

Knowledge management and self-identity as a sub-culturally bound determinant: Subsoil of the hofstede hypothesis

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Abstract

While organizations have initiated knowledge management initiatives to systematically and methodically capture both explicit and tacit (or silent) knowledge, these initiatives have experienced mixed results. Inherent organizational idiosyncrasies have bounded the transferability and reusability of the knowledge base. Characteristics such as relevance, timeliness, but most important, cultural context, bind both the generalizable and transferable value of knowledge. For the knowledge to have value and utility, the cultural context must be taken into consideration. The problematic generalization and applicability of the Hofstede Hypothesis is redefined as a matter of statistical aggregation averages. The collectivity that establishes the essence of culture has many faces that situationally define the culture context (i.e, profession, organization, religion, and ethnicity). Application of the model to demographic, professional, organizational, and other identities may be more useful, telling and generalizable than contemporary national profiles. The framework is readily adaptable to identifiable more homogeneous sub-cultures, and hence a potential source of data that can validate the universality of the Hofstede Hypothesis to document multi-dimensional cultural profiles within the context of a national cultural environment. This research concentrated on the analysis of the results of two additional questions added by the researchers to the Hofstede VSM2013eng survey designed to capture the participants' self-defined notion of identity to a participant pool of Polish, American, and Slovak individuals including undergraduate and graduate students. Understanding cultural nuance and its pervasiveness is critical to context and its role in understanding human behavior. Cultural profiles and individual identity can have relevance in the study of the knowledge management, especially in the practical application of an individual's own knowledge.

Keywords: Hofstede, knowledge management, identity, culture

Introduction

Knowledge and knowledge management is contextualized and situational. While organizations have initiated knowledge management initiatives to systematically and methodically capture both explicit and tacit (or silent) knowledge, these initiatives have experienced mixed results. Inherent organizational idiosyncrasies have bounded the transferability and reusability of the knowledge base. Characteristics such as relevance, timeliness, but most important, cultural context, bind both the generalizable and transferable value of knowledge. For the knowledge to have value and utility, the cultural context must be taken into consideration.

Knowledge is defined as a “mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and formation... In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and Norms” (Davenport & Prusak, 2000, p.1). Given that each organization, department, problem and problem is culturally bound, the knowledge associated with each situation can be argued to be appropriate only in similar cultural settings –based on self-defined identity.

Beyond Hofstede – A New Model

Our research to Hofstede’s original Hypothesis shows there is a new way to understand dimensions of an individual and a person’s viewpoint within society. In particular, our research interests led to further assessment and understanding of the individual’s cultural identity at a national level. Our research interests related to comparing cultures across Hofstede’s six dimensions (Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity, Long/Short Term Orientation and Indulgence/Restraint) and to further interpret results at a level of aggregation, where a holistic approach could be used to determine not only national culture, but also an individual’s identity within the national culture. (Hofstede 2011). An individual’s identity has contextual frames beyond nationality. As an example, an individual’s frames relate to their profession, religion, economic class and historical ethical heritage. Those frames might reflect a contextual mindset that can be applied to various cultural perspectives at a national level. While the national cultural perspective has been addressed in prior Hofstede based research, our research lends itself to further exploration that an individual’s cultural perspective is relative at not only a national level, but also at the individual’s viewpoint on life at a personal level based on different frames of the individual.

Hofstede’s (1980) cultural framework can be argued to be one of the most influential (and controversial) studies to focus on cultural identities and differences around the world. While his study was based on surveys conducted in cooperation with IBM and its employees over a 6 year period in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, his resulting cultural framework then based on four cultural dimensions has become fodder for the hundreds of follow up studies by many researchers trying to either validate or debunk Hofstede’s findings. While most subsequent studies have focused on the relevance and validity of Hofstede’s early dimensions, much has changed for both Hofstede and the world. For instance, the four original cultural dimensions of Power Distance (PDI), Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS), and Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) have increased to include two more dimensions: Long Term Orientation (LTO) (now Pragmatic versus Normative (PRA)), and Indulgence versus Restraint (IND). However, it is uncertain as to how many studies are using the appropriate formula for determining the dimensions (i.e., the 5 dimension version or the six dimension version and how it affects the overall derived indices). These changes were made as the result of further research into what constituted cultural markers or indices beyond the original dimensions. Furthermore, much has happened since the 1970’s to have potentially changed cultural frames such as the end of the cold war geopolitical and ideological shifts (i.e., the EU), the internet, 9-11, the financial crisis of 2008, etc. It can be argued that the aggregated national cultural indices

established as reference points for nation state cultures in their mean average form not accurately reflect the essence of a cultural identity or characteristic.

Hofstede Hypothesis Re-contextualized

The work of Geert Hofstede has been discussed and debated over the past 30 years. Hofstede's notion of national culture is essentially based on five (now six) conceptions. He hypothesizes that culture displays a geographic or territorial uniqueness, is nationally shared from a statistical average vantage point, is inherently mentally subjective, is determinate as the influence, displays identifiable characteristics and predictable consequences, and is enduring (McSweeney, 2003, p.7). Hofstede's dimensions of power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long term orientation (and most recently nurturing) together provide the basis of a profile that is reflective of a centered average of national cultural characteristics. Discussion, however, has emerged from numerous studies applying his data gathering questionnaire to the same national cultural entities as established by Hofstede in his initial worldwide study of IBM employees. Given the resulting cultural profiles are varied from the original Hofstede profiles; the resulting profiles are interesting through the pragmatism of providing an analytical tool to help explain cultural difference within a national context. The question becomes, what defines the national culture in what context? With the advent of readily accessible mass media, the internet, and varied social identity it can be argued that any individual may at the same time harbor the profile of multiple identities within the context of national identity. One can wear many cultural hats. Beyond national identity there is ethnic identity, professional identity, organizational identity, social/sport/hobby identity, as well as religious identity (Kohun, Skovira & Burcik, 2012). Each of which manifests cultural attributes, values, language and practice that may contradict the cultural attributes of one or more of the other cultural identities an individual may assume. Individuals manifest the cultural attributes and characteristics of the culture they self-identify with at any given point in time. Hence, in Hofstedian terms, each of the cultural dimensions would reflect the cultural identity assumed by an individual all within the realm of a particular national context.

The Hofstede perspective: "Culture is always a collective phenomenon ... Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It [culture] is the collective programming of the mind that distinguished the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p. 6; see Hofstede, 1983, p. 76 for an early view; see also Kirkman et al., 2006, p. 286). There are a couple of questionable aspects of the perspective defined above. This perspective is the source of what can be called the Hofstede Hypothesis. What are the questionable aspects? The first is the word and idea of "programming"; the second is the word and idea of "mind"; there is a possible additional aspect to be noted which is the term and idea "unwritten rules of the social game". What vocabulary or taxonomic domain is the source here? And, what ontological space affords an environment for these ideas?

Furthermore, does "programming" reference the ontological space of computer science or information science? So, programming is computing; thinking is computational. The model appropriate may be the information processing of mind. This may allow for a construal of the

idea as a cognitive psychological affair. That is, reality is made, or computed, in terms of mental models (DiMaggio, 1997, p. 267) tacitly configuring situations, actions, consequences, and meanings.

Or, can “programming” as an idea be construed simply as a set of social habits, or practices? Practices as social schemes silently are in play bounding a group’s members’ activities. Analogous, perhaps, to a “program” of a social event which orders or organizes the social event as a situation of meaning; a sense-making document organizing people’s experiences; a program of frames.

Does “mind” reference the ontological domain of cognitive psychology, wherein mind is construed as a set of operative mental models, cognitive schemas, or scripts? Or, should this idea be construed as a set of social practices or social habits (Uoro & Kuofie, 2006, p. 17)? Or, can “mind” be thought of as a set of “language games” representative of a “way of life” according to Wittgenstein?

Another aspect (the third) of a programmed mind is that some of the programming consists of “unwritten rules” of social behavior; the learning of what is or is not appropriate ways of acting in situations. What is learned, of course, are programmed modules of social action. The use of “programming” denotes something else. The actions spawned by a program are not conditional or hypothetical, they are deterministic. The “mental program”, script, or mental model is a procedural instrument of action dependent on a recognized situation. And another model programs the mind to recognize the appropriate features of the situational environment.

Hofstede does not want to appear as deterministic as his words make him appear. A person’s “mental programs” on the surface of action are flexible and adaptive as they construct “practices” which are variable socially. The deep structures of mental programs rest on collectively inculcated “values” which are deterministic of behaviors, i.e., practices (Leung et al., 2005, p. 357; Javidan et al., 2006, p. 879).

So, a culture determines the value scheme which frames all personal behavior. A person’s “intellectual” and “emotional” machinery consists of the hard-core frames of values which enforce identifiable perspectives evidenced in performances and language.

All this gives rise to the Hofstede Hypothesis. This is a perspective that no one can escape the bonds of the collectivity (Hofstede, 1993, pp. 83-87), the group and language, one was born into and raised in, and that one cannot escape the bonds of the society a particular group has lived-in; that “practices” may change, but “values” are permanent (but they are programmed as a source of the practices) (Newman & Nollen, 1996, p. 754). As Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) write: “Not only organizations are culture bound; theories about organizations are equally culture bound” (p. 307).

Institutional frames such as professions and religion reflect a context and mindset that may be programmed to different cultural perspectives than prescribed by a national cultural *average*.

The Hofstede Foundational Data in Perspective

The conclusion that formed the basis of Hofstede’s cultural profiles were based on Hofstede’s 2 IBM studies with a combined data sample of 117,000 questionnaires. While the 2 studies

involved 66 countries, only 40 of the countries yielded scores. As a result, less than one third of the 117,000 IBM employee responses were used in the study. Additionally, 6 out of the initial 66 countries yielded more than 1,000 survey results from the combined 2 studies. Less than 200 respondents were reported in 15 countries. The only surveys returned in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore were 88, 71, and 58 respectively (McSweeney, 2003, p.9).

The actual questionnaires themselves were not designed to assess and identify attributes of a national culture but were designed by IBM as a tool to understand and analyze possible factors with respect to declining morale within the corporation. The questionnaires were not administered independently and without process. The completion of the questionnaires was not monitored for objectivity, integrity, and confidentiality. For instance, some questionnaires were not completed individually but rather in groups. Because of possible consequences and lack of confidentiality, the respondents answered subjectively, politically, and strategically. Finally, all workers were not represented; only marketing and sales staff—not blue collar workers (McSweeney, 2003, p.9). In the initial studies—was the population survey representative of a national “average” profile or a skewed organizational and/or professional culture average?

While Hofstede acknowledges the data limitations and constraints, it appears that the national cultural profile implications, in essence, took on a life of their own. While the data may not be universally accurate, the study was both historic and important in that it was one of the first studies that provided a global corporate snapshot that was the basis for frame of analysis using generalizable observations. That is not to say that with refinement, cooperation, and design, Hofstede’s questionnaire can be used in the focused context of respective professional, organizational, religious sub-cultures within the confines of a national label.

Global Cultural Homogenization?

While the Hofstede Hypothesis provided insight to understanding and harnessing cultural differences, its analytical impact has been and still is significant. Using his mode of analysis and questionnaire provides for a consistent cultural assessment tool. The resulting analytical frames (Hofstede’s five—now six—dimensions), while regarded by some only as an interesting basis of discussion, can be used in the confines of more homogeneous cultures sub-cultures such as those discussed earlier to assess the overall validity of the Hofstede Hypothesis. Nevertheless, the model and the associated cultural profiles based on aggregate averages can be effectively used to analyze the possible impacts of phenomena like the internet, social media, the EU, the financial crisis of 2008, and globalization on national cultural profile. Previous research has suggested that globalization, the Internet, and social media have “flattened” the world as is evidenced by Hofstede cultural model compared values before and after the change variable had been mainstreamed (Burcik et.al, 2009). More recent research has demonstrated that after the financial crisis of 2008, cultural profiles moved/returned closer to the values established by Hofstede (Kohun et.al, 2012). The Hofstede Hypothesis and associated model and questionnaire can and should be applied to a segmented population based on a variety of demographic characteristics such as age, profession, ethnic identity, economic class, and education. The demographic segmentation can help answer questions such as the impact of social media on cultural identity and characteristics on 18 year olds versus 60 year olds. Is the profile the same? Does it change as one gets older to pre-established historical norms?

While promising in its approach to have empirical based data results on frames such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance, the data is rather obsolete in its historical context whereas the world today is a global marketplace. Technology, connectivity and communication are available as commodities to almost everyone. As noted by Friedman in “*The World Is Flat*”, technology is so widespread in society that “everyone is connected”. His view is that the world is a level playing field in terms on commerce, technology and communication where everyone has equal opportunities. Individual viewpoints and perspectives can be shared with friends from around the world today easily, instantaneously via social media products such as Facebook, as opposed to the process used from Hofstede’s original research where individuals mingled in local neighborhoods to meet and discuss viewpoints with friends and neighbors.

Research: Our Study, Data, and Findings

While the Hofstede initial hypothesis provided insight to understanding and harnessing cultural differences, its analytical impact has been and still is significant. The resulting analytical frames (Hofstede’s six dimensions noted above) regard an interesting basis for discussion related to homogeneous cultures, sub-cultures and individual identity. Individual identity can relate to attributes such as a person’s job, relationship and respect towards a boss, job performance, recognition, and opportunities for promotion. On private life outside of work or going to school, personal attributes such as the ability to spend free time for fun, spending time with friends, enjoying good health and minimizing daily stress also relate to personal identity. One of our more interesting attributes to review relates to an individual’s personal viewpoint on nationality and national identity. Our research concentrated on the following questions added by the researchers to the Hofstede VSM2013eng survey designed to capture the participants’ self-defined notion of identity.

- What is your nationality?
- What was your nationality at birth?

By including national and individual identity with Hofstede’s six dimensions, a more in-depth and richer assessment might be available at an aggregated level on the individual’s cultural frame. The preliminary findings of our research (A brief summary overview of the results below) aligns with prior insights gained from Hofstede’s dimensions and frames while adding a new paradigm—the cultural sub-soil, i.e. the individual’s identity related to nationality and national identity, age, education, and/or profession.

This study used the QuestionPro online survey tool to administer the Hofstede VSM 2013eng cultural tool. There were 25 questions that are part of the standard VSM survey along with 5 additional questions asked by the researchers.

The participant profile for this study:

- 152 individuals from three countries started the study
- 101 completed the study (66% /response completion rate with US 72%, Poland 26%, and Slovakia 2%)
- 51 Did not complete—most from Slovakia

In terms of technology and submission statistics:

- 87% Desktop/Laptop (13% Windows 8; 13% Mac; 74% Windows (Other))
- 10% Smartphones (60% Android; 33% iPhone; 1% Windows 8)
- 3% Tablets (50% iPad; 25% Android; 25% Windows 8)

The five additional questions that were added to the Hofstede cultural tool questionnaire:

1. Are you Male or female?
 - a. Male 72.28%
 - b. Female 27.72%
2. How old are you?
 - a. Under 20 10.89%
 - b. 20-24 40.59%
 - c. 25-29 16.83%
 - d. 30-34 13.86%
 - e. 35-39 4.95%
 - f. 40-49 9.90%
 - g. 50-59 2.97%
 - h. 60 and Over 0.00%
3. How many years of formal education did you complete (start with primary school)?
 - a. 10 years or less 2.97%
 - b. 11 years .99%
 - c. 12 years 4.95%
 - d. 13 years 12.87%
 - e. 14 years 9.90%
 - f. 15 years 10.89%
 - g. 16 years 14.85%
 - h. 17 years 11.88%
 - i. 18 years 30.69%
4. If you have had a paid job, what kind of a job is it/was it?
 - a. No paid job 9.90%
(Includes full time students)
 - b. Unskilled or semi-skilled manual worker 26.73%
 - c. Generally trained office worker or secretary 9.90%
 - d. Vocationally trained craftsman, technician,
IT-specialist, nurse, artist, or equivalent 8.91%
 - e. Academically trained professional or equivalent 15.84%
(But not a manager of people)
 - f. Manager of one or more subordinates 20.79%
(Non-managers)

- g. Manager of one or more managers 7.92%
- 5a. What is your nationality? (Responses written in by participant subject).
- h. Polish participants 100% as “Polish” or “Polska”
 - i. Slovak participant 100% as Slovak
 - j. US participants responses varied:
 - i. 51% responded American, USA, or US
 - ii. 6.8% responded White
 - iii. 6.8% responded Caucasian
 - iv. 1.5% responded Black “nigga”
 - v. 3% responded African American
 - vi. 4% responded Native American
 - vii. 4% responded Indian
 - viii. 1.5% responded Gambian
 - ix. 1.5% responded Tanzanian
 - x. 1.5 % responded Rwanda
 - xi. 8% responded Saudi
 - xii. 10% responded of various mixed European decent
- 5b. What is your nationality at birth (if different from 5a)? Response written in by participant
- k. Polish participants 100% Polish as a response
 - l. Slovak participants 100% Slovak as a response
 - m. United States participants 59% US as a response (varied responses most matching the previous question response)

Discussion

From the preliminary findings of the data, a few observations and conclusions can be drawn. Foremost, the United States participants responses are significantly different from the other two countries examined in the context of this paper. The United States participants did not have a consistent sense of identity based on national affiliation. Poland and Slovakia (although, with a low response rate—a large amount of data previously collected from Slovakia yielded the same findings), on the other hand, demonstrated a consistent and solid national identity—regardless of other parameters. The difference between the United States and the other two countries may be explained by: the size of the country—and hence its heterogeneous responses; and its rich history of immigration and associated immigrant communities and ongoing culture. (It can be conjectured that a similar phenomenon and pattern may have emerged with the old Soviet Union). Additionally, preliminary findings seem to indicate that age and education may be common factors in Hofstede’s cultural dimensions—crossing cultural borders. These may, in fact, be culturally flattening indicators possibly representing wisdom and knowledge. Finally, preliminary finding indicate the same for profession. At any rate, the data does demonstrate that the United States is different from other countries in that national identity is secondary.

Furthermore, while Table 1 and Figure 1 represent the current aggregate values collected by the Hofstede Center to present a cultural profile using the six cultural dimensions of the United States, Poland, and Slovakia, the findings of this research suggest that the subsoil of the data inclusive of age, education, and profession may reveal a different story.

Table 1: Hofstede Center Cultural Dimension Comparative Statistics (2014)

		Poland	US	Slovakia
Power Distance	PDI	68	40	100
Individualism vs. Collectivism	IDV	60	91	52
Masculinity vs. Femininity	MAS	64	62	100
Uncertainty Avoidance	UAI	93	46	51
Long-Term Orientation	LTO	38	26	77
Indulgence vs. Restraint	IND	29	68	28

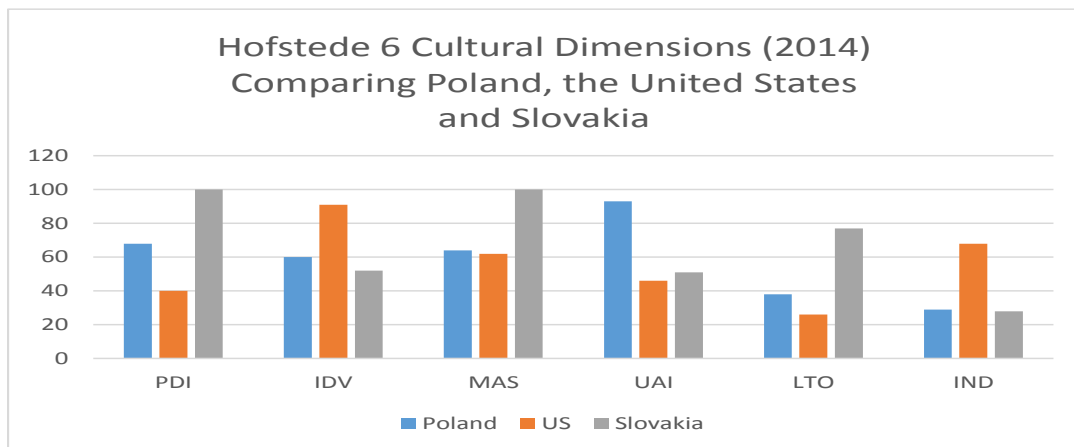


Figure 1: Hofstede 6 Cultural Dimensions

Conclusion and Future Research

While there is much discussion and debate over the applicability and validity of the Hofstede cultural model, Hofstede’s work is oft cited, used in much research, and provides a useful frame for cultural determined knowledge management and decision making. The cultural profiles, established by the model, while the product of statistical averages and of questionable generalizability, are useful for baseline measures of change. Application to demographic, professional, organizational, and other identities may be more useful, telling and generalizable than contemporary national profiles. The framework is readily adaptable to identifiable more

homogeneous sub-cultures, and hence a potential source of data that can validate the universality of the Hofstede Hypothesis to document multi-dimensional cultural profiles within the context of a national cultural environment. Self-identity for certain cultural groupings such as Poland and Slovakia tend to reinforce the Hofstede cultural profiles. Others, such as the United States reflects greater cultural diversity and indicators of cultural value. Nevertheless, other cultural groups such as Americans have quite diverse identity profiles that, in many cases, reflect ethnic cultural heritage two or more generations prior as opposed to the mainstream “aggregate” American identity. This research is being expanded to include other migrant countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Further refinements of the instrument are underway to include an additional question on “What is your identity” as well as to break employment down into specific professions and occupations. Understanding cultural nuance and its pervasiveness is critical to context and its role in understanding human behavior. Cultural profiles and individual identity can have relevance in the study of the knowledge management, especially in the practical application of an individual’s own knowledge.

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