Topic 2.2: Dimensions of national cultures

1. Developments on dimensions of national cultures

"In the first half of the twentieth century, social anthropology developed the conviction that all societies, modern or traditional, face the same basic problems; only the answers differ. American anthropologists, in particular Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) and Margaret Mead (1901–78), played an important role in popularizing this message for a wide audience" (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 29).

The next step for social scientists was trying to identify the problems common to all societies, through reflection and conceptual reasoning on field experiments as well as through statistical studies (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 29). In 1954, the sociologist Alex Inkeles and the psychologist Daniel Levinson, published a broad survey dealing with English-language literature on national culture. They assumed that the following questions are globally seen as common basic problems affecting the functioning of societies, of groups within these societies and of individuals within these groups (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, pp. 29-30):

- Relation to authority
- Conception of self – in particular:
    - The relationship between individual and society
    - The individual's concept of masculinity and femininity
- Ways of dealing with conflicts, including the control of aggression and the expression of feelings

Twenty years later, Geert Hofstede examined a large amount of survey data about the values of people from more than fifty different countries. These people worked in local subsidiaries of a large multinational cooperation (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 30). A statistical analysis of country averages of responses to questions about the values of similar employees in different countries revealed common problems, but with solutions varying from country to country concerning the following areas (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 30):

- Social inequality, including the relationship with authority
- The relationship between the individual and the group
- Concepts of masculinity and femininity

- Ways of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity

The Inkeles and Levinson study clearly predicted what Geert Hofstede found out twenty years later. "The four basic problem areas defined by Inkeles and Levinson […] represent *dimensions of cultures*. A dimension is an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures" (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 31).

2. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Cultures across the world are getting more and more interconnected, and the business world is becoming more and more global. As a manager, this means being able to work with a large variety of people from different countries and cultural backgrounds. As most people are so immersed in their own culture, they often do not see how it affects their patterns of thinking or their behaviour. To overcome this, scientists propose a type of tools or mechanisms to compare countries on cultural similarities and differences. Several attempts have been made to combine these cultural differences across borders (e.g. the GLOBE study, Trompenaars' cultural dimensions and Hall's cultural dimensions). However, the best-known and most-used framework for cultural differences is *Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions*. Over the years, his research has led to six cultural dimensions by which countries can be classified: Power Distance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-term/Short-term Orientation and Restraint/Indulgence (De Bruin, 2017). The following image illustrates the six different dimensions:
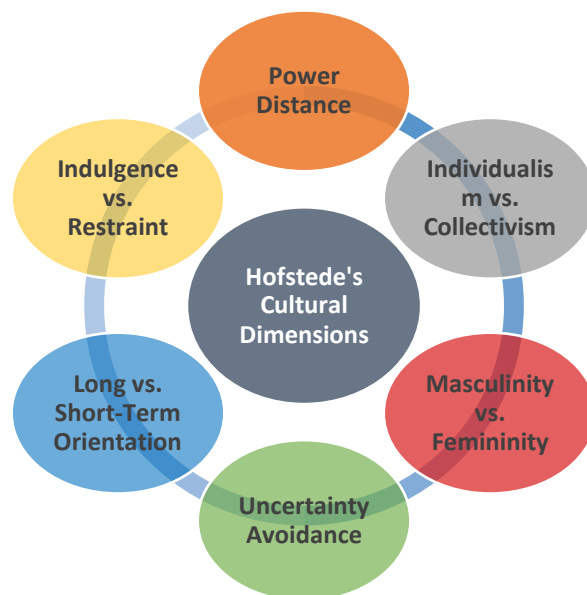

Figure 1: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions
Source: adapted from De Bruin, 2017

2.1 Power Distance

"Power Distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 2014). The basic issue here is how a society deals with inequalities between people. People in societies with a large degree of Power Distance accept a hierarchical order in which everyone has their place and no further justification is needed. In societies with low Power Distance, people strive for an equal distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power. For example, China and Saudi Arabia are both countries with a high Power Distance index (De Bruin, 2017).

2.2 Individualism versus Collectivism

"Individualism is the extent to which people feel independent, as opposed to being interdependent as members of larger wholes. Individualism does not mean egoism. It means that individual choices and decisions are expected. Collectivism does not mean closeness. It means that one 'knows one's place' in life, which is determined socially" (Hofstede, 2014). This dimension deals with the relative importance of individual versus group interests. Individualism can be described as a preference for a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are expected to care only for themselves and their immediate family members. Its counterpart, collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly knit social framework in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular group to take care of them in exchange for unconditional loyalty. A society's position regarding this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms such as "I" or "we". The USA is considered one of the most individualistic countries in the world (De Bruin, 2017).

2.3 Masculinity versus Femininity

The dimension Masculinity versus Femininity is about which values are considered to be more important in a society. The masculine side of this dimension stands for a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive. The opposite, femininity, represents a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large tends to be consensus oriented. In the business context, masculinity versus femininity is sometimes referred to as

'tough versus tender' cultures. Japan is considered a very masculine country, while Scandinavian countries like Norway and Sweden are considered highly feminine (De Bruin, 2017).

2.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

"Uncertainty avoidance deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Uncertainty avoidance has nothing to do with risk avoidance, nor with following rules. It has to do with anxiety and distrust in the face of the unknown, and conversely, with a wish to have fixed habits and rituals, and to know the truth" (Hofstede, 2014). The dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance expresses the extent to which members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. Moreover, its impact on the establishment of rules is considered. The key issue here is the way a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: Should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Countries with a high level of Uncertainty Avoidance maintain strict codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant towards unorthodox behaviour and ideas. These countries often need many rules to limit uncertainty. Countries with a low Uncertainty Avoidance index maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice matters more than principles, tolerance of ambiguity is accepted and the demand for rules to contain uncertainty is minimal. South American countries like Chile, Peru and Argentina are highly uncertainty avoiding countries (De Bruin, 2017).

2.5 Long-term versus Short-term Orientation

This dimension is about how societies deal with change. "In a long-term-oriented culture, the basic notion about the world is that is in flux, and preparing for the future is always needed" (Hofstede, 2014). These cultures are future-oriented and promote thrift and efforts in modern education to prepare for the future (De Bruin, 2017). "In a short-time-oriented culture, the world is essentially as it was created, so that the past provides a moral compass, and adhering to it is morally good" (Hofstede, 2014). These societies are past and present oriented while valuing social obligations and traditions. Moreover, they view societal change with suspicion. Morocco, for example, is considered a short-term oriented country. Asian countries, such as Japan and China, are well-known for their long-term orientation (De Bruin, 2017).

2.6 Indulgence versus Restraint

"In an indulgent culture it is good to be free. Doing what your impulses want you to do, is good. Friends are important and life makes sense. In a restrained culture, the feeling is that life is hard, and duty, not freedom, is the normal state of being" (Hofstede, 2014). This dimension is relatively new in this culture model. It shows the extent to which people try to control their impulses and desires based on how they were raised. A rather weak control is called Indulgence and a rather strong control is called Restraint. Therefore, cultures can be described as indulgent or restrained. Indulgence represents a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives associated with enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses the gratification of needs and regulates it through strict social norms (De Bruin, 2017).

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