

Lecture 3: Cultural Dimensions

1) Cultures: different or alike?

Now that you have developed a general understanding of the concept of culture, its types and elements, you have certainly referred to your own culture. You perhaps have thought about the elements of your culture more profoundly: its beliefs, values, assumptions..., etc. You perhaps have as well asked the question “are all cultures similar?” Maybe yes; maybe not! It is perhaps better to consider that cultures may be similar in some aspects n but different in others. However, you need to think well of such aspects.

Cultures may be similar or different in many respects including:

- a) **Work:** some cultures like Latin-American and Asian ones mix work and relationships while others like the USA do not.
- b) **Decision making:** in some cultures, it is ‘participative’ while in others, it is ‘individual’
- c) **Time:** the concept of punctuality differs from one culture to another.
- d) **Space:** ‘personal’ space and ‘public’ space differ across cultures (Arabs may be said to violate the personal space in case of contact with Northern European.)
- e) **Public displays of affection:** some cultures, like the Arabs, do not tolerate public displays of affection while some other cultures accept them.
- f) **Silence:** silence is used to communicate different intentions depending on the culture.

It could be used to show agreement, disagreements, uncertainty.....

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- g) **Family relations and roles:** the family size and the roles of its members differ from one culture to another. As is the case with male and female relationship.
- h) **Social relations and hierarchies:** Some individuals gain high status and respect in some cultures based on their age, job, education, family name.... Things may differ in other cultures, however. (teachers in Japan vs. in America)

Thinking of these aspects could be a never ending task as many of them spring out each time you think of possible similarities and/ or differences. As a result, many models for comparing cultures have been suggested by scholars and researchers. Hall (1976), for example, is well-known for his distinction between cultures based on their way of communication. He divided cultures into high-context and low-context cultures. The former refers to those cultures where little linguistic input is used during communication because much of the information is found within the context. The latter refers to those cultures where nearly everything is expressed linguistically. Hall and Hall (1990) suggested additional conceptual frameworks that include time (past, present, or future oriented), space, information flow, and interfacing (Hofstede, 2011; Gibson, 2000;Merrouche, 2006).

Probably in the literature comparing cultures, the most known model is the one postulated by Hofstede which is referred to as cultural dimensions.

2) **Cultural Dimensions**

A dimension of culture is defined as “ an aspect of culture that can be measured relative to other cultures” (Hofstede, 2011 p 07). Many scholars proposed lists of dimensions upon which cultures can be described, analyzed and compared. However, before discussing

these lists of dimensions, a distinction between cultural domains and cultural dimensions should be made to exhibit better the influence of the deep culture on human behavior. The former refers to “ specific socio-psychological characteristics that are considered to be meaningful outcomes, products, or constituents of culture, including attitudes, values, beliefs, opinions, norms, customs, and rituals” (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004 cited in Shaules, 2007 p.47). However, the latter refers to “general tendencies that affect behavior and reflect meaningful aspects of cultural variability” (Shaules, 2007 p.48).

- A) **Power Distance**, related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality. The high-power distance cultures support social hierarchies as a way to establish authority and order. However, low-power distance cultures believe in equality between its members for a more democratic life.
- B) **Uncertainty Avoidance**, related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future, ambiguity and risk.
- C) **Individualism versus Collectivism**, related to the integration of individuals into primary groups: cultures based on individualism focus on the individual, and people are concerned with their goals without much loyalty to the group. In cultures based on collectivism, individuals are loyal to all the groups they belong to and the these groups' goals.
- D) **Masculinity versus Femininity**, related to the division of emotional roles between women and men: cultures can be divided into those guided by masculine assertive values and feminine nurturing and modest ones.
- E) **Long Term versus Short Term Orientation**, related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present and past.

- F) **Indulgence versus Restraint**, related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life.

These dimensions are interrelated....There is always a kind of correlation between two dimensions or more.

EXERCISE:

- 1) Based on Hofstede's dimensions, how do you describe your own culture?
- 2) Choose these dimensions to compare and contrast another culture (of your choice) with your own culture.
- 3) Discuss the following statement:

“These dimensions are interrelated....There is always a kind of correlation between two dimensions or more.”