	24	37.5	3	13.6
Need orientation	3	9.4	2	2.4	3	4.7	6	27.3
Relationship	10	31.3	38	45.2	3	4.7		
Stereotypical	4	12.5	6	7.1	2	3.1		
Do not know	2	6.3	3	3.6	28	43.7	13	59.1

Note. Categories were developed by Eisenberg, Lundy, Shell, and Roth (1985). No responses were given for the categories of hedonistic, reciprocity, and approval orientation.

a passive, spontaneous, or elicited share. Therefore, for any given dyad, the number of total candies shared was equal to the sum of all passive, spontaneous, and elicited shares.

Using both percent agreement and Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960), we calculated interrater agreement reliabilities for types of sharing separately for U.S. and Colombian observers. In the United States, because there were three observers, reliability was calculated separately for each dyadic combination. One pair of observers had 100% interrater agreement, whereas the other two combinations of observers had 92% and 94% agreement ($\kappa = .91$ and .92, respectively). In Colombia, the agreement was 88% ($\kappa = .70$). We resolved cases of disagreement by consensus after the interaction through the observers' examination of their open-ended descriptions for each dyad.

Separate ANOVAs were conducted for each type of sharing (spontaneous, elicited, and passive). Results showed more elicited shares in friendship dyads than in acquaintance dyads, $F(1, 97) = 4.20$, $MSE = 2.24$, $p < .05$ (Ms = 0.95 and 0.38, respectively). Country and gender main effects and all interactions were not significant for elicited shares. The U.S. children had marginally significant more spontaneous shares than did the Colombian children, $F(1, 97) = 3.05$ $MSE = 7.52$, $p < .08$ (Ms = 1.93 and 0.98, respectively). Dyad type and gender main effects, as well as all interactions for spontaneous sharing behavior, were not significant.

An ANOVA for passive shares was not deemed appropriate because there was no variance for the Colombian children. None of the Colombian children were observed in passive sharing, whereas the mean number of passive shares for the U.S. children was 1.89 candies. We conducted a two-way ANOVA of Gender × Dyad Type for only U.S. children, but no significant main effects nor interactions were found. The Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test was conducted for Colombian and U.S. children on the number of passive shares. Because both groups had more than 10 participants, a transformed z score was obtained (Siegel & Castellan, 1988, pp. 132–134). The U.S. children had significantly more passive shares than did Colombian children, $z = -4.41$, $p < .0001$, for two-tailed probability. Although one might suggest that this significant difference could be a result of coding differences by observers from the two countries, the Colombian observers stated that they understood the category of passive sharing, but none of the Colombian children took a candy from the other child without asking. Therefore, this significant difference most likely reflects a valid difference in sharing behavior.

Discussion

In conclusion, most of the current findings were inconsistent with the classification of the U.S. and Colombian children into a dichotomy of individualism and collectivism, respectively. The U.S. children actually shared more than the Colombian children did, and in both countries, the children gave similar reasons for sharing, frequently stating that sharing occurred because of friendship. The

Colombian and U.S. children shared more with friends than with acquaintances, which supports relationships between individuals as an important context in prosocial behavior. The present study suggests that across cultures, children consider their friendship with another as a more valid reason for sharing than simply liking another child (i.e., a fellow classmate). The friendship between the children, therefore, was a better predictor of their prosocial behavior than was their classification into the collectivist–individualist dichotomy.

These findings highlight the need to consider social contextual effects, such as norms for social relationships, in cross-cultural research. Broad sweeping dichotomies that categorize cultures are too simplistic and do not account for complex social relationships that occur within each culture. Our findings are consistent with those of Wink (1997), who also stated that more attention should be focused on the personal, social, and cultural contexts that facilitate or inhibit individualist or collectivist behavior. He found that the relationship between collectivist behavior and ethnicity was decreased when social factors, such as religion and the class background of the family, were controlled.

We do not suggest abandonment of the collectivist and individualist constructs; rather, we suggest that there is a need to restructure future research. First, as demonstrated in this study, researchers need to pay more attention to the social context of the situation, because this is often more important than other ethnic differences in predicting behavior. Second, researchers must abandon the tendency to place persons from particular countries or ethnic backgrounds into broad dichotomies, such as the individualist–collectivist dimension. Although researchers often acknowledge that individualism and collectivism are separate constructs, which can be found in varying degrees throughout ethnic groups, they still tend to view them as a bipolar construct and to make comparisons across ethnic groups on the basis of this division. In addition, Rodriguez and Kosloski (1998) reported familism (family orientation) itself to be a multidimensional concept, which lends support to viewing collectivism as a multidimensional construct as well.

There are a few further points of discussion regarding the present study. Even though the U.S. children shared more total candies, it is worth noting that a portion of this increased sharing was because the U.S. children frequently took candy from another child without asking (what we called passive sharing). The Colombian children did not engage in this type of sharing behavior. Passive sharing could be deemed an individualistic-type behavior because it entails the child's placing more importance on a personal goal (i.e., candy for him- or herself) than on in-group cooperation (i.e., keeping the other child happy). In other words, it may be that the Colombian children did not take candy without asking because they were interested in maintaining their in-group stability. Therefore, part of the greater frequency of sharing by the U.S. children reflects the increased frequency of these children to be individualistic and to take candy from another child without permission. However, this still does not explain why the U.S. children

engaged in more spontaneous sharing than did the Colombian children. The U.S. children gave candy to another child without being asked to do so, which is putting aside personal gratification and focusing on the needs of another. If the U.S. children were acting in an individualistic manner, they should have focused on their own needs and less on the needs of another in their in-group, especially in comparison with their "collectivist" cohort. One possible explanation for why the U.S. children acted in such a collectivist manner might be their religious training. We were careful in our sample selection to match schools on extraneous variables such as religion. Nevertheless, it is possible that the religious socialization of children who attend Catholic schools in the United States might result in more collectivist behavior than is typically seen in U.S. children.

It could be argued that the Colombian children shared very little because the other child in the dyad was not part of their "in-group." Marín and Marín (1991) stated that the concept of familism has been identified as being one of the most central values in Hispanic cultures, and thus, the in-group for Hispanics is more likely to be family members. However, the finding that the children in both cultures shared more with friends speaks to the similarity between Colombians and North Americans in viewing relationships between friends as being more important than relationships with others in one's general peer group. In fact, Shkodriani and Gibbons (1995) reported no collectivist/individualist differences between Mexican and U.S. university students with friends, but did find such differences with regard to family members.

It is possible that the candy was of greater value to the Colombian children, which could explain the more frequent sharing by the U.S. children; however, we made great effort to ensure that the candy was native to both cultures and identical across cultures in size, texture, and shape. This issue of comparability of measures, however, exemplifies the argument that contextual factors are often overlooked when cultures are placed into broad dichotomies.

A few limitations of this study should be mentioned. Data were collected in the presence of two observers; consequently, it is possible that the mere presence of the observers affected the children's behavior. However, given the differential sharing that occurred between friends and acquaintances, we do know that our experimental manipulation worked. The scenario was limited in its scope and only dealt with one type of prosocial behavior—sharing. A study including other types of prosocial domains, such as helping behavior, might yield different results. Miller and Bersoff (1998), for example, found that North Americans were less likely to report helping behavior as necessary when they disliked a person, in comparison with Indian participants, who did not make this distinction and helped regardless of whether they liked the person. On the basis of their findings, Miller and Bershoff also argued for the need to go beyond a simple cultural dichotomy. Although past characterizations of the individualist construct have stressed freedom from coercive conformity, the authors indicated that their North American participants, to get their needs met, might have been pressured into act-

ing a certain way to make others like them. In summary, then, researchers need to focus on the social context in cross-cultural research rather than on simple dichotomies of culture that often overlook the complex associations between culture and behavioral differences.

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Received June 30, 2001