

TROMPENAARS' AND HAMPDEN-TURNER'S SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

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Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner defined a set of seven cultural dimensions, which they referred to as the “Seven Dimensions of Culture” model, using an extensive database with over 30,000 survey results collected during the course of multiple studies involving questionnaires sent to thousands of managers in 28 countries. In general, respondents were given dilemmas or contrasting tendencies and were asked to respond to basic questions that the researchers believed would provide insights into basic cultural attitudes and values. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner identified seven dimensions which they believed explained distinctions between national cultures and which are explained in the following sections. Five of the dimensions pertained to ways in which members of the society related to one another, one dimension addressed how societal members relate to their environment and the last dimension addressed various aspects of time orientation. The researchers were also management consultants and suggested that their model explained cultural differences in multi-national organizations, provided insights for managers to avoid culturally-based misunderstandings and assisted marketing specialists in understanding why consumers in different countries respond differently to the same product and promotional campaign.²

1. Universalism/Particularism

Universalism/particularism distinguishes societies based on the relative importance they place on rules and laws as opposed to personal relationships. The basic question is: “What is more important—rules or relationships?” Members of universalistic societies focus more on rules, codes, values and standards and believe that they take precedence over the needs and claims of friends and other personal relationships; believe that rules or laws can be applied to everyone and should be used to determine what is right; use precisely defined agreements and contracts as the basis for conducting business; tend to define global standards for company policies and human resources practices; and believe that agreements and contracts should not be changed. Members of more particularistic, sometimes referred to as pluralist, societies focus more on human friendships and

¹ The material in this report will appear in *Organizational Management and Administration: A Guide for Managers and Professionals* by Dr. Alan S. Gutterman and is presented with permission of Thomson Reuters/West. Copyright 2010 Thomson Reuters/West. For more information or to order call 1-800-762-5272. Dr. Gutterman is the Director of the Center for Comparative Management Studies [www.comparativemanagementstudies.org].

² For further discussion, see F. Trompenaars and C. Hampden-Turner. Riding the waves of culture: Understanding cultural diversity in business (Nicholas Brealey, UK, 2005). Portions of the discussion below are adapted from class notes prepared by Professor Gary R. Oddou and available at <http://courses.csusm.edu/mgmt461go/> (downloaded September 26, 2010)

personal relationships than on formal rules and laws; place emphasis on friendships and look at the situation to determine what is right or ethically acceptable; believe that deals are made based on friendships and that contracts can be adapted to satisfy new requirements in specific situations; and permit local variations of company and human resources policies to adapt to different requirements. Germany and the US would be examples of strongly universalistic societies while China and Russia would be examples of strongly particularistic societies.

2. Individualism/Collectivism

Individualism/collectivism (communitarianism) distinguishes societies based on the relative weight given to individual versus group interests. The basic question is: “Do we function as a group or as individuals?” In individualist societies members place the individual before the group or community and one finds frequent use of the term “I”; “on the spot” decisions made by representatives of the organization; people ideally achieve alone and assume personal responsibility; and vacations are taken in pairs or even alone rather than as part of a group. Individual happiness, fulfillment and welfare are the most important in individualist societies and members are expected to take care of themselves first. In contrast, in collectivist societies members place the group or community before the individual and collectivist, sometimes called communitarian, societies are characterized by frequent use of the term “we”; decisions are referred back to the organization by the representatives; people ideally achieve objectives in groups and assume joint responsibility; and vacations are taken in organized groups or with extended family. Members of a collectivist society are expected to act in ways that serve the best interests of the society and by doing so their individual needs will also be served. The US would be an example of a strongly individualistic society while Japan would be an example of a strongly collectivist society.

3. Achievement/Ascription

Achievement/ascription distinguishes societies on the basis of how they distribute status and authority and is quite similar to Hofstede’s power distance dimension. The basic question is: do we have to prove ourselves to receive status or is it given to us?” In achievement-oriented societies status is based on what members have accomplished and characteristics of such societies include the following: use of titles only when relevant to the competence brought to the task; respect for superiors in the hierarchy is based on previous achievements, demonstrated adequacy of their knowledge and good performance of their jobs; and companies where most senior managers are of varying ages and genders and have obtained their positions through accomplishments rather than just seniority. In contrast, ascription-oriented societies ascribes status based upon social, position, age, gender, wealth and similar factors and is characterized by extensive use of titles, especially when these clarify status in the organization; respect for superiors in the hierarchy; and companies where most senior managers are male, middle-age and promoted based on primarily on seniority. The US would be an example of a strongly achievement-oriented society while China and Russia would be examples of strongly ascription-oriented societies.

4. Neutral/Affective

Neutral/affective distinguishes societies based on how they view the display of emotions by their members. The basic question is: “Do we display our emotions?” Neutral societies are characterized by not overtly revealing what one is thinking or feeling; only accidental revelation of tension in face and posture; hidden emotions that may occasionally explode out; cool and self-possessed conduct and control over feelings; lack of physical contact, gesturing or strong facial expressions; and monotone oral delivery of written materials. In contrast, affective societies are characterized by nonverbal and verbal display of thoughts and feelings; transparency and expressiveness in release of tensions; easy flow of emotions sometimes effusively, vehemently and without inhibition; the admiration and display of heated, vital, animated expressions; and fluent and dramatic delivery of statements. Japan would be an example of a strongly neutral society while Mexico would be an example of a strongly affective society.

5. Specific/Diffuse

Specific/diffuse distinguishes societies based on how their members engage colleagues in specific or multiple areas of their lives (i.e., the extent to which societal members keep their personal and working lives separate). The basic question is: “How far do we get involved?” Members of more specific-oriented societies tend to clearly separate their personal and working lives and have a completely different relation of authority in each social group. This follows from the fact that members of specific-oriented societies tend to first analyze all elements of their lives individually before putting them together and thus it is not surprising that only a single component of a member’s personal life can be entered at any one time and that interactions between members are well-defined. In diffuse-oriented societies members see the individual elements of their lives as interrelated and thus there is no clear distinction between personal lives and work and the hierarchy of authority at work can reflect into social areas outside of work hours. The US would be an example of a highly specific society while China would be an example of a highly diffuse society.

6. Internal/External

Internal/external distinguishes societies on the degree to which members believe they can exert control over their environment as opposed to believing that their environment controls them. The basic question is “Do we control our environment or work with it?” In an internal, or inner-directed, society, members have a mechanistic view of nature and while they believe that nature is complex it can be controlled by people who make the effort and have the appropriate expertise. In an external, or outer-directed, society members have an organic view of nature and rather than trying to control nature the preferred approach for members is to learn how to live in harmony with nature and adapt themselves to external circumstances. Not surprisingly, members of internal societies have more dominating attitudes and are uncomfortable with change while members of

external societies are more flexible and comfortable with change and more willing to compromise in order to achieve harmony.

7. Time Orientation

Sequential/synchronic distinguishes societies based on whether members prefer to do one thing at a time or work on several things at the same time. The basic question is: Do we do things one at a time or several things at once?" Members of sequential societies prefer to do one activity at a time and follow plans and schedules strictly. In contrast, members of synchronic societies see time as flexible and intangible and are comfortable doing several activities in parallel, loosely following schedules and agendas and selecting current activities based on the priorities among all of the individual activities that are in the queue.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner argued that the sequential/synchronic dimension represented one of two ways that cultures responded to time and that it was also important to take note of distinctions between societies with respect to the importance they assigned to the past present and future. Past-oriented societies view the future as a repetition of past events and experiences and are characterized by talk about history, origin of family, business and nation; motivation to recreate a golden age; respect shown for ancestors, predecessors and older people; and everything is viewed in the context of tradition or history. Present-oriented societies do not assign much weight to either the past or future and are characterized by a sharp focus on current activities and enjoyments as being the most important; good planning and poor execution; intense interest in present relationships, focus on here and now; and assessment of everything in terms of its contemporary impact and style. Future-oriented societies are focused on future prospects and do not see the past as being terribly significant in determining what is to come and are characterized by much talk of prospects, potentials, aspirations, future achievements; enthusiasm for planning and strategizing; great interest in the youthful and future potentials; and use and exploitation of the present and past for future advantage.