

Topic 1.2: Concepts of Culture

1. Different minds, but similar problems

“The world is full of confrontation between people, groups, and nations who think, feel, and act differently. At the same time these people, groups, and nations [...] are exposed to common problems that demand cooperation for their solution. Ecological, economical, political, military, hygienic, and meteorological developments do not stop at national or regional borders. Coping with the threats of nuclear warfare, global warming, organized crime, poverty, terrorism, ocean pollution, extinction of animals, AIDS or a worldwide recession demands cooperation of opinion leaders from many countries. They in their turn need the support of broad groups of followers in order to implement the decisions taken. Understanding the differences in the ways these leaders and their followers think, feel, and act is a condition for bringing about worldwide solutions that work. Questions of economic, technological, medical or biological cooperation have too often been considered as merely technical. One of the reasons why so many solutions do not work or cannot be implemented is that differences in thinking among the partners have been ignored” (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 4).

2. Culture as mental programming

Every human being has their own patterns of feeling, thinking and acting which are learned throughout the human’s lifetime. Many of those patterns are acquired in early childhood, as a person is most receptive to learning and assimilating during that time. Once a person has established specific patterns of feeling, thinking and acting within their mind, the person must unlearn these patterns before being able to learn something different. As unlearning is more complicated than learning something new for the first time, it is quite difficult to acquire new patterns of thinking, feeling and acting. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov describe these patterns by using the analogy of the way computers are programmed and call them “mental programs” or “software of the mind” (2010, pp. 4-5). As a person's behaviour is only partly defined by their mental programmes, they have the basic ability to depart from them and respond in new, creative, destructive or unexpected ways. The mental programmes have their origins in the social environment in which one grew up and in one’s own collected life experiences. The programming begins within the family, goes on within the neighbourhood

and continues at school, in youth groups, at the workplace and in the living community (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 5).

“A customary term for such mental software is *culture*. This word has several meanings, all derived from its Latin source, which refers to the tilling of the soil. In most Western languages *culture* commonly means ‘civilization’ or ‘refinement of the mind’ and in particular the results of such refinement, such as education, art, and literature. This is culture in the narrow sense. Culture as mental software, however, corresponds to a much broader use of the word that is common among sociologists and, especially, anthropologists. [...] Social (or cultural) anthropology is the science of human societies – in particular (although not only) traditional or ‘primitive’ ones. In social anthropology, *culture* is a catchword for all those patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting [...]. Not only activities supposed to refine the mind are included, but also the ordinary and menial things in life: greeting, eating, showing or not showing feelings, keeping a certain physical distance from others, making love, and maintaining body hygiene” (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 5).

Culture is always a collective construct, as it is partly shared with people who grew up in the same social environment. Culture is not inherent but learned and it originates from one’s social environment rather than from one’s genes (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 6). The following figure shows the differentiation of culture from human nature on the one hand and its differentiation from personality on the other hand.

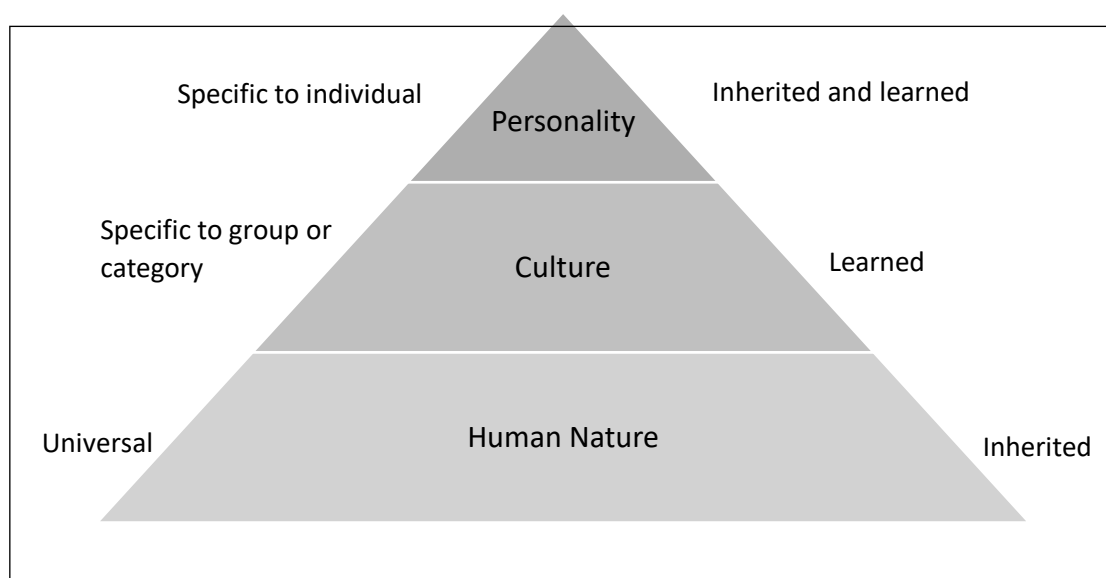


Figure 1: Three Levels of Uniqueness in Mental Programming
Source: adapted from Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 6

Human nature means the universal level of every human's mental software and its inheritance is found in our genes. "[W]ithin the computer analogy it is the 'operating system' that determines our physical and basic psychological functioning. The human ability to feel fear, anger, love, joy, sadness, and shame; the need to associate with others and to play and exercise oneself; and the facility to observe the environment and to talk about it with other humans all belong to this level of mental programming" (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, pp. 6-7). Yet, what a person does with their feelings and how they express them, is modified by culture.

The personality, on the other hand, is a unique personal set of mental programmes, which is based on characteristic traits, that are partly inherited and partly learned. In this context 'learned' means modified by the influence of culture and by individual personal experiences (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 6).

Cultural attributes were often related to inheritance because philosophers and other scientists in the past did not know how else to explain the significant consistency of differences in cultural patterns between human groups. They underestimated the effects of learning from previous generations and teaching to a future generation what one has learned oneself. The significance of inheritance was greatly exaggerated by pseudoscientific race theories, which found great importance in ideologies such as Fascism and Nazism. Ethnic conflicts are often justified by unfounded arguments of cultural superiority and inferiority (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 6).

3. Symbols, Heroes, Rituals and Values

Cultural differences manifest themselves in different ways. Among the many terms used to describe cultural manifestations, the following four describe the entire concept quite clearly: symbols, heroes, rituals and values. By picturing the four terms together as the layers of an onion, you get the famous 'onion model of culture' by Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov, 2010, pp. 7-8). The following figure illustrates the onion model of culture:

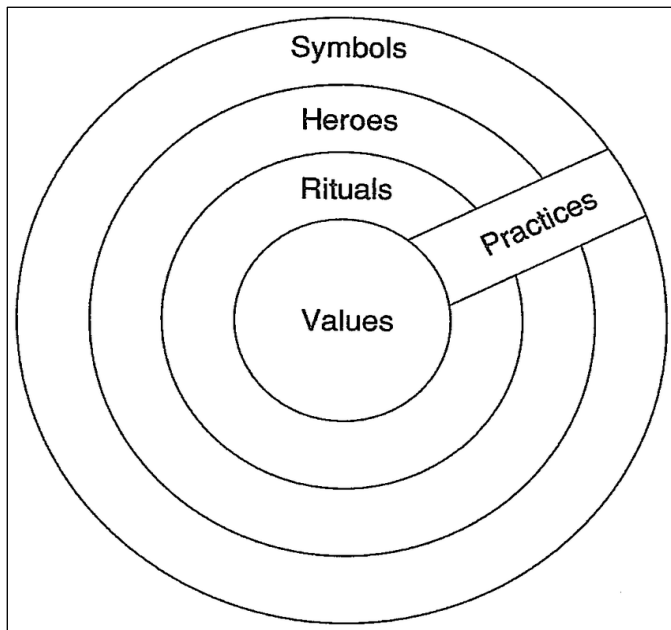


Figure 2: Onion Model of Culture by Hofstede

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Hofstedes-Onion-Model-of-Culture-Cultural-Values-are-located-at-the-core-and-are_fig3_254921413 (Accessed: 12 December 2019)

In this model symbols are the most superficial manifestations of culture, whereas values represent the deepest cultural expressions. Heroes and rituals are located in between.

Symbols are words, gestures, images or objects that have certain meanings and are only recognized as such by those who belong to the same culture. Such Symbols can be hairstyles, clothes, flags, language, gestures and facial expressions. Symbols are not fixed and change throughout time. They influence symbols of other cultures and are copied regularly by other cultural groups. That is why the symbols are located at the outer edge of the onion model (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, pp. 7-8).

The next layer of the onion model is called heroes. "Heroes are persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as models for behavior" (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 8). In the age of television, outer appearances have become more important than before in the choice of heroes. Examples of heroes in the United States are Barbie or Batman and in France for example Asterix (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 8).

The third and second to last layer in the onion model is called 'rituals'. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov describe rituals as "collective activities that are technically superfluous to reach desired ends but that, within a culture, are considered socially essential. " (2010, p. 9).

Examples of rituals are gestures of greeting, paying respect towards another person as well as social and religious rites. Political and business meetings, which are organised for apparently rational reasons, are often mainly for ritual purposes, such as strengthening group cohesion or enforcing leadership. Rituals include discourse, the way in which language is used in text and conversation, in daily interaction and in communicating beliefs (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 9).

Figure 2 shows that the onion model subsumes symbols, heroes and rituals under the term 'practices', which means that they are visible as such to an external observer. However, the cultural meaning behind these practices is invisible and usually not perceived. It can only be interpreted correctly by the insiders (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 9).

'Values' form the core of the onion model of culture. "Values are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others. Values are feelings with an added arrow indicating a plus and a minus side. They deal with pairings such as the following:

- Evil versus good
- Dirty versus clean
- Dangerous versus safe
- Forbidden versus permitted
- Decent versus indecent
- Moral versus immoral
- Ugly versus beautiful
- Unnatural versus natural
- Abnormal versus normal
- Paradoxical versus logical
- Irrational versus rational

[...] Our values are acquired [very] early in our live" (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 9). Humans have a receptive period of ten to twelve years in which they can quickly and unconsciously absorb important information from their environment, such as symbols (e.g. language), heroes (e.g. parents), rituals (e.g. toilet training) and most importantly the basic values (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, pp. 9-10).

4. National Identities, Values, and Institutions

Regions and countries differ in more than just their cultures. The following figure shows three pillars on which a country and its society is built. Based on a country's or culture's history, they all have different meanings to the according ingroup.

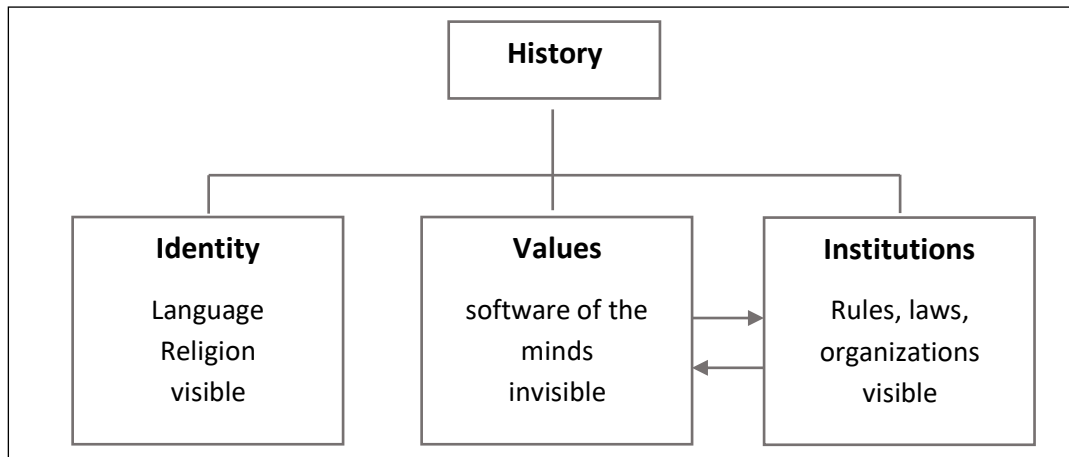


Figure 3: Differences between countries and groups
Source: adapted from Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 22

Identity gives an answer to the question to which group one belongs. It is often based on language and/or religious connection. Identity is visible and felt by the holder as well as by the environment that does not share the same identity. Identities can change throughout one's lifetime, which is easily observable in many cases of immigration. Identity is explicit and can be expressed in words, e.g. 'a woman' or 'a German citizen' (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, pp. 22-23).

"Values are implicit: they belong to the invisible software of our minds. Talking about our own values is difficult, because it implies questioning our motives, emotions, and taboos. Our own culture is to us like the air we breathe, while another culture is like water – and it takes special skills to be able to survive in both elements" (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 23).

Furthermore, countries vary in their historically developed institutions, which compose the laws, rules and organizations dealing with family life, government, media, art, sports, sciences, schools, health care and business. Some sociologists and economists think that these institutions are the true reasons for differences in thinking, feeling and acting between countries. The question here is the following: Do we need to reflect about cultures as invisible mental programmes if such differences among countries can be easily explained by institutions that are clearly visible? The answer was given by a French nobleman, Charles-Louis

de Montesquieu, more than two centuries ago (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, pp. 23-24): “[There is] a general spirit of a nation [and] the legislator should follow the spirit of the nation [...] for we do nothing better than what we do freely and by following our natural genius” (Montesquieu, 1979, p. 461). That means institutions follow mental programmes by adapting to the local culture (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, p. 24).

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Bibliography

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