Ways of manifesting collectivism
An analysis of Iranian and African cultures

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PURPOSE
To help government analysts better understand selected Iranian and African cultural perspectives by performing a cultural analysis using the Relational Models Theory.

CONCLUSIONS
Cultural analyses of Iranian and three select African cultures show that, although all are collectivistic cultures, they have distinct forms of collectivism.

RELEVANCE
These cultural case studies demonstrate how the Relational Models Theory can enable analysts to better understand differences between collectivistic cultures. Further, these cultural analyses will inform future work on cultural priming, a technique that will help analysts adopt the perspective of those from other cultures.

Executive summary

PURPOSE
To understand another person’s behavior and predict future behaviors, analysts must adopt the other’s perspective. Adopting the perspective of those from other cultures, however, is particularly challenging because individuals are prone to interpret situations from their own cultural perspective. For example, analysts from individualistic cultures, such as that of the United States, might have difficulty understanding the behaviors of those from collectivistic cultures, such as those of China, Afghanistan, Iran, and Africa, that place priority on group needs.

To help analysts better understand not only collectivistic cultures as a whole but also differences between those cultures, the University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) is using a theoretical framework based on the Relational Models Theory (RMT). The RMT proposes that there are four fundamental approaches to social interactions: Communal Sharing (sharing based on perceived mutual similarity, as in family or village groupings), Authority Ranking (dominance relations, as in employer and employee), Equality Matching (relations based on maintaining parity, as in exchanging favor), and Market Pricing (associations based on mutual benefit, as in alliances).

Previous CASL analyses used RMT to examine the cultures of the United States, Japan, China, and Afghanistan/Pakistan. This report provides a cultural analysis of Iranian and African collectivistic cultures. These cultural analyses will inform future work on cultural priming—a technique that temporarily breaks individuals’ native cultural framework by shifting their perspective to be more consistent with a different cultural perspective.

CONCLUSIONS
CASL’s cultural analysis of the collectivistic cultures of Iran and Africa support the following conclusions:

1. Iranian civil society ranks Communal Sharing > Authority Ranking > Equality Matching > Market Pricing.
2. Iranian political society ranks Authority Ranking > Market Pricing > Equality Matching > Communal Sharing.

While these classifications are grounded in extensive scholarly literature and provide a useful guide for analysts, empirical studies are needed.
to fully validate them. Preparations for such a study of an Iranian sample are underway.

RELEVANCE

CASL’s cultural analyses of Iranian and African cultures illustrate how collectivism can vary across cultures and how the RMT analysis can help analysts understand and describe these differences. Further, these analyses inform the development of a cultural priming tool, which uses culturally relevant cues to help analysts shift their cultural perspectives and accurately comprehend these societies.

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Executive report

PURPOSE

Analysts attempt to understand another person’s behavior to successfully predict his or her future behaviors and increase mission success. Thus, adopting the perspective of others is a vital skill for effective intelligence analysis.

Predicting the behavior of members of other cultures can be especially challenging for analysts. For example, American analysts who learn that farmers in Kandahar regularly pay the Taliban 50 percent of their earnings might conclude that the farmers are paying extortion money. However, the correct conclusion might be that they are paying them in return for protection against a corrupt national government. The latter interpretation would lead policymakers to the culturally appropriate approach of working with the village elders to restore their influence as a substitute for the Taliban.4

One of the best known characterizations of cultural differences is individualism versus collectivism. Individualism refers to a culture’s social pattern of distinguishing an individual from a collective (e.g., family, work, tribe, nation). Individuals are encouraged by society to perceive the self as independent and unique from others.5 Collectivism refers to a culture’s social pattern of closely linking individuals with others in a collective.6 Individuals are “primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives.”7

While collectivism has been widely applied to make sense of cultural differences, it does not capture the diversity of collectivistic cultures. For example, the hierarchical Confucian societies of China and Japan cannot be treated as equivalent to the tribalistic societies of Afghanistan and Pakistan, despite their both being nominally collectivistic.

Cross-cultural psychologists have developed models to describe other aspects of cultural differences. For example, the Relational Models Theory (RMT) is a useful framework for distinguishing between collectivistic cultures, which could help analysts better understand the nuances of these cultures. It is particularly well suited for distinguishing between collectivistic cultures because it focuses on enumerating the types of socioeconomic relations found across cultures, and collectivism is, by its nature, about social relations. While the theory is well established, using it systematically to differentiate between different forms of collectivism is novel.

According to the RMT, there are four fundamental approaches to social interactions, also referred to as relational models (Figure 1):

1. Communal Sharing (sharing based on perceived mutual similarity, as in family or village groupings),
2. Authority Ranking (dominance

Figure 1. The four kinds of interdependent self-construal according to the Relational Models Theory. The relational models are depicted from the perspective of an individual participant (observer) represented by a star: (a) For Communal Sharing, the individuals inside the shape are all stars, highlighting the observers’ perceived similarity to those with whom he or she shares resources. (b) Authority Ranking illustrates the division of individuals into distinct social categories. (c) Equality Matching focuses on the dyadic connections between individuals; the line connecting two nodes represents the reciprocal relationship between them. (d) Market Pricing illustrates the tendency of individuals to gravitate toward others who control or represent a valuable asset.

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relations, as in employer and employee).
3. Equality Matching (relations based on maintaining parity, as in
   exchanging favor), and
4. Market Pricing (associations based on mutual benefit, as in
   alliances).

While the RMT model stipulates that all societies express all four relational
models, collectivistic societies may be described as having different rank-
ings of the four, resulting in different forms of collectivism. Previous CASL
analyses used this approach to catego-
rize relationships in the collectivistic
cultures of Afghanistan/Pakistan,
China, and Japan. This report uses the
same approach to examine Iranian and
selected African cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

CASL’s cultural analysis of the col-
lectivistic cultures of Iran and Africa
support the following conclusions:

1. **Iranian political society ranks**
   Authority Ranking > Market
   Pricing > Equality Matching

In Iranian civil society, respect toward
“people of higher status and age . . .
[is] not necessarily deeply felt . . . [as
compared to] emotionally charged
respect that may be felt toward parents,
older siblings, uncles, aunts, mentors,
cultural heroes (poets), and religious
figures.” As a result, Iranian authori-
tarianism is rooted in familial structure
where individuals tend to categorize
themselves in relation to those around
them. In terms of relational models,
Communal Sharing is given preced-
ence over Authority Ranking by the
Iranian civil society.

Within relationships, reciprocity is
highly valued (manifest in Equality
Matching social relations), and favors
or help extended to others comes with
the expectation of repayment. Because
highly valued elements from Comm-
nunal Sharing, Authority Ranking,
and Equality Matching tend to provide
individuals with support in society,
Market Pricing ranks as least promi-
lient. Thus, individuals are less likely
to gravitate toward an individual with
a perceived asset who is outside of their
family (thus bound by loyalty and obe-
dience) or peer group (thus bound by
reciprocity, politeness, benevolence).

2. **Iranian political society ranks**
   Authority Ranking > Market
   Pricing > Equality Matching

Ruling clerics view themselves as
holding vested authority and expect
obedience. From the state perspec-
tive, the ultimate survival requirement
is deference to authority. As a result,
much attention is given toward superi-
or that can pro-
vide beneficial assets. In terms
of relational
models, Author-
ity Ranking takes
precedence over
Market Pricing
for the Iranian
political society. The Iranian Revolu-
tionary Guard Corps (IRGC) gravitates
toward the theocracy due to the per-
ceived asset of receiving government
contract funds. Iranian clerics do not
expect an equal exchange of goods, but
do receive IRGC service in return.

In the Iranian civil society, Equality
Matching emphasizes reciprocity as
linked to values of loyalty, sensitiv-
ity to the needs of others, conformity,
tradition, benevolence, and power.
However, reciprocity can be under-
stood in a different way when con-
cerning the Iranian state. The political
society keeps track of historical events
and expects, or anticipates, an event-
tual evening out of this relationship
between Iran and the West. Although
Communal Sharing does not take pre-
cedence in Iranian state culture due to
the lack of a cohesive in-group amidst
political partitions and power plays,
it can be understood in the ways that
the Iranian state attempts to foster a
cohesive identity for its citizens.

3. **Somali culture ranks**
   Equality Matching > Communal Sharing
   > Market Pricing > Authority
   Ranking.

A hallmark of Somali culture is
egalitarianism and individual freedom,
symbolized by the spirit of the gazelle
and reinforced in the poetic traditions
of the Somali. Somali culture also
reinforces a strong sense of Communal
Sharing and unity both at the national
and clan levels, driven by common
livelihood, shared religion, and impor-
tance placed on ancestral lineage—not
without negative ramifications for
these competing levels of community
loyalty.

Historical development of mutually
beneficial socioeconomic rela-
tions between pastoralist and agricul-
turalist groups contributes to a
Market Pricing relational model. Although
Authority Ranking is low in Somali culture, it
lingers in past manifestations of hier-
archy between clans and in authority
afforded to Islamic holymen in the
religious context.

4. **Tuareg culture ranks**
   Authority Ranking > Communal Sharing
   > Market Pricing > Equality
   Matching.

Tuareg confederations are historically
known for a caste-like social hierarchy
wherein a complex of vassal classes
and slaves paid tribute to a dominant
warrior class of nobles. Nonetheless,
a relatively strong sense of communal
affiliation cutting across castes in a
given drum group had been fortified
through such factors as a sense of
shared ancestry and marriage between
groups. However, given the relatively
loose basis for familial bonds and the
noble’s reliance on the vassal class for
basic provisions, the noble class had to
balance their authority against certain
Market Pricing principles.

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Hausa culture ranks Communal Sharing > Authority Ranking > Market Pricing > Equality Matching.

Compared to Somali and Tuareg cultures, Hausa culture more closely exemplifies an open melting pot, and the basis of Hausa identity is thus less clear. A sense of Hausa identity can be gleaned from a complex of cultural values known as *mutumin kirki* (of the characteristics of a ‘good person’), and the majority of these characteristics have to do with Communal Sharing.

Hausa culture is also said to be marked by stratified social organization, based on a complex of birth, occupation, wealth, and patron–client ties, thus supporting an Authority Ranking model. Several aspects of *mutumin kirki* reflect the importance of positive reputation, thus pointing to Market Pricing values. Furthermore, given the relative prestige of Hausa vis-à-vis neighboring minority groups, the individual choice to adopt Hausa culture can be attributed to a Market Pricing model.

**CONSIDERATIONS**

These cultural case studies provide a scientific foundation for using techniques, such as cultural priming,1 to help analysts more effectively engage materials from unfamiliar cultures. Cultural priming is the process of making a cultural mindset more easily accessible by the presentation of an appropriate cue. This process has a robust effect that has been demonstrated in nearly a hundred laboratory studies.9

CASL’s cultural priming project is in part intended to transfer this laboratory phenomenon to the real world through the application of the RMT framework. The RMT framework is expected to more usefully differentiate between the broad range of collectivistic cultures in order to provide more nuanced cultural understanding of analytic problems. We expect that the present cultural framework, reinforced with the cultural priming technique, will enable analysts to more effectively analyze materials from other cultures, both in the classroom and in the workplace.

**RELEVANCE**

Interpreting situations through one’s own cultural perspective poses a serious challenge to the Intelligence Community. American analysts must be able to modify their perspective and interpret nonnative materials or data from others’ cultural perspectives. Cultural analyses based on the Relational Models Theory can help analysts better understand the differences between collectivistic cultures.

While these classifications are grounded in extensive scholarly literature and provide a useful guide for analysts, empirical studies are needed to fully validate them. Preparations for such validation are in progress with an Iranian sample. Nonetheless, the present cultural case studies show how the RMT theory can serve as a conceptual framework with which to improve analysis of people’s behaviors and intentions, especially for cultures new to an analyst.

**ENDNOTES**


*Note:* Both Nina G. Hamedani, MS, and Tristan M. Purvis, PhD, contributed equally to the report as primary authors of their respective sections.

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