

# In the land of the free, interdependence undermines Americans' motivation to act

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Public campaigns that call upon people to think and act interdependently may undermine motivation for many Americans, according to new research published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Americans are repeatedly exposed to messages urging them to think and act with others in mind, telling us, for example, to act sustainably by bringing [reusable bags](#) to the grocery store or to act responsibly by getting a [flu shot](#). Researchers MarYam Hamedani, Hazel Rose Markus, and Alyssa Fu of Stanford University wondered what impact these kinds of appeals have in a culture that stresses independence.

"Decades of research in the social sciences have shown that fostering people's sense of independence is the most effective driver of behavior among Americans. We suspected that while Americans might say they like the idea of working together and cooperating, such appeals may not motivate them to action," says Hamedani.

In two different experiments, the researchers found that European Americans who were primed to think about interdependent behavior were less likely to persist at challenging tasks. They gave up sooner than European Americans primed to think about independence. In one study, they spent about four minutes less working on the task than those primed with independent behavior or than those who received no prime. These results suggest that the interdependence prime actually decreased their [motivation](#) to keep working on the task.

But what role does invoking interdependence play in relation to an actual social issue? In a third experiment, students evaluated a university course where they could learn about promoting [environmental sustainability](#).

In line with the previous experiments, European American students predicted they would put less effort into the class when the participation in the course was framed in terms of interdependence—for example, learning to work together, take others' perspectives, and be adaptable. They were also less likely to agree that the course should be a university requirement. Those who read the interdependent course description also said they would be less motivated in the class, which helped to explain why they chose to allocate fewer resources to the course when given the opportunity.

Across the three studies, however, Asian American students' behavior did not vary when interdependence vs. independence was emphasized.

The researchers point out that many bicultural Asian Americans are exposed not only to the power of independence through American culture, but also to interdependence through their Asian family, friends, and ethnic community contexts. For them, thinking about how they are connected to others and tuning their behavior to others can be a motivating force as well, since East Asian culture stresses interdependence. For independently minded European Americans, however, thinking about working together with others seems to take the focus off the self and weaken motivational resolve.

Together, the three experiments demonstrate that our ways of thinking and our motivations to act are deeply tied to the cultural frameworks that shape our social worlds.

These findings have important implications for those working to promote social and behavioral change, whether they're campaigners,

marketers, or policymakers.

Today's most pressing social and political issues—from the global economic recession, to the universal impact of climate change, to public health scares like this year's influenza epidemic—highlight the significance of people's interdependence with one another. But the findings reported here suggest that focusing on this interdependence may backfire:

"Appeals to interdependence might sound nice or like the right thing to do, but they will not get the job done for many Americans," says Hamedani.

A better strategy for motivating action among European Americans, according to Hamedani and her colleagues, may be to encourage individual effort for the good of the team or collective, urging each individual to "be the change YOU want to see in the world."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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