

Individualism–Collectivism Priming, Traits and Redistributive Attitudes

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Keywords: Individualism; Collectivism; Priming; Redistributive attitudes

Abstract: This study examines how situational individualism-collectivism priming of values and trait values influence people's attitudes toward redistribution. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure people's support for redistributive taxation. The results show that priming effects were insignificant before controlling for individual value traits and demographics. After including the control variable, collectivism priming significantly increases support for redistribution compared with individualism priming. At the trait level, horizontal collectivism has a significant positive impact on attitudes towards redistribution, while vertical collectivism has a negative inhibitory effect on such attitudes. The findings indicate that stable trait values may generate a suppression effect that masks the true influence of situational priming. Meanwhile, horizontal and vertical dimensions of collectivism show opposing influences, revealing notable internal heterogeneity. This study distinguishes situational values from trait values, offering empirical evidence for understanding people's redistributive preferences and guiding relevant public policy practice.

1. Introduction

Redistributive taxation is a crucial policy instrument for mitigating income inequality and maintaining social fairness worldwide. Nevertheless, people's support for taxing the wealthy to assist disadvantaged groups varies substantially across individuals, and value orientation will affect people's attitudes towards redistribution. According to the individualism-collectivism framework proposed by Triandis (1995)^[1], collectivists tend to perceive the self as an integral part of the in-group, whereas individualists view the self as an independent entity separated from social groups. Rooted in the classic cross-cultural value theory (Hofstede, 1980)^[2], individualism and collectivism have been widely adopted to explain public fairness preferences and redistributive policy attitudes (Fong, 2001^[3]; Luttmer & Singhal, 2011^[4]; Alesina & Giuliano, 2011^[5]).

Despite abundant prior evidence, existing literature still presents two major research gaps. First, most previous studies fail to distinguish situational priming values from stable trait values. As documented by Oyserman & Lee (2008)^[6], value priming only temporarily activates individualistic or collectivistic mindsets and functions as a transient cognitive state. In contrast, trait values represent stable, long-term internalized tendencies. Simply comparing priming conditions without

controlling for inherent value traits may lead to unobserved suppression effects, whereby genuine priming effects are masked, resulting in incomplete or biased conclusions. Second, prior studies generally operationalize collectivism as a single unified construct and rely on aggregate scores for empirical testing, neglecting the inherent heterogeneity between horizontal and vertical value dimensions. Horizontal values emphasize interpersonal equality and equal resource distribution, while vertical values legitimize social hierarchy and institutional inequality. Given their distinct core logics, the two dimensions may exert divergent influences on redistributive attitudes. Therefore, a unified collectivism score is insufficient to capture nuanced value mechanisms underlying people's tax preferences.

Addressing these research gaps, the present study adopts a priming experimental design to manipulate situational individualism and collectivism cues. Meanwhile, horizontal collectivism (HC), vertical collectivism (VC), horizontal individualism (HI), and vertical individualism (VI) are measured systematically. This study comprehensively investigates the joint effects of situational value priming and stable trait values on people's redistributive attitudes, aiming to refine the theoretical understanding of value-based redistributive preference formation and provide empirical evidence for relevant public policy practices.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

A total of 160 college students were recruited on the Guangdong University campus to participate in laboratory experiments. Laboratory technicians randomly assigned them to specific experimental sessions. All participants were taking part in this experiment for the first time. The selected student participants were from the College of Economics and Management, the College of Tourism Management, the College of Information and Optoelectronics, the College of Literature, and so on.

2.2 Priming Task

The present study adopted two classic paradigms to activate individualistic and collectivistic mindsets among participants, including the pronoun-circling task developed by Gardner et al. (1999)^[7] and the group imagination task proposed by Lee et al. (2000)^[8]. Both priming procedures required participants to read assigned experimental materials and complete corresponding follow-up questions. In the pronoun-circling task, the two versions of the text read by participants differed only in whether the pronouns used were individualistic (e.g. 'my') or collectivistic (e.g. 'our'). In the group imagination task, participants were instructed to imagine themselves as members of a team or working alone, which explicitly elicited situational group-oriented or self-oriented attention, thereby achieving effective value priming.

2.3 Measures and Questionnaire

Participants' attitudes towards redistribution were measured using a 5-point ordered Likert scale as the dependent variable in this study. The specific question was: 'To what extent do you agree with the statement "We should levy higher taxes on the wealthy to help the poor"? 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree'. Drawing on the scale proposed by Singelis et al. (1995)^[9], the study assessed the participants' levels of four dimensional traits: horizontal collectivism, vertical collectivism, horizontal individualism and vertical individualism. Finally, a questionnaire was used to collect participants' personal

information, such as age, gender, to serve as control variables in this study.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics by Group

Table 1: Descriptive statistics by group.

Variables	Collectivism-Priming			Individualism-Priming			Two-tailed t-test p-values
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Tax support (1-5)	80	3.375	0.998	80	3.250	0.834	0.392
HC	80	4.661	0.733	80	5.214	0.693	0.000
VC	80	4.578	0.922	80	4.359	0.575	0.074
HI	80	4.958	0.567	80	5.083	0.517	0.147
VI	80	4.321	0.743	80	4.411	0.633	0.414
Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	80	0.500	0.503	80	0.500	0.503	1.000
Age	80	21.000	1.125	80	20.125	0.933	0.000
Part-time job (yes = 1, no = 0)	80	0.875	0.333	80	0.625	0.487	0.000

As shown in Table 1, there was no significant difference in redistributive attitudes between the collectivism priming group and the individualism priming group. Nevertheless, significant group differences existed in horizontal collectivism (HC) and vertical collectivism (VC). Individual demographic information, including gender, age, and part-time job experience, was incorporated as control variables in the subsequent regression analysis.

3.2 Comparison across Different Priming Groups

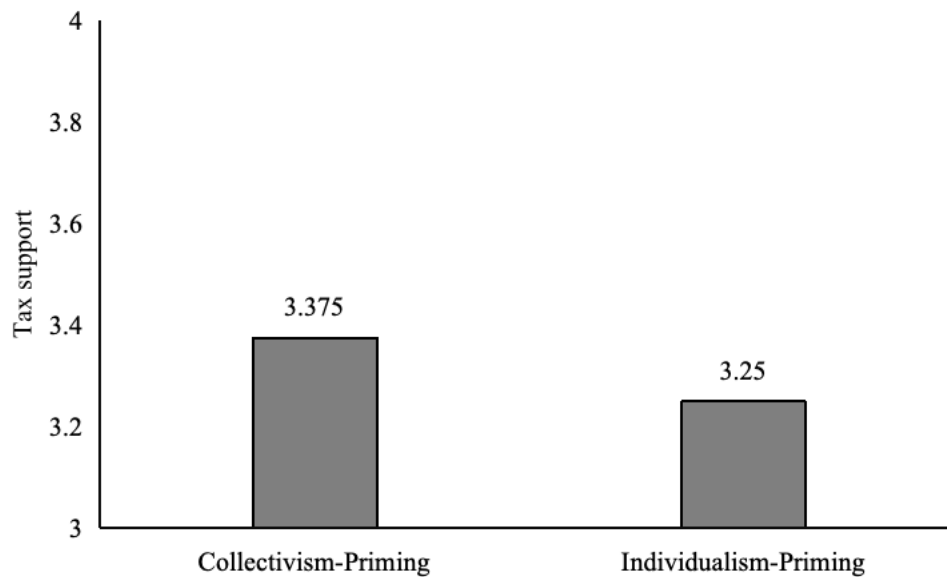


Figure 1: Comparison of mean tax support.

At the sample level, as shown in Figure 1, the mean levels of support for taxation in the

collectivist and individualist groups were 3.375 (s.d = 0.998) and 3.25 (s.d = 0.834) respectively. Given that the variable is an ordered categorical variable, a further ranksum test revealed no significant difference ($p = 0.468$). Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that there was no significant difference in participants' support for taxation following exposure to different types of priming.

3.3 Regression Analysis

Table 2: Regression analysis of two treatments of tax support.

Dependent Variables: Tax support	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	OLS 1	OLS 2	OLS 3	ologit 1	ologit 2	ologit 3
Collectivism vs. Individualism	0.125 (0.145)	0.596*** (0.160)	0.406*** (0.106)	0.213 (0.292)	1.608*** (0.385)	1.170* (0.639)
HC		0.749*** (0.138)	1.197*** (0.101)		1.996*** (0.360)	5.852*** (0.876)
VC		-0.448*** (0.120)	-0.940*** (0.085)		-1.114*** (0.271)	-4.535*** (0.633)
HI		-0.389*** (0.137)	0.122 (0.102)		-0.717** (0.297)	0.416 (0.507)
VI		0.080 (0.116)	0.173** (0.080)		0.138 (0.255)	1.180*** (0.404)
Gender			-0.337*** (0.102)			-1.406** (0.693)
Age			0.760*** (0.055)			3.889*** (0.520)
Part-time job			-0.191 (0.131)			-1.086* (0.595)
Sample size	160	160	160	160	160	160

Notes: *, **, *** significant at 10, 5, 1 percent level.

Previous inter-group comparisons have yielded preliminary experimental findings. To further verify these conclusions at the individual level, econometric regression models were adopted for rigorous empirical testing. Considering that individual performance and attitudinal responses in the experiment may be interfered by personal characteristics, demographic information collected from the questionnaire was incorporated as control variables to re-examine the priming effect after eliminating individual-level confounding factors.

In this study, tax support was set as the dependent variable. Given that the variable was measured on a 1–5 ordinal categorical scale, both the ordinary least squares (OLS) model and the ordered logit (ologit) model were applied for regression analysis, and the corresponding results were presented in Table 2. The two estimation methods produced highly consistent outcomes. Columns (1) and (4) report the baseline regression results without controlling for individual characteristics, showing that the coefficient of “Collectivism vs. Individualism” was statistically insignificant, which was consistent with the foregoing group comparison results.

After further controlling for participants' individualism and collectivism traits in Columns (2) and (5), the coefficient of “Collectivism vs. Individualism” turned significantly positive. Meanwhile, horizontal collectivism exerted a significant positive effect on tax support, whereas vertical

collectivism showed a significant negative effect, and this pattern remained robust across both OLS and ologit models. In Columns (3) and (6), individual demographic variables, including gender, age, and part-time job experience, were further added into the regression model. The core results remained unchanged: the coefficient of “Collectivism vs. Individualism” still positively. In addition, supplementary demographic effects were observed. Gender was significantly and negatively associated with tax support, while age showed a significant positive effect on tax support.

The above regression results fully validate the hidden priming effect of situational value activation. The insignificant priming effect observed in the simple group comparison was masked by individuals’ stable trait values. After controlling for dimensional trait values and demographic characteristics, the promotional effect of collectivism priming on redistributive attitudes became statistically significant. In terms of trait values, horizontal collectivism and vertical collectivism presented completely opposite predictive effects, which strongly demonstrates the inherent dimensional heterogeneity of collectivism. Ignoring such structural differences will lead to biased and incomplete empirical conclusions.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Main Findings Overview

This study systematically examined the influence of individualism-collectivism situational priming and the four-dimensional horizontal and vertical value traits on the public’s attitudes towards redistributive taxation. The findings reveal the differential effects of state-level priming and trait-level values, as well as dimensional heterogeneity within collectivism.

4.2 The Suppression Effect of Trait Values on Situational Priming

A simple between-group comparison revealed no significant difference in attitudes towards redistribution between individualism and collectivism priming; however, after controlling for demographic variables and stable values, collectivism priming (vs. individualism priming) significantly increased support for tax-based redistribution. This result suggests that individuals’ long-term, stable value traits may mask the effects of brief situational priming. Unadjusted between-group differences fail to reflect the true effect of priming, perhaps because individuals’ inherent value orientations offset the subtle shifts in attitude induced by brief situational cues. This finding suggests that future research on value priming must control for trait values; otherwise, the true effects of situational priming may be underestimated or overlooked.

4.3 Heterogeneous Effects of Horizontal and Vertical Collectivism

The diametrically opposed effects of horizontal collectivism and vertical collectivism may be closely linked to their underlying value systems. Horizontal collectivism emphasizes equality within groups and the equalization of resources, and may be more inclined to support the narrowing of the wealth gap through taxation; whereas vertical collectivism recognizes the legitimacy of hierarchical order and inequality within groups, and may be more resistant to redistributive policies. Collectivism is not a singular, homogeneous value structure; its positive and negative effects are mutually opposed, and combining them into a single analysis is likely to obscure key effects.

4.4 Theoretical Implications, Limitations and Future Research

Overall, this study distinguishes between situational and trait values, and provides preliminary

insights into the parallel mechanisms through which they influence attitudes towards redistribution. Short-term collectivism priming promotes support for redistribution, whilst the long-term, stable dimension of collectivism shapes public perceptions of policy in a completely different direction. This study provides some empirical insights into the relationship between values and attitudes towards distributive justice. At the same time, the study is subject to certain limitations, such as sample composition and single-item measurement; future research could be expanded through multidimensional measurement and the inclusion of moderating variables to further refine this line of inquiry.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the School-level Research Fund Project of Zhaoqing University, No. QN202403.

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