

The many dimensions of culture

Academic Commentary by Harry C. Triandis

I first met Geert Hofstede in 1973, at the Congress of the International Association of Applied Psychology in Liege, Belgium. He mentioned to a group of delegates at the Congress that he had a large data set that he was going to analyze and offered to take us to Brussels to look at it. We were quite impressed.

A few years later, Sage Publications asked me to review the manuscript that became the 1980 book. I recommended publication most enthusiastically. I found the individualism-collectivism dimension particularly helpful, because it organized many of the observations of research I had done in the 1960s in traditional Greece and in Illinois.¹ For instance, I observed that Greeks behaved much more differently when they interacted with an ingroup (e.g., the family) than with an outgroup (e.g., strangers) than did the samples from Illinois. The Greeks behaved much more under the influence of norms (what should I do?) than of attitudes (what would I like to do?) than was true for Americans. They defined who they were in more social terms. Many social behaviors were associated with intimacy in Greece to a greater extent than was the case in Illinois. For example, upon meeting a "new friend," the Greeks might ask: "How much do you earn per month?" which was not a likely question in Illinois.

At the time I reviewed the Hofstede book, I was also studying Hispanics in the USA. Many of the findings could be understood much better if the individualism-collectivism dimension was taken into account. For example, we found when we presented several hundred situations to our samples of Hispanics and non-Hispanics and asked them to rate the probability of different behaviors in those situations that the answers fell into a particular pattern. When the behavior was positive, the Hispanic average rating of the probability was higher than the rating of the non-Hispanics, but when the behavior was negative, the Hispanic average rating of the probability was lower than the rating of the non-Hispanics. We called this the *simpatico*

script,² because it is characteristic of people who want to have good relationships with others, i.e., want others to see them as "simpatico."

The other dimensions of Hofstede's 1980 book—Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity-Femininity—are also interesting. In what follows I will first make some general comments about Hofstede's work, then will discuss the individualism-collectivism dimension and stress its importance in the recent literature in psychology and organizational studies, and finally I will touch on the other dimensions.

The Importance of Hofstede's Work

When I started working as a psychologist, in the mid-1950s, the study of culture was of marginal significance. Psychologists favored cross-cultural studies only as a means of confirming that their findings were universal and eternal. By contrast, I felt that culture was a central topic for psychology because, like Hofstede, I am multicultural and multilingual and I reacted to many of the "important" findings of social psychology by saying to myself: "This would not make sense in X culture." Most psychologists in the 1950-80 period held the view that "cultural differences are for anthropologists to work on." While there were some psychologists who paid serious attention to culture, such as Klineberg whose text on social psychology included much cultural material, and some who collaborated with anthropologists, like Jerry Bruner and Bill Lambert and Wally Lambert, the majority view was that "culture is none of our business." The minority view held, by contrast, that culture is so pervasive that all psychology should be a cultural psychology.

Culture "Inside" the Person

The Hofstede book increased the influence of the minority. But culture was still thought of as "out there" and thus of little importance for psycholo-

gists. A major turning point occurred when culture started to be conceived of as "inside" the person. This view argues that all psychological processes have a cultural component. This perspective was common in the Soviet Union, among the followers of Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev, and it entered psychology when Michael Cole,³ who had studied there, insisted that a "cultural psychology" should be added to the "cross-cultural psychology." But Cole was not "mainstream." The change occurred when well-established mainstream psychologists like Hazel Markus⁴ and Dick Nisbett⁵ of the University of Michigan became converted. The conversion occurred when their students, such as Kitayama and Peng, convinced them that what was true in Michigan was not true in Japan or China. When these mainstream psychologists went to the Far East, they became fascinated and converted.

The Turning Point

I think that in the field of psychology a critical turning point occurred with the publication of the Markus & Kitayama⁶ review, which essentially showed that there are major cultural differences in cognition, emotion, and motivation. Psychologists suddenly realized that what was considered universal in psychology is true only in the West, e.g., in individualist cultures; it is not valid everywhere. Of course this work required antecedents, and Hofstede, as well as Triandis,⁷ was among the antecedents needed to make that argument. In any case, the Markus and Kitayama paper shifted the field. Instead of culture being something at the margin of psychology, it became a vital topic. Between 1984 and 2000 the number of papers in the major psychology journals that were concerned with culture increased seven-fold!⁸ Many mainstream psychological findings were no longer eternal verities, but depended on time and place.

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An interesting indication of the change in the "culture of psychology" was the story of the writing of the chapter on culture for the *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (Dunnette & Hough). Dunnette asked me to write it in 1985. I wrote the first draft, but the volume that was to

include it was delayed because the other authors were late in delivering their chapters. A couple of years later, I was asked to update the culture chapter, which I did. Again the others were late, and a couple of years later Dunnette asked me to update it again, which I did. By 1992 the field had changed so much that Dunnette asked me to edit a whole international volume (!) for the *Handbook*.⁹ Hofstede's work was referenced almost 70 times in that volume.

The Cultural and Individual Levels of Analysis

An important contribution of Hofstede's work was the emphasis on the distinction between the cultural and individual levels of analysis. His work was at the cultural level, and at that level individualism and collectivism are on opposite poles. But when serious work at the individual level of analysis was undertaken, Individualism was split into several facets (such as Distance from Ingroups, Hedonism, and Competition), and Collectivism was split into such factors as Family Integrity and Sociability. These factors were no longer on opposite poles but could be correlated, so that a person could be high in both collectivist and individualist tendencies. For example, one study has shown that people who were raised in a collectivist culture and then lived in an individualist culture for several years were high in both collectivism and individualism.¹⁰ Other studies suggested that people who were high on both individualism and collectivism were better adjusted and could deal with adversities more successfully. It is almost like the argument that one should invest in a diversified portfolio!

The Detractors

Hofstede has had his detractors. Scholars come in at least two varieties: Those who are creative and those who are critical. Hofstede is creative and, while he tries to be methodologically sophisticated, there are places where he can be criticized. The critics¹¹ are usually not creative, and they do inflate themselves by disparaging others. My reaction to McSweeney's paper was that he made some valid points but "the perfect is the enemy of the good."

I see no point in rehashing the arguments of the critics. I think they are summarized by the previous quote.

In short, Hofstede's work has become the standard against which new work on cultural differences is validated. Almost every publication that

deals with cultural differences and includes many cultures is likely to reference Hofstede.

Individualism and Collectivism: The Most Important Dimension

In 1980 I started studying the individualism-collectivism dimension in greater detail. Over the years this dimension has become the most important in studying cultural differences, though the other four Hofstede dimensions also deserve attention.

In a paper I wrote on the occasion of the publication of the second edition of Hofstede's book,¹² I argued that there are scores of dimensions of cultural variation. Some dimensions are "primary" and directly linked to variations in ecology. Other dimensions are "secondary" having evolved from the primary dimensions, the way *homo sapiens* has evolved from *homo habilis*. Hofstede has identified many of the primary dimensions.

The Research

In the course of the last 25 years, many people have worked on the individualism-collectivism dimension, and some of the findings are worth recording. First, the perceptions and behavior of people in collectivist cultures are different from the perceptions and behavior of people in individualist cultures.¹³ Among the most important characteristics of people in collectivist cultures relative to those in individualist cultures is the emphasis on context more than on content. For instance, in communication they pay more attention to how something is said (tone of voice, gestures) than to what is said. This can lead to catastrophic results, as happened in Geneva in 1991. Secretary of State James Baker told the Iraqis "We will attack you if you do not get out of Kuwait," and they understood that the Americans would not attack, because Baker was calm and did not seem to be angry! What a mistake!

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In addition, collectivists see people as relatively mutable and the environment as relatively immutable; individualists see individuals as stable entities, no matter what the environment. Collectivists see behavior as due to external factors, such as norms and roles, more than due to internal factors, such as attitudes and personality. Further-

more, they see the self as interdependent with ingroups. But the self changes depending on the ingroup one is with. In individualist cultures the self is stable.

In collectivist cultures people give priority to ingroup goals rather than to personal goals. They pay more attention to norms than to attitudes. They see interpersonal relationships as more stable than do people in individualist cultures.¹⁴ There is now also considerable information about cultural differences in thought patterns.¹⁵

As we studied individualism and collectivism in different cultures, we realized that within culture there are individuals who are *idiocentric* (think, feel, and behave like people in individualist cultures) as well as individuals who are *allocentric* (like people in collectivist cultures). Collectivist cultures have somewhere between 30 and 100 per cent allocentrics; individualist cultures have somewhere between zero and 35 per cent allocentrics. Individualist cultures have somewhere between 35 and 100 per cent idiocentrics, while collectivist cultures have somewhere between zero and 35 per cent idiocentrics. Idiocentrics in collectivist cultures feel dominated by the culture and want to escape it. The democracy movement in Tian an Men Square in China is an example. Allocentrics in individualist cultures feel the need to join groups—associations, unions, social movements, a kibbutz, a commune.

Idiocentrics were found to be high in expressiveness, dominance, initiation of action, aggressiveness, logical arguments, regulation of flow of communication, eye contact, tended to finish the task, and had strong opinions. Allocentrics were high on accommodating and avoidance of argument, and they shifted their opinions more easily than did idiocentrics.

Tendencies toward idiocentrism or allocentrism are influenced by many factors. Idiocentrism increases with affluence, when the person has a leadership role, much education, has done much international travel, and has been socially mobile. In addition, it is more likely if the person has migrated to a culture other than the culture of upbringing and has been socialized in a bilateral family (where both the mother's and father's relatives were influential). Furthermore, idiocentrism increases when the person has been greatly exposed to the Western mass media or has been acculturated for years to a Western culture.¹⁶

Allocentrism is more likely if the person has been financially dependent on some ingroup, is of low social class, has had limited education, has done little travel, has been socialized in a unilat-

eral family (e.g., where only the father's family norms are present), is traditionally religious, and has been acculturated to a collectivist culture.¹⁷

Research showed that allocentrics in collectivist situations are especially cooperative, but idiocentrics are not, and no one is very cooperative in individualistic situations.¹⁸ Thus the kind of situation in which one is interacting with another person must also be considered.

Noting the number of topics that have been found to be relevant to individualism and collectivism, we can see the importance of this dimension. Unfortunately, however, most of the research was done in East Asia and North America, and we are not yet sure that the findings that will be summarized below also apply to other collectivist and individualist cultures.

Hofstede identified Power Distance as an important dimension of cultural variation. This dimension interacts with individualism and collectivism in interesting ways, resulting in different kinds of individualism and collectivism.¹⁹ For example, we can consider horizontal and vertical varieties of individualism and collectivism. Horizontal individualism (HI) is found most commonly in Scandinavia, where people want to do their own thing but do not want to "stick out." Vertical individualism (VI) is more common in the US, especially in competitive situations, where people want to be "the best" and to be noticed by others. Americans often want to be on television and to be mentioned in the newspapers (see the crowds in front of NBC in the morning, waving at their relatives). Horizontal collectivism (HC) is typical of the Israeli kibbutz. Vertical collectivism (VC) is found in traditional cultures such as rural China or India.

A test has been developed that assesses what per cent of the time, in different situations, people use one of these four patterns. For example, in a study²⁰ of Danish and American students, the Danish sample used the HI pattern 49 per cent of the time, across situations; the American sample used it 44 per cent of the time. The Danish sample used HC 35 per cent of the time, while the American sample used it 28 per cent of the time. The Danes used VI 8 per cent of the time and the Americans 22 per cent of the time. The Danes used VC 8 per cent of the time and the Americans 6 per cent of the time. In these studies a difference of 2 per cent is statistically highly significant. Thus, we see rather important differences between the two kinds of individualist societies. In collectivist cultures studies have shown higher levels of VC (of the order of 15 per cent) than are shown above.

Implications for Working in Another Culture

When teaching people to work in another culture, it is helpful to mention to them some of the findings outlined above. The individualism-collectivism framework becomes a general way of thinking about cultural differences and facilitates learning about the other culture.

In individualist cultures, studies found greater use of individualist human resource practices. For example, people were selected on the basis of individual attributes, while in collectivist cultures they were selected on the basis of group memberships. Other things being equal, there is more training in collectivist than in individualist cultures because employees are more loyal to the organization and high in organization commitment, so that they are less likely to leave the organization. Paternalism is a more common leadership style in collectivist than in individualist cultures. In fact, the boss is much more involved in the personal life of employees, knows much more about them, and does more helpful things on their behalf in collectivist than in individualist cultures. For example, a boss might find a spouse for an employee, might send congratulations when the employee's child graduates from high school, or send condolences when a member of the employee's family dies.

Managers in collectivist cultures are not as concerned with performance as managers in individualist cultures are, but they are more concerned with interpersonal relationships than managers in individualist cultures are.

As countries become more affluent, their populations become more individualist. However, this change requires several generations. We do not know how long it takes for a complete switch from collectivism to individualism, but even in individualist cultures we find collectivist elements (see above).

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With the recent concern about deception in organizations around the world (Enron, etc.), it is interesting to note that the individualism-collectivism dimension has some relevance. Triandis et al.²¹ found that people in vertical collectivist cultures are likely to use deception if it helps their ingroup; however, people who are vertical idiocentrics are also likely to use deception. In this case,

competitiveness and the need to be "the best" (i.e., have the most impressive organization) seem to be the factors that increase the use of deception.

In sum, the individualism-collectivism dimension has generated a great deal of research, some of which is summarized above. The Power Distance dimension was closely linked with it in Hofstede's study and was here presented as resulting in horizontal and vertical kinds of individualism and collectivism.

Uncertainty Avoidance: Tight and Loose Cultures

The Uncertainty Avoidance dimension of Hofstede has also stimulated some corresponding research. There are major cultural differences among cultures in the extent to which they are tight or loose.²² In tight cultures there are many rules, norms, and standards for correct behavior. For example, there are strict rules about how to smile or bow. In loose cultures there are few rules, norms, or standards. Furthermore, when people do not follow a rule, when they break a norm or ignore a standard, in tight cultures they are likely to be criticized, punished, or even killed. In loose cultures people in that situation are likely to say: "It does not matter."

Tightness requires agreement about norms. This is more likely when the culture is isolated, so that it is not influenced by other cultures. Furthermore, cultural homogeneity is obviously needed for a culture to be tight. Finally, in cultures with high population density, tightness is particularly functional, since it helps regulate behavior so that people do the right thing at the right time and can thus interact smoothly and with little interpersonal conflict.

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Japan is a tight culture; it was even tighter in the 19th century than it is now. People in Japan are often afraid that they will act inappropriately, that they will be criticized. Getting drunk in Japan is particularly helpful because it is an occasion when one can relax and break all norms, and people excuse the inappropriate behaviors.

Japanese teenagers who spend some years in the US, which is a relatively loose culture, find it very difficult to return to Japan, because they are

criticized for trivial behaviors such as having too much tan (there is more sunshine in the US than in Japan) or having the "wrong" hairdo. One major problem in Japanese high schools is that young people gang up on one fellow student who has deviated from "proper behavior," such as using an upper-class accent when most fellow students use a different accent.

The Taliban in Afghanistan was one of the most extreme cases of a tight society. They executed people right and left for "offenses" such as listening to music!

Thailand is a loose culture. When people do not do what they are supposed to do, other people may just smile and let it go. Thailand is not at all isolated, since it is sandwiched between the major cultures of China and India. People have different points of view about "correct" behavior, so there is much tolerance when others do not behave "appropriately."

The US is in between. However, the US in the 1940s was much tighter than it is now. One clue of tightness is the extent to which people wear more or less the same type of clothing. In the 1950s, for instance, going to a party required coat and tie. Now one can go in almost anything, except a bathing suit! Organizations also differ in how tight they are. Some require coat and tie, and others allow their employees to wear whatever they like.

Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance is related to tightness. In cultures high in Uncertainty Avoidance, people want to have structure, to know precisely how they are supposed to behave and what is going to happen next. Predictability of events is highly valued.

There is research on tightness. For example, across a large number of societies, there is a correlation between tightness and collectivism.²³ One study found more agreement about the meaning of concepts in Japan than in the USA.²⁴ Gelfand at the University of Maryland is at present summarizing data from 35 cultures that measure tightness and its societal correlates.

Other Dimensions of Cultural Variation

A major dimension of cultural variation is cultural complexity. It contrasts hunters and gatherers with information societies. However, because organizational psychologists deal mostly with industrial societies, this dimension is not relevant. Nevertheless one can mention that in combination with tightness-looseness it seems to be related to collectivism and individualism. Collectivist cultures are both tight and simple; individualist cultures

are both loose and complex.²⁵ Research by Carpenter²⁶ has supported this point.

The masculinity-femininity dimension has received less attention in the literature than the other dimensions. Masculinity is correlated with domestic political violence and other phenomena. Hofstede summarized several studies that included this dimension in his books, especially in the second edition of *Culture's Consequences*.²⁷ This book summarizes recent work regarding each of the Hofstede dimensions. It includes almost 900 references to recent publications that have contributed something to our understanding of these dimensions.

The Influence of Hofstede's Dimensions

Thus each of the important dimensions of cultural variation has been uncovered by Hofstede. The dimensions he identified are relevant to how people function in industrial societies. We can look at the way these dimensions influence psychological processes and organizational behaviors in many cultures. The dimensions have generated a tremendous amount of research and have been highly influential in all the social sciences.

Endnotes

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¹⁹ Triandis, 1995.

²⁰ Nelson, M. R., & Shavitt, S. 2002. Horizontal and vertical individualism and achievement values: A multimethod examination of Denmark and the United States. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 33: 439-458.

²¹ Triandis, H. C., et al. 2001. Culture, personality and deception: A multilevel approach. *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, 1: 73-90.

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²³ Carpenter, S. 2000. Effects of cultural tightness and collectivism on self-concept and causal attributions. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 34: 38-56.

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²⁵ Triandis, Dunnette, & Hough.

²⁶ Carpenter.

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