

On Hofstede's Two Cultural Dimensions: Individualism-Collectivism and Power Distance

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Abstract. Intercultural communication emerged as a subject has undergone more than half century. The development of intercultural communication is rapid with the globalization in recent years. However, some theories proposed by those scholars are influential, among whom is Geert Hofstede. His cultural dimensions have attracted attentions in the academic circle. The paper aims at analyzing what the theory is about and making a contrast of Chinese culture and western culture in terms of power distance and individualism-collectivism. The purpose of the paper is to point out that culture should be understood in a relative way. No culture is better or worse than others.

Introduction

With the development of globalization, intercultural communication has showed its importance in linking with people and countries frequently. During the past decades, a lot of scholars and experts in the field of intercultural communication have creatively established the theories on how to develop communication competence. For instance, Edward.T. Hall wrote a book *The Silent Language* in 1959, announcing the beginning of intercultural communication as a social science. Then came to Clyde Kluckhohn, Abraham Maslow and Geert Hofstede who had achieved a lot in the intercultural communication. One of them is Geert Hofstede who made a survey of cultural dimensions by questioning and interviewing huge number of workers in the IBM, which resulted in the birth of the important theory, Cultural Dimensions.

Individualism and Collectivism

There are cultural varieties and diversities that demonstrate the richness and uniqueness of this colorful world. Values as the core of culture represent the originality of a country and people. Individualism and collectivism are two major ideologies that influence the personality of cultures. Where there is an ideology, there is a different system.

What is individualism? According to the website, it is defined as follows: a doctrine that the interests of the individual are or ought to be ethically paramount; the conception that all values, rights, and duties originate in individuals. This concept is understood based on the interests of individuals. This is also a different value between the west and the east. However, it is a proper way to know that there is no better or worse when studying cultures. It is not wise to judge others based on one's own, which will lead to the ethnocentrism. Traditionally, individualism is narrowly understood as a selfish concept or doctrine. Actually, individualism highly values the individual initiativeness or originality which is the driving force for development. It also values independence that is a good virtue for the individual. In addition, individualism attaches great importance to privacy. Therefore, people living in those individualistic cultures have formed this doctrine guiding their life and work. For example, American enjoy doing thing creatively and independently. One saying proves this: God help those who help themselves. Countries like England, Canada, Australia and some European countries follow this doctrine. Then what is collectivism. According to Wikipedia, collectivism is a cultural value that is characterized by emphasis on cohesiveness among individuals and prioritization of the group over self. Individuals or groups that subscribe to a collectivistic worldview tend to find common values and goals as particularly salient and demonstrate greater orientation toward in-group than toward out-group. The characteristics of

collectivism is group's interests that each individual must follow. People living in the collectivist cultures highly value working together for common interests. Unity is the symbol of this collectivism. Hofstede(1980) was highly influential in ushering in an era of cross-cultural research making comparisons along the dimension of collectivism versus individualism. The collectivism is also viewed as *we* culture, which means everything that is beneficial to society is advocated. All the interests of individual should be in accordance with the society. With the development of globalization, no culture can live and improve independently without learning from others. For example, nowadays, in Chinese community some cultural values have been emphasized in a bid to further drive the progress of economy, politics and education. These values are not just possessed in the individual culture, but also in the collectivistic culture. They are so important that they should be fully expressed among all the members of society. These values contain personal creativity and production creativity. Now in the company, at school, a strong sense of initiativeness has been cultivated which leads to the birth of large number of talented people in different walks of society. This strongly reflects the importance of integration of different cultures. Hofstede conceptualized collectivism and individualism as part of a single continuum, with each cultural construct representing an opposite pole. The author characterized individuals that endorsed a high degree of collectivism as being embedded in their social contexts and prioritizing communal goals over individual goal.

Through the definition above, it is clear to see the difference between individualism and collectivism. Differentiating these two concepts does not mean there is no links or relations. Actually, with the development of globalization, the integration and cohesion of different cultures will promote the economy, culture, politics an education of the world. Both individualism and collectivism have their soil of growth, but shared values between them should be paid attention to. Here the author wants to state that there is no superior and inferior when cultures are compared. By contrast, the purpose is to select what is proper to put into application for cultural fusion. For example, in the individualistic culture, in terms of education, cultivating students' thinking and innovating abilities are placed in the first place. The role of educators is giving methods and offering suggestions instead of transmitting knowledge. This kind of teaching and learning is good for development of learners' problem-solving. Nowadays in Chinese classroom, such educational idea has been advocated, which means that quality-oriented education is more important than test-oriented education. In my teaching career, I have been pursuing a method of encouraging students to think in a dialectical and a relative way, which makes them reach a level of understanding different cultural values that are helpful to the adaptation of different cultures.

Power Distance

Power distance refers to the degree of human inequality in terms of status or social power. According to Hofstede, he stated that power distance will cause social hierarchy. There are high power distance and low power distance.

The Chinese culture measures high on the "power distance" scale compared to countries such as the United States but not as high as countries such as Japan and Korea. High power distance means conformity to hierarchy and authority while low power distance equates to the belief that power should be distributed evenly. Please note that although this tradition has been engrained into the mentality of the older generation, the culture of the younger generation is gradually migrating toward a westernized society under the influence of globalization. In Chinese society, people-centered policy is highly valued among the members of society. Under the new era, the Chinese government has made its commitment to lead people to the realization of well-off society. Each member in this community is equal. No one has been ignored. This strongly reflects the meaning of equality in modern China which is different from those years.

The modern Chinese language does not have different sets of tones to use depending on the social status of the speaker and receiver that Japanese and Korean do. However, social status is still a central theme to Chinese society; most Chinese refer to each other by their title and last name, such

as manager Li or secretary Zhang. Close friends may drop the title and substitute by their age difference such as old Li or young Zhang.

In the past, the high power distance nature of the Chinese culture was also reflected by the frequent use of spokespersons or models in Chinese marketing to promote ownership appeal of a particular product. The perceived success and influence of a celebrity has tremendous effect on the Chinese audience. Organizations that target the older generations will often display pictures of company founders and leaders to appeal to this social value as well. Now, there is a favorable atmosphere of respecting those capable of making contributions to the society. For example, scholars, educators, engineers, scientists and businessmen have contributed a lot to the improvement of living conditions. Those personnel are the images of times that will bring society to the headway.

Power distance used in the education reflects different phenomenon performed by teachers and students in the classroom. For example, most students in the English speaking countries highly enjoy discussing questions with their teachers. Teachers are functioned as counselors or advisors without answering questions before students think and analyze. During the teacher's explanation or talk, if there is a certain doubt that students do not understand. They often challenge the teachers. For equality between teacher and student is highly valued. However in some Asian countries, classroom teaching is mainly dominated by the teacher who controls everything of the teaching. Students are required to follow teachers without any interruption or challenge in most circumstances. Nowadays in China, classroom teaching is making progress which the traditional teacher-dominating has been challenged thanks to the quality-oriented policy. However, it takes time to complete this great education reform. The Chinese classroom values the development of each individual but devalues heated argument with teachers. However, as mentioned in the first topic, culture should be mutually integrated so that globalization will become effective to promote the shared future of the world. Now the Ministry of Education in China has issued a lot of positive policies of improving the quality of education from the first stage of primary education to the high stage of higher education. The Chinese government has been placing great importance to the training of students. Quality education has been advocated to help students with the improvement of abilities in education. For instance, now if you go to the kindergarten, primary school, high school and university, traditional teaching modes have been taken place by using flexible, interesting, creative methods. In recent years, the government also encouraged educators to make full study of educational theory and educational practice, which gave a rise to the rapid development of education. Compared with the previous years, Chinese students have made tremendous progress in their academic studies. A group of new and talented scientists have performed beautifully in their fields, which lay a solid ground for the brighter future.

Conclusion

The two dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede determine what culture does and thinks. On one hand, each culture has its characteristics and uniqueness that has been established for long years. For example, in the Chinese history, people have formed an ideology based on the Confucianism that human and nature should be in a harmonious state. This has resulted in a collectivistic concept, which interests belong to the groups. On the other hand, each culture's changes and development are linked with other cultures. No culture can develop in a vacuum. The whole world is interrelated and interdependent. For instance, in the collectivistic culture, people behave and act based on the individualism. This phenomenon can be seen in some fields like science, arts, company and education. So cultural understanding is relative. No absolute standard exists in a culture. With the rapid development of digital science, cultural sharing and cultural tolerance will guide people from different places to have a better understanding in conducting communication and cooperation. It is pleasing to expect the harmony of the whole world as human abandons prejudice, stereotypes and other dislikes with each other.

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