

Research on cultures: how to use it in training?

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Abstract: This article targets researchers who use culture as a control variable and trainers or consultants who use it when they speak about leadership, communication, management or other aspects of working life. It briefly sketches the state of the art in the study of culture. By and large the dimensional paradigm first introduced by Hofstede and expanded upon by many others has proven very useful. It is unfortunately opposed by some who use dimensions at the level of the individual and thus confuse dimensions with stereotypes. The article then gives some advice to researchers of cross-cultural issues. In these, making a clear separation between the concepts of culture as something implicit and group identity as something conscious is important. Finally, a number of tips for trainers are presented.

Keywords: culture; national culture; training; group identity; dimensional model; stereotypes; group-level selection; leadership; management; using theory; cross-cultural research; open-world assumption.

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Biographical notes: Gert Jan Hofstede is a population Biologist who has worked as a Computer Programmer, Researcher in information systems and a Teacher in cross-cultural management. He holds a PhD in Production Planning of Wageningen University where he is an Associate Professor in Information Management. His enduring interest is in the biological and historical causes, the modelling and the societal and organisational consequences of human culture. He lectures and trains widely across the world in both academia and the business world. He creates and uses simulation games as an instrument for learning about the cultural aspects of social behaviour.

1 A rich but problematic concept

Since the seminal publication of *Culture's Consequences* in 1980 (Hofstede, 1980), the world has embarked on an intense process of globalisation. This has greatly enhanced the demand for cross-cultural competency among all kinds of people from many parts of the world. But the concept remains fraught with controversy. Why is this so and what should users of cross-cultural research do? These are issues addressed here.

A note from the author: Readers might expect a partial view from a son of Geert Hofstede. I shall try to be impartial, but it is true that I know that work better than I know a lot of other studies. It is also true that I believe that Geert's work is seminal, far too little understood and often far too flippantly attacked by people who should know better. But I see that as a compliment for the work, if not for those critics. I also believe Geert Hofstede's work to be a building block, not a monument and I find value in lots of other studies.

2 The dimensional paradigm

The concept of culture as a set of unwritten rules of social interaction is very old. Since the beginning of civilisation, travellers have commented on the ways of other peoples. In the past century anthropologists have attempted to enumerate basic problems of society. But Geert Hofstede (1980) introduced and updated (Hofstede, 2001) a new paradigm that made the concept of culture more accessible to many. Basing himself on empirical analysis of a very large, stratified sample across many countries, he provided firm empirical evidence for the idea that culture is the way in which a group – in his case, a society – handles a set of basic issues of social life. This led to his much-used four-dimensional, later five-dimensional model of culture.

Other authors have since then come up with variations on the paradigm of dimensional models. They include Inglehart (1997), the GLOBE team (House et al., 2004), Schwartz (1994), Triandis (1995), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) and recently Minkov (2007). One can argue about the relative merits of the work of these authors, but that is not my present concern. All of these models and more can be put to use in trying to clarify cross-cultural experiences and each of them has its strong points. One can think of them as tools serving related purposes. It is not because one has a Swiss army knife that one does not need a saw every now and then. My prediction is that due to its simplicity, empirical base and predictive power, Hofstede's model will stand the test of time best and be the best building block for future development of theory. I see dimension-discovering studies at regional level or other levels in between nation and individual, as promising. Evidence on regional cultures so far is quite limited.

In recent research in psychology, a fashion has arisen to consider culture at the level of the individual. I would argue that this is not fruitful. We became cultural beings through group-level selection (Richerson and Boyd, 2005; Wilson, 2007) and we did so precisely because these competing groups need rules in order to function; this is the essence of culture. Analyses at individual level can be used for many purposes. But they will tend to reproduce personality factors, not culture dimensions.

3 Dimensions and stereotypes

One of the big misunderstandings about these dimensional models is that they describe each and every individual from a particular society and a related fear that this constitutes a pejorative value statement – in other words, a stereotype. If some trainers use these models in this way, they are dead wrong. Instead dimensional model describe the unwritten rules of society. That is, they describe expectations and norms about how to behave in social life, e.g., between parent and child, among members of different in-groups, different hierarchical levels, different ages and genders. Dimensional models by no means preclude the idea of variety and change in society; of course every society is immensely complex, with vast differences between its members and with change occurring all the time. The dimensional work enables to make predictions about the kinds of organisation and changes that might occur in societies.

To see how the confusion between the level of the individual and that of society can impede research, consider the following quote from the public report of a European Union project on ‘Cultural differences in European cooperation’ [CULTPLAN, (2007), p.11]:

“CULTPLAN set out to provide recommendations for dealing with cultural influences: recommendations that were not based on cultural stereotypes and would not lead to new forms of stereotyping. This posed a dilemma in relation to research conventions in this field. Technically, it would have been feasible to map all the regional cultures in Europe and draw up guidelines as to how to deal with them (...). But this constructivist approach was considered likely to propagate stereotyping instead of producing new knowledge that could replace it. On principle, therefore, the choice was made to focus on revealing the manifestation of culture on the social practice of cooperation in INTERREG in a very open-minded way.”

While of course open-minded observation is crucially important and obviously better than to issue directives without observing practice first, these authors have failed to observe ground rules of scientific methodology. There is no reason why the researchers should not have followed a proven three-step approach. Start by putting forward hypotheses based on theory, for instance, dimensional models of culture and perhaps models of culture shock, group dynamics or leadership. Then go out into the field and do open-minded data collection, the content of which is informed by the theory. Finally check the observations against the hypotheses to see whether the empirical evidence confirmed, contradicted or complemented that knowledge. This opportunity was missed in CULTPLAN. To be fair, they did start with a theory (Gullestrup, 2006). But they did not do more than pay lip service to the model in the analysis of their findings. As a result, a variety of scattered observations about regional differences without integrating framework are found in the concluding chapter.

Moral: a theory should be used as a tool for understanding; the issue is: what can the theory help me make sense of? Avoid making it a religion, in which the issue becomes: am I a believer or not?

4 Interpretative studies

The practice of describing the basic value orientation of groups of people in a limited set of numbers has not appealed to all. A variety of social scientific fields of study with names such as interpretative anthropology (Lie, 2003) take the construction of interpretations in everyday interactions as their source of data. The reason is that culture is assumed not to be directly observable. This is true. The workaround of the dimension paradigm is to compare group averages across cultures – and most social scientists tend to work differently. They study individuals in action. While this can be a very good research method, it is not directly usable for the study of culture at the level of society. Consider the statement by Lie (2003, p.54):

“the conclusion must be that all cultural identities are fragmented and hybrid in many aspects; they are constructed (formed) out of different cultural spheres. At a community level these elements are adopted, rejected, changed, adjusted and reshaped to fit in the already existing collective identity. This process (...) is what makes identities dynamic.”

While this is undoubtedly true it is not a reason to refrain from using the dimensional paradigm. Just like field work in vegetation analysis can be helped along by charting the total territory from a helicopter, ‘field work-based’ interpretative and ‘helicopter-based’ dimensional work need not bite. In practice and regrettably, many separate parochial research communities have formed and fail to inform one another’s literature. But remember: just because one is handy with a Swiss army knife does not mean that a saw or a hammer, cannot be useful at times. It depends on the task at hand.

Moral: clarity in defining concepts is crucial, in particular, being clear about the level of aggregation (individual, group, society) at which concepts apply. This can guide the choice of theory or theories. Methods at different levels of aggregation can complement one another.

5 Culture and identity

The quote from Lie (2003) also illustrates a difference in dialect in the literature that baffles many: the confusion between culture and identity. Of course the two concepts are used interchangeably in popular parlance. But researchers and trainers need to be precise. Lie speaks about ‘cultural identity’. As I define these concepts, a better term would be ‘group identity’. This is because it is frequently the case that groups with separate identities are very similar in culture, as in the Balkans or that people with different cultural backgrounds assemble in a single group with a single identity, as in today’s professional soccer teams or in any intercultural team.

My preference is to speak of identity as that which a person or group believes itself to be, while culture is the unwritten rules of the social game in a group or society. So although both terms denote a distinction, identity is conscious, whereas culture is usually unconscious. Identity could be about individuals or groups, while culture is about groups only. So let us take a close look at both concepts.

5.1 *Identity is explicit*

Anyone can put into words their identity, for instance ‘a woman’, ‘a bicultural individual’ and ‘a US citizen’. In fact a single person could tell you any of these three things, depending on the setting in which you asked her. Identity is potentially very flexible and context-dependent, although the degree to which it is so depends on culture. In individualistic, complex societies, people can have several identities and it is relatively easy to change the identity portfolio. One can become a member, change one’s style, move house. This kind of changeable identity is congruent with life in multicultural, fluid societies such as city life, academia or business. This is the kind of life that fits with Lie’s description.

In collectivistic societies, in which most of the world’s population still live, one conceives as oneself much more as a small part of the community, whether this is ethnic, regional or national and the sense of identity derives mainly of that group affiliation.

5.2 *Culture is implicit*

In stark contrast to this, talking about our own culture is very difficult to most of us, because in order to talk about it meaningfully we need to understand it first and one can only understand one’s actions from a culture point of view if one first understands motivations, taboos and emotions. Culture is about the small print of how people in different parts of the world deal with these things differently in similar social settings. Our own culture is to us like the air we breathe and another culture is like water – and it takes special skills to be able to survive in both media. The most essential part of culture is learned in youth and it is very hard to change subsequently, hence phenomena such as culture shock upon emigration or remigration. While it is certainly true that in mixed-culture groups, working cultures develop that strike compromises, this does not erase the underlying differences in basic values. In fact a lot of intercultural training is precisely about how to reach well-functioning operational cultures when differences in basic values exist. Good leadership and a sense of common purpose, so that a certain sense of shared identity arises, are important elements.

Moral: clarity in defining the concepts culture and identity is crucial. They are linked in many ways but should not be confused.

6 **Culture as the transcendental?**

People have evolved so as to be highly cultural. As a result of this evolution, establishing their group identity is crucial to them. They spend enormous amounts of time communicating group affiliation information to the world around them and engaging in bonding behaviour, through the heroes, symbols and rituals they adopt.

Argyris (1957) noted that people are very good at covering up their intentions in communication and then covering up the cover-up to themselves. This is the sort of mechanism that makes culture elusive to introspection. We internalise our culture and use it as a moral compass. Inspecting one’s moral compass is surrounded by taboo. As a result of this, it is hard to make people understand the concept of culture unless they have firsthand, vivid experience of cultural differences. But how can one tell whether a group experience or encounter is cross-cultural or not? The concept of culture is not always

defined by those who speak about it and if you ask them you might receive answers that verge on the transcendental: a communion of souls, a spirit, a shared identity (yes!), a brotherhood... It is actually really nice to hear such descriptions. But they describe group identity and the emotions attached. They do not directly describe culture.

There is nothing transcendental about culture. Good leaders, teachers and trainers have the ability to create a harmonious group in which shared positive feelings occur. Participants of such a group are eager to be allowed to believe that their group has a very special culture. They want nothing better than being proud of their group and engaging in rituals that enhance group solidarity. But this is not 'culture', it's just shared good feeling. It does provide a very positive group identity.

Incidentally, it is the case that any group, once it operates, develops its own unwritten rules of interaction. And it is true that these constitute that group's culture. But when members enter a group as adults this cultural programming will never be remotely as powerful as is the programming of infants by the groups that surround them.

Moral: it is difficult it is to speak about culture analytically, because we are conditioned to internalise it.

7 Tips for trainers

So what does all of this imply for leaders of cross-cultural teams and for trainers in cross-cultural issues? One approach certainly does not fit all; different people have different styles and backgrounds.

Here are some tips that have worked for me and will hopefully work for others. I am assuming the context of a class, though some tips can also be used in other settings. More elaborate advice can be found in my book for trainers (Hofstede et al., 2002).

7.1 Create a safe atmosphere

If participants to a session are anxious they will be defensive and tend to look for social safety within as narrow a group as they can create around themselves. They might close off or they might form a subgroup with in-group co-participants. In this way much of what you try to tell them or what happens between participants, will be interpreted in the light of their anxiety. Moreover it will disturb the rest of the group. Learning will be distorted. So the first and foremost thing to do and it can take quite some time, is creating a safe atmosphere in which everyone present is part of one group. If this cannot be done, that is issue number one to solve.

7.2 Use first-hand experience

People have difficulty being introspective about culture. That is why creating a shared experience by doing exercises together is a very good way of creating material for discussion. But there is also a risk involved. Such experience should stay well clear of the taboos of any of the participants or defensive avoidance will set in.

7.3 Use any theory, but use it

You could use any theory that does the work for your purpose. But make sure that you actually use any theory that you present in explaining actual events, whether they occur in your class or were reported by participants as homework exercise or were supplied by you as course materials. It is counterproductive to present theory and not use it as a tool to analyse actual events. Dimensional models of culture are, because of their seeming simplicity, particularly vulnerable to being misunderstood and to be taken for stereotyping tools if they are just dropped on the participants.

7.4 Adopt an open-world assumption

The closed-world assumption holds that if something is unknown or unclear, then it is wrong. It can be useful in formal systems of thought. But in a cross-cultural class it quickly leads to the situation that everything is wrong except the most dogmatic statements. The open-world assumption is more fruitful. It holds that if something is unknown or unclear, it merits further discussion, investigation or explanation. These activities will allow participants to see that any concept that is not utterly trivial can have a different meaning in a different appreciative setting. Be careful of not making the closed-world assumption, for instance out of a fear that your authority as a trainer could be questioned.

7.5 Be well prepared

Of course, you can only afford to follow the advice above if you are knowledgeable and well prepared. It is an open door but in a subject area as vast and taboo-ridden as culture, half work can do a lot of damage. Cross-cultural simulation games can sometimes reinforce stereotypes rather than take them away. Be sure to prepare well and especially to debrief well, so that participants can get over any stressful emotions and achieve learning.

7.6 Do not expect miracles in one day of training

By now it should be clear that it makes no sense to teach the concept of culture in an intellect-only modus. Without awareness of the flesh-and-blood quality of culture, of how it shapes desires, life aims and fears, there is no way that essential features of dimensional models will be understood by participants. Firsthand experience is almost a necessary precondition. Reflection and internalisation, is so too. Having the introspective ability to know one's own motivations is also indispensable.

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