

1.4 Cultural Dimensions

“So what are the people like there?” Individuals who have lived abroad for a longer period and are asked to report on their experiences in the host country are probably familiar with questions of this nature. In answering, one might hear statements such as: “. . . they are incredibly superficial when dealing with people, even with friends . . .” – “. . . they don’t respect personal boundaries, talk constantly and loudly and are always touching you . . .” – “. . . women have no say whatsoever. They always have to keep quiet . . .” – “. . . they are so prudish and uptight . . .” – “. . . everyone is friendly and willing to help . . .”.

Such answers have a two-fold purpose: On the one hand, the person answering tries to interpret certain behavioral patterns on the basis of his interactions with people from the host country that he believes to be typical. On the other, one tries to describe the behavioral patterns in terms that are plausible to both oneself and the listener. Scientists searching for so-called “cultural standards”, in effect do little else. When referring to cultural standards in intercultural research, researchers base certain behavior on underlying cultural patterns.

The quest for so-called “cultural standards” goes a step further, however. At this point the question arises whether particular cultural standards can be traced back to and identified as certain basic dimensions of human behavior. This can be illustrated in the following example: A German manager, on an international assignment in Japan, might easily get the impression that Japanese business consist of very inflexible hierarchies and authoritarian relationships between superiors and subordinates. He might further conclude that something like “authoritarian hierarchy” is a cultural standard in the Japanese corporate world, while considering himself to be part of a more “cooperative hierarchy” on the basis of his experiences. Let’s imagine further that the same German manager had the opportunity to interact with Danish and French business colleagues. In view of these new experiences, he might possibly change his mind on the basis of a comparison between the French and Japanese and conclude that the Japanese do have a rather co-operative style after all. He might also believe himself to be far more authoritarian than he thought he was, compared to the Danes. Based on these new experiences, the German manager might conclude that

dealing with hierarchical relationships involves fundamental cultural dimensions with extremes of either “highly authoritative” or “highly cooperative”. All cultures could be pinpointed along such a range of parameters.

Researchers engaged in the study of comparative cultures are convinced that the German manager’s observations are, in principal, quite valid, which means that it is possible to identify fundamental cultural dimensions and to localize cultures along this dimension. Then the question arises as to how many cultural dimensions exist and how they can be labeled.

A pioneer in this field and in related research is the Dutchman Geert Hofstede. In order to complete his extensive study, which in its sheer breadth is the only one of its kind, he (Hofstede 1980) developed a questionnaire to interview a total of 116,000 employees of a multinational computer company. The questionnaire was translated into 20 languages and, as a result, could be administered in 53 countries. The questionnaire measured “work-related values” and contained questions to determine aspects of job satisfaction (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your current job?”). Other questions involved the evaluation of job requirements (e.g., “How often does your supervisor expect you ‘to go the extra mile?’”) or personal work-related issues (e.g., “How important is a high salary to you?”) and more. Hofstede subjected his findings to correlation statistical and factor analytical evaluation, on the basis of which he identified four fundamental cultural dimensions:

Power Distance. This dimension examines the extent to which a culture accepts unequal power distribution. In cultures with a high power distance, members experience power differences in institutions and organizations as unproblematic and therefore expect them. Commensurate with Hofstede’s findings, very complex and impermeable hierarchical systems develop here. In cultures with a low power distance, members experience the distribution of power in institutions and organizations as problematic and they will tend to resist. According to Hofstede, this will eventually lead to the development of very flat and permeable hierarchical systems.

Individualism/Collectivism. This dimension shows to what extent the members of a culture define themselves as part of a social network and how committed they are to this network. Members of collectivist cultures perceive themselves as members of a relationship-oriented in-group, and try to align and reach personal goals in accordance with the group. Members of individualistic cultures perceive themselves as autonomous individuals and try to set and achieve personal goals apart from the interests of their reference group.

Uncertainty Avoidance This dimension shows to what extent unclear and ambiguous situations create feelings of insecurity and anxiety in a culture. For members of a culture with strong uncertainty avoidance, rules to regulate private and public life are binding, causing them to react to unclear circumstances with disorientation or even aggression. According to Hofstede, very complex and rigid social regulatory systems develop, which, if ignored, result in a form of reprimand. For members of a culture with weak uncertainty avoidance, rules to regulate private and public life are not binding and they react to unclear or even chaotic circumstances with relative ease. According to Hofstede, very flexible social regulatory systems evolve here.

Masculinity and Femininity. This dimension shows to what extent gender roles are delineated and predefined. In masculine cultures, men and women's roles in society are clearly designated. The masculine role is defined through performance, assertiveness, dominance and materialistic pursuits. The feminine role is defined through solicitousness, modesty, subordination and warm-heartedness. In feminine cultures almost all roles in society can be assumed by either men or women and the gender roles are not limited to clearly defined characteristics.

Hofstede later amended these four dimensions by a fifth. He deemed this addition necessary after the findings of a group of researchers in China (Chinese Culture Connection 1987), who had conducted a replication study:

Long-term Orientation. This dimension shows to what extent long-term thinking is valued. In cultures with a high degree of long-term orientation, long-standing traditions influence the present and today's actions are binding for the future. According to Hofstede, this mindset creates very stable and binding social structures over generations and resists change. In cultures with a lesser degree of long-term orientation, traditions hold nostalgic value at best in the sense of "here today, gone tomorrow". In such cultures, claims Hofstede, social change is easily mobilized. The resulting social conditions, however, tend to be correspondingly unstable and non-committal.

The terms developed by Hofstede and the mindsets underlying these cultural models are very practical. This is probably also the reason why Hofstede's work is acknowledged beyond the field of academics and has found much resonance with individuals active internationally.

The same is true for the work of the American researcher, Edward T. Hall (1985, 1990). He chose an entirely different approach and, like Hofstede,

came up with specific cultural dimensions. Hall approached his topic from an anthropological perspective. He attempted to identify fundamental dimensions of human co-existence pertaining to human beings in all cultures. According to Hall, these are dimensions of space, time and communication. Every culture is forced to develop specific standards of action based on these fundamental dimensions. The concept of space, for instance, applies to cultural differences in terms of personal distance and the way in which it is automatically applied in interactions with friends or business partners.

In the *time* dimension, Hall distinguishes between two patterns of time that govern different cultures: *monochronic* time and *polychronic* time. In monochronic cultures, time is experienced and used in a linear fashion, prescribing a consecutive order in which specific activities occur. This orientation demands a high degree of self-management in terms of planning and reliability on a personal level, as well as in managing public systems and structures, as in the public transportation system for example. Accordingly, monochronic cultures tend to have a lower tolerance threshold when it comes to changes in timing, scheduling and other interruptions. In contrast, polychronic cultures span many different levels in pursuing their intended communicative action, any number of which can occur simultaneously.

This orientation requires a high degree of flexibility and consequently, individuals from these cultures tend to have a high tolerance with respect to time/schedule overlaps and interruptions.

Hall differentiates between the so-called “*low-context*” and “*high-context*” communication. The adjectives “low” and “high” refer to the extent to which the nonlinguistic context in a given situation is included in a conversation. In “low-context” cultures, an effort is made to render all information as explicit as possible leaving the listener little room for interpretation. In contrast, cultures in which “high-context” communication dominates, the prevailing atmosphere surrounding a situation, including nonverbal signals, is perceived as an essential part of the communication process. That which is actually verbalized is full of insinuation, ambiguity and metaphors, and can only be understood within the context of the entire conversation.

In his popular scientific work (Trompenaars 1993), the Dutchman Fons Trompenaars, an international business manager and consultant, added to Hofstede’s, Hall’s and other authors’ models by developing a model of cultural dimensions based on his own professional experience. According to his model, there are cultural differences in three fundamental areas of life: (a) the relationship of human beings to *time*, (b) their relationship to *nature* and (c) in their *interaction with others*. According to Trompenaars, one cultural

dimension can be derived from man's relation to time and nature respectively, while a total of five cultural dimensions can be derived from the different possibilities of man's interrelation with others. In this way, Trompenaars arrived at a total of seven different cultural dimensions. Like Hofstede, he refers to one of these dimensions as "individualism/collectivism". To Trompenaars, this dimension constitutes one of the five cultural dimensions by which the relationship between human beings can be described. His description is nearly identical to that of Hofstede, so that only Trompenaar's remaining six cultural dimensions are mentioned here in more detail.

Universalism/Particularism. This dimension shows to what extent universally valid laws and regulations prevail in universalistic societies. Regulations are written for everyone and must be upheld, even enforced, in a culture to structure human co-existence. In contrast, individuals in particularistic societies are more focused on the nature of a given circumstance and are reluctant to follow strict and predetermined rules.

Neutral/Affective. This dimension shows to what extent the public expression of feelings and emotions is prevalent. In neutral cultures, efforts are made to suppress feelings in public and to follow protocol as strictly as possible during negotiations or discussions. In affective cultures, the expression of spontaneous feelings is socially acceptable, even in negotiations and discussions. It is considered normal if "human" reactions such as loud laughter, angry desk pounding or shock are openly expressed. Certain parallels to Thomas' cultural standard of "task orientation" become evident here (q.v. Ch. I, 1.1).

Specificity/Diffuseness. This dimension describes the situation in which individuals interrelate. In specificity-oriented cultures it is quite common that individuals meet exclusively in defined areas of life, for example at work, at sports clubs and teacher-parent events at school. Although these encounters may be frequent and sincere, in specificity-oriented cultures this does not mean that those involved wish to socialize with each other in other areas of life. In diffuse cultures, on the other hand, individuals who have become more than just acquaintances are generally granted access to all areas of a person's life. Frequently, business partners are invited to join in common outdoor sports events in an effort to get to know them better outside of the immediate business setting. Occasionally, such "getting acquainted" rituals are a prerequisite to business relations.

Ascription-Achievement. This dimension shows what factors determine social standing in a culture. In a culture in which achievement is held in high

esteem, personal success through demonstrated competence attained throughout the course of life, for example, as a result of professional or athletic accomplishments, leads to heightened social status. In a culture in which the ascription pattern is prevalent, social standing is acquired by virtue of heritage or social circumstances such as gender, age, title and belonging to the upper echelons of society.

People-Nature Orientation. In man's relation to nature, Trompenaars differentiates between cultures that try to subjugate nature and those that try to live in harmony with nature. In the first case, nature is seen as a sort of power in its own right, independent of human interference that requires constant confrontation. Man's duty therefore involves "wresting" inherent secrets from nature and "taming" its forces with the help of technology. In contrast, man sees himself as part of nature instead of its opponent, whose mission is to adapt to nature in order to co-exist in harmony.

Temporal Orientation. Trompenaars differentiates between three orientation forms with regard to time: In cultures that have past orientations, the past is the most important time form. Efforts are made to preserve the past, to pass it on over generations and to make its presence felt in the present. In cultures with future orientations, on the other hand, the past is considered "over and done with". The emphasis here is on reaching future goals, which, once achieved, lead on to higher goals. In contrast, systems with present orientations, neither the past nor the future play an important role. The focus here is on living for the moment as time is of relatively little importance in relation to other aspects of life.

What academic and practical value do these models have? Apparently, internationally active individuals who experience intercultural encounters daily in their work environment can draw upon the concepts and categories offered by such models for support. In addition, the overlaps and interrelated aspects between the individual models mentioned support the notion that despite different theories and concepts, they at least describe the same phenomena. So, how do these models contribute to the understanding of cultural differences? To answer this question, let's turn back to Hofstede's research, where results are reflected in interviews about work-related values conducted with employees of a multinational computer firm. The following questions arise: Can the results actually be transferred to other individuals who are not employees of this particular computer firm? Can the results also be ascribed to areas of life that exist apart from the interviewees' immediate work environment? Do the results represented outlast cultural patterns or is it a historical snapshot taken at the time the

study was conducted? This excerpt from a multitude of critical questions, asked in relation to even such an encompassing study as Hofstede's, shows just how dangerous it can be to infer conclusions about national cultures based on the momentary observation of behavioral patterns.

The French researcher Jacques Demorgon (1989) developed a model that also includes cultural dimensions and which he imbedded in differentiated cultural theories suitable for dealing with some of the risks mentioned above. For those who are internationally active, this offers a grid that helps them to reflect upon and categorize unfamiliar actions more accurately.

Similar to Hall, Demorgon determines his cultural dimensions by attempting to cover the entire spectrum of possible human action. Consequently, this can only be a dimension that is characterized by two opposing poles. The example of the *action mode* – that is, the form that action takes – illustrates this: One can only act extremely *quickly* or extremely *informed*. Both occurring simultaneously is not possible. In this respect, all theoretical action modi can be exemplified between these two extremes. Thus, the action mode represents the first of a long list of dimensions defined by Demorgon. The most important of these are mentioned below:

Action orientation. This cultural dimension extends between the two poles labeled *simultaneity* and *consecutivity* and is related to Hall's differentiation between monochronic and polychronic patterns of time: According to consecutive action orientation, the focus is on one task at a time. Once completed, the focus shifts to the next step. In simultaneous action orientation, several tasks are tackled at the same time and thus can tolerate gaps in a given action process.

Attention. Demorgon sees a close connection between action organization and directing attention, which he defines as a separate cultural dimension. Its opposite poles are *centered* and *diffuse* attention. When concentration is centered, the focus is on a few things only, albeit with utmost intensity and precision. Accordingly, diffuse attention occurs when an observer perceives any number of aspects of a situation, however, with relatively little precision.

Communication mode. Demorgon differentiates between the two extremes *explicit* and *implicit* communication as it applies to communication in particular. At one extreme, every effort is made to explain all relevant information as precisely as possible. In contrast, at the other extreme, much remains unspoken and must be deduced from the context of the conversation, which, of course, depends on the nature of the relationship between the conversation partners.

Communication content. Demorgon describes this second dimension in communication as *objective* and *subjective* speech. In objective speech, the speaker detracts from himself by referring to statements about facts and tasks at hand, which he tries to present as precisely as possible. In subjective speech, on the other hand, the speaker himself is at the center of the communication process, while imparting personal views and emotions as descriptively as possible.

Motivation. According to Demorgon, this cultural dimension describes what motivates a person to act. At the *task-related* extreme, the tasks themselves motivate to action. This corresponds to Thomas' cultural standard of task orientation. In *relationship orientation*, action is dependent on completing a task involving important individuals. For example, a person wants to do another a favor or because a person has the authority to demand completion of a task.

Authority. This cultural dimension establishes a relation between motivation to act and a person's authority. Demorgon distinguishes between *external* and *internalized* authority. In the case of external authority, task completion depends on individuals higher up in the external hierarchy, who are in a position to order completion of the task, to supervise and to evaluate it. In the case of internalized authority, tasks are completed even when there is no assigned outside authority to ensure that the task has actually been completed. On the contrary, individuals who are higher up in the hierarchy are not welcome to "interfere" where they are not needed.

Responsibility. Authority is concerned with responsibility. Demorgon distinguishes between the extremes *determination* and *co-determination*. In the first case, authoritative persons do not tolerate interferences. Instead, they assert personal opinions or form them if they do not happen to have any explicit ones. Responsibility is thus concentrated on one person who must also carry the consequences. In the case of co-determination, those bearing responsibility encourage others to contribute their views and opinions to the decision-making process. In this way, the responsibility is evenly distributed.

Decisions. As is evident in the different approaches to responsibility, this subject relates directly to the issue of decision-making behavior. Here Demorgon differentiates between the extremes *dissent* and *consensus*. Dissent refers to opposing decision-making behavior, which can be a reaction to a person in charge in a higher position in the hierarchy. Much emphasis is placed on opposing opinions and suggestions to avoid a focus on one predominant view. During consensus-oriented decision-making behavior, only those thoughts are voiced that are not only realistic and feasible from the

outset, but also bound to achieve a consensus. The idea here is to piece all ideas together in a sort of mosaic with the resulting compromise being accepted by all as the best solution.

Attitude toward Organizations. In organizations' decision-making behavior, responsibility, authority, communication mode and many more aspects we have discussed here are institutionalized. Thus, according to Demorgan, the relationship between individual and organization present a further important cultural dimension. Here, he distinguishes between the extremes *degradation* and *appreciation* in relation to institutions. In the case of degradation, all organizations are regarded with skepticism and are rejected or resisted with a feeling that they do not serve the individual. The opposite is true for the other extreme where institutions and organizations are seen as positive, providing the individual with identity, sense and security.

The manner in which Demorgan incorporates these cultural dimensions into a general cultural theory is just as important as the individual cultural dimensions or their description. On the basis of this general theory, Demorgan develops a grid that helps the practitioner to understand and consider unfamiliar forms of behavior from various angles. This approach prevents the viewer from regarding other-culture individuals as "cultural machines", who behave according to well-defined cultural dimensions.

If unusual forms of action are repeatedly observed, one might ask on which *level* the behavior is observed: Is it the behavior shown by an individual (individual level), a small group of individuals (group level) or that of a specific social class (subculture level) or is it a phenomenon that can be observed throughout all groups and subcultures of a nation (national-culture level)? Does one actually have enough contacts to answer this question? A business manager who spends some months on an international assignment within the scope of short-term project work hardly has the time to come in contact with local nationals outside of his immediate work environment. His business partners, on the other hand, represent a small section of the given population. Even Trompenaars narrows his scope when he refers specifically to cultural differences in the "business world". Considering the specific framework within which Hofstede surveyed his candidates, one might come to the conclusion that similar constraints would be more to the point. According to Demorgan, the issue of levels constitutes an initial filter through which observations should pass, before drawing conclusions about national-culture idiosyncrasies.

A second filter asks what specific modes of behavior can be observed in different *areas of life*. The manager who experiences his foreign business partners exclusively within a work-related context might be surprised to

see the way these same people behave at a private party or a religious ceremony. Everyone knows, from personal experience, how many different types of behavior are displayed depending on the social context. Therefore, before jumping to conclusions, it is extremely important to ascertain if one is dealing with behavior that is related to particular areas of life and are only shown there, or if they overlap into other areas of life.

A third filter should be in place, according to Demorgon, when attributing national-cultural characteristics. Here, he refers to *history*.

Even if specific modes of behavior can be observed in all areas of life and social groups, they can still be, in a historical sense, situational snapshots taken under conditions of force or necessity, for example in connection with war or the collapse of the economy. If a country is suffering from inflation and stores are looted, then one will hardly conclude that this is a national-culture pattern. Not until particular modes of behavior reoccur throughout history can categories pertaining to national-culture characteristics be applied.

The cautiousness with which Demorgon treats the cultural dimensions that he himself developed should also be an example of how to treat the models developed by Hofstede, Hall, Trompenaars and others (considering the authors themselves do not do it). Aside from the previously mentioned questions, the determination of cultural dimensions poses two more fundamental problems, which Demorgon also faces and which, in concluding, we would like to explore further. Questions of this sort tend to arise when the described models are used as research tools. They can be useful where they provide practical orientation in reflecting on unfamiliar forms of action.

The Issue of One-dimensionality. Those who, like Hofstede, set up an axis with the extremes, “low power distance” and “high power distance” at either pole and line up all countries along this axis, implicitly imply that hierarchical constellations all over the world differ only in relation to the degree to which the existing power distances are accepted. The manager from our example, who has had experience with Japanese, French and Danish colleagues, would most likely report that this hardly appeared to be the only difference between the respective hierarchical systems. Rather, that each one of the three hierarchical systems takes on a different form. In some areas of authoritative style, he might find that the Japanese and the French are most similar, while he might get the impression that in issues of caregiving within hierarchical systems, the French are entirely different from the Japanese and, in fact, have more in common with the Danes. Most of the axes defined within the cultural dimensions do not represent one-dimensional characteristics, although this is suggested when, for example,

Denmark has a “power distance index” of 19, Japan an index of 52 and France an index of 70.

The Problem of Perspective. Let us stick to our example: Our manager finds the Japanese authoritarian because the leadership style practiced by his Japanese colleagues would be called “authoritarian” in Germany if he assumed a similar style. The French colleagues might not regard the Japanese as authoritarian at all and the Japanese might associate the behavioral style under discussion with entirely different definitions and concepts. This means that many of the cultural dimension models do not refer to an absolute designation of culture, but rather a description from a specific cultural perspective. Accordingly, the dimensions and concepts are used because they make sense to oneself. It is not at all clear if dimension concepts like “power distance”, “uncertainty avoidance” or “individualism” are meaningful to a Mexican, for example. We can only say that a certain behavior displayed by Mexicans strikes *us* in a certain way and that we see much similarity or dissimilarity to persons from other countries. The issue of perspective becomes especially evident when concepts within the cultural dimension suggest certain valuation: In speaking about “diffuse”, “affective” or “particular” cultures, then, from a German perspective, one is glad to find oneself at the other end of the scale. In spite of authors’ efforts to keep valuation out of their models, any description of other cultures is always effected from the personal perspective.

Considering the many questions and problems related to the concepts used in the cultural dimension models, should the cultural dimension models be used at all? If they are used carefully, the answer is: yes. No doubt the concepts are handy and useful tools for structuring thoughts about unusual forms of behavior. However, it is important to remember that one is dealing with a temporary structure created from one’s own-culture perspective and which must remain open to more precise differentiation once the other culture becomes more familiar. Without the finer differentiation, the practical aspect may quickly become an intellectual trap. In this case, the concepts turn into sophisticated-sounding academic labels that cling to empty clichés. People who are continually in contact with only a relatively homogeneous group of individuals in a foreign country should be aware of this risk at all times.

References

- Chinese Culture Connection (1987): Chinese values and the search for culture-free dimensions of culture. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 18: 143–164.
- Demorgon, J. (1989): *L'exploration interculturelle. Pour une pédagogie internationale*. Paris.
- Demorgon, J.; Molz, M. (1996): Bedingungen und Auswirkungen der Analyse von Kultur(en) und interkulturellen Interaktionen. In: Thomas, A. (Ed.), *Psychologie interkulturellen Handelns*. Göttingen, pp. 43–86.
- Hall, E. T. (1985): *Hidden Differences: Studies in International Communication*. Hamburg.
- Hall, E. T. (1990): *Understanding Cultural Differences*. Yarmouth, ME.
- Hofstede, G. (1980): *Culture's Consequences. International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills.
- Trompenaars, F. (1993): *Handbuch Globales Managen. Wie man kulturelle Unterschiede im Geschäftsleben versteht*. München.