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# Six Approaches to Understanding National Cultures: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

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An Overview of Hofstede's Dimensional Paradigm

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This paper presents an overview of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions framework, which identifies "overarching cultural patterns or dimensions which influence people's behavior in significant ways" (Arasaratnam, 2011, p. 45). The framework brought a distinct quantitative-comparative approach to the study of cultures by identifying and measuring defining aspects of world cultures (Hofstede, 2011). The theory, sometimes described as the dimensional paradigm, or 6-D model, was first unveiled in Hofstede's (1980) book *Culture's Consequences*. Hofstede's original model introduced in that work featured four dimensions for analyzing and understanding national cultures, but subsequent research resulted in the addition of two more dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). The six dimensions that currently make up Hofstede's framework are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, long-term orientation, and indulgence (Arasaratnam, 2011, pp. 45-50; Chen & Starosta, 2005, pp. 51-54; Dainton & Zelle, 2011, pp. 182-188; Hofstede, 2011).

### **Theorists Background**

The development of the cultural dimensions framework is largely attributed to the work of Dutch scholar and researcher Geert Hofstede (with later contributions from his son Gert Jan Hofstede). However, two other collaborators contributed to the expansion and evolution of the theory. This section provides brief biographical background on Hofstede and the other contributors to the 6-D paradigm.

Geert Hofstede's personal website provides several details about his life and research (Geert Hofstede, n.d.). Hofstede was born in 1928 and his educational background includes a M.Sc. in Mechanical Engineering and a Ph.D. in Social Science. Between 1965 and 1971,

Hofstede established and led the human resources research department of IBM Europe, a role that gave him access to the data that would serve as the empirical foundation of cultural dimensions theory. Following his work at IBM, Hofstede held a number of positions in business as well as in academia, including serving as a professor of management in Belgium and France, and a professor of organizational anthropology and international management in the Netherlands. He was also co-founder and first director of the Netherlands-based Institute for Research on Intercultural Cooperation. In 2008, Hofstede was listed among the Wall Street Journal's top 20 most influential management thinkers (Geert Hofstede, n.d.).

Canadian Michael Harris Bond and Bulgarian Michael Minkov contributed key research that led to the incorporation of the fifth dimension (long-term orientation) and sixth dimension (indulgence) into the framework (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Bond's background (Curriculum Vita, 2015) includes roles as professor of psychology, business, and sociology at universities in Hong Kong, Japan, and the U.S., after completing doctoral studies at Stanford University. According to his biography (Professor Michael Minkov, n.d.), Minkov earned a doctorate in social anthropology. A disciple of Hofstede, he has served as a professor of cross-cultural awareness and organizational behaviour in several countries including the U.K., Netherlands, Turkey, Denmark, and Russia.

### **Theory Overview**

The following is a description of the six elements of the dimensional framework.

#### **Power Distance**

As Chen and Starosta (2005) write, "the dimension of power distance specifies to what extent a culture adapts to inequities of power distribution in relationships and organizations" (p. 52). Hofstede's research identified a distinction between those belonging to high-power-distance

and low-power-distance cultures, with the former characterized by comparatively larger hierarchical gaps among individuals on the basis of differentiators such as age, sex, generation, and status (Chen & Starosta, 2005). In high-power-distance cultures, power tends to be more centralized and much value is placed on status and rank (Dainton & Zelle, 2011). In contrast to the prevalence of vertical, authoritarian-leaning relationships in high-power-distance cultures, low-power-distance cultures exhibit much more horizontal modes of interpersonal interaction. Cultural dimensions research has resulted in the quantification of power distance scores for several countries. For example, the United States has a power distance score of 40, compared to a score of 80 for Ghana (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). This means that comparatively, status and rank distinctions matter less in the United States, but they have a greater influence in Ghana's cultural and value system.

### **Uncertainty Avoidance**

Uncertainty avoidance “measures the extent to which a culture can accept ambiguous situations and tolerate uncertainty about the future” (Chen & Starosta, 2005, p. 52). As Arasaratnam (2011) further explains, “cultures high in uncertainty avoidance tend to be traditional, prefer methods that are tried and true, and prefer stability over change or even innovation” (p. 49). A country such as Mexico, for example, has an uncertainty avoidance score of 82, compared to 46 for the United States (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). Thus, Mexican culture is viewed as more risk averse and more inclined towards stability than U.S. culture.

### **Individualism**

Individualism refers to “a social mentality which focusses on the individual, valuing and recognizing individual achievement, and encouraging independent thought and action” (Arasaratnam, 2011, p. 45). These are societies in which “self-concept” (Chen & Starosta, 2005,

p. 51) is highly emphasized, as opposed to cultures rooted in collectivism, where “social framework” (p. 51) is the overriding consideration. To illustrate, cultural dimensions research scores the United States highly on individualism (91), while Egypt registers a much lower individualism score of 25 (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). In practical terms, this means citizens from these two countries may view the importance of such matters as family obligations and personal choices from very different perspectives.

### **Masculinity**

Chen and Starosta (2005) describe this dimension as “the extent to which stereotypically masculine and feminine traits prevail in the culture” (p. 53). Thus, “in masculine cultures, men are expected to be assertive, ambitious, and competitive; women are expected to be supportive, nurturing, and deferent” (Dainton & Zelle, 2011, p. 186). Masculine cultures include Japan (95), Australia (61), Venezuela (73) and the U.K. (66), while feminine cultures include Sweden (5), Norway (8), Denmark (16), Portugal (31), and Thailand (34) (Chen & Starosta, 2005, pp. 53-54; The Hofstede Centre, n.d.)

### **Long-term Orientation**

Cultures with a long-term orientation are characterized by “thrift, savings, perseverance, and the willingness to subordinate one’s self to achieve a goal” (Dainton & Zelle, 2011, p. 187), while life in cultures with a short-term orientation “centers on a desire for immediate gratification” (p. 187). Additionally, short-term-orientation cultures emphasize the past, stability, universal morality, nationalism, and luck; long-term-orientation cultures place emphasis on the future, adaptability, situational morality, internationalism, and effort (Hofstede, 2011). For comparison, Canada, China, the U.S., Germany, and Japan have long-term orientations of 36, 87, 26, 83, and 88, respectively (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.).

## **Indulgence**

In the cultural dimensions framework, a culture inclined towards indulgence suggests “a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15). In essence, cultures with high indulgence scores place greater value on seeking happiness, compared to cultures that lean toward restraint. Research related to this dimension reveals an indulgence score of 24 for China, 48 for France, 68 for the U.S., 72 for Ghana, and 80 for Trinidad and Tobago (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.).

### **Examples of Primary Research**

The origins of the cultural dimensions framework go back to Hofstede’s work in the personnel research department of IBM Europe in the 1970s, a position that gained him access to survey data on employees from more than fifty countries, collected through over 100,000 questionnaires over a four-year period (Hofstede, 2011). In analyzing the data, Hofstede incidentally noticed correlations between the data for four key values and the nationalities of employees. To verify that this had nothing to do with IBM’s culture, Hofstede later administered the same questionnaires to about 400 respondents from 30 countries and found significant corroboration of the IBM findings (Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede reported his discoveries related to the four dimensions—power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and femininity—in the book *Culture’s Consequences*. Following the book’s publication, as noted earlier, Hofstede’s partnership with fellow researchers Bond and Minkov led to the addition of the long-term orientation and indulgence dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

### **Recent Research and Applications**

The cultural dimensions framework has been applied widely in several research contexts to help understand and analyze the impact of culture on various spheres of activity. These

include public relations and corporate social responsibility practices and perceptions (Bae & Kim, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2010; Hackert, Krumwiede, Tokle, & Vokurka, 2012), business management and leadership (Alzeban, 2015; Busse, 2014; Carrasco, Francoeur, Labelle, Laffarga, & Ruiz-Barbadillo, 2015; Pressentin, 2015; Rejchrt & Higgs, 2015; Tavakoli, Keenan, & Crnjak-Karanovic, 2003), and the impact of culture on the use of media and technology (Mertens & d'Haenens, 2014; Pérez, 2014; Zahedi & Gaurav, 2011). There have also been research applications of the dimensional paradigm in the areas of marketing and sales (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Ming-Yi, 2013; Samaha, Beck, & Palmatier, 2014; Tianjiao, 2014; Yang, 2011), human resources, career-related activities, and workplace interactions (Ellis, 2012; Morrow, Rothwell, Burford, & Illing, 2013; Sartorius, Merino, & Carmichael, 2011), and in education (Cheung & Chan 2010; Goodall, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

As this paper has shown, the cultural dynamics paradigm, developed by Hofstede with notable contributions from Bond and Minkov, has had a significant impact, both as a practical tool for understanding other cultures and as a framework used by researchers across several disciplines to investigate the consequences of culture. For intercultural interactants, the six dimensions—power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, long-term orientation, and indulgence—serve as concise, accessible, and potentially powerful tools for gaining a better understanding of each other's values and beliefs and how they influence and shape corresponding communication behaviors.



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