

Responsibilities in close social relationships explain differences across cultures

Study untangles decades of conflicting findings on identifying collectivism

By Kimberlee D'Ardenne, ASU News
September 15, 2026

Do you think that a person who reorganizes their life so that their aging parents can live with them would be likely to push another out of the way on the subway? What about greeting strangers with a smile?

The answers to these questions are at the heart of a puzzle social psychologists have been debating for 30 years: how to best understand differences between cultures.

Cultures are generally classified as interdependent or independent, and the prevailing idea that defines cultural differences is whether people value others more than the individual, a concept called collectivism. For decades, the surveys that social psychologists used to measure collectivism have generated contradictory and nonsensical findings, such as repeatedly labeling Western cultures, such as the United States and United Kingdom, as more interdependent than East Asian countries, such as Japan.

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Thomas Talhelm

Robert Cialdini Endowed Professor in Social Influence and lead author on the study

In a [study published in Nature Human Behavior](#) on Sept. 15, an international research team has shown that the responsibilities people hold in close relationships are what reliably differentiates Eastern and Western cultures and form the foundation of collectivism. The researchers developed a survey to measure this phenomenon, which they termed responsibilism.

“Culture is everywhere, and because it is everywhere, understanding it unlocks opportunities all around us,” said Thomas Talhelm, lead author on the study and the new Robert Cialdini Endowed Professor in Social Influence in Arizona State University’s [Department of Psychology](#).

“This work on responsibilism has the potential to give insight to people who straddle cultures, including children of immigrants navigating conflicting expectations at home and in school, teachers who adjust their instruction based on students with different value sets, or doctors who have to help people make decisions for sick family members.”

The importance of who and what

Talhelm spent seven years living in China, which inspired and shaped this work. While living in Beijing, he experienced competitive jostling on the subway and received suspicious frowns when he smiled at people he passed on the street.

At first, these behaviors seemed to be inconsistent with China having a collectivist culture — until he realized the common thread running through all these interactions was that they were between people who did not have close relationships with each other. Talhelm thought this thread might be contributing to contradictory findings about collectivism.

To test this idea, the research team set up the new survey questions to drill down into the responsibilities that come with having a close relationship with someone. The questions were specific about who was involved and what was happening, such as scenarios about keeping aging parents at home or going to a party and talking to people you don’t know to make new friends.

The researchers specified the closeness of the people involved, whether it was a parent, co-worker or stranger, and the circumstance and actions involved. Separately, the survey included questions about emotions, such as how people felt about others who were close to them or part of a larger group.

This responsibilism survey was translated into 45 languages and given to 12,247 people in 100 different cultures. The sampled countries covered 90% of the world’s population.

The new survey reliably separated East Asian and Western cultures, which previous work struggled to do. Countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia scored higher in responsibilism than North America, Europe and Australia.

“Individualism versus collectivism explains differences between continents, nations and even groups within nations,” Talhelm said.

Responsibilism predicts societal differences, individual behaviors

Collectivist cultures tend to do well on measures of social order, but those come at the cost of individual rights and openness, Talhelm explained.

Countries that scored high on the responsibility survey have lower democracy scores and more corruption in government, the study found. They also have fewer policies favoring immigrants, such as right to work and family reunification, and fewer patents and sales of creative goods.

The survey also found differences in public health, with countries scoring high having fewer deaths per capita from COVID-19 and lower rates of drug abuse.

Scores on the responsibility survey also predicted behaviors at the individual level, with higher scores being associated with living with extended family members and being willing to lie in court for a close friend. By contrast, lower responsibility scores, which are associated with more independent cultures, were associated with being likely to [return a lost wallet](#) — and with [fewer parking tickets](#) given to United Nations diplomats.

Diplomatic immunity means that parking tickets do not have to be paid, but despite the nonexistent consequences, the number of parking tickets among U.N. diplomats varied widely, ranging from none to 246 per diplomat over a four-year period. Violating parking rules means that someone else, who is likely unknown to the driver, was unable to park. The distance of this relationship likely influences the choice of where to park, and the diplomats with the most parking tickets from near the U.N. were from countries with high responsibility scores.

After decades of conflicting findings, Talhelm believes responsibility offers a more precise lens for understanding culture — one rooted not simply in caring for others, but in the responsibilities people feel toward the relationships that matter most. He hopes the framework will help researchers better understand cultural differences and, ultimately, improve how people navigate them.

This work was conducted with researchers from Northwestern University; Hubei University in Wuhan, China; ESADE Business School in Barcelona, Spain; Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat, Oman; Maqsut Narikbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan; Aarhus University in Aarhus, Denmark; and Wenzhou-Kean University in Wenzhou, China. The research was supported by the William Ladany Faculty Scholar fund and the National Natural Science Foundation of China.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Research from the ASU Department of Psychology has shown that responsibilities people hold in close relationships are what reliably differentiates Eastern and Western cultures. Photo by Duy Pham/Unsplash

Text image(s)



Thomas Talhelm