

Individualistic Practices and Values Increasing Around the World

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Individualism is thought to be on the rise in Western countries, but new [research](#) suggests that increasing individualism may actually be a global phenomenon. The [findings](#), published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), show that increasing socioeconomic development is an especially strong predictor of increasing individualistic practices and values in a country over time.

“Much of the research on the manifestation of rising individualism—showing, for example, increasing narcissism and higher divorce rates—has focused on the United States. Our findings show that this pattern also applies to other countries that are not Western or industrialized,” says psychology researcher Henri C. Santos of the University of Waterloo. “Although there are still cross-national differences in individualism-collectivism, the data indicate that, overall, most countries are moving towards greater individualism.”

Drawing from national census data and data collected for the World Values Survey, Santos, senior study author Igor Grossmann (University of Waterloo), and study co-author Michael E.W. Varnum (Arizona State University) were able to examine 51 years’ worth of data detailing individualist practices and values in a total of 78 countries.

In general, individualist cultures tend to conceive of people as self-directed and autonomous, and they

tend to prioritize independence and uniqueness as cultural values. Collectivist cultures, on the other hand, tend to see people as connected with others and embedded in a broader social context – as such, they tend to emphasize interdependence, family relationships, and social conformity.

To measure individualistic practices across cultures, the researchers examined data on household size, divorce rates, and proportion of people living alone. To measure individualistic values, they examined data on the importance that people place on friends versus family, how important people believe it is to teach children to be independent, and the degree to which people prioritize self-expression as a national goal.

Santos, Varnum, and Grossmann also looked at data on specific socio-ecological factors – including the level of socioeconomic development, disaster frequency, incidence of infectious disease, and extreme temperatures in each country – to examine whether they might account for any shifts in individualism over time.

Overall, the [results](#) showed a clear pattern: Both individualistic practices and values increased across the globe over time. Specifically, statistical models indicated that individualism has increased by about 12% worldwide since 1960.

Only four countries—Cameroon, Malawi, Malaysia, and Mali—showed a substantial decrease in individualistic practices over time, while 34 out of 41 countries showed a notable increase.

And only five countries—Armenia, China, Croatia, Ukraine, and Uruguay—showed a substantial decrease in individualistic values over time, with 39 out of 53 countries showing a substantial increase.

While the data indicated an overarching trend toward greater individualism, the researchers noted that sizable differences between countries remained through 2011.

Several socio-ecological factors — including more frequent disasters, less prevalent infectious disease, and less climatic stress in poorer countries — were linked with individualism, but increased socioeconomic development was the strongest predictor of increased individualism over time. Various aspects of development were related to increases in individualism, particularly increases in the proportion of white-collar jobs, in education levels, and in household income.

“The fact that most of the countries that did not show an increase in individualist values were among the lowest in socioeconomic development over the time period examined is consistent with the observation that socioeconomic development drove the rise in individualism,” the researchers explain in their paper. “China is an exception to this pattern, showing a decrease in individualist values even though the country has experienced economic growth. Notably, China has a complex socioeconomic history, so it will be worthwhile to investigate this country in more detail in future research.”

“I hope that these findings encourage psychologists in a variety of countries to take a more in-depth look at the rise of individualism within their respective countries,” says Santos.

Santos and Grossmann are hoping to continue this line of research, studying other predictors of cultural change, including migration and shifts in ethnic diversity, and also the potential consequences that rising

individualism may have on a global scale.

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All [code and data](#) have been made publicly available at the Open Science Framework. The complete Open Practices Disclosure is [available](#) online. This article has received the [badge](#) for Open Data.