Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

...for AFS & Friends

Consider this situation: Sarah is a U.S. American teenager and her family recently moved to Japan, where her father has been transferred for work. Sarah is finding life in the big city of Tokyo a bit overwhelming, but she is trying to get settled and make friends. One of her biggest adjustment challenges has been related to school. There are many new rules and rituals – considerably more than she had experienced in the United States! For example, in Japan she must wear a uniform, while in the US she did not. At her Japanese school, they not only wear the same uniform, but all students of a certain grade level also wear the same in-door shoes. Her classmates seem to like wearing the same clothes as everyone else, but Sarah feels like she has lost a significant portion of her ability to express herself. Another challenge for Sarah is the fact that every day after school, all students work together to clean up their classroom and the school hallways. Sarah doesn't generally mind cleaning, but it is the last thing she wants to do after a long day at school and she frequently gets frustrated and upset by the additional activity. Finally, the school year began with a one-hour ceremony. It was extremely ritualized and Sarah's classmates told her that it was exactly the same each year. Her classmates seemed to really enjoy the ceremony, even though they had to stand during the entire 60 minutes. Sarah had gotten bored, as well as tired from standing so long, and couldn't understand why her classmates looked forward to this ceremony each year.

Being unable to navigate unfamiliar cultural contexts can lead to frustration and confusion.

What is going on? Why might people from different cultures react distinctly to similar contexts?

According to **Geert Hofstede**, this discrepancy in behavior can be explained by cultural differences. When a foreigner, like Sarah, visits another country, s/he may feel out of place, disliked or stressed by how differently natives of that country act. These feelings can also occur when interacting with people from other subcultures, as well, including social class, religion, gender, and even different regions within one's home country. But why do people from other cultures seem to behave and think differently?

Geert Hofstede developed a theory to explain this phenomenon based on studies he conducted in the 1980's involving more than 50 national cultures. His theory is called the Cultural Dimensions Theory and it offers a framework to examine how cultural values affect behavior and give clues to why people of a culture might act a certain way. The theory presents six Cultural Dimensions*: Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long-Term Orientation, and Indulgence versus Restraint.

The Cultural Dimensions are continuums and most cultures fall somewhere between the two extremes. The cultural examples provided below do not mean that these cultures have all of the traits of that Cultural Dimension, but rather that they have a tendency for those traits.

1. POWER DISTANCE (PDI)

The Power Distance Indicator (PDI) describes how less powerful members of society accept and expect an inequality of power. In large PDI societies, members of society do not challenge those in higher levels. Also, they expect more powerful members to give them direction. The PDI is typically larger in societies in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa.

In small PDI cultures, people have equal power among members, and advancing to a higher status (via education, income, job position, etc.) is possible. Some national cultures with small PDI are: The Nordic countries, New Zealand and Australia.

Common Characteristics of Cultures with High and Low Power Distance:

Large Power Distance	Small Power Distance
Inequality is accepted	Inequality is minimized
There is a hierarchy for necessity	There is a hierarchy for convenience
Superiors are not accessible	Superiors are accessible
Those that have power have privileges	Everyone has the same rights
Change happens through revolution	Change happens through natural evolution
Children learn obedience	Children are equals

2. INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM (IDV)

In an Individualist society, members tend to make decisions independently and be most concerned about themselves and close family members. Some Individualistic national cultures include: the United States, Australia and England. On the other hand, in Collectivistic societies, group ties are strong and the family unit includes extended family (aunts and uncles, cousins, etc.). Some Collectivistic national cultures are: Guatemala, Pakistan and Indonesia.

In Collectivistic societies, relationships and group harmony are important.

Common Characteristics of Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures:

Individualism	Collectivism
Communication is usually Low Context	Communication is usually High Context
Focused on "me"	Focused on "us"
Emphasis on personal choice	Relations are more important than tasks
You have to fulfill your own obligations	Obligation to fulfill obligations imposed by group
Speak your thoughts directly	Maintain harmony and avoid direct confrontation

3. UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE (UAI)

The Uncertainty Avoidance Indicator (UAI) explains how members feel and deal with unknown situations. In strong UAI cultures, people tend to avoid risks and unexpected situations. The unknown situation creates high anxiety and stress. Japan, Greece and Russia are countries whose national cultures have a high UAI, where there is high preference for predictable or controlled situations.

Members of cultures with a weak UAI tend to be more tolerant of what they cannot control. Uncertainty is accepted as a part of life and people are generally more relaxed and flexible to the unknown situation. Countries such as Jamaica and Singapore have national cultures that tend to embrace ambiguity.

Common Characteristics Strong and Weak Uncertainty Avoidance:

Strong Uncertainty Avoidance	Weak Uncertainty Avoidance
High stress levels around uncertainty	Low stress levels around uncertainty
Uncertainty in life is a continuous threat and must be fought	Uncertainty is a part of everyday life Accept things as they come
There is a need for consensus	Differences of opinion are acceptable
There is a need to avoid failure	Taking risks is okay
Large need for rules and laws	Little need for rules and laws

4. MASCULINITY VERSUS FEMININITY (MAS)

In Masculine societies, people tend to focus on success and winning.

In high Masculine societies, people are driven by competition and achievement. People tend to be assertive and focused on material success. Countries with high Masculinity national cultures are: Japan, Venezuela, Italy, Ireland and Mexico.

In low Masculine societies, or Feminine societies, people are focused on building good relationships and ensuring a high quality of life for all. It is not important to be the best, so long as everyone is happy. Countries with a higher feminine index for their national cultures are: Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark and Holland.

Common Characteristics of Masculine and Feminine Cultures:

Masculine	Feminine
Focus on ambition	Focus on quality of life
Live to work	Work to live
Large and quick things are beautiful	Small and slow things are beautiful
Admiration for the successful	Compassion for the less fortunate
Conflict resolved by allowing stronger party to win	Conflicts resolved through compromise

5. LONG-TERM VERSUS SHORT TERM ORIENTATION (LTO)

Societies with long-term orientation encourage people to invest and be thrifty. Being persistent and cautious will lead to rewards. Members in society have distinct ranks, elders must be respected, and relationships are to be treasured. Long-Term Oriented societies also tend to adapt traditions to modern contexts. East Asian countries such as China, Korea and Japan tend to have national cultures that are long-term oriented.

Societies that are Short-Term Oriented respect tradition but encourage spending and immediate gains. Status of members is not very important and relationships are seen as important only if something can be gained. The United

In the U.S., people's long-term savings are often described as their "nest egg."

3

States, England and Spain are some countries with national cultures that have a short-term orientation.

Common Characteristics of Cultures with Long- and Short-Term Orientations:

Long-Term Orientation	Short-Term Orientation
Perseverance and effort produce results slowly	Effort should produce immediate results
It is important to save and be careful with resources	There is social pressure to spend more
Willingness to postpone one's desires for a greater cause	Immediate gains are often more important than relationships

6. INDULGENCE VERSUS RESTRAINT (IVR)

This dimension examines the importance of happiness and life control. Societies with a high rate of indulgence (high IVR) allow people to freely satisfy basic human needs and desires, especially those related to enjoying life and having fun. In societies with high restraint scores (low IVR), people suppress their urges under strict social norms. Society holds moral discipline in high regard and people tend to be more pessimistic.

Common Characteristics of Indulgence and Restraint Cultures:

Indulgence (high IVR)	Restraint (low IVR)
Free behavior	Behaviors suppressed and regulated
Material rewards are not so important	Expects material reward for good work
Focuses on present moment	Easily feels unfair treatment
Material objects are used for function not status	Material objects are important for status (car, house, company)
People are more positive and optimistic	People are more pessimistic and cynical
More extroverted and outgoing	More reserved
Values leisure time and friends	Leisure time / friends are less important

Going Back to Our Case Study:

After reviewing Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, let's reflect on the incident discussed in the beginning of this document. Can you apply the framework to Sarah's situation in Japan?

From Hofstede's country data, when comparing Japan and the United States, there are two dimensions with considerable difference that are relevant to Sarah's story: Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV), and Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI). The United States, with an IVC score of 91 (out of 100), indicates a highly individualistic society. This is linked to a desire to express unique personal identity characteristics and focus on one's needs, rather than the collective needs of a group. Japan scored 46 in this dimension, indicating that it is a collectivistic society, in which group membership is important. This membership can be demonstrated though uniforms and participating in group activities that contribute to the general good.

Cultural Dimension Comparison for the United States and Japan; from: http://geert-hofstede.com
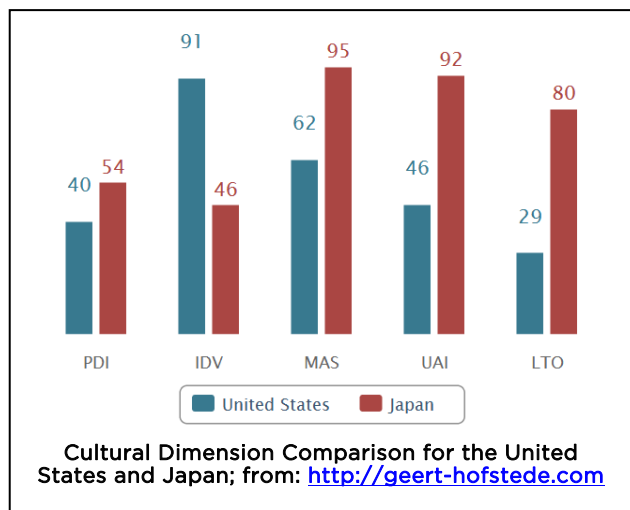
In terms of Uncertainty Avoidance, the United States scored 92 and Japan scored 46. This indicates that the Japanese generally prefer avoiding uncertainty and thus enjoy structured and well-planned activities, while U.S. Americans have a greater tolerance for the unknown. Activities are dynamic and continually updated so as not to repeat something that has already been done. These differences in group interactions, as well as feelings towards uncertainty, have created much frustration for Sarah.

As seen through this scenario, when there are differences in Cultural Dimensions, conflict and/or misunderstanding may arise. The six Cultural Dimensions of Hofstede are tools that allow us to make general comparisons of cultures around the world. By understanding these, we may understand the values and norms of a society, and why there may be differences in the way people behave. To this day, Hofstede's theory of Cultural Dimensions is widely used in educational organizations like AFS, work places, institutions, and various cross-cultural settings to bring about greater understanding of members in an international context.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions...

✓ provide a framework of behavioral, perspective, and value tendencies that are associated with 50 national cultures around these constructs:
  1. Power Distance (PDI)
  2. Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV)
  3. Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS)
  4. Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)
  5. Long-Term Orientation (LTO)
  6. Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR)
✓ increase understanding of cross-cultural contexts and interactions with someone of a different cultural background.

Books by Hofstede:

Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind (2010)

Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations (2001)