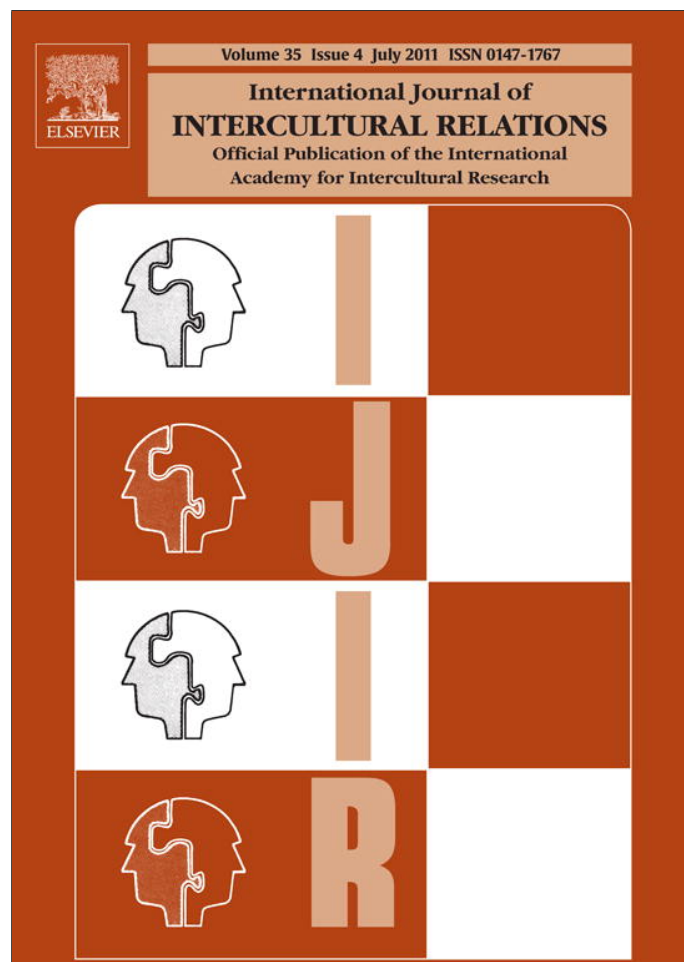


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## Individualism–collectivism and business context as predictors of behaviors in cross-national work settings: Incidence and outcomes

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### ABSTRACT

Brief descriptions of cross-national problem events by 1349 organizational employees from many nations were content analyzed. Contrasts between individualistic and collectivistic behaviors were much more strongly predicted by variations in business context (e.g., language spoken and hierarchical relations between the parties involved) than by a measure of nation-level in-group collectivism practices. Respondents from individualist nations emphasized performance goals and task focus, whereas those from collectivist nations emphasized personal aspects of work relations more strongly. Task-focused behavioral responses to problems were uniformly associated with positive outcome, whereas the outcome of emotional responses interacted significantly with individualism–collectivism practices. The results are interpreted in terms of collectivists' greater attention to context.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, considerable progress has been achieved in defining the nature of cultural differences between nations. Researchers have shown that nations differ systematically in terms of the values, beliefs and personality types that are most prevalent, and that these variations can be classified along a series of dimensions (Allik & McCrae, 2004; Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 2004). Furthermore, the scores on conceptually-related dimensions correlate moderately well, even when derived from surveys done at different times and which have sampled different populations within the nations surveyed (Hofstede, 2001). Dimensional scores have subsequently been used to predict the incidence of a variety of social and organizational behaviors across a range of national cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006; Smith, Bond, & Kağitçibaşı, 2006). Given the contrasts (for instance in communication styles, leadership preferences, etc.) that have been identified, one can readily foresee that problems will arise if members of one nation continue to behave in similar ways when interacting with members of some other nation. Considering the rapidly increasing frequency of such cross-national interactions, it is important to explore the factors influencing individuals' behaviors in such settings. This study first builds on our understanding of individualism–collectivism by comparing nation-level scores and the types of business contexts that are prevalent in individualistic and collectivist nations as predictors of reported behaviors in problem work settings. In the second section of the paper, we test whether the relation between respondents' behavioral responses to problem events and positive outcome varies with cultural practices. Fig. 1 gives an overview of the relationships between the variables that are explored in this paper.

The present study focuses on cross-national work interactions. The outcome of such interactions is dependent on numerous factors, here characterized as distal or proximal. Researchers have most frequently characterized nations in terms of cultural values. However, nation-level indices of cultural difference can provide only a remote or 'distal' basis for predicting the behavior of individuals engaged in cross-national interactions. Specific interactions will be more strongly affected by the proximal factors that are relevant to specific work settings. Some proximal factors are likely to derive from distal factors, while others will not. For instance, employees in individualist nations are frequently native English speakers, while those from collectivist nations are less often so. Where an interaction involving one person from an individualist nation and one from a collectivist nation is conducted in English, the protagonists will likely be affected both by the contrasting cultures of their nation (a distal cause) and by their related fluency in English (a proximal cause). These and other causes will affect each individual party's behavior. The final outcome of their interaction will then be affected by the way in which each party's behavior impinges upon that of the other.

### 2. Development of hypotheses

#### 2.1. A distal predictor: individualism and collectivism

The contrast between national cultures characterized in terms of their degree of individualism and collectivism has provided a fruitful basis for understanding cultural variations in organizational behavior. It is used here to predict the types of behavior to which the parties involved in cross-national interactions will be predisposed. Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and

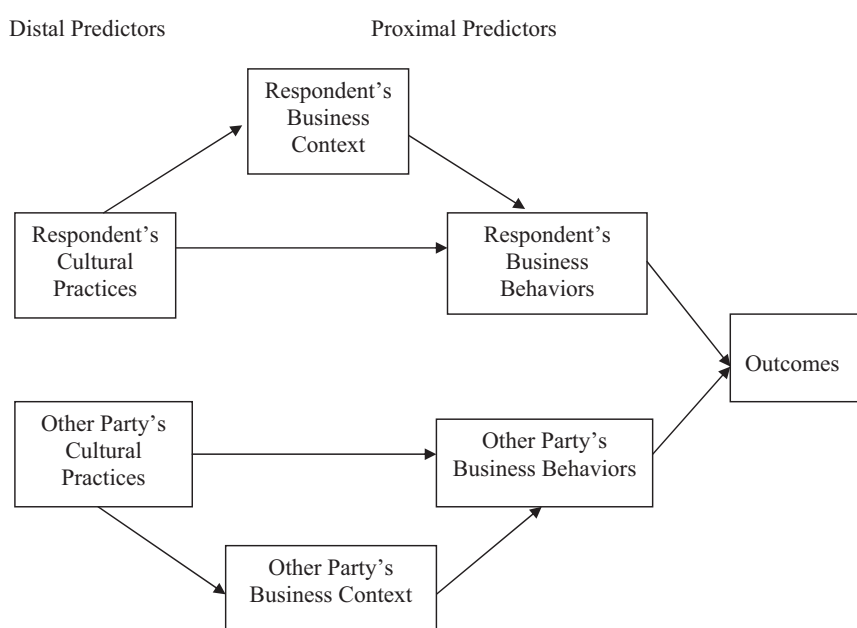


Fig. 1. Factors influencing business behaviors and outcomes in cross-national interactions.

Norenzayan (2000) proposed that persons from Western nations more frequently engaged in analytic cognition, whereas those from Asian nations more frequently engaged in holistic cognition. They did not consider whether this contrast was also relevant to non-Asian collectivist nations. As applied to work behavior, this contrast can be expected to show that persons from individualist nations will prioritize a focus upon the task at hand, while those from collectivist nations will see tasks as interconnected with the interpersonal contexts within which they engaged. Evidence supports this view. For instance, Smith, Misumi, Tayeb, Peterson, and Bond (1989) found that correlates of the task and maintenance dimensions of supervisor behavior were positively related in Japan and Hong Kong, but not in the US or the UK. Sanchez-Burks et al. (2003) reported a series of studies showing that US respondents discounted the indirect, relational implications of messages when these referred to work settings, but not when they referred to non-work settings. In contrast, East Asians took account of indirect relational implications equally in both types of settings. One of the studies reported by Sanchez-Burks et al included measures of individualist and collectivist self-construal. These measures were shown to mediate the cultural contrast that had been found. Thus, task focus at work is shown to be associated with individualism. Similarly, among the dimensions of national culture identified by House et al. (2004), performance orientation, which emphasizes task accomplishment, was significantly opposed to institutional collectivism practices across 61 nations.

Members of individualistic cultures are also found to favor directness of communication, while members of collectivistic cultures tend to communicate less directly (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Hall, 1966; Park, Hwang, & Harrison, 1996). Adair and Brett (2005) used a complex simulation to compare intra-cultural negotiations in national cultures identified as low-context (Germany, Sweden, Israel and US) versus high-context (Russia, Japan, Hong Kong, and Thailand) (Hall, 1966). Low-context negotiators (equivalent to individualists) communicated more directly and emphasized task information more than high-context negotiators did. These differences arise due to the greater emphasis upon the preservation of harmonious interpersonal relations within collectivist cultures. In a series of studies of intra-cultural negotiation, Graham, Mintu, & Rodgers (1994) compared intra-cultural buyer-seller negotiations across samples from 16 nations. Negotiators from North America and Europe were found to be more competitive, while those from elsewhere were more disposed toward joint problem-solving and thus maintaining harmonious relationships.

The task focus favored in individualist nations can also be expected to encompass a preference for reduction of uncertainty through adherence to rules and laws. House et al. (2004) found uncertainty avoidance practices to be significantly correlated with both in-group collectivism values and institutional collectivism values. The range of findings sampled above provides a basis for the first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Respondents from individualistic nations will emphasize their preference for a focus on tasks, performance goals, direct communication and reliance on formal rules, whereas respondents from collectivistic nations will emphasize their preference for personal relationships and less direct communication.

In cross-national settings, each party will be aware of the contrast between their own behaviors and that of the other party. It is therefore possible also to formulate a second hypothesis on the basis of the contrasts discussed above. Individualists will tend to see collectivists as preoccupied with relationships and lacking in task focus, while collectivists will be aware of individualists' lesser emphasis on a relational focus, and may feel excluded.

**Hypothesis 2.** Respondents interacting with persons from individualistic nations will emphasize feeling excluded and having their cultural distinctiveness ignored, whereas respondents interacting with persons from collectivist cultures will emphasize the other party's emotional behaviors.

## 2.2. Proximal factors

Interactions between persons from nations that are more individualist and more collectivist occur in a wide variety of circumstances. Many of these circumstances are likely to influence interaction outcomes in intra-national as well as cross-national contexts. For instance, the relative status of the two parties may be critical. However, the probability of occurrence of particular cross-national contexts is likely to be influenced by the individualism and collectivism of the nations from which the two parties are drawn. Individualist nations are more wealthy than collectivist nations (Hofstede, 2001), more frequently provide the owners of multinational businesses and more frequently speak English as a first language. Distal and proximal causes of difficulty will therefore augment one another if inherently difficult contexts co-occur with individualism-collectivism.

For instance, Brew and Cairns (2004) found that the contrast between the directness of Australian expatriates and the indirectness of South-East Asian host nationals was exacerbated by the presence of time pressure and when superior versus subordinate relationships were involved. Drake (2001) found that the cross-cultural negotiation behavior of students was affected more by whether they were in the buyer or the seller role than by their endorsement of individualism or collectivism. Consequently, an understanding of problematic events requires consideration both of respondents' distal cultural context and of the proximal contexts within which events occur.

No attempt is made in the present study to predict the range or impact of proximal contextual factors on reported behaviors. It is simply predicted that when the impact of these factors is controlled, the effects of individualism-collectivism will remain significant.

**Hypothesis 3.** After controlling for contextual factors, behavioral contrasts associated with individualism–collectivism will remain significant.

### 2.3. Behavioral change

The capacity to adapt one's behavior in culturally different work settings has been the focus of researchers' attention for many years (Brislin, 1981), and has most recently been conceptualized in terms of cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Thomas & Inkson, 2004). The majority of work in this area has focused on attempting to define and measure the skills that are necessary for effective cross-national working. In this study the focus is more directly upon whether individualists and collectivists report changing their behavior, on the types of change that they make and on the reported effectiveness of change.

Rao and Hashimoto (1996) examined the self-reported influence tactics employed by Japanese managers working in Canada, each of whom had both Japanese and Canadian subordinates. They found that managers reported using more direct tactics when their subordinates were Canadian than they did when their subordinates were also Japanese. For instance they reported more use of assertiveness, more appeals to reason and more use of threats. With Japanese subordinates they reported using less influence tactics, relying more on their subordinates' intuitive anticipation of their wishes that would be typical within an organization in Japan. Interviews with respondents indicated that these contrasts were only partly due to a conscious intention to adapt. Interviewees reported that their lack of complete fluency in English led them to express themselves in ways that were likely to be perceived as more direct and assertive.

While this study did provide some evidence of behavioral change, it does not tell us why the Japanese managers considered this adaptation necessary, nor whether it enhanced their effectiveness. Thomas and Ravlin (1995) did find evidence for a favorable response to cultural adaptation by Japanese managers. US employees of a Japanese firm located in the US responded more positively to a videotape in which a Japanese manager had adapted his behavior to the US context than to one in which he did not. The adapted manager was perceived as more effective and more trustworthy, particularly when the behavior change was attributed to internal causes.

A further field in which cultural adaptations may often be required is that of cross-cultural negotiation. Pekerti and Thomas (2003) showed that when Caucasian New Zealand students negotiated with East Asian students, the contrast between the parties became more extreme than when negotiating intra-culturally. New Zealanders increased their emphasis on task issues, while the East Asians increased their frequency of harmonizing behaviors. These changes were associated with two negative outcomes: increased unwillingness to change position and increased time to achieve agreement. In their study discussed earlier, Adair and Brett (2005) also included dyads that pitted a high-context negotiator against a low-context negotiator. The high-context negotiators were from Japan and Hong Kong. They were found to become more direct in their communication while the low-context US negotiators showed no change. Despite this adaptation the negotiation outcomes were less good than for either type of monocultural dyad.

The existing literature thus indicates that behavioral adaptations occur sometimes but not always, and that adaptation may be more frequent among those from collectivist cultures. This is what might be expected, given collectivists' greater attention to context.

**Hypothesis 4.** Rated behavior change will be greater among collectivists.

### 2.4. Behavior change and outcome

Further hypotheses therefore focus on the relation between behavior change and positive outcome. The literature on cross-cultural skills indicates the skills that trainers seek to enhance in maximizing cross-cultural effectiveness. Thomas and Fitzsimmons (2008) differentiate information skills, interpersonal skills, action skills and analytic skills and suggest that each of these could contribute to task achievement, relationship development and personal adjustment. The general literature on stress and coping (Lazarus, 1999) has yielded substantial evidence that active attempts to cope with problematic work events have greater probability of achieving positive outcomes, whereas those that are characterized by passivity, withdrawal or negative emotionality would hinder outcome. However, the determinants of work strain are found to differ in collectivist cultures (Spector, Cooper, Sanchez, O'Driscoll, & Sparks, 2001), and there are some indications that in these contexts emotion-focused responses may contribute more strongly to positive outcome at work (Bhagat et al., 2010). O'Connor and Shimuzu (2002) found that problem-focused coping was effective among both Japanese and British students, but that emotion-focused coping was also important for the Japanese. However, none of these studies provides direct guidance as to effective responses in cross-national contexts. Hypothesis 5 focuses on culture-general effects of behavior change.

**Hypothesis 5.** Positive outcome will be associated positively with use of problem-focused behaviors and negatively with use of emotional behaviors.

The use of cultural intelligence requires the selection of behavior changes that are appropriate to the problem that has arisen. For instance, where language problems arise, some type of language adjustment would be appropriate. This could entail speaking more slowly, using simplified vocabulary, checking for understanding, switching to another language or using an interpreter. Where task focus threatens interpersonal relations, interpersonal skills would become important in

establishing an adequate relationship basis for work to proceed. Where rules and procedures become a priority, task focus will likely be required for instance in making clear the nature of cross-national differences in required procedures. As discussed earlier, members of collectivist cultures tend to give more attention to the context within which interactions occur (Nisbett et al., 2000). This implies that when interacting with someone from an individualist nation with a task focus, collectivists will accommodate by also adopting a task focus, as we have noted (Adair & Brett, 2005; Rao & Hashimoto, 1996). Since Hypothesis 5 already predicts a main effect of task focus on positive outcome, there is less reason to predict an interaction between task focus and collectivism. Conversely, if a member of an individualist culture fails to accommodate to the relational needs of someone from a collectivist nation, outcome will be impaired. An interaction effect should be found.

**Hypothesis 6.** Positive outcome will be higher when problem-focused behaviors are used in relation to other parties from individualist nations and when harmonizing behaviors are used in relation to other parties from collectivist nations.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Survey design

Respondents were asked to describe in a few sentences a difficulty that they had experienced when working with someone from a nation other than their own. It was specified that this could relate either to a person within one's own organization, or in buyer-seller relations or other types of relationship with other parties. They were asked to report what happened and to state 'what were the reasons that made you feel that it was difficult to work with the person(s) compared to working with someone from your own culture/nationality'. In a subsequent question, they were asked to indicate what changes in their normal behavior they noticed in this situation. The survey also included 24 checkbox items describing the context of the interaction and three five-point rating scales. These asked for ratings of whether they would have behaved in the same way with someone of their own nationality (Entirely the same/Entirely different), what was the outcome (All aspects bad/All aspects good), and how important was the outcome to the respondent (Not important/Critically important). Respondents also gave details of their age, gender, job role and nationality, as well as the one or more nationalities of the other parties involved. Most surveys were completed in English (58%), followed by Spanish (19%), and Portuguese (13%), Turkish (3%), Mandarin Chinese (2%), German and French (both less than 1%). Event descriptions were translated into English by competent bilinguals before coding.

#### 3.2. Participants

Respondents were recruited in a variety of ways, including attendance at management training workshops, internal company distribution by e-mail, and personal approach in public places such as airports and commuter trains. No estimate of response rate is available. Most of the respondents were employees of organizations in their own countries, occupying various positions, predominantly at the managerial level. 1270 codable responses were received. Approximately 30 of these respondents described two separate events, where each of the other parties was from a different nation. Some respondents also described events in ways that required more than one code using the categories described below. Total problem event descriptions were 1497. Details of the respondents (R) who described each event and the other parties (OP) with whom they interacted are summarized by nation in Table 1. Among the 10 regional clusters identified by House et al. (2004), only the Nordic cluster is not sampled. Respondents were drawn from a wide range of organizational functions. They were not asked to provide additional details of their cross-national experience, because the focus of the study was on the nature of problems that arise and how these problems are addressed, rather than on differentiating skilled from unskilled practitioners. Since respondents were permitted to choose which problem episode to describe, the distribution of the other party's nation differs from that of the respondents.

#### 3.3. Predictor variables

The in-group collectivism societal practices scores provided by House et al. (2004) were used for hypothesis testing. The practices measure was preferred to the values measure because the focus of this study is on reported behaviors, not on desired states. The societal measures were used because the focus of this study is on cross-national contrasts. Each problem event description was assigned the in-group collectivism score for the respondent's nation and for the other party's nation. In the sample as a whole the mean collectivism score for the respondent's nation was 5.07 (SD .71), while that for other party's nation was 4.76 (SD .69). The individual-level correlation between these scores was  $-0.13$  ( $p < .001$ ,  $n = 1106$ ). Thus, the sample had a small predominance of respondents from collectivist nations, including interactions that paired individualists and collectivists, but also including interactions that paired different individualist nations as well as others that paired different collectivist nations.

Responses to the 24 checkbox items were used to specify the contexts within which the described events occurred. Table 2 shows that scores on 13 of these items were significantly correlated at the individual level of analysis with the collectivism scores of respondents' nation.

**Table 1**  
Problem event reports by the respondent's nation and by the nation of other party.

| Nation of R | N    | Mean Age | % Male | R COLL | Nation of OP | N    | Mean Age | % Male | OP COLL |
|-------------|------|----------|--------|--------|--------------|------|----------|--------|---------|
| Brazil      | 238  | 35.5     | 50     | 5.16   | US           | 179  | 35.5     | 61     | 5.27    |
| UK          | 135  | 39.2     | 51     | 4.08   | Germany      | 88   | 34.0     | 62     | 5.05    |
| Chile       | 107  | 43.3     | 71     | –      | UK           | 81   | 36.3     | 68     | 5.24    |
| Lebanon     | 94   | 38.5     | 63     | –      | France       | 80   | 37.4     | 52     | 4.96    |
| Singapore   | 88   | 37.2     | 49     | 5.49   | Japan        | 66   | 39.0     | 69     | 5.28    |
| Mexico      | 79   | 31.5     | 67     | 5.62   | China        | 61   | 37.4     | 67     | 4.77    |
| India       | 59   | 36.9     | 91     | 5.81   | India        | 59   | 36.6     | 57     | 4.72    |
| Nigeria     | 54   | 37.3     | 93     | 5.34   | Italy        | 50   | 37.6     | 59     | 5.04    |
| Turkey      | 48   | 34.8     | 59     | 5.79   | Spain        | 38   | 38.8     | 40     | 4.91    |
| China       | 47   | 27.9     | 47     | 5.86   | Australia    | 30   | 39.0     | 59     | 5.28    |
| Spain       | 44   | 32.9     | 86     | 5.53   | Argentina    | 27   | 35.3     | 58     | 5.71    |
| US          | 43   | 36.9     | 58     | 4.22   | Colombia     | 27   | 37.7     | 67     | 5.39    |
| New Zealand | 41   | 39.7     | 56     | 3.58   | S. Korea     | 23   | 35.3     | 70     | 5.53    |
| Netherlands | 32   | 37.7     | 87     | 3.79   | Netherlands  | 20   | 40.2     | 79     | 4.96    |
| Colombia    | 23   | 33.7     | 73     | 5.59   | Canada       | 16   | 38.7     | 47     | 5.47    |
| Germany     | 18   | 36.6     | 76     | 4.16   | Sweden       | 16   | 38.5     | 75     | 4.58    |
| All Others  | 130  | 34.5     | 56     | 4.99   | All Others   | 250  | 36.0     | 62     | 4.92    |
| Total       | 1270 | 36.5     | 62     | 5.07   | Total        | 1111 | 36.3     | 63     | 4.78    |

Notes: COLL = In-Group Collectivism practices scores from House et al. (2004). Scores for less frequent nations not listed. R = Respondent, OP = Other Party. Means for collectivism for the same nation differ in the two columns, because the left hand mean refers to R's nation while the right hand mean refers to the nations of the persons with whom OP was interacting.

**Table 2**  
Business contexts significantly associated with responses from more individualist and more collectivist nations.

| Responses correlated with individualism | r      | Responses correlated with collectivism    | r      |
|---|--------|---|--------|
| We were in the same team                | .10*** | I was seeking to buy                      | .16*** |
| The situation recurred repeatedly       | .16*** | I was meeting the OP for the first time   | .07**  |
| The OP was a junior in my organization  | .22**  | The OP was a superior in my organization  | .14**  |
| We were meeting face to face            | .14*** | We were communicating electronically      | .11*** |
| We spoke in English                     | .13*** | My own nationals were also involved       | .07*   |
| We were speaking my first language      | .36*** | Three or more nationalities were involved | .06*   |
|   |        | We were speaking OP's first language      | .09*   |

\*  $p < .05$ .  
\*\*  $p < .01$ .  
\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### 3.4. Design of behavior indices

Given the absence of any pre-existing categorization of work problems experienced in cross-cultural settings, the categories to be used in coding problem events and the reported behavior changes were developed inductively, based partly on the first 50 surveys to be received and partly by using as a guideline those cultural dimensions identified by House et al. (2004) that extend or amplify Hofstede's (1980) earlier dimensions. A detailed coding manual comprising 29 event categories was developed.<sup>2</sup>

Before coding, the event descriptions were scanned to determine whether they contained a sufficiently adequate description to permit coding. Responses in which very general descriptions were provided, for example those that attributed the problem to 'cultural differences' or 'differences of viewpoint' were discarded. The remaining 1497 cases were transcribed in a randomised sequence, with the nationalities of the respondent and the other party deleted. Where a response referred to problems encountered with persons from two or more nations, separate cases were created for each of the nationalities involved, with separate codes being assigned in those instances where respondents indicated that their behavior toward different parties was not the same. Many of the responses described complex sequences of actions and reactions. To represent this data adequately, coders were also permitted to assign more than one code to an event where the description was sufficiently rich. 44% of events received two agreed codes and 18% received three agreed codes (independent of whether these codes were initially agreed or not). These procedures raised the number of codes assigned in the database to 2018.

All events were coded independently by two of the authors of this paper, who are of different nationality and were not directly involved in the data collection. Cohen's kappa for initial codes was .64. The coders discussed all events on which there was not initial agreement until 100% agreement was achieved.

<sup>2</sup> A copy of the manual is available on request from the first author.

**Table 3**

Factor analysis of behaviors that are I–C relevant and respondent-focused.

|                                   | Factor 1: performance oriented | Factor 2: task focus | Factor 3: rule oriented |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| R universalistic                  | .74                            |                      |                         |
| R performance oriented            | .77                            |                      |                         |
| R assertive                       |                                | .53                  |                         |
| R task-oriented                   |                                | .43                  |                         |
| R person-oriented                 |                                | –.74                 |                         |
| R favors rules                    |                                |                      | –.81                    |
| R favors flexibility              |                                |                      | .55                     |
| Eigenvalue/(% variance explained) | 1.24 (18)                      | 1.10 (16)            | 1.04 (15)               |

**Table 4**

Factor analysis of behaviors that are I–C relevant and other-party-focused.

|                                   | Factor 1: OP universalistic | Factor 2: OP excludes me | Factor 3: OP emotional |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| OP universalistic                 | .70                         |                          |                        |
| OP assertive                      | .61                         |                          |                        |
| OP passive                        | –.46                        |                          |                        |
| OP excludes me                    |                             | –.82                     |                        |
| OP is indirect                    |                             | .48                      | –.56                   |
| OP is emotional                   |                             |                          | .78                    |
| Eigenvalue/(% variance explained) | 1.19 (20)                   | 1.06 (18)                | 1.02 (17)              |

Note: In hypothesis tests, the sign of Factor 2 was reversed to reflect the fact that the item most strongly defining the factor loads negatively.

Among the 29 categories in the overall coding scheme, 13 were considered relevant to individualism–collectivism. Seven of these refer to the respondent's (R) emphasis on their preferred or non-preferred behaviors (e.g., R assertive), while six others refer to R's view of the other party (OP) (e.g., OP excludes me). Separate factor analyses were conducted in order to create scores relevant to individualism–collectivism for the events that received an R code and for events that received an OP code. At least one of the seven codes referring to R's behavior was present for 471 events. Brief descriptions of the nature of these codes are shown in Table 3, along with the results of a factor analysis of these cases, using varimax rotation. Three factors accounting for 49% variance were extracted, identified as 'performance orientation', 'task focus' and 'rule orientation'. In a similar way, codes for 566 events referring to OP's behavior were factor analyzed, again using varimax rotation, as shown in Table 4. Three factors accounting for 56% variance were extracted, identified as 'OP universalistic', 'I am excluded' and 'OP emotional'. Events coded as OP universalistic were those in which OP is perceived as taking no account of cultural differences. Among the remaining cases not included in these analyses, codes for 535 events referred to aspects of language difficulties and a further 446 codes referred to a wide variety of other problem events, of which the most frequent was a general reference to communication difficulties. These latter cases were included only in the testing of the hypotheses concerning outcome. The number of codes exceeds the number of cases because of multiple coding in some instances.

Responses to the open-ended behavior change question were coded by the same two coders. Six behavior change indices were created and labelled as 'task initiative' (for instance, initiating, being more assertive, direct or rational), 'harmony initiative' (for instance, empathizing, consulting, socializing, being open-minded and patient), 'adjust language', 'adapt to other party's behavior', 'defensive withdrawal' (for instance, expressing caution, defensiveness, frustration, helplessness or withdrawal), and 'no change'. Initial agreement on behavior change codes was 85%.

#### 4. Results

Results were analysed through the use of individual-level correlations and regressions. Table 5 gives correlations between the various indices. The upper diagonal of the table refers to the 471 cases for which the assigned code was one of the seven codes that focus on the *respondent* and were deemed to be relevant to individualism–collectivism (see Table 3). The lower diagonal refers to the 566 cases for which the assigned code was one of the six codes that focus on perceptions of the *other party* and were also deemed relevant to individualism–collectivism (see Table 4). The values of N vary because the scores derived from House et al. (2004) are not available for all nations sampled.

##### 4.1. Hypothesis tests

Hypotheses 1–3 were tested through the use of the stepwise regressions shown in Tables 6 and 7. Each of these tables shows two regressions. In all regressions, the demographic factors of age and gender were entered at Step 1, with predictors then entered at Steps 2 and 3. In Equation 1 in Table 6, the predictors specified in Hypothesis 1 are entered at Step 2. A significant increase in  $R^2$  is found. Respondents from individualist nations give more emphasis to performance orientation and to task focus, but there is no effect for rules focus. In a similar way, in Equation 1 in Table 7, the predictors specified in Hypothesis 2 are entered at Step 2. A significant increase in  $R^2$  is again found. More collectivist respondents perceive the other party as excluding them and as ignoring cultural differences. There is no effect for perceiving the other party as emotional.



**Table 5**  
Correlations for predictors and dependent measures.

|                           | 1      | 2      | 3       | 4       | 5     | 6      | 7      | 8     | 9     | 10      | 11      | 12      | 13      | 14     |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|---------|---------|-------|--------|--------|-------|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| 1. R collectivism         | –      | –.13*  | –.20*** | –.20*** | .03   | .26*** | –.08   | –.02  | .00   | –.19*** | .00     | .06     | .12*    | –.11*  |
| 2. OP collectivism        | –.13*  | –      | .10     | .04     | –.09  | –.09   | .02    | –.02  | .02   | –.04    | –.08    | .03     | .10     | .12*   |
| 3. R performance oriented | –.08   | .12**  | –       | –.01    | .00   | –.13*  | –.01   | .00   | –.01  | .12*    | –.15**  | .07     | .00     | –.08   |
| 4. R task focus           | .05    | –.07   | –.07    | –       | .00   | .01    | .21*** | –.03  | –.07  | –.11*   | .11*    | –.09    | .09     | .06    |
| 5. R rule oriented        | .04    | –.07   | –.08    | .09     | –     | .15**  | .12*   | .01   | .08   | .08     | –.07    | –.05    | .11*    | –.03   |
| 6. OP universalistic      | .11*   | –.11*  | –.13*   | .00     | .14** | –      | –.06   | –.05  | .06   | .03     | .05     | –.13*   | .22***  | –.05   |
| 7. OP excludes me         | –.11*  | .15**  | .01     | .13*    | .08   | –.04   | –      | –.01  | –.03  | –.07    | –.12*   | –.17**  | .04     | .05    |
| 8. OP emotional           | –.14** | –.03   | –.04    | –.03    | .00   | –.02   | –.01   | –     | –.05  | .14**   | .01     | –.08    | –.03    | –.09   |
| 9. Rated change           | –.04   | .03    | .01     | .00     | .03   | .01    | .00    | –.10* | –     | .01     | .03     | .06     | .08     | .04    |
| 10. CH: Emotional focus   | –.09   | –.13** | –.03    | –.10*   | .06   | –.03   | –.09   | .15** | .06   | –       | –.28*** | –.29*** | –.15**  | –.15** |
| 11. CH: Task focus        | .07    | –.02   | –.12*   | .16***  | –.10* | .04    | –.09   | .00   | .08   | –.25*** | –       | –.27*** | –.16**  | –.10*  |
| 12. CH: Harmony           | –.09   | .10*   | –.16*** | .04     | –.10* | –.03   | .09    | –.10* | .11*  | –.41*** | –.21*** | –       | –.17*** | –.15** |
| 13. CH: Adapt behavior    | .10    | .08    | –.03    | .02     | .11*  | .08    | .09    | –.01  | .085  | –.21*** | –.11*   | –.18**  | –       | –.09   |
| 14. CH: Adjust language   | .04    | .14**  | –.04    | .07     | .02   | –.01   | .01    | –.11* | –.11* | –.16*** | –.09    | –.14**  | –.07    | –      |

Note: R=Respondent. OP=Other Party. CH=Codes for behavior change. Values above the diagonal refer to cases that are I-C relevant and R-focused, n = 335–405. Values below the diagonal refer to cases that are I-C relevant and OP-focused, n = 419–535. Variation in n is principally due to absence of collectivism scores for some nations.

\* p < .05.  
\*\* p < .01.  
\*\*\* p < .001.

4.2. Hypothesis 3

As a first step in testing Hypothesis 3, it was necessary to determine the relation between the proximal factors and cultural values. The association of business context with values was determined through the regressions shown as Equation 2 in Table 6 and in Table 7. Since no prediction was made as to which aspects of business context might be related to the dependent measure, forward entry was used to determine which of the 24 available indices had a significant effect.

In Table 6, 14 aspects of context entered the equation at Step 2. Respondents from individualistic nations were more frequently speaking their own language, more frequently speaking English, more senior to the other party, more often in face-to-face contact, and in situations that were either repeated or novel. Conversely, respondents from collectivistic nations were more often equal or junior to the other party, meeting them for the first time, seeking to sell rather than buy,

**Table 6**  
Regression of respondent behaviors on collectivism of R's nation, with and without control for business contexts.

|                                      | Equation 1     |          |         | Equation 2     |          |         |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|----------|---------|----------------|----------|---------|
|                                      | R <sup>2</sup> | F change | β       | R <sup>2</sup> | F change | β       |
| Step 1: Demographics                 | .050           | 31.70*** |         | .049           | 30.53*** |         |
| Age                                  |                |          | –.15*** |                |          | –.15*** |
| Gender                               |                |          | .04     |                |          | .04     |
| Step 2: Business Practices           |                |          |         | .318           | 19.21*** |         |
| We spoke my first language           |                |          |         |                |          | –.35*** |
| We spoke in English                  |                |          |         |                |          | –.22*** |
| Situation occurred repeatedly        |                |          |         |                |          | –.15*** |
| OP junior to me in my organization   |                |          |         |                |          | –.15*** |
| I was seeking to buy                 |                |          |         |                |          | .11***  |
| OP superior to me in my organization |                |          |         |                |          | .09***  |
| Three or more nationalities present  |                |          |         |                |          | .09***  |
| My own nationals also involved       |                |          |         |                |          | .09***  |
| Meeting OP for the first time        |                |          |         |                |          | .09***  |
| Speaking OP's first language         |                |          |         |                |          | .08*    |
| Single occasion                      |                |          |         |                |          | –.08*   |
| Communicating electronically         |                |          |         |                |          | .07*    |
| Communicating face to face           |                |          |         |                |          | –.07*   |
| OP was at same level                 |                |          |         |                |          | .06*    |
| Step 3: Behavior Factors             | .075           | 11.00*** |         | .332           | 5.96***  |         |
| Performance Orientation              |                |          | –.12*** |                |          | –.07**  |
| Task Focus                           |                |          | –.11*** |                |          | –.08*** |
| Rules Focus                          |                |          | .00     |                |          | –.01    |

Notes: Ten additional aspects of business contexts that did not enter equation 2 at step 2 are not shown.

\* p < .05.  
\*\* p < .01.  
\*\*\* p < .001.

**Table 7**

Regression of R's perception of OP's behaviors on collectivism of OP's nation, with and without control for business contexts.

|   | Equation 1     |          |         | Equation 2     |          |         |
|---|----------------|----------|---------|----------------|----------|---------|
|   | R <sup>2</sup> | F change | $\beta$ | R <sup>2</sup> | F change | $\beta$ |
| Step 1: Demographics                        | .000           | 0.26     |         | .001           | 0.40     |         |
| Age   |                |          | .02     |                |          | .00     |
| Gender                                      |                |          | .00     |                |          | .02     |
| Step 2: Business Practices                  |                |          |         | .049           | 10.74*** |         |
| We spoke in OP's first language             |                |          |         |                |          | -.15*** |
| We spoke in English                         |                |          |         |                |          | -.13*** |
| OP was a superior in my organization        |                |          |         |                |          | -.07**  |
| OP was junior in my organization            |                |          |         |                |          | .06*    |
| Event occurred repeatedly                   |                |          |         |                |          | .06*    |
| I was seeking to sell                       |                |          |         |                |          | -.06*   |
| Step 3: Factors for OP's Perceived Behavior | .013           | 5.18**   |         | .059           | 4.27**   |         |
| OP universalistic                           |                |          | -.07*   |                |          | -.06*   |
| OP excludes me                              |                |          | -.08**  |                |          | -.08**  |
| OP emotional                                |                |          | -.02    |                |          | -.02    |

Notes: 17 additional aspects of business contexts that did not enter equation 2 at step 2 are not shown.

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

speaking the other party's language and communicating electronically. Cumulatively, these proximal predictors accounted for a substantially greater amount of variance than the distal predictors. Nonetheless, when the distal predictors were entered at Step 3, they accounted for significant additional variance. The variance explained by the distal predictors in Equation 2 is .014, compared to .025 in Equation 1.

Equation 2 in Table 7 shows that six aspects of business context were significantly related to individualism–collectivism. Where the other party was from an individualist nation, the exchange was more likely to be with a superior and to be in English, which is not the respondent's first language. Conversely, when the other party was from a collectivist nation, the exchange was more likely to be one that recurred and to be with a more junior person. These proximal predictors again accounted for more variance than the distal predictors, but in this case also additional significant variance was explained when the distal predictors were entered at Step 3. Variance explained declined from .013 to .010.

Having determined that both the distal and the proximal predictors are associated with nation-level individualism–collectivism, it becomes possible to test Hypothesis 3, which determines whether a nation's cultural practices predict the occurrence of individualistic and collectivistic behaviors after proximal contextual factors have been discounted. Further regressions (not shown) were conducted. An index recording the occurrence of any one of the respondent's individualistic behaviors listed in Table 3 was used as the dependent measure. After demographics and the contextual factors found in Table 6 to be predictive of individualism–collectivism had been entered at Step 1, entry of the collectivism score of R's nation did not add significantly to variance explained. In the same way, with an index recording the respondent's perception of any one of OP's behaviors listed in Table 4 as the dependent measure, no additional variance is explained by entering the collectivism score of OP's nation after demographics and context factors have been entered. Hypothesis 3 is not supported: distal factors wholly mediate the relation between individualism–collectivism practices and the occurrence of collectivistic and individualistic behaviors.

#### 4.3. Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 concerns behavioral change among respondents from collectivist cultures. Two measures of change were available. The numerical rating of amount of perceived change from how one would have behaved with a co-national correlated modestly but significantly with the behavior code for *no change* at  $-.24$  ( $n = 1479$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The hypothesis was tested using partial correlations. In the total sample, the rated magnitude of behavior change correlated with the collectivism score of respondent's nation at .04 ( $df = 1343$ ; ns), after controlling for age and gender. In a similar way, episodes for which there was *no* reported presence of behavior change correlated with collectivism of respondents' nation at .03 ( $df = 1343$ ; ns). Hypothesis 4 is not supported.

#### 4.4. Hypotheses 5 and 6

The mean rating of outcome was 3.31 (SD .87) on the 5-point scale. Thus, the sample comprised events for which the outcome was reported as moderately positive. However, the rating of the importance of the outcome was lower at 2.44 (SD .90). The ratings for outcome and importance correlated at 0.11 ( $n = 1463$ ;  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that the database tends to contain event descriptions of successes that were more important and failures that were less important. The mean for amount

**Table 8**  
Regression of collectivism and behavior changes on reported outcome.

|                             | Equation 1 Respondent's culture |            |         | Equation 2 Other party's culture |            |         |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------|---------|----------------------------------|------------|---------|
|                             | $R^2$                           | $F$ change | $\beta$ | $R^2$                            | $F$ change | $\beta$ |
| Step 1: Demographics        | .003                            | 1.49       |         | .00                              | 0.10       |         |
| Age                         |                                 |            | -.01    |                                  |            | .00     |
| Gender                      |                                 |            | -.04    |                                  |            | .01     |
| Step 2: Cultural Values     | .007                            | 5.93*      |         | .00                              | 0.01       |         |
| Collectivism                |                                 |            | .06*    |                                  |            | -.01    |
| Step 3: Behavioral Response | .066                            | 14.92***   |         | .052                             | 15.33***   |         |
| Defensive withdrawal        |                                 |            | -.16*** |                                  |            | -.16*** |
| Task Focus                  |                                 |            | .08*    |                                  |            | .09**   |
| Harmony                     |                                 |            | .06     |                                  |            | .04     |
| Adapt Behavior              |                                 |            | .03     |                                  |            | .03     |
| Adjust Language             |                                 |            | .09**   |                                  |            | .08*    |
| Step 4: Interactions        | .072                            | 1.45       |         | .062                             | 3.51**     |         |
| IC × Defensive withdrawal   |                                 |            | .02     |                                  |            | .11***  |
| IC × Task Focus             |                                 |            | .00     |                                  |            | .05     |
| IC × Harmony                |                                 |            | -.03    |                                  |            | .12***  |
| IC × Adapt Behavior         |                                 |            | .07     |                                  |            | .07*    |
| IC × Adjust Language        |                                 |            | .01     |                                  |            | .03     |

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

of behavior change was 2.69 (SD 1.20), somewhat below the scale midpoint, suggesting that most changes were perceived as relatively modest. Partial correlations controlling for age and gender showed that positive outcome was associated with rated amount of behavior change at  $-.09$  ( $n = 1343$ ;  $p < .001$ ), but with episodes for which some form of behavior change was coded at  $.00$  ( $n = 1421$ ; ns). Thus, there is some suggestion that negatively evaluated behavior changes were rather more substantial than positive ones. The remaining hypotheses test whether it is possible to predict the occurrence of those changes that were evaluated positively.

Hypotheses 5 and 6 were tested through two further regressions that are shown in Table 8. The dependent measure was respondent's rating of the positive outcome of the event that they had described. At the first step, demographic controls were entered. In Equation 1 on the left of the table, the collectivism score of the respondent's nation was entered, followed by the codes for the different types of respondent's behavior change at Step 3, and interaction terms between collectivism and behavior change at Step 4. The variables were centred before computation of interaction terms. The significant increase of variance explained at Step 2 indicates that although there was no evidence for greater change by respondents from collectivist nations, they were significantly more positive about the changes that they did make. The further increase in variance explained at Step 3 provides support for Hypothesis 5. Positive outcome was associated with behavior change that was task focused or involved adjustment of language. It was negatively associated with defensive withdrawal. There were no significant interaction effects at Step 4.

Equation 2 in Table 8 shows the results of a second regression, in which the collectivism of OP's nation is entered at Step 2. This shows no main effect for collectivism, and replicates the effects for types of behavior change at Step 3. However, there is now a significant effect at Step 4. Where OP is from a collectivist nation, harmony behaviors, behavioral adaptation and defensive withdrawal are all rated more positively. In the case of defensive withdrawal, since there is a main effect with a negative sign, the interaction term indicates that defensive withdrawal behaviors are rated less negatively when OP is from a collectivist nation than from an individualist nation. Hypothesis 6 is supported.

## 5. Discussion

The central theme of this paper has been upon the greater tendency of persons from collectivist nations to focus their attention upon the context within which interactions occur. It was expected that this emphasis would be associated with different patterns of behavior, differences in willingness to change behavior according to circumstance and different requirements for positive outcomes of cross-national interactions.

The study has surveyed actual types of problem episode that business employees report when working cross-nationally, and related the incidence and handling of these problems to a key dimension of cultural variation. Nation-level scores for individualism–collectivism practices did predict reports of individualistic and collectivistic behaviors by respondents. However, these same effects were much more strongly predicted by the more proximal contextual factors characterizing the circumstances within which the events took place. The contextual factors are not independent of individualism–collectivism. Within the current configuration of international business, they are inescapably confounded with the dimensional differences

that Hofstede (1980) first identified in terms of values. He and others have subsequently noted that contrasts between individualism and collectivism are also confounded with differences in national wealth. It may be that if the present study had included measures of the values of individual respondents these could have accounted for as much variance as did the contextual factors. Particularly in data from nations that appeared infrequently in the present sample, nation-level means may be inadequately representative. However, errors due to unrepresentativeness of this kind would favor the null hypothesis. Furthermore, cultural contrasts in the literature from Hofstede (1980) to House et al. (2004) have been derived from contrasts in nation-level scores for values and practices, not from individual scores. A striking aspect of the present findings is that contrasts in behaviors characterized as individualist or collectivist can best be predicted by proximal aspects of context such as the language spoken and the relative status of the parties involved, rather than by prevailing cultural practices.

Testing for links between dimensions of national culture and the incidence of work problems is a challenging assignment, since there may be considerable variability in both the settings and the individuals engaged in cross-cultural interactions. The majority of cross-cultural interactions may indeed be problem free. However, respondents were asked to report problems and had no difficulty in identifying them. Perhaps because of the diversity of the various types of problems surveyed, the associations identified between the measure of collectivism and types of reported problem achieved only modest levels of significance.

The hypothesis tests conducted through analysis of R's perspective on OP's behavior amplify these results. The OP analyses refer to a different range of nations, and place together the perceptions of sets of persons from a variety of cultures who have in common only that they were all interacting with persons from a single specific nation. Despite these major differences in perspective, the associations found between problem type and collectivism are compatible with the results obtained from the respondent's own perspective.

In the analyses using R's perspective only two of three predicted behavior patterns were found. Respondents from individualist nations did not more frequently favor following rules over flexibility. The failure of this prediction may have been because of rather frequent references to the inflexibility and incompatibility of rules concerning import and export between collectivist nations such as Brazil and Turkey and other nations. The preference for rules identified by House et al is focused more upon preference for following established rules and procedures within one's nation.

In the analyses referring to OP, it was again the case that only two of the three predictions were supported. OPs from individualist nations were not more frequently seen as emotional. The failure of this prediction was most probably because when one party becomes strongly emotional, the other party tends to follow suit. There were a substantial number of episodes of this type within the database.

While the results of this study confirm the continuing existence of approaches to cross-cultural interactions that are contrasting and predictable from cultural dimensions and their correlates, it is the nature and effectiveness of behavior changes that are of strongest interest. No support was found for the prediction that collectivists would more frequently report that they had changed their behavior. Further analyses indicated that the rating of change was correlated both with the incidence of changes associated with positive outcome (for instance,  $r = .08$ ,  $n = 1479$ ,  $p < .001$  with harmony focus) and with changes associated with negative outcome ( $r = .09$ ,  $n = 1479$ ,  $p < .001$  with emotional focus). The change rating was therefore insufficiently precise to detect whether collectivists do in fact make adaptive changes more frequently.

Defensive withdrawal was found to be associated with poor rated outcome, while the other four indices of behavioral change were all significantly linked with one or more positive outcomes. The generality of these effects provides some support to the viewpoint of those who endorse a culture-general model of cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Thomas & Inkson, 2004). The success of the predicted interactions between the collectivism of the other party and adaptive changes also supports the utility of context-specific forms of adaptation. An illustrative example selected from the database shows a respondent from an individualist nation adapting his approach to the more relational perspective of the other party from a more collectivist nation:

**Problem:** The other party had proposed an investment which I had to evaluate. After trying to work by e-mail, I decided to go to Madrid to work face to face. I had to coach the other party in how to prepare the proposal, in the course of which we both came to realise that there was a better solution than his original.

**Behavior Change:** I took longer than normal to go through the review and spent time socialising with my counterpart.

### 5.1. Limitations

This study sought to bridge the gap between the literature on cross-cultural skills and cultural dimensions. To do so effectively, a large sample of respondents was required. The data are based on relatively brief self-reports and there is no independent data derived from the other parties involved in the same interactions as to how they perceived what occurred. The sample included respondents from a wide range of national cultures, spanning nine of House et al.'s (2004) ten regional clusters. Persons from less wealthy nations were overrepresented as respondents and their reports tended to be focused on interactions with those from more wealthy nations. The study also lacks indications from respondents as to the extent to which they endorse the most characteristic practices of their nation, so that the hypotheses will have been most validly tested in respect of nations that were well represented in the sample. These limitations reduce certainty as to the generality

of what was found, but leave intact the indications that it is valuable to focus studies on the efficacy of context-specific behavior change in enhancing cross-cultural effectiveness.

## 5.2. Conclusions

The results indicate that the types of work problem that arise in cross-national interactions can be understood in terms of the cultural contrasts previously identified using intra-national data. However these effects are not simply the consequence of contrasting cultural practices. They can be better understood in terms of the consequences of associated global differences in wealth, power and linguistic skills. The results concerning the outcomes of interactions provide a basis for more effective training in cross-cultural skills. Training that focuses solely on briefings about the other party's cultural context is unlikely to elicit awareness of one's own role in the creation of problem episodes. Outcomes are enhanced where persons from more collectivist nations are able to accommodate individualists' focus on task issues, and where persons from more individualistic nations can give respect to collectivists' awareness of relational context. Training that gives direct and systematic attention to these types of reciprocal effects can yield enhanced value. Designs built on this basis can unify the work both of those who define cultural intelligence in a culture-general way and of those who believe that cultural skills are more situation-specific.

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