**The Changing Individualist Ideology during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to analyse ways in which individualism has been changing during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. While such an issue can only require a collectivist mindset in order to be under control, the individualist values around the world have suffered a lot and could change even after the pandemic.

What issues does the COVID-19 pandemic trigger? Most importantly, global inequalities are on the rise, due to unequal opportunities of access to health resources, and later on due to certain jobs which were no longer practiced under lockdown conditions. However, regardless of the pandemic, there has always been economic inequality worldwide, according to Stiglitz (2012).

Under these conditions, in what ways can we speak of a crisis of the values of individualism? After all, the isolation during the pandemic, such as the lockdown and the quarantine, promote individualism. Yet, at the same time, protests against the restrictive measures and the lack of rights of those unvaccinated show that the individualist values, together with the usual liberties of the citizen, are threatened. In what ways will all these lead to a change in individualist ideology?

Keywords: Values, lockdown, quarantine, protests, isolation, inequality.

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a wide range of reactions to the various issues it has triggered. Health was affected and threatened at a global scale, and plenty of discussions emerged regarding the measures taken for lockdown, social distancing, wearing masks and getting the vaccine. Some were willing to comply, while others went as far as protesting and claiming that everything was a set-up and that the virus was not real. Economy was also affected, together with some jobs which could no longer be practised or could not be practised remotely.

Individualist countries focus on individuals’ achievements and freedom, while collectivist countries focus on the well-being of each group. Managing the pandemic would require a collectivist approach. We need to have in view the wide scale of COVID-19: “The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented public health crisis that poses a challenge to humanity” [1]. The benefit of a collectivist approach is suggested by research done based on how the pandemic was managed in individualistic and collectivistic countries. According to [2], “the more individualistic (vs. collectivistic) a country was, the more COVID-19 cases and mortalities it had”. Research has been done [3] regarding Hoftede’s cultural dimensions, including individualism and collectivism, and their consequences on the way various countries dealt with the pandemic: “Countries where people wore a mask, maintained social distance, and frequently washed their hands were more likely to contain the pandemic.” However, their research concluded that individualism among other dimensions, such as masculinity (cultures oriented on achievement and competition) vs femininity (cultures oriented on welfare and collaboration), power distance (the way relationship with authority function, and whether this relationship is more relaxed or more authoritarian), and long-term orientation showed no evidence that “they significantly affected people’s response to the pandemic”. Instead, these researchers found that “countries with higher uncertainty avoidance and indulgence had significantly higher rates of COVID-19 cases.” [3] My opinion is that individual values, which have become recently widespread all over the world [4], including in traditionally collectivistic cultures such as those in Asia, have been under serious threat because of the restrictive measures taken during the pandemic period. While there has been, to some extent, an adaptation in individualist cultures to the pandemic, the issues of restrictive measures and their threat to personal freedom have had consequences on personal lives. For instance, in Romania, during 2020, many citizens exposed on social media the belief that spring has been stolen away from them by the restrictive measures which had parks closed and leisure walking restricted or only limited to getting out with the purpose of buying groceries that are strictly necessary at the closest supermarket.

At the same time with restrictions placed on rights and freedoms, individualist opportunities arose from working remotely and gaining more in the case of personal businesses. Benefitting of personal space during the pandemic was an aspect which could also be discussed from an individualist point of view: remote work, which was possible in fields such as education, allowed for discussions related to personal space, such as whether or not students should be asked to turn on their cameras during class, or at least only when they decide to speak. The choice of bluring the background at home or chosing a customized background for webcam for various online platforms is related to the issue of privacy, or personal space as well.

Generally, individualism is connected with high economic development ([5], [6], [7], [8]). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic economic development was threatened. Economic inequalities have been expected to be on the rise as a consequence, since not everyone had access to health resources, while also some jobs could no longer be practised under lockdown conditions. However, research [9] claims that there has always been economic inequality in the world even before the pandemic started.

Some changes during the pandemic were supposed or hoped to be permanent ones, such as the following: “it is clear that the world will not go back to where it was before COVID emerged. For example, it is highly unlikely that many firms will insist that all workers must again brave peak-hour traffic and be in office at a particular time, or be present on all days of the week for all of their working hours. Organized religions will find it difficult to convince their followers that it is obligatory for them to congregate in a physical space at a fixed time for prayers.” [10]. All these measures show benefits for the individual, that are rooted in individualism. In spite of these predictions, however, coming back to the face-to-face format, at least in some domains of activity, such as the academic education, has not retained much of the online facilities. Classes on online platforms made it easy to share presentations, of both teachers and students, while in the face-to-face format class the overhead projector may not always be available. While, for instance, some conferences and workshops may still be held at most in hybrid format, the return to the face-to-face format for courses and seminars, as well as exams, was considered a necessity. The choice of the individuals regarding what form of the hybrid format to choose, at least for events such as conferences, may have to do with individualism, to the extent that, if an individual chooses online format for comfort’s purposes, it is a personal choice. What is more, some events have offered the possibility of the online format for individuals that have chosen not to take the COVID-19 vaccine. Whether or not to take the COVID-19 vaccine was, thus, a choice in certain areas, while in others it was compulsory to take all three doses. Travelling was not allowed unless tested, and, at least for a while, attending events such as concerts and visiting museums, and even sitting in a cafe were based on showing the COVID-19 certificate.

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic was a time when individualism as a value was seriously threatened, at least for a limited amount of time. Some individuals chose to comply in order to keep themselves and the others safe, while others took part in protests. However, the government allowing people to express themselves through protests could be seen as a measure to prevent more violent social unrest against restrictive measures. Some individuals took a break from individualist values for a while, in the hope of being able to defeat the pandemic, while others objected to the restrictive measures. Some went as far as claiming the COVID-19 pandemic to be fake, and some even died of the virus they did not believe in. In Romania, for different ages, there were time intervals during the day at the beginning of the pandemic period when they could shop for groceries. Otherwise, walking even in parks was restricted in the first spring of the pandemic. Some citizens broke the rules and received fines from the police. Such rebellious behaviour could be regarded as a sign of individualism, together with the distrust in the government and health system. With those who were for and those who were against the vaccine, we could notice the issue of trust and, respectively, distrust in the government, health system and other institutions of the state. In the case of Israel, vaccinations were made obligatory and citizens complied. They were also convinced that the vaccine was for their own good. At the same time, in Romania, as well as in the United States, where individualist rates are higher, the citizens were split in two groups: those for and those against. Those that were against showed an issue with the authority of the state over the individual, feeling that the state was becoming too controlling.

One threat to individualism could be regarded under the form of individuals’ well-being at a psychological level, not only at the level of freedoms and rights, as well as the level of economy. The effect of “psychological stress” ([1], [11], [12], [13]) can be divided into “primary stress associated with the fear of infections”, and into “secondary stress, or adversity associated with the pandemic, including shortage of supplies, unemployment, disruptions of daily routines, and lack of access to psychiatric care” ([1], [14]). There is a “decline in psychological well-being, such as lower feelings of success in life (i.e., flourishing) and negative affective balance, resulting from the pandemic (e.g., [15]).” [1]. This fall in the feelings of accomplishment for the individuals can also be a threat to the values of individualism, which include self-achievement and imply personal well-being. Too much control from the state can also result in issues related to personal psychological well-being and stress. It is normal for cultures which were used to a high degree of individualism or which valued individualism to adapt with more difficulty to the restrictive measures to personal freedom and interest taken by the state. According to [16], narcissists, which are present in “highly individualistic cultures, such as the United States and other Western European countries [17]”, have also been affected by the measures taken during the pandemic. As a rule, “Narcissists value interpersonal dominance over interpersonal warmth” ([16], [18], [19]). Thus, “Narcissists tend to avoid working with and relying on others.” [16]

It looks as if the pandemic meant an adaptation of values, or a shift for some amount of time, to collectivist values, to some extent, as required by the measures taken by the state. The values in any society show their influence in shaping their members’ personalities. If the members of the respective society are not at odds personally with the values imposed and practised by it, then they can internalize them. These values will affect the way they respond to a pandemic crisis, which requires an approach centred on the community’s interests, not on each individual’s. While obeying certain rules does not mean internalizing them or even adopting them on long term, collectivist societies may be regarded as dealing easier with complying with restrictive rules imposed by the state, since they are used to this system. How has the individualist ideology been changed, even if temporarily, by the measures taken against the spread of COVID-19?

**Methodology**

Individualism as a value should be regarded in strong connection with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism sought for a state that would have a minimal role of constraint. Friedrich von Hayek believed that the “minimal state would protect private property, maintain order, and provide some protection for the poor” [20]. Neoliberalism refers to the following: “governments cannot create economic growth or provide social welfare; rather, by trying to help, governments make the world worse for everyone, including the poor. Instead, private companies, private individuals, and, most importantly, unhindered markets are best able to generate economic growth and social welfare” [20].

We need to have in view both neoliberalism and individualism, to see that, together, they create a certain form of solidarity in Europe, at least [21].

Based on this type of solidarity, we could say that it was quite easy for citizens to stick together for the authoritarian measures taken against the spread of COVID-19. Regardless of the way citizens enjoyed their freedom, they understood that this pandemic crisis represented an exceptionnal situation which required exceptionnal measures in order to be controlled. Perhaps this is an explanation of what helped individualist cultures notice the need to take collective measures in order to fight against the pandemic. The fighting against the pandemic included various social media hashtags and various slogans which included or alluded to the fact that together we could see that we are all well, we and our loved ones, and that wearing the mask should make a differences for everyone, and also shows that we care about each other. All such slogans contain collective mindsets, which may not be the expected orientation of societies that value individualism. However, these slogans also relied on the fact that, regardless of how high individualism is in every society, we all have families, friends and loved ones that we care about and which we are trying to protect. For our close ones, we should be motivated to embrace the collective mindset in dealing with the pandemic. Once we are scared or once there is a threat that is common to us, we tend to join forces in order to fight for it. This is a natural reaction of survival.

The concept of responsibilised individualism is considered a result of neoliberalism, yet its roots lie in liberalism. Regarding welfare regimes, the “political economic forces of neoliberalism and the cultural forces of responsibilised individualism” offer a welfare regime that is not universal, and thus not based “on more affective normative dispositions” [21].

At the time of the pandemic, the state, even if taking authoritarian measures, tried to look protective with all of them. This was a strategy to diminish the effect of the authoritarian, drastic measures which threatened personal freedom and interests, which, until then, had been the norm.

The main distinction between individualism and collectivism is focus on individuals vs focus on communities, or groups: “Whereas self-focused,‘me’-oriented thinking is promoted in individualistic cultures, other-focused,‘we’-oriented thinking is celebrated in collectivistic cultures [22]” [1]. This leads to the following result with respect to the perception of the pandemic crisis: “people in individualistic cultures are likely to perceive COVID-19 as a personal crisis, while those in collectivistic cultures are likely to perceive it as a collective crisis” [1]. The results of this difference in perception is as follows: as a coping mechanism, members of “individualistic cultures are likely to hoard rather than donate and share essential items”, while members of collectivistic cultures tend to focus on social needs and “donate food and supplies to people in need.” [1]

We may see a contradiction in the pursuit of personal, individualistic interest and the need of keeping solidarity to help survival: “The pursuit of competitive self-interest as a global ethic represents a serious challenge to the care and solidarity humanity needs for its survival; yet rugged, self-referential individualism is endemic to neoliberal capitalism ([23]; [24]).” [25] At the same time, attention is drawn, from a sociological perspective, to the way “people relate together normatively” and to “A sense of what is moral exists within people, defining, orienting and regulating their actions from within”, as well as to the way “things matter outside of formal politics and the economy” [25]. The sense of morality thus could have been one explanation for the collective actions which were taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, or, at least, for why citizens were sensitive to what the state urged them to do. Given the pandemic situation, human solidarity was considered a task which appealed to the sense of morals from a sociological perspective which contributes to the way people relate together. Needing help is a definitory trait of human beings, and asking for help and getting help are also usual human actions: “Being needy is a quality shared by all of humanity”, as “Humans call out for care as needy people, and give care, often at the same time.” [25] Since it is a fundamental trait, all the slogans asking for help and support in order to get together through the pandemic and keep safe can be explained as directly appealing to human nature. What is more, this sense of care is also shared in larger circles, not just close ones, with families and friends. Professional settings also count: “Care-giving and receiving applies not only in intimate primary care settings, but in professional and community contexts ([26]; [27]), and in political settings [28].” [25] When we refer to “care”, we should keep in mind that “it signifies an ethical orientation and action showing concern for others” [25].

Thus, the political aspect regarding measures taken by the state, and the reactions of citizens to these measures, whether they are obeying them or questioning them, can be completed by adding the sociological dimension of care and being needy. Human solidarity is a value that is specific to human nature in times such as these, regardless of the cultural dimensions where these individuals live, as well as regardless of their education until then. The United Nations Human Rights site [29] claimed that “Communities All Around the World are Showing Solidarity and Compassion to Help Each Other through the COVID-19 Pandemic” and offered a few such examples of people helping each other (e.g. in India there was help offered under the form of food to migrant workers) which can show that human solidarity works all over the world. For a while, all cultures, including those highly individualistic, can resort to other values which are triggered by the current context. Given the fact that human nature is sensitive to needy people and caring for them, as well as to solidarity calls, it is expect for the majority of them to react to such calls. The measures taken by the state to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus looked less restrictive and authroitarian when placed under the form of billboard adds with message such as the following: “I am wearing a mask because I care”, “I am wearing a mask hoping for everything to improve” (which were visible in some neighbourhoods in Bucharest), or under the form of drawings with rainbows done by children and placed in the home’s windows, with the announcement “Evrything will be fine”, as an encouragement to stay indoors during lockdown and only get out for necessary shopping for a short while, in the neighbourhood area. Such examples encouraged the aspect of solidarity, regardless of the degree of personal freedom people were used to before the pandemic. At the same time, spreading the virus would affect anyone personally, since everyone is vulnerable to get sick and we do not know how we are going to react to the illness. The suggestion was that, together, in an act of solidarity, we could help prevent the spread of the virus further. The creation of the COVID-19 vaccines was also an example of reaction along the lines of solidarity, and the volunteers for testing the first vaccines were also doing this for the good of the community. While some interpreted the compulsory vaccination in order to be received in cafes, restaurants, in some cases at work, at shows, in museums as a measure that takes away the freedom of individuals and as an attack to indivdiuals’ rights, there was another aspect of these measures: the state took these measures in an effort to protect its citizens. However, trust in the state may have been diminishing in some countries, and for some groups of individuals (especially if they have gone through communist regimes where their individual rights had been attacked). This distrust in the state led them to reject the vaccine, or even go as far as to protest against it, seeing it as a means of controlling them. Some even spread the fake news that the vaccines were intended to kill the world population, or implant microcips in them, or even to experiment with their organisms.

In order to reinforce its protective image, the state has gone as far as organizing live sessions on social media such as Facebook in order to have doctors explain the benefits of the vaccines. The Romanian Ministry of Health had organised such sessions, and those invited would take questions from the public about the vaccine and answer them. In the comments, we could see two main reactions: of trust and belief that the vaccines would be of great help, and of complete distrust and even violent verbal language against the state.

According to [30], whether or not we trust scientists during the pandemic with the vaccines and depends on “the influence of ideology”. Political orientation can influence trust as follows: “those espousing left- (vs. right-) wing beliefs place more trust in the scientific profession.” The attitudes and beliefs regarding the vaccine policy were also influences by political orientation, the same way as trust in scientists.

**Results**

Attitudes towards the measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were found to depend on a series of factors, not just on the cultural dimensions of individualism or collectivism. The reactions for or against these measures depends, to some extent, on the way people have been used to relate to each other and to the community before the pandemic, yet they also depend on political orientation and, finally, on the spontaneous reactions in human nature, of solidarity and caring for the needy ones during such times. Left-wing orientation led to trust in science and in the vaccine, while right-wing orientation led to distrust in these.

Right-wing orientation refers to the conservatives, while left-wing orientation to the communists. As for the liberal political orientation, it is placed in a centre position. All these orientations have to do with how much control of the state is accepted in the citizens’ lives. For the right wing orientation, inequality and a hierarchy present socially are considered normal, while left wing orientation is more focused on welfare, thus concerned with social equality. For this, left-wing orientation allows for more control of the state in the individuals’ lives. The trust or distrust in vaccines could be related to the degree various orientations accept the interference of the state in their lives. Right-wing orientation can correlate well with individualism, while left-wing orientation can correlate well with collectivism. Liberalism supports human rights, which were affected by the drastic measures taken against the spread of COVID-19. In China, the collectivist mentality allowed for long lockdowns without protests, while in the Western world protests would appear now and then.

Allowing protests to occur every now and then against the wearing of the mask or against the vaccine, or even against the lockdown, or quarantine of certain cities or areas, could be related to the freedom of speech present with liberalism. People were allowed to socialize with others sharing the same views and to express their wish to be free. In this way, they were led to believe that they could express themselves and be listened to.

**Conclusion**

The cultural dimension of individualism cannot be regarded as a predictor of the general reactions to the measures against the pandemic or to the beliefs about the efficiency of the vaccine. While neoliberalism has had everyone, before the pandemic, feel free to travel anywhere in the world, and be free to take one’s own decisions regarding various vaccines, things changed during the COVID-19 crisis. The world where life was comfortable due to high economic development and resources that were more than enough had, at least for a limited amount of time, disappeared. However, currently, restrictions have been, mostly, removed, in the majority of countries, in an attempt to remove the worries about an economic or food crisis, and even the threats of violent social unrest.

Individualism could be regarded just as a value that is imposed culturally or socially. The isolation during the time of the pandemic has affected anyone, including individualists, and even those that were not leading an active social life, to some extent. Mass-media has presented everyone willing to socialize after the restrictions were raised, at least in Romania, and going to events, walks in the park, cafes and restaurants, for walks in the streets, all in crowded groups.

Mass-media, during the pandemic period, has urged not so much to a changing individualist ideology but more to a call to solidarity which was needed for an amount of time until the situation would improve.

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