INDEPENDENT-INTERDEPENDENT SELF: EXPLORATORY STUDY WITH PORTUGUESE AND ROMANIAN STUDENTS

LAURA CIOCHINĂ, LUISA FARIA
Faculty of Psychology and Education, University of Porto Portugal

Abstract

This study represents an initial phase of a larger investigation whose aim is to construct a new instrument for the assessment of the independent-interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1994) in Portugal and Romania. Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with 1st and 3rd year university students, 16 Portuguese and 16 Romanian, in order to explore the meaning attributed to the following elements of the independent-interdependent self: uniqueness vs connectedness to each other, independence vs dependence-interdependence, personal goals vs collective goals, direct vs indirect communication and static vs dynamic self. In both cultural contexts the content analysis showed that uniqueness is considered in terms of personal style and values, independence is mainly seen from the financial point of view, boys give more importance to collective goals than girls, direct communication is considered more efficient than the indirect one, and the social validation of the self is thought to indicate low self-esteem.

Cuvinte-cheie: self/independent-interdependent, cultura, analiză de conținut

Keywords: independent-interdependent self, culture, content analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The studies in the field of the self have shown that, despite the structural and dynamic dimensions of the self which are considered to be universal (Neisser, 1994), there are also intercultural variations of the self (Grace & Cramer, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1994). These variations refer to the way individuality is conceived, that is, the way in which the self develops itself in the context of the relationships with significant others.

Regarding this, Markus and Kitayama (1994), in their influential cultural theory of the self, pointed out that one of the most significant variations in what people in different cultures believe about themselves is related to the extent to
which they see themselves as separate from others or as connected with others. Thus, they advanced two approaches of the self: the *independent* and the *interdependent* self.

The core aspect of the independent self is represented by the belief in individuals' uniqueness, autonomy and independence, and in their separation from others. At the same time, the independent self is defined in terms of internal attributes, such as personal abilities and attitudes.

The interdependent self is characterized by a strong cohesion and connectedness of human beings to each other, being defined in terms which refer to belonging to a certain group and being faithful to the relationships inside the group. Such a conception of the self entails considering that one's behavior is, to a large extent, regulated by contextual factors, such as the thoughts, feelings and actions of significant others.

This distinction between the independent self defined in terms of internal attributes and the interdependent self regulated by contextual factors was used by a series of authors (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Heine et al., 2001; Kanagawa-Cross, & Markus, 2001) in order to explain the static vs. dynamic nature of the self, aspect which we also included in the present study, as we shall present later on.

It is worth noting that the dichotomy the present study dwells upon – independent vs. interdependent self – represents a key variable for the distinction between members of occidental cultures – more individualistic – and members of non-occidental cultures – more collectivistic (Utz, 2004).

In this framework of intercultural comparisons, we need to emphasize that in Hofstede's (1980) pioneer studies, which led him to the construction of one of the most evoked and used theorizations of IND/COL, Portugal had been included among the 55 countries investigated by the author, having received an IND index of 27, which was placing it on the 33rd/35th positions, that is, among the countries less individualistic and more collectivistic. As to Romania, although also a Latin country, but belonging to Eastern Europe, Hofstede had not included it among the 55 countries which were analysed.

Consequently, it appears relevant to us to compare these two cultural contexts, also taking into consideration what had been emphasized by Ciochină and Faria (2006) in other studies conducted in the two mentioned cultures, that is, the fact that these two countries have undergone a dictatorship regime. The authors notice the following aspect: "Although different in nature (fascism in Portugal and communism in Romania), we can conjecture that such regimes have led, through specific ideological, political, cultural and social mechanisms, to the implementation of a collectivistic mentality" (Ciochină & Faria, 2006, p. 178).

In spite of these similarities between Portugal and Romania, if we proceed from what Hofstede (1980) observed regarding the positive correlation between the individualism level and a high GNP, the latter being associated with an economy based on individual interests, our hypothesis is that, considering their actual
political and economical status – Portugal being part of the European Union since 1986, while Romania joined the European Union only in 2007 –, the individualistic life model, with its specific functioning norms, has been assimilated by the Portuguese society in a higher degree than by the Romanian society.

In a previous study, Ciochina and Faria (2011) analysed the influence of individualism/collectivism on personal conceptions of intelligence (PCI) of Portuguese and Romanian adolescents, aiming to investigate the association patterns between IND/COL and the two types of PCI – static and dynamic (Dweck, 1999). In doing so, we considered that the nature of the self – independent vs. interdependent – could mediate the relationship between the two dimensions – IND/COL and PCI, but since the measurement of the self was left aside, in the present research we attended to this particular aspect.

More concretely, we conducted a series of interviews with a view to establishing the meaning attributed by Portuguese and Romanian university students to the two types of self. For this purpose we used the semi-directive interview (Ghiglione & Matalon, 2003).

2. METHOD

2.1 PARTICIPANTS

A total of thirty two 1st and 3rd year university students, 16 Portuguese and 16 Romanian, from various university courses (Educational Sciences, Humanities, Fine Arts and Economics), of both sexes (50% boys and 50% girls) were interviewed. The Portuguese and Romanian samples comprised 8 students for each university year. The age mean of the Portuguese students was 20.3 ($SD = 1.40$) for the 1st year and 22.0 ($SD = 1.06$) for the 3rd year. The age mean of the Romanian students was 19.3 ($SD = .60$) for the 1st year and 21.6 ($SD = .70$) for the 3rd year.

2.2 INSTRUMENT

In order to establish the investigation questions of the semi-directive interview, we took into consideration the central elements of the independent and interdependent self, as they were theorized in previous studies (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994).

Thus, uniqueness and its forms of manifestation in different contexts – family, group of friends and faculty – was one dimension of the self explored in the study. The inclusion of questions about uniqueness (e.g. “What does being unique and different from others mean to you?”) in the interview grid was justified by the fact that the independent self emphasizes individuals’ uniqueness and the expression of internal attributes in autonomous actions, while the interdependent self does not focus on its uniqueness, but rather on external attributes, such as social roles, connectedness and cohesion with the others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994).
The meaning attributed to goals was another aspect investigated by some of the interview questions (e.g., "What does achieving your goals in life mean to you?"). Since, as Singelis (1994) and Triandis (1995) point out, the independent self is characterized by goals which are different from the goals of the in-group, whereas the goals of the individuals with an interdependent self are generally compatible with the goals of the in-group and, even if they are not compatible, the latter tend to have priority.

Other dimensions explored in the semi-directive interview were the independence/interdependence (e.g., "Who are the persons who can limit your independence?"), belonging to a certain group (e.g., "What does belonging to a certain group, as for example, your group of friends, a work group or your family, mean to you?") and direct vs. indirect communication (e.g., "In which situation do you prefer to communicate openly and directly to the others? Which are the situations in which you prefer using a rather indirect communication?"). Regarding these two types of communication, the former one is illustrative of the independent self, while the latter, characterized by trying to guess the communicational intentions of the interlocutor and by "reading others' minds" (Singelis, 1994, p. 581), illustrates the interdependent self.

Since the present study represents an initial phase of a larger investigation which aims to verify the relation between the two types of self and the two types of personal conceptions of intelligence (PCI) – static vs. dynamic – considered from the perspective of Dweck's socio-cognitive model (Dweck, 1999), we also included questions related with validating and demonstrating personal qualities to other people (e.g., "How would you describe a person who is always concerned about demonstrating his or her qualities to the others?"), as well as questions related to personal development (e.g., "How do you think you could improve your own person?"). Thus, through the interview, we aimed to evaluate the static vs. dynamic dimension not only of PCI (Dweck, 1999), but also of the self in general (Heine et al., 2001).

Summing up, the investigation questions referred to the central dimensions of the independent/interdependent self – uniqueness (two questions), goals (three questions), independence (three questions), belonging to a certain group (two questions), and communication type (three questions) –, as well as to aspects related to the static vs. dynamic nature of the self (two questions).

2.3. PROCEDURE

The semi-directive interview was conducted inside the faculties which took part in the study, in classrooms which allowed the interviewer and the interviewee a private dialogue. Each interviewee agreed upon the interview being recorded. The average duration of the interview was 50 minutes.

The number of participants was previously established (16 students in each cultural context). This was done starting from the practical conclusions of authors
such as Ghiglione and Matalon (2003) who point out that the 20th or the 30th interview represent the critical points starting from which other interviews will no longer provide new information.

The 32 interviews were transcribed proceeding from their audio-recording and then content analysis was conducted. Regarding the codification process, we started by defining the register and the content units (Bardin, 2011). The theme was considered to be the register unit and the paragraph, the context unit.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The themes of the interview were: definition of uniqueness, definition of goals, independence, belonging to groups, communication type and social validation of the self vs. improving the self.

The construction of the system of categories and subcategories was based on the theoretical concepts underlying the interview, as well as on the empirical data collected from the participants' answers.

With respect to the first theme, definition of uniqueness, we established the following categories: psychological uniqueness (with the subcategories “personal style and values”, “way of dealing with problems” and “specific aptitudes”) and physical uniqueness (with the subcategories “physical traits” and “way of dressing oneself”).

The frequencies of the Portuguese and Romanian participants who described their uniqueness in psychological or physical terms can be seen in Table no.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Portuguese context</th>
<th>Romanian context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological uniqueness</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical uniqueness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it can be noticed, in both cultural contexts, all the participants described their uniqueness in terms related to their personality, personal style and values being significantly valorized (“having my own personality”, “having my own style”, “uniqueness is my way of thinking and looking at things”) to the prejudice of the physical traits.

As regards the subcategory “way of dealing with problems”, four Portuguese boys (one from the 1st year and three from the 3rd year) considered that the way of dealing with a certain problem makes them unique, whereas no Romanian participant referred to such an aspect. These results may be explained by the fact

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1 For all the tables the same subject can appear in more than one category or subcategory.
that, in a progressively competitive educational system such as the Portuguese one, students, especially boys, aspire to have more independence and more decisional power during the academic period. This inevitably confronts them with the necessity of dealing with more problems, which may enhance their feeling of uniqueness.

The subcategory “specific aptitudes” is weakly represented, since only a Romanian girl from the 3rd year and a Romanian boy from the 1st year referred to their aptitudes as aspects which make them unique.

For the same category of uniqueness, an interesting result was noticed, namely a Portuguese boy from the 3rd year and a Romanian boy from the 1st year talked about the impossibility of conceiving one’s uniqueness independently of the relationships with the others. For the Portuguese boy uniqueness is “a discovery process which cannot be done in isolation, since it has to be in continuous discussion with the others”. For the Romanian boy uniqueness is “a characteristic which is discovered only in the collective context. I don’t think it is possible to talk about uniqueness individually.”

Consequently, starting from these answers, we can emphasize the fact that, despite being an attribute characteristic of the independent self, separate from others, uniqueness is constructed and assessed in the context of the relationships with the others.

Concerning the theme definition of goals, in both cultural contexts we identified the following categories: type of goals (with the subcategories “personal goals” and “professional goals”) and own goals vs. others’ goals (with the subcategories “situations in which others’ goals are favoured” and “persons whose goals are favoured to the prejudice of personal goals”).

The frequencies of the Portuguese and Romanian participants in the subcategories “personal goals” and “professional goals” are presented in Table no. 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Portuguese context</th>
<th>Romanian context</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of goals</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We noticed that, in both cultural contexts, in comparison with the students from the 1st year, those from the 3rd year favoured personal goals (“having a family”, “being happy”, “see myself surrounded by people who like me”, “being happy doing the things I do”, “growing as a person”) more than the professional ones which seem to be more appealing to the students from the 1st year (“graduating and finding a job”, “having a good job”). These results suggest the fact that the maturity level (superior in the case of the 3rd year students) gives access to a more comprehensive view on what being an achieved person means.
In connection with the category own goals vs. others' goals, in both cultural contexts the subcategory "situations in which others' goals are favoured" refers predominantly (14 Portuguese participants, 6 from the 1st year and 8 from the 3rd year, and all the 16 Romanian participants) to the situations in which a friend or a member of the family is being helped out. At the same time, two Portuguese students from the 1st year, a boy and a girl, mentioned having given up enrolling in a certain university course just to "please the parents" who wanted them to enroll in another one. As for the subcategory "persons whose goals are favoured to the prejudice of personal goals", this includes predominantly the family members (12 Portuguese students, 5 from the 1st year and 7 from the 3rd year and 12 Romanian students, 6 from the 1st year and 6 from the 3rd year) and to a lesser extent the friends (7 Portuguese students, 3 from the 1st year and 4 from the 3rd year and 5 Romanian students, 3 from the 1st year and 2 from the 3rd year).

Despite this generalized altruistic behavior, we also verified that three Portuguese girls and four Romanian ones assert that, nevertheless, they do not use to "leave aside their own goals" so as to favour others' goals, whereas boys do not overtly make such statements. This may be explained by the fact that, at least when it comes to the group of friends, the comradeship is an attribute that boys valorize to a great extent since this ensures them the group affiliation.

Concerning the theme independence, the following categories were identified in both cultural contexts: meaning attributed to independence (with the subcategories “financial independence”, “independent actions and decisions” and “responsibility”) and persons or situations which can limit independence (with the subcategories “parents”, “friends” and “other situations”). The frequency distribution of the participants in these subcategories is presented in Table no. 3.

We can notice that in the majority of cases being independent is associated to having financial independence, especially as concerns the 1st year students who, at this age, most probably feel more dependent on their parents than the 3rd year students do. This may be due to the fact that 3rd year students are more susceptible to have part-time jobs which, to a certain extent, allows them to sustain themselves.

We can also notice that responsibility appears to be encompassed in the meaning attached to independence, particularly as concerns the Romanian students. This may be a reminiscence of the social discourse conveyed by the educational system in this country after the shift from communism to democracy, when teachers used to draw students' attention on the risks of a freedom wrongly understood, that is students were made aware of the fact that being free and independent also meant being responsible for one's acts and not hurting the others.

Regarding the category persons or situations which can limit independence it can be noticed that the parents are considered to be the main limiting factors. On the second place come the friends who, by means of their opinions, pieces of advice and personal preferences can condition and limit the participants' actions and decisions.
Table no. 3
Frequency distribution of participants in the categories “meaning attributed to independence” and “persons or situations which can limit independence”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Portuguese context</th>
<th>Romanian context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>3rd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of independence</td>
<td>Financial independence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent actions and decisions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons situations</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regard to the theme belonging to a certain group, we identified the following categories: intellectual factors (common opinions, ideas, values, interests and goals), moral factors (respect, sincerity), emotional factors (being heard, mutual help and support) and advantages and disadvantages of belonging to a certain group. In Table no. 4 we present the frequency distribution of the participants in the first three categories mentioned above and since the category advantages and disadvantages of belonging to a certain group has quite many nuances, we shall describe it separately.

Table no. 4
Frequency distribution of the participants in the categories “intellectual factors”, “moral factors” and “emotional factors”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Portuguese context</th>
<th>Romanian context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>3rd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual factors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral factors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional factors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We notice that, when belonging to a group, the intellectual factors – having common opinions, ideas, values, interests and goals – seemed to be more important for the 3rd year students than for the 1st year ones for whom the emotional factors – being heard, mutual help and support – appeared to play major role. The moral factors – mutual respect, sincerity – seemed to have a quite similar importance for both the 1st year students and the 3rd year ones.

Concerning the category advantages and disadvantages of belonging to a certain group, when talking about advantages, the answer that appears to be dominant in both cultural contexts refers to the complementarity of the group members’ characteristics (10 Portuguese students, 4 from the 1st year and 6 from the 3rd year and 11 Romanian students, 5 from the 1st year and 6 from the 3rd year), as well as to the emotional support received from the group (11 Portuguese students, 4 from the 1st year and 7 from the 3rd year and 13 Romanian students, 6 from the
1st year and 7 from the 3rd year). A 1st year Portuguese girl and two 1st year Romanian girls also talked about the advantage of being able to learn things together with the other members of the group.

Regarding the disadvantages of belonging to a certain group, all the 1st year Portuguese students referred to the existence of possible conflicts, whereas their 3rd year counterparts did not mention such an aspect, but rather the limitation of personal space and time (two boys and two girls), the negative influences of the group (two boys), the necessity to live up to the image that one has in the in-group (a girl) and the difficulty of getting to know other people (a girl). As for the Romanian students, only two girls—one from the 1st year and one from the 3rd year—referred to the existence of possible conflicts. Three boys and two girls from the 1st year and four boys and two girls from the 3rd year considered that the biggest disadvantage of belonging to a group is represented by the subsequent responsibility. A girl from the 1st year mentioned the limitation of personal time and another one referred to the necessity to live up to the image one has in the in-group. A boy from the 1st year did not manage to mention any disadvantage of belonging to a certain group.

As concerns the theme communication, we established the following categories: “direct communication”, “indirect communication”, “advantages/dis-advantages of the direct communication” and “advantages/disadvantages of the indirect communication”. In both cultural contexts the direct communication is predominantly used in informal contexts – family and group of friends –, whereas the indirect communication is preferred in more formal contexts or in relation to persons in whom one does not have too much trust.

Finally, in the matter of the theme social validation of the self vs. improving the self, we noticed that in both cultural contexts the answers of the participants fell in the following categories: meaning attributed to the concern for demonstrating personal qualities to other people and ways of improving oneself. Thus, we noticed that in both cultural contexts the majority of the participants (14 Portuguese students – 6 from the 1st year and 8 from the 3rd year – and 15 Romanian students – 7 from the 1st year and 8 from the 3rd year) considered that the concern for demonstrating personal qualities to other people indicated low self-esteem and need for attention. However, a 1st year Portuguese boy considered that this type of attitude shows ambition, while a 1st year Portuguese girl and a 3rd year Portuguese boy considered that “one has to let the others know his or her qualities, but not exaggeratedly”. At the same time, a 3rd year Portuguese boy mentioned that such an attitude may represent “a need for motivation, active motivation to try to achieve things”, opinion shared by a 1st year Romanian boy who considered that “if this ensures one’s progress, then it means it helps them, it’s good for them.”

With regard to the category ways of improving oneself it is interesting to notice that 8 Portuguese students (3 from the 1st year and 5 from the 3rd year) believed that they could improve themselves by “interacting with the others”. 
“learning together with the others” and by “hearing the opinions of other people”, whereas only three Romanian students (1 from the 1st year and 2 from the 3rd year) referred to such aspects. This may be in line with the results obtained in a previous study conducted by Ciochínha and Faria (2009) on the meaning attributed to individualism/collectivism by Portuguese and Romanian secondary school students. These results showed that the Portuguese participants preferred the group work more than the Romanian ones, highlighting the advantage of learning from and together with the others.

Finally, another way of improving oneself is considered to be “studying more” (10 Portuguese students – 6 from the 1st year and 4 from the 3rd year – and 14 Romanian students – 8 from the 1st year and 6 from the 3rd year), “searching for new experiences” (1 Portuguese girl from the 1st year and 1 Portuguese boy from the 3rd year) and “exercising in other languages” (1 Romanian boy from the 1st year).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to clarify the conceptual framework of the independent-interdependent self-constructions, proceeding from the content analysis of the answers given by Portuguese and Romanian university students to a semi-structured interview.

The categories and the sub-categories to which the content analysis led represent a thorough concretization of the two mentioned constructs which will allow us to conduct a future larger investigation whose central aim will be the construction of a new questionnaire for the assessment of the two types of self – independent vs. interdependent – in Portugal and Romania.

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REFERENCES


**REZUMAT**

Acest studiu reprezintă etapa inițială a unei investigații mai ample ale cărei obiectiv este construirea unui nou instrument de măsurare a selfului independent-interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) în Portugalia și România. Au fost realizate 32 de interviuri semi-structurate cu studenți de anul 1 și III. 16 portughezi și 16 români, cu scopul de a explora următoarele elemente ale selfului interdependent: unicitate vs interconectivitate, independentă vs. dependentă, obiective personale vs. obiective colective, comunicare directă vs. indirectă și self statu vs. self dinamic. În ambele contexte culturale analiza de conținut a evidențiat faptul că unicitatea este intâmpinată în termenii de stil și valori personale, independenta este considerată din punctul de vedere al autonomiei financiare, băieți, în comparație cu fetele, acordă mai multă importanță obiectivelor colective, comunicarea directă este considerată mai eficientă decât cea indirectă, iar validarea socială a selfului este văzuță ca indicator al unui nivel scăzut de autocont. 