

INDIVIDUALISM BETWEEN NATURE AND NURTURE. A CASE STUDY ON ROMANIAN BUSINESS STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the current research was to find out whether the tendency of individuals to manifest an individualistic behaviour is based on natural, i.e. genetic factors, or on culturally learned behavioural models. The subjects of the study were students in economic sciences after their graduation, the research being a follow-up of a previous research conducted on Romanian students right after their enrolment, using the Trompenaars' and Hampden-Turner's matrix centred on seven cultural dimensions, expressed as couples of opposing attitudinal dispositions. The results of the current research seem to validate the hypothesis according to which individualism, defined as the tendency to be self-oriented is rather culturally construed and learned than genetically determined.

KEYWORDS: *individualism, evolutionary theory, socialization, culture*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *Z13*

1. INTRODUCTION

During a research project destined to determine the cultural orientation of Romanian business students according to the model designed by organizational theorists and management consultants Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (1997), we discovered that one element of this model, namely the "individualism versus collectivism" orientation suffered significant modifications during the three years of under-graduate studies. We made the assumption that the modification, in the direction of an increase in individualism and selfishness could be determined by exposure to the neo-classical economic theory, hypothesis confirmed by studies belonging to some other researchers. The explanation that we believe accounts for this effect resides in the very nature of humans, as cultural beings, products of a long process of gene-culture coevolution.

2. THE INDIVIDUALIST – COLLECTIVIST ORIENTATION

The current research started from one of the dimensions included by various researchers in cultural systems, namely the individualist – collectivist orientation. For instance, Parsons and Shils define a cultural system as an ensemble of values, norms and symbols which provide the foundations of people's choices and actions and determine the modes of interaction between individuals and, among the five pairs of opposing cultural dimensions, one could find the "self-orientation – collectivity orientation (Parsons & Shils, 1962, pp. 80-85).

Similarly, Geert Hofstede formulated a different model of a cultural system, based on five cultural dimensions, among which "individualism versus collectivism" plays a big role, by this dimension

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defining the degree to which people of a society understand themselves as individuals, apart from their group, or as members of various groups they belong to (Hofstede, 1980; 2001).

An extensive model is also the one designed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, who have identified seven cultural dimensions, expressed as couples of opposing attitudinal dispositions that can be identified in each culture, of which "individualism versus communitarianism" is one of the main dimensions for defining people's social interactions (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, pp. 8-10).

This latter cultural model stays at the basis of the current research, as Trompenaars' seven-dimension model also provided a test for identifying and measuring the respondents' orientation. What was of interest for the main objective of the research was the "individualism versus communitarianism" dimension, by this understanding the orientation of the individual either towards the self, or towards the group. As defined by Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997, pp. 50-68), in individualistic cultures the individual is perceived as being more important than the group, fundamental values of such cultures referring to personal freedom and initiative, individual decision and responsibility, as well as individual achievements as the core of self-identity and self-concept. In individualistic societies, individuals must make their own decisions and take care of themselves, as personal achievements are the elements that define them. In communitarian cultures, on the contrary, the group is considered to be more important than the individual, and the common good is cherished and sought more than the personal good. In exchange for individuals' belonging to the group and adherence to group norms, the group provides the individuals with safety and help when needed. In collectivistic societies, belonging to a group and the well-being of the group are more important than personal freedom and independence.

Although different depending on many factors, both individualistic and collectivistic cultures share some common elements. In individualistic cultures, for instance, individual performance is praised and rewarded; people enjoy a high degree of initiative and autonomy to make their own decisions; the needs of individuals are more important than those of organizations; and people are encouraged to be creative and learn from their mistakes. In communitarian cultures, on the other hand, group performance is praised and rewarded, the individual achievements being important only as long as they contribute to the performance of the group; individual performance is not praised publicly; decision-making is rather collective; and personal partisanship is avoided (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, pp. 50-68).

2.1. Research methodology

In order to find out whether individualist or communitarian orientations are the result of either nature or culture, the current research presents the results of a self-administered questionnaire that was delivered to Romanian students in economic sciences, after their graduation. The questionnaire included the tests formulated as dilemmas by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). Nevertheless, for the objective of the research only the results regarding the second dimension of his seven-dimension cultural model were taken into account and processed, namely "individualism versus communitarianism" (the group versus the individual).

The research is a follow up of a similar analysis that was carried out in 2013, on Romanian students in management right after their enrolment. The current investigation used the same tests, applied in 2016 to Romanian students in economic sciences after their graduation of the three-year educational programme, in order to assess their value-orientation and identify whether they were modified by the students' exposure to the various aspects of the educational programme. The objective of the research was to find out whether there are differences between the value orientation of young people before they begin their education in economic sciences and after they were influenced by the curriculum.

The questionnaire was delivered to 235 students in economic sciences, of which only 213 were filled out and valid. The students were aged between 21 and 32, with an average of 23 years old, of which 48.36% males (103 individuals) and 51.64% females (110 individuals).

2.2. Main results of the research from 2016

The results of the research (as shown in *Figure 1*) revealed a high percent of students that have a radical or moderate individualist orientation. The highest percent, namely 39.57% of graduates declared themselves as being mainly individualist, while 32.34% of graduates preferred a radical individualist orientation, indicating that the respondents place their interests above the interests of the group. A small percent of the graduates, namely a total of approximately 28, chose a communitarian orientation, either radical (11.06%) or moderate (17.02%).

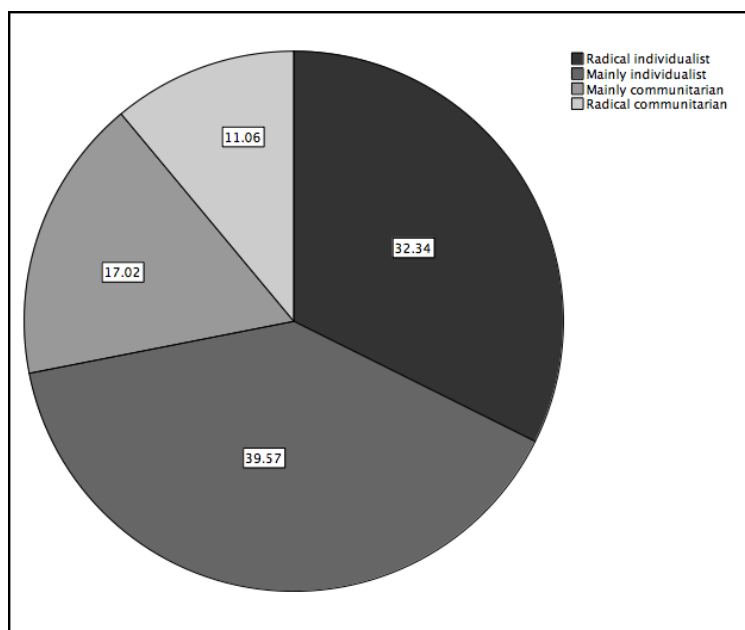


Figure 1. Individualist versus communitarian orientation of graduates

Source: adapted from personal research

It is worth mentioning here that radical individualists are persons who are oriented towards achieving their personal goals with little or no consideration for their place within the group or organization or for the benefits of the group, while a mainly individualist person affirms competitive individualism, but reconciles it with communitarian cooperation. On the other side, mainly communitarian individuals assert the ascendancy of the group, but also allow the existence of competing individuals, while a radical communitarian is rather interested in the well-being of the group or organization (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, pp. 65-66).

Compared to the results of 2013, which assessed the value orientation of young individuals prior to their exposure to their education in economic sciences, assuming that these value orientations reflected their "natural" attitudes, derived directly from the fundamental attitudes of Romanian culture, the results of the current research are rather worrisome (as presented in *Figure 2*). The number of those who preferred a radical individualist orientation increased from 21.99% in 2013, to 32.34% in 2016, while the number of graduates who declared themselves as mainly individualist increased from 34.55% in 2013 to a worrying 39.57% in 2016. At the same time, the number of graduates with a mainly communitarian orientation decreased from 24.61% in 2013 to 17.02% in 2016, while the number of those who declared a radical communitarian orientation decreased from 18.85% in 2013 to only 11.06% in 2016.

The substantial increase of the number of individuals with an individualist value orientation, both radical and moderate, indicate that their exposure to the educational content of an economic-profile higher education institution made them more self oriented and thought them that personal achievements are more valuable than the performance and well-being of the group or organization they belong to.

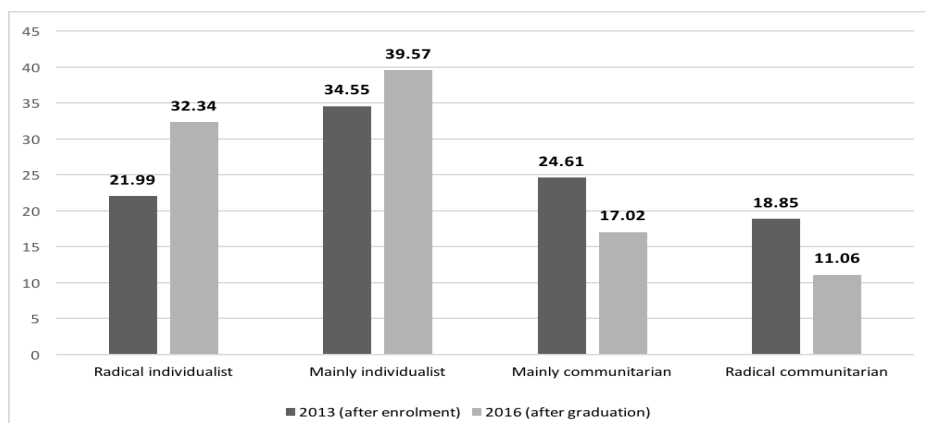


Figure 2. The evolution of individualist versus communitarian orientation before and after graduation of Romanian students in economic sciences

Source: adapted from personal research

As regarding the sex of the graduates (presented in *Table 1*), it is worth emphasizing that male graduates are the most radical individualists, 37.9% of them being exclusively self-oriented and 35.9% being individualist yet also prone to communitarian cooperation. A higher number of female graduates, of 41.8% of all females, declared themselves as mainly individualist, while 28.2% chose a radical individualist orientation.

Table 1. Individualist versus communitarian orientation according to sex

2016 Survey					
Individualist versus communitarian orientation (ICO) * Sex Crosstabulation					
			Sex		Total
			Masculin	Feminin	
ICO	Radical individualist	Count	39	31	70
		% within ICO	55.7%	44.3%	100.0%
		% within Sex	37.9%	28.2%	32.9%
		% of Total	18.3%	14.6%	32.9%
	Mainly individualist	Count	37	46	83
		% within ICO	44.6%	55.4%	100.0%
		% within Sex	35.9%	41.8%	39.0%
		% of Total	17.4%	21.6%	39.0%
	Mainly communitarian	Count	17	20	37
		% within ICO	45.9%	54.1%	100.0%
		% within Sex	16.5%	18.2%	17.4%
		% of Total	8.0%	9.4%	17.4%
Radical communitarian	Count	10	13	23	
	% within ICO	43.5%	56.5%	100.0%	
	% within Sex	9.7%	11.8%	10.8%	
	% of Total	4.7%	6.1%	10.8%	
TOTAL	Count	103	110	213	
	% within ICO	48.4%	51.6%	100.0%	
	% within Sex	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	48.4%	51.6%	100.0%	

Source: calculated based of results of personal research

In numbers, as presented in *Figure 3*, 39 males and 37 females opted for a radical individualist orientation, indicating a similar preference. A comparable number of male and female graduates declared themselves as being mainly communitarian or radical communitarian, although their total number is rather negligible as related to the total.

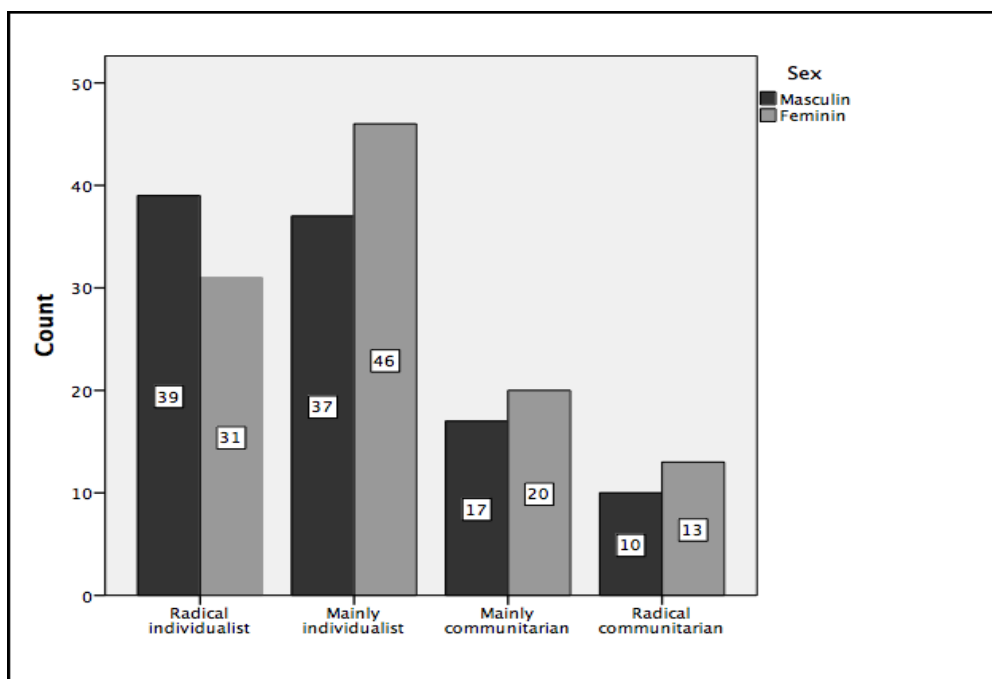


Figure 3. The individualist versus communitarian orientation according to sex
 Source: adapted from personal research

What could explain these results? Our hypothesis is that studying economics, i.e. being constantly exposed to the mainstream theory of the neo-classical economics, the theory of the rational agent, that nowadays dominates the discourse in this science has the result of increasing students' tendency towards individualism, egoism and rejection of altruistic and communitarian values.

Other research results seem to corroborate our hypothesis. Thus, Neil Gandal, Sonia Roccas, Lilach Sagiv and Amy Wrzesniewski (2005) did a comparative study of the Israeli students, both freshmen and graduates. They discovered that students of economics had a tendency to be more inclined towards individualism, achievement, power, hedonism and selfishness than the students of other disciplines, who gave more importance to altruism, responsibility, loyalty and helpfulness. If the difference between first-year students was not so great, it increased in the case of the third-year students, where those studying economics had the tendency to rate altruistic values as far less significant than before (Gandal et al, 2005). This could mean either that studying economics increases the tendency towards selfishness, or that people who are already individualistic and selfish are more prone to study economics, and this value orientation is only reinforced.

Another interesting study was published by Robert H. Frank, Thomas Gilovich and Dennis T. Regan (1993) and concerned the correlation between economic studies and the inhibition of the natural tendency towards cooperation. In their research, they started from the fact, proved by several empirical studies, that economists generally behave in more self-interested ways, admitting that, as we have seen before, "this evidence does not demonstrate that exposure to the self-interest model *causes* more self-interested behaviour, since it may be that economists were simply more self-interested to begin with, and this difference was one reason they chose to study economics" (Frank, Gilovich & Regan, 1993, p. 159). Thus, economists were found to be more likely than others to free-ride in situations that called for private contribution to public good, were more selfish when playing "the ultimatum game", less likely than others to donate to private charities, more inclined to defect instead of cooperate when playing "the prisoner dilemma". Next, Frank and his colleagues compared upperclassmen and underclassmen, economists and non-economists, in order to find out if the differences in behaviour result from training in economics or not. What they found out is extremely interesting. For instance, in the context of playing the "ultimatum game", students

do exhibit a significant tendency toward more cooperative behaviour correlated with advancement toward graduation, but this trend is conspicuously missing in the case of economics majors, who become instead more prone to defection. In another test, where students were invited to solve some ethical dilemmas destined to measure honesty, it became clear that the tendency towards dishonesty and cynicism was higher for economics students and significantly increased with time and more exposure to neo-classical economic theories. As a consequence, Frank and his colleagues do believe that differences in cooperativeness between people who studied economics and those who did not are significant and are caused by the training in economics (Frank, Gilovich & Regan, 1993).

Another study from 1996 by the same researchers goes one step further, investigating the possible consequences of studying economics on the quality of the graduates as future citizens (Frank, Gilovich & Regan, 1996). They wanted to investigate what are the consequences of teaching students that people are selfish, un-cooperative and individualistic, and discovered that by inculcating opportunism, cynicism and individualism, economic education rather creates a disadvantage to students because will determine them to be less cooperative and so lose the social and economic advantages of cooperation (Frank, Gilovich & Regan, 1996, p. 191).

Not only increased individualism is a consequence of economic training, but also a tendency to become less generous, as proved by Yoram Bauman and Elaina Rose (2009), who analysed comparatively the voluntary contributions to social programs by University of Washington undergraduates. They found out that the economics students proved to be less generous than those majoring in non-economic disciplines, and also that in the case of economics students, their donations decline significantly after exposure to indoctrination through economics instruction.

But how can we explain this situation? Why does economic education have such a dramatic effect on people's system of values? May it be because learning in general has this effect on ideas and beliefs?

An answer to this question can be found in the evolutionary theories that explain human behavior, and especially in the most sophisticated one, the theory of gene-culture coevolution (Laland & Brown, 2002). Charles Darwin believed that the distinctive note that differentiated us from the other primates and made us the dominant species on Earth is our big brains, but this cannot be the answer, because the Neanderthals had an even bigger brain, and yet they went extinct, most probably exterminated by the humans that invaded their territories when they arrived in Europe from Africa (Harari, 2015, Ch. 1).

The secret of human species' success is not their native intelligence, neither some innate instincts that prevent humans from inflicting self-destruction, but the fact that they gradually became a cultural species, meaning that humans began to learn from each other's experience in such a way that culture became cumulative, so as each generation could use the knowledge accumulated before, and at the same time could build up on it and improve it. Human individuals no longer used first and foremost the personal experience to guide their behavior, but rather the cumulative experience of their society, transmitted as cultural knowledge, through learning. Once this process started, it snowballed, and no one could survive without learning all this complex toolkit of practices and techniques: the hunting secrets, the tool making procedures, the way to distinguish between edible and non-edible plants, cooking methods, and so on. In these new conditions, natural selection began to favor those individuals who were better cultural learners, who could better appropriate and exploit the body of accumulated knowledge in a society. Thus, as anthropologist Joseph Henrich (2015) puts it, "cultural evolution initiated a process of self-domestication, driving genetic evolution to make us prosocial, docile, rule followers who expect a world governed by social norms monitored and enforced by communities" (Ch. 1). A new form of status appeared in human societies, alongside with dominance status that we inherited from our ape ancestors, namely the status of prestige: humans began to grant respect to those individuals who were wiser, that is who had more cultural knowledge than others, and who can thus be imitated, emulated and be sources of learned information.

Thus, according to this view of human nature, we are naturally prone to defer to those individuals who have prestige, be it born from age, competence or success, and to instinctively learn from them and internalize the values they are transmitting to us. So, if this is the mechanism of cultural transmission and if humans were naturally selected to be better and better learners, it is of no surprise that any form of education has significant effects on our value systems, economic education being no exception.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The fact that, given their nature as cultural beings, people have a strong tendency to internalize the values they acquire during their education, specifically economic studies in this case, underlines even more the importance of the content of the economic training. In the context of the globalization phenomena, the world is today more and more interdependent, and the importance of social cooperation is increasingly important. As today the authors of public policies are often economists, it is of the utmost importance that the tendency towards increased selfishness and individualism determined and reinforced by the study of neoclassical economics to be balanced by other elements of the curricula, such as humanities, that could diminish and counter this tendency.

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