2014

Effects of an economic crisis on individualistic and collectivist values

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol18/iss1/8
The relationship between societal change brought about by economic crises and changes in human values has not been investigated extensively across cultures by psychologists. This investigation examines two questions related to this relationship: (1) what is the connection between major economic or social events that occur in a culture and changes in important social meanings that emerge in that culture? And (2) if there are changes in the availability of resources in a community, will there also be changes in the endorsement of different cultural values? More specifically, this study examines how changes in the availability of economic resources over a 5-year period may affect the endorsement of cultural values. Two nations that experienced significantly different levels of an economic crisis, the U.S (low-to-moderate level) and Greece (high level), will be compared with regard to shifts in the values of individualism and collectivism. The construct of individualism is present in cultures that value independence, emphasize personal goals, and encourage individuals to separate themselves from the collective by highlighting one's uniqueness and autonomy. In contrast, in a collectivist culture individuals conceptualize the self as a member of a collective and all aspects of social behavior are interdependent and a reflection of one's perception of the self in cohesion with others.

The study will investigate possible changes in the endorsement of individualistic and collectivist values from 2009 to 2014. In addition, subgroups of these constructs-vertical/horizontal individualism and collectivism--will also be considered. Briefly, “vertical” refers to hierarchical and power-based social relations and “horizontal” refers to social equality. The participants in our study are approximately 200 university students from Grand Valley State University (USA) and the University of Athens (Greece). Responses to a scale measuring individualism and collectivism from 2009 (pre-crisis) and 2014 (post-crisis) will be analyzed via factor analysis and factor-comparison techniques in order to investigate possible changes in both the psychological structure and the relative national endorsement of the two constructs. In preliminary analyses, t-tests performed on the Greek individualism and collectivism scores from 2009 and 2014 showed that there was a general, though non-significant, trend toward lower individualism scores. Analysis of the US data is pending. A possible explanation of this early result could reflect that Greeks, in this period of extended and severe economic crisis, are using reliance on in-group and interdependence as a means of survival.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.