



**Iconesoft Edizioni
Terni – Italy**

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Cultus

THE JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL
MEDIATION AND COMMUNICATION

2009, 2

Iconesoft Edizioni
Terni - Italy

Registrazione al Tribunale di Terni
n. 11 del 24.09.2007

Direttore Responsabile Elisa Paradisi
Editore Iconesoft Edizioni
Finito di stampare da Tipografia Vighi & Rizzoli - Bologna
nel mese di novembre 2009
ISSN 2035-3111

© *Iconesoft Edizioni*
via Garibaldi 89 – 05100 Terni
www.iconesoft.com

CULTUS

the Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication

2009, Volume 2

TRAINING AND COMPETENCE

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A Kuhnian Revolution in Cross-cultural Research:

Geert Hofstede is interviewed by Delia Chiaro

Delia Chiaro:

The concept of culture dimensions that are outlined in *Culture's Consequences* and more recently in *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (2001, London Sage), is both powerful and convincing. Can you begin by describing how you became involved in the experimental design that led to the conception of these dimensions?

Geert Hofstede:

I joined IBM in 1965, around the time that its management had decided to investigate what employees thought about the company. The founder of IBM, Thomas J. Watson Senior, who had died in 1956, was a Quaker and, as you probably know, the Quakers are a religious group who put the onus on life rather than doctrine. He was very concerned about the impact of the organisation on its people and so he had created an organization culture in IBM in which “respect for the individual” was a basic rule, so much so that complaints from employees could damage the career of a manager. In the mid-1960s, within this background, psychologists working in the personnel departments started surveys regarding the opinions of its employees.

Another good reason for the survey was also that, at that time, IBM was already very strongly into selling services. Of course they sold hardware, but basically they sold machines that would do jobs for people. So they were very much concerned with the way the company was perceived by its customers and that this was strongly related to the way it was perceived by the employees. At that time we found out that more than half of all the employees at IBM, and there were some 300,000, had direct face to face contact with customers. Even though it wasn't

primarily a service company, I think they rightly realised that if you wanted to have the key to a good relationship with your customers, you should have a good relationship with your employees.

I was involved in the research project almost, but not quite, from the beginning. It was actually some people in the US together with a British lady who had initially thought up the project. But I was involved right from the start in developing the questionnaire which was to use the same questions to employees in different countries. This was a novel idea at the time and I was deeply involved in the conception of getting the questionnaires internationally balanced but we had several disagreements, well, fights actually, regarding what should go into them. There were resistances from some countries. Interestingly, in hindsight, these resistances could be related actively to cultural differences; the fact that we disagreed was obvious as there were company psychologists from different countries deciding what should be in the questionnaires. But at that time of course we were not interested in *culture* at all. The questionnaire was simply supposed to find out what employees thought about IBM, the company they worked for. Of course IBM had a corporate culture which was very deeply concerned with the well being of its employees but the word *culture* in its broadest sense hadn't even been mentioned.

Chiaro:

Let's talk about the research design behind the questionnaire. IBM had establishments in different countries so you needed a questionnaire in different languages. How did you go about customizing the questionnaire for each different place where it was to be administered? Were you able to bear in mind the cultural as well as the linguistic differences of your respondents?

Hofstede:

As I said in *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, the questionnaire was developed by an international team and we translated it into at least 20 language versions. However, although we had people from various European countries in it, the team was still rather a western one. Some people, not me, also tested the questionnaire in Latin America. There was a certain amount of testing. But I don't think that the Asian side was well represented, and that's one of the reasons why

the Asian side has been added more recently in the insight of a new dimension.

Chiaro:

And how did you actually come up with the dimensions?

Hofstede:

Once we had done the surveys we found that we were able to create a very large database. I was part of the international staff trying to compare the data from the different countries and I found very interesting things, but of course I was busy running other surveys as part of my job. And then in 1971 I got a sabbatical from IBM, and I spent two years as a management teacher in Switzerland, at an institute which is now called IMD. It was there that I discovered that there were interesting country differences. When I was due back to IBM, which was in '73, I proposed that they should research these country differences but they did not want to. Unfortunately I had a new boss and he said that we could give the data to the university, and then I said "Well, if you don't mind, Sir, I will join that university".

So that's the reason why I left IBM in 1973, and for the next 6 years I lived on temporary contracts teaching part time and doing research at the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management in Brussels. Now, I had been trained first as an engineer, a training which already played a role in the way I approached my data but then I had to be trained as a social psychologist too. This training in psychology made me initially look at the differences between individuals, but then I discovered that there was a difference in countries that could not be explained as a difference between individuals. These differences were actually of a diverse nature and I was able to group them into a series of dimensions. I knew a lot about dimensions of individual personality but I discovered that at the country level we were able to group the answers to the questionnaire in a very different way. In fact, it took me about a year, I think, before I realised that I was onto something which very few people had done yet, also because few people had data about so many countries. Most international research was based on 2 or 3 countries - at best maybe on 10 countries or so - but I initially had data on 40 countries. Actually I had more, but I used 40 and this meant that I could use a much wider number of statistical approaches and all at the level of countries. In other words, I found that I was operating in anthropology

rather than in psychology. Possibly, this was due to the fact that my background was in engineering, but anyway I wasn't so much committed to psychology and I was able to make that switch in my mind. So what did happen is that I came up with a new paradigm. Much later I discovered I had actually started a Kuhnian paradigm revolution in the field. It is interesting to note that since my book appeared in 1980, all major cross-cultural research, studies such as the one by Schwartz¹ and the Globe survey², have followed the same approach. However there are also a number of people who follow the old paradigm. They don't like me. They ridicule me. They say exactly the same things as the old school that Thomas Kuhn describes in his book³. This is happening less often now, but there are still some of these old dinosaurs surviving. But also dinosaurs should have an opportunity to survive, there is really no need for them to face the real world.

Chiario:

Still on methodological issues, you also state that there are other dimensions related to equally fundamental problems of mankind which were not found in your data simply because the relative question was not asked well in the questionnaire. Can you elucidate this point?

Hofstede:

There is a book I strongly recommend to you published in 2007 by somebody who over the past ten years has become a friend of mine, a Bulgarian called Michael Minkov. The book called *What Makes us Different and Similar* was published in Sofia, but it is written in English⁴. Now what Minkov does is something which I was always hoping someone would do. When I started my analysis, I had only this IBM database, and that, at the time, was the best that was available. Nowadays of course there is an enormous volume of data, there is for example

¹ Shalom H. Schwarz. 1992. "Universals in the content and structure of values: Theory and empirical tests in 20 countries." In M. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 25) (pp. 1-65). New York: Academic Press.

² Robert J. House. 2004. *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: the GLOBE study of 62 societies*. London: Sage.

³ Thomas Kuhn. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago University Press, Chicago.

⁴ Michael Minkov. 2007. *What Makes us Different and Similar: A New Interpretation of the World Values Survey and Other Cross-Cultural Data*. Sofia: Klasika i Stil Publishing House.

Inglehart's "World Values Survey"⁵ which is a longitudinal as well as cross-cultural values study that stretches over a period of 30 years, so we have three cycles of similar questions - the initial survey was repeated after an interval of about 10 years and subsequently at intervals of approximately 5 years – in which people are being asked the same questions at the same time in 80 countries around the world. What Minkov has done is start from scratch looking at the data that exists today searching for new dimensions. In his book, he comes up with three new dimensions which he found in the data. Although his is not an exhaustive survey, one of these dimensions is very similar to my individualism versus collectivism dimension, another one is somewhat similar to long- versus short-term orientation but not completely, and the third one is entirely new, it is one which we hadn't seen yet and it is called "Indulgence versus Restraint". Indulgence could also be hedonism. If you want to know more about this, go to my website, my real one not the Mickey Mouse website.

Chiaro:

A Mickey Mouse website?

Hofstede:

My real one is without a slash in my name, and if you read my real one you see the story called "tale of two websites". It is the story of the impostor who took all my data and made a website using my name! Of course I took the impostor to court and got the website back. I have now turned it over to a white knight, a consulting company who takes care of it for me. But still this scoundrel started his own website using my name again...and so, as I gave up...I mean, I'm not in the business of suing people but...it's a nice story, it seems to be a sign of...praise, I should be flattered.

Chiaro:

Let us return to the new dimension of "Indulgence versus Restraint", I could almost guess which countries would go where.

⁵ Ronald Inglehart's World Value Survey: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>

Hofstede:

You'll find it on my real website which is “www.geerthofstede.nl” and you will find the new Values Survey Module '08, developed by a team of four people. Besides me, there is Minkov and Gert Jan Hofstede and still another colleague. The four of us have developed a new instrument, and this is actually based on integrating the things Minkov discovered into my work; it's an attempt at updating my past work by taking into account what we know now about differences between countries, and in fact it asks for seven dimensions but we actually think that it may collapse into six dimensions. However, with the new dimensions the problem is that you don't know exactly how to ask things - I mean you can't predict what a questionnaire will do till you've used it and if you think of a cross-national questionnaire, that means 10 years before you know whether you had asked the right questions. But the bad thing that happens in this field and of course to a lot of people doing research, is the approach of just accepting everything. I mean most of the people who do research have some kind of commitment to their own tracks, and they're not very good at reading the works of others; professors stop reading books of other professors after they get tenure. Minkov hasn't got tenure, anyway he belongs to the minority who read the books of other professors. By the way, I also count myself in that minority, I've always been eager to read what other people write but then I soon discovered that if I found things, they were of course related to other works, including mine. Unfortunately, others often were not happy at all, in fact they were almost insulted that I dared to correlate their data against mine even though I found significant correlations.

Chiaro:

Surely they should have been happy?

Hofstede:

They should have been happy of course! But, people are curious, they never want to speak to me again! By the way, this is an English joke, of course...in English you have professors...you have lecturers and readers...but the difference is that readers don't lecture and lecturers don't read.

Chiaro:

Absolutely...that's a nice joke! Lecturers, readers and professors! Which leads us nicely into the issue of sense of humour. Would you say that there is a cultural element to sense of humour or do you see it as an individual personality trait? In my own research on cross-cultural appreciation of humour, while being unable to deny that there is a strong cultural element in what we find funny, at the end of the day, humour appears to be in the eyes and ears of the beholder. In other words, so much is to do with the psychological constructs pertaining to personality, namely trait (individual characteristics) and state, i.e. present mood⁶.

Hofstede:

Let's look at the case of bicultural Indonesian children I discuss in my book (*Cultures and Organizations* 2005: 329-30). Jokes made by Dutch people do not work in Indonesia at all. Now, this could not be a matter of uncertainty avoidance but more a matter of collectiveness because there's still a difference in uncertainty, not so much between Indonesia and Holland, but, for example whether you can make jokes that question a person's status, or whether you can make jokes about a person's authority and that kind of thing.

Chiaro:

As you know, the Italian prime minister, Mr. Silvio Berlusconi and his allies do not like being joked about. Have you any thoughts on this matter in cultural terms?

Hofstede:

Minkov found that on the new dimension of Indulgence versus Restraint, Italians score 30, which is quite restrained, which means they prefer order over freedom of speech. Berlusconi benefits from that, and so does the Catholic Church. I think Italian bosses want to be respected, not joked about. A matter of Power Distance.

⁶ See Delia Chiaro. Forthcoming. "Introduction: Humour and Translation, Translation and Humour" in Delia Chiaro (ed.) *Humour, Translation and Literature*. London: Continuum.

Chiario:

Professor Hofstede, your work has often been criticized because your dimensions tell us nothing about the individual. What is your response to such criticism?

Hofstede:

These people are stuck in the old paradigm. They haven't discovered that analysing society is a different thing from analysing individuals, so they focus on the individual, and individuals of course are variable. In order to see the large picture, you have to zoom out...but if you are short sighted and you can't zoom out, you can't get the big picture...you'll be very worried.

There are about 57 or so different definitions of the word culture, first we have to agree on what we mean by culture. Let us look at Belgium as an index of culture; well, the interesting thing, if you read my book, is that there's very little difference on my scores between the Flemish and Walloons. They are actually fighting on issues of practices related to language. But basically they fight because it's part of their culture to fight anything that is different. So Belgium is particularly strong on uncertainty avoidance on both the language sides. By the way I got a honorary doctorate in Wallonia the other week... I'm not yet honorary doctor in Bologna so...if they need one I can offer myself...

Chiario:

Ok, that's true. I teach at the University of Bologna so I'll try to see what I can do... what do you mean by issues of "practices"?

Hofstede:

Yes, well in my book...and this is also something which dawned on me gradually, I explain the difference between practices and values. This difference is illustrated in the famous onion diagram of the manifestations of culture in which the outer layers are labelled practices, symbols, heroes and rituals, and the inner core of the onion, values. Now, the conclusion which I arrive at in the book, is that values are acquired in early youth (pre-puberty), they belong to the basic programming which the child gets, which he/she needs for surviving in the world, while practices are learned partly as a child but also later. This implies that the kind of cultures that you pick up as a young child, which are basically your gender and your nationality, are full of values and that

the kind of cultures which you pick up after puberty, are full of practices. Practices can be learned all around. What globalisation is about is unifying practices. And it is not about unifying values, because after puberty, people's values can hardly be changed. And I'm not talking about individuals, there may be exceptions for individuals, but by and large you find that migrants, for example, retain the values they picked up as children.

Chiaro:

One of your most interesting dimensions is Uncertainty Avoidance. How come Singapore with all its rules falls into this dimension?

Hofstede:

Okay, uncertainty avoidance, right, Singapore is a good example. In Singapore in a way the sense of order is not in people, the sense of order is imposed. Singapore has a very large power distance as the population is basically unruly and has to be kept in order by strict authority. It is a culture that is all about rules, it's all about authority, and about forcing people. Now if Singapore had a strong uncertainty avoidance, it wouldn't need all these rules! People would do things themselves without needing to be told. For example in Britain, you have the practice of queuing. People queue naturally, by themselves. There are no laws that oblige people in Britain to queue because there's no need. Singapore has laws for queuing because people wouldn't do it by themselves.

Chiaro:

Reminds me of Italy, full of rules which people disobey. Which brings me to a really nice question. According to your dimensions, why is Italy so difficult to govern?

Hofstede:

Uhm...I don't think you should base that on my dimensions...you shouldn't use them for any purpose, I mean...there is a lot of history involved of course...Italy was only unified 140 years ago, which is extremely young for a country. Unlike Belgium, they have one language but they don't have one culture you could say...and they have thousands, and more, of very different mind-sets. In my data I found Italy - I'm referring to the IBM data - rather close to German-speaking Switzerland and Germany, but this, of course refers to the north...because at that

time IBM was mainly operating in the north of Italy...so in my Italian data the south...the *Mezzogiorno* is under represented. It's the combination of things. But this is not only a matter of dimensions, it's a matter of history, because the dimensions are also a matter of history in the end. But please don't try to put everything into the dimensions. They're just a way of...well, beginning to make sense of the very complex reality...and this probably is what happens if you put an engineer into the social sciences.

Chiario:

What you have just said about history reminds me of one of the things you describe in your books regarding the way cultures see dirt and handle it...

Hofstede:

The story of the American couple in the park in Italy?

Chiario:

That's right! The couple noticed that American parents would allow their offspring to run around freely, without being particularly bothered if they fell over and got dirty, whereas Italian parents seemed more aware of danger and concerned with their children's cleanliness. Interestingly cross-cultural studies on hygiene and food safety repeatedly show that salmonella in Europe occurs in Switzerland! In other words, the country that is perceived as the cleanest country in Europe, where you can't drop anything in the street and which is well known for its cleanliness, appears to have a high incidence of food-borne salmonella while countries such as Greece, Turkey have very few.

Hofstede:

I think, that my son Gert Jan would like this, he's a biologist and he...for example he wouldn't allow his daughters to wash their hands before dinner. And I was appalled by that...but he believes in having them develop their own resistance...

Chiario:

Returning to the issue of Uncertainty Avoidance (*Cultures and Organizations* 168f.), How come Britain, a low uncertainty avoidance

country, has had a much longer history of private pension provision in comparison with other higher uncertainty countries?

Hofstede:

The samples are not supposed to be representative of whole national cultures, but the *differences between* well-matched country samples are representative of the differences between national cultures. This holds not only for our study, but for all studies comparing cultures, such as those comparing student samples. The validity of one's findings has to be tested by correlating one's scores with measures from other sources. These include, in our case, results of supposedly representative national samples like the World Values Survey.

Chiaro:

You have been criticized about your use of equivalents for terms in different languages.

Hofstede:

The issue of differences in the meaning of a word between two languages becomes less important when you base your conclusions on statistical trends across 40 countries and 20 languages. For example, Uncertainty Avoidance cannot just be done away with like they do. It has become a major concept in cross-cultural research, resurging in empirical research by researchers from different countries on very different cultures and population samples. It tells us things about France which French sociologists have also said, and so on for other countries; some part of what the dimensions tell us may be politically welcome and some parts not; but don't shoot the messenger because you don't like the message.

Personally I am a polyglot - at 80, I still teach occasionally in Dutch, English, French and German; we lived for 8 years in a French speaking environment, French is our second family language. Between me, my wife and our 4 sons we have studied 13 languages, including Arabic and Chinese. My wife and one of our sons are professional translators. I will never ignore the importance of language, but there are aspects of culture that go across and beyond that. Many, however, are still caught in the old paradigm.

Chiario:

What advice would you give to a younger person interested in researching intercultural issues and what would you have them investigate?

Hofstede:

Well it depends, you see, there is always a reason why people want to go into this field, for example because their parents are from different countries, or they have travelled or visited a lot of places, so, the very important thing is that you use the assets you have got. I mean, you have some experiences and you use them as a basis to go on and to find out about other people. Often it starts off with culture shock. For example it's quite common in all those students now that go on internships abroad. Some of these students undergo a cultural shock and...well, if you have the right mind-set then you say...well, "this is very interesting". Culture shock is so interesting, but if you don't have the right mind-set you say "I'll never go there again, these people are bad" and so on. But if you have the right mind-set you use that as a challenge and you get committed to investigating culture.

Chiario:

Well, Professor Hofstede, thank you very much for your time. It has been a pleasure to talk to you this morning.

Hofstede:

Not at all. Thank you and bye bye.