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CRITICISMS

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions:

The Basics and the Criticisms

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Abstract

Hofstede's model (1980) has been used widely in research in the past two decades. The culture-based model consists of four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. Each of these dimensions was identified through the use of group-level data collected from IBM branches in 40 different countries. Despite the contributions of the model to cultural research, it has faced many criticisms over the years. Some in-principle criticisms include: the level of analysis used (i.e. group vs. individual), the potential for stereotyping, methodological concerns, and whether the simplicity of the model truly accommodates the complexity of culture. Even with these criticisms, cultural research continues to rely on Hofstede's model as a starting point to quantitatively examine culture.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions: The Basics and the Criticisms

Geert Hofstede made a considerable contribution not only to the field of psychology, but also to all disciplines. The publication of his book *Culture's Consequences* (Hofstede, 1980) helped to further orient the world to differences among cultures, and to begin the process of defining cultural differences using a common language. Hofstede posited that the question: "Do American theories apply abroad?" was the beginning of a "paradigm shift à la Thomas Kuhn" (Hoppe, 2004). Although Hofstede's book was not the first to address cultural issues and did not cause an immediate orientation to cultural ideas, the importance of culture became more widespread and has been increasing in importance in such fields as applied psychology, international business, and the social sciences ever since. In fact, prior to Hofstede's publication, the field of cultural research was often delegated to the anthropologists, and was not truly recognized as having a part in mainstream science (Triandis, 2004). Following his book, however, cultural was able to carve a niche for itself in psychology.

Given the importance of Hofstede's research in pushing the cultural movement forward in psychology, this paper will begin by discussing the factors in Hofstede's theory. Following the introduction of his ideas, the criticisms surrounding the Hofstede's theory will be presented.

Hofstede's Model

Hofstede's research, based on information from 40 countries, identified 4 major dimensions on which cultures differ (Hofstede, 1980). They are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. Hofstede arrived at these dimensions through group level data analysis. Although this was the only

method available for analysis given the sample, Hofstede does recognize the need for individual and universal level analyses as well (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 2004).

Hofstede, however, was not the first to encounter the issue of levels of analysis in cultural research, arguments were already ongoing over the levels at which culture must be studied. In fact, one anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, made an in-principle argument that every culture must deal with several universal problems/circumstances, and thus advocated a standard framework for dealing with similar circumstances (Kluckhohn, 1953). This idea of levels of analysis will be discussed further throughout the following section.

The first cultural dimension examined is power distance. Power distance, as defined by Hofstede (1980), is a measure of interpersonal power or influence between a boss and a subordinate, as perceived by the subordinate. There is an important caveat to note in the measurement of power distance, as well as the other cultural dimensions. Power distance, which is typically measured at a national or collective level, must also be measured at an individual level. The reasoning behind this clarification is that a country as a whole may exhibit high power distance, but the distribution of individuals within the country typically follows a normal curve. Primarily, some people will be extremely high or low on power distance, but the majority center around the intermediate levels of power distance.

Despite the difference between national and individual levels of power distance, the individual does influence the national level. In a study done by Maznevski, DiStefano, Gomez, Noorderhaven, and Wu (2002), it was found that when cultural data was first gathered at the individual level then aggregated to the national level, there was a

difference in means between countries. This indicates that, the average individual level of power distance will be higher in a country that is ranked high on power distance. So what exactly influences the individual level of power distance? Such aspects as age, where you grew up, and if you moved away from the country help to determine each individual's level of power distance (Triandis, 2004; Yamada & Singelis, 1999). The idea of individual and national levels of analysis presented for power distance also holds true for the remaining three cultural dimensions.

The second dimension is uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance is determined by rule orientation, employment stability, and stress at both the individual and national levels; it can be defined as the amount of uncertainty that can be coped with. Some countries, at both the governmental and corporate level, aim to avoid uncertainty and take measures such as creating rules and organizational plans to deal with any possible contingency that may occur. In order to understand this concept better, an example given by Vishwanath (2003) will be examined. Given that uncertainty avoidance is determined determines how much ambiguity a person can handle or feel comfortable with, Vishwanath studied the area of online auctions, such as e-Bay. Vishwanath (2003) found that Americans were more likely to bid in online auctions than were Germans or Japanese. This heightened participation in an ambiguous activity is a result of Americans' lower need for structure. Because both Germany and Japan have higher overall uncertainty avoidance indexes (i.e. they do not feel comfortable with uncertainty), they do not participate in online auctions as frequently as Americans.

Individualism-collectivism is perhaps the best known of Hofstede's dimensions in today's literature and can be understood as the extent to which the self is defined in

relation to others. Individualism, which has been studied for over a decade (e.g., Kelly, 1901), relies on a multitude of factors ranging from the proximity of the family to whether the individual lives alone or with others. Other institutions such as education, religion, politics, and utilitarianism also determine the level of individualism. As with all aspects of culture, there is a national and individual level to each of these factors. Some researchers, including Yamada and Singelis (1999), take Hofstede's dimension further. Yamada and Singelis (1999) found empirical evidence that not only are two dimensions of individualism more appropriate when talking about the individual, but that a bicultural individual may differ on each of the two dimensions. More specifically, a person may differ on independent and interdependent self-image, such that in Western cultures the independent self is determined by relationships and societal roles, whereas the interdependent view is based primarily on context of the situation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). According to Yamada and Singelis (1999), participants who identified themselves as bi-cultural, and typically lived in one country but had family members born in another country, reported an interdependent self similar to the one that prevailed in the Traditional culture (similar to their family members collective nature at the cultural level), but an independent self similar to Western culture (where they currently live). Given this evidence, it is easy to see the importance of Hofstede's work and how it has propelled empirical research forward.

The final dimension identified by Hofstede in his 1980 book is masculinity-femininity. This dimension directly addresses the sex roles that are present throughout all cultures; the difference lies in how each society deals with these roles and whether or not they affect societal roles and activities. For example, organizational positions such as

nursing are typically more feminine roles, whereas executive positions are seen as more masculine roles. The question here is whether or not a society/culture subscribes to this structure of roles. One criticism of this dimension, however, is that it was defined using Western-based norms of gender, rather than utilizing a more global definition.

Furthermore, this dimension ignores the effects of history and geography as well as the function they have in shaping gender roles in each culture. For example, Hofstede assumed that warmer climates result in a more masculine culture and heightened violence as a consequence. The assumption that the masculine culture is what breeds violence is made without looking at the fact that wealth may not evenly distributed, or that ecological destruction may be playing a role in the heightened rather than the masculine nature of the culture. Finally, it would seem that classifying an entire culture as either masculine or feminine may eliminate the individual differences that are present within a culture, or even more dangerously, encourage investigators to overlook these differences. This fact speaks to the warning given by Hofstede to avoid taking group level data and trying to apply it to the individual. Despite these criticisms, however, the masculinity-femininity dimension is used quite frequently and is indeed present in everyday life. (Imwalle & Schillo, 2004)

Hofstede's work outlining the 4 major dimensions that exist across cultures has been very influential, as one might imagine. Not all researchers have supported or agreed with all of Hofstede's conclusions and findings however. Therefore, the next sections will aim to outline some of the key arguments against Hofstede's model and methodology.

General Criticisms of Hofstede's Work

Although the criticisms to Hofstede's cultural model are abundant, which is quite typical of any pioneer model, some include in-principle arguments, while others use empirical data to back up their claims. The majority of the critical arguments, however, are in-principle; therefore the information presented in the following sections will also consist of in-principle arguments. Several clear themes arise in the criticisms of Hofstede's work; methodological issues as well as levels of analysis problems present themselves in more than one venue (McSweeney, 2002; Smith, 2002). To make this point more clearly, I will present information from a series of discourses that were published in *Human Relations*, as well as other articles that present similar criticisms.

As discussed earlier in this paper, a levels of analysis approach was not something that Hofstede utilized in his first edition of *Cultural Consequences* (1980). Instead, he relied solely on group level data, and did not look at individual data. Researchers, such as Yamada and Singelis (1999), emphasized the idea of looking at levels in the cultural research forum. Hofstede, because of his data collection procedures, had no choice but to aggregate the data to group level. Furthermore, Hofstede realized this flaw in his data and stated that one cannot assume that related variables at the group level will also be related at the individual level and vice versa. Several recent studies have identified more accurate methods of dealing with cross-cultural data, however. More specifically, one option used by Williams and Best (as cited in Smith, 2002), is to have individuals describe what others around them both say and do. Although such data still require aggregation to the group level, they perhaps takes the focus off of the individual himself.

Related to this topic is individual stereotyping based on group level data. Inferring individual level information from group level data would result in a stereotype that may or may not be true. Although Hofstede warns against this way of thinking, it is not easy to resist the temptation, and he does not provide information or suggestions that would help readers and researchers avoid it (Imwalle & Schillo, 2004). Consequently, many researchers have fallen prey to stereotyping, including Hofstede himself. In fact, in the later chapters of his book, according to McSweeney (2002), Hofstede makes references to individual-level interpretations. The only case in which this would be acceptable is when the sample is completely or nearly completely homogenous in nature, and this rarely occurs. A viable solution to dealing with such challenges is to separately test hypotheses with both group- and individual-level data (Smith, 2002). Hofstede indeed recognizes such studies, but continues to disregard the individual-level analyses and focus solely on group-level findings.

This section has presented the most basic criticisms of Hofstede's work: the levels of analysis discussion and the problem with interpreting group-level data at the individual level. In the following section, more complicated issues surrounding Hofstede's theory will be examined. This will be done primarily through McSweeney's (2002) in-principle argument, and will include various responses to these ideas.

Underlying Assumptions of Hofstede's Model

McSweeney (2002) presents a compelling argument against Hofstede's model by showing a number of inherent methodological flaws. He argues that Hofstede makes several assumptions in his model of cultural research which are not necessarily true or valid. Therefore, in this section the paradigmatic approaches of the researchers involved

will be discussed to establish a common ground; several of the assumptions presented by McSweeney (2002) will be further examined; and finally both Hofstede's and others' response to these assertions will be presented (Hofstede, 2002; Williamson, 2002).

To begin this discussion it is important to define the paradigmatic approach Hofstede takes in his research. Researchers have described Hofstede's paradigm as functionalist. Although the precise meaning of the term "functionalist" is unclear in this setting, researchers do provide several points of reason for using it. First, Hofstede not only adopts "realist and deterministic assumptions" but also collects his data through the use of stratified samples. Furthermore, he uses data analysis techniques that ignore subjective interpretations. Finally, Hofstede is interested in making a model that is universally applicable (Williamson, 2002). McSweeney, however does not report the type of paradigmatic approach he uses in evaluating Hofstede's model and the flaws that he reports. In some instances it appears that he is also using a functionalist approach, but this may not be the case. Based on the potential difference in paradigmatic approaches it is necessary to evaluate the validity of the following criticisms very carefully.

The first assumption Hofstede (1980) makes in his research is that organizational, occupational, and national culture are independent of each other. This is a central tenet for Hofstede because cultural differences that he reports are said to be due to national culture, rather than the other two types of culture. Hofstede makes this assumption because both organizational culture (only IBM companies were sampled) and occupational culture (participants from different plants were matched based on job) were controlled for in the sample. However, McSweeney (2002) claims that it is not possible to treat each instance of a job title as though it is the same as all the others, because jobs

can differ from branch to branch and country to country. He made a similar argument for the organizational culture; not all IBM branches will be exactly the same or promote the same exact values, even if they are in the same country, despite the effort put forth by IBM to accomplish this. Furthermore, there is the concern that IBM workers may not generalize to the majority of the public in each of the forty countries (McSweeney, 2002; Williamson, 2002). In fact, many of the workers in smaller countries throughout the world are employed by family-owned and run businesses, not multinational corporations.

Hofstede (2002) combats this criticism by stating that he measured differences between national cultures, and therefore, research using similar types of samples would report the same results. Hofstede (1980) actually addresses this fact in his book by showing that similar results were obtained from a new set of organizations separate from the original data set. In concordance with Hofstede's additional findings, there have been other studies (e.g., Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) that utilized data similar to Hofstede's (i.e. multinational corporation data from numerous countries) to confirm the existence of the major dimensions. These studies statistically examined the significant differences between nations to ensure that factors such as occupation were adequately controlled.

Another concern raised by McSweeney (2002) deals with the ultimate complexity of culture. More specifically, McSweeney is concerned that the four (later five) dimensions offered by Hofstede implies a rather simplistic view of culture and perhaps other dimensions should be considered to explain culture more wholly. Hofstede (2002) argues, however, that he identified the major dimensions, but not necessarily all of the dimensions that differentiate cultures from one another. Furthermore, he appears to be

open to the addition of other dimensions, provided that they are statistically independent of the four dimensions in the model. This statistical independence that Hofstede requires, however, is not highly realistic given his dimension's breadth of coverage. Williamson (2002) suggests that although Hofstede's dimensions may seem simplistic in number and in their bi-polarity, they offer a method in which quantitative analyses can be pursued. Additionally, Hofstede's model is parsimonious because of its clarity and limited number of dimensions (Williamson, 2002).

In this section a limited number of the methodological criticisms brought against Hofstede have been addressed. Although there are reasons to believe these criticisms, Hofstede attempts to show why they do not invalidate his findings. Furthermore, Williamson (2002) provides a more neutral view, providing both reasoning for McSweeney and Hofstede. Although Williamson's (2002) view is purported to be neutral, it clearly leans towards the side of Hofstede, and in some cases acts as a champion of Hofstede's model.

These criticisms are by no means a complete list, and are not meant to be. They have been presented to provide examples of the various problems that researchers have struggled with over the years since Hofstede's research began. More specifically, they represent problems with Hofstede's model itself (i.e. masculinity-femininity definitions), levels of analysis issues and stereotyping concerns, and finally concerns addressing data collection methods as well as the assumptions made during data analysis.

Conclusions

As pointed out in this paper, there have been many criticisms to Hofstede's work over the years. Many of these criticisms appear to be well-founded, but have yet to be

empirically tested in many cases. In other cases a better alternative has yet to be found. Given the pioneering nature of Hofstede's work in the cultural field, it is often used as a yardstick for current research, despite the criticisms present here and in other venues.

Despite the numerous researchers who have pointed to flaws in Hofstede's model, his work nonetheless provides a starting point for cultural research. His work highlights the importance of controlling for extraneous factors, such as occupational and organizational culture. Furthermore, he shows that it is necessary to compare many cultures at once in order to get a better picture of how culture operates on a global level.

Methodological contributions are not the only contributions to the field of culture, however; Hofstede's model makes it clear that culture at the national level can not be assumed to be the same as at the individual level. This has many implications for industry today. For example, currently accepted measures of success and adjustment may not be applicable to all cultures. In the past many researchers have attempted to apply measures and tools developed in Western cultures to all other cultures and have found that they just do not function the same. Hofstede himself said that you it is impossible to use one measure across cultures because all cultures differ from one another. Even when two cultures are similar at a national level, the cultures at the individual level may not be similar. These differences imply that cultural-specific measures must be developed. Given the importance of Hofstede's model to industry, the defenses and criticisms surrounding the findings of his research and model need to be more closely examined.

In conclusion, the criticisms presented by many researchers and more specifically in this paper by McSweeney (2002), and others, are perhaps true, but could also be unfounded. In order to further this field, and to accurately determine whether these in-

principle arguments are valid, empirical research must be pursued to address each of the concerns wherever possible. Although it is not always the case that empirical research can be pursued relevant to in-principle arguments, in this field there are many available options. Even with these possibilities, not all in-principle arguments surrounding Hofstede's model will be empirically testable. The sample that would be needed may be too diverse and large for actual researchers to manage.

Future research should aim to strengthen Hofstede's model or determine that another model is needed to accurately assess cultural differences if possible. Given the growing number of cultural models in research, it may be beneficial to compare the models in order to determine their similarities and differences. This type of investigation may show that similar constructs form the foundation of culture and the constructs unique to a single model may be the peripheral aspects of culture. Taking this one step further, the peripheral constructs may be those that change over time with respect to geographical changes, climate, and historical occurrences. Given just this one specific suggestion for research, it is easy to see that the possibilities are endless for examining culture.

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