2.1: A Values Analysis Approach to Intercultural Communication

Anyone who has had an intercultural encounter or participated in intercultural communication can tell you that they encountered differences between themselves and others. Acknowledging the differences isn't difficult. Rather, the difficulties come from describing the differences using terms that accurately convey the subtle meanings within cultures. These subtle meanings are rooted in deep-level, cultural value systems.

Values and Culture

Value systems are fundamental to understanding how culture expresses itself. **Values** are deeply felt and often serve as principles that guide people in their perceptions and behaviors. Using our values, certain ideas are judged to be right or wrong, good or bad, important or not important, desirable or not desirable. Cultural values are learned, mostly subconsciously, and are hidden deep within the language and traditions of the surrounding society. Shared cultural values form the customs, guide the behaviors, and shape the attitudes of its members. Therefore, analyzing cultural values can be a useful way to understand fundamental differences between cultures.

Geert Hofstede, sometimes called the father of modern cross-cultural science and thinking, developed a framework for comparing values across cultures. Through his research, he identified six key value dimensions (individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long/short term orientation, and indulgence/restraint) that analyze and interpret the values of a national culture (Hofstede, 1980).

Value Dimensions
Individualism vs. Collectivism

The salient category often used to characterize and contrast cultures is individualism versus collectivism. Individualism vs. collectivism anchor opposite ends of a continuum that describes how people define themselves and their relationships with others. **Individualism** is just what it sounds like. It refers to people’s tendency to take care of themselves and their immediate circle of family and friends, perhaps at the expense of the overall society. Cultures labeled as individualistic are seen as emphasizing the rights of the individual to self-determination, with children being brought up to be assertive and distinctive. In individualistic cultures, what counts most is the self, or concern for one's own personal goals. Each person is viewed as responsible for their own success or failure in life. Initiating alone, sweating alone, achieving alone—not necessarily collective efforts—are what win applause. In individualistic cultures, competition is the fuel of success. The United States is labeled as the most individualistic country. People from the United States strongly believe in independence. They consider themselves as separate individuals in control of their own lives. The Declaration of Independence states that all people—not groups, but individual people—are created equal. In the United States, individualism is valued and promoted—from its political structure (individual rights and democracy) to entrepreneurial zeal (capitalism). Other examples of high-individualism cultures include Northern European societies and Australia.

In contrast, **collectivism** describes a society in which tightly-integrated relationships tie extended families and others into in-groups. These in-groups are laced with undoubted loyalty and support each other. When a person or culture has a collective orientation they place the needs and interests of the group above individual desires or motivations. Collectivistic cultures (seen as prevalent in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East) emphasize group identity and conformity, with children expected to be obedient and respectful.

When looking at Hofstede’s research and that of others on individualism and collectivism, it is important to remember that no culture is purely one or the other. Again, think of these qualities as points along a continuum rather than fixed positions. Individuals and co-cultures may exhibit differences in individualism/collectivism from the dominant culture and certain contexts may highlight one or the other. Also remember that it can be very difficult to change one’s orientation and interaction with those with different value orientations can prove challenging. In some of your classes, for example, does the Professor require a group project as part of the final grade? How do students respond to such an assignment? In our experience we find that some students enjoy and benefit from the collective and collaborative process and seem to learn better in such an environment. These students have more of a collectivistic orientation. Other students, usually the majority, are resistant to such assignments citing reasons such as “it’s difficult to coordinate schedules with four other people” or “I don’t want my grade resting on someone else’s performance.” These statements reflect an individualistic orientation.

**Power Distance**

Power distance refers to how openly a society or culture accepts or does not accept differences between people, as in hierarchies in the workplace, in politics, and so on. For example, **large power distance** cultures openly accept that a boss is “higher” and as such deserves more formal respect and authority. People tend to accept relationships of servitude. Subordinates expect to be told what to do and won’t take initiative or speak their minds unless a manager explicitly asks for their opinion. They would probably be much less likely to challenge a decision, to provide an alternative, or to give input. They may have learned that less powerful people must accept decisions without comment,
even if they have a concern or know there is a significant problem. An individual's status, age, and seniority are an integral part of the social equation. Examples of these cultures include Southern Europe, Latin America, and much of Asia. For example, in Japan or Mexico, the senior person is almost a father figure and is automatically given respect and usually loyalty without question.

At the other end of the spectrum are small power distance cultures, in which superiors and subordinates are more likely to see each other as equal in power. This sense of equality leads to the idea that all people are of the same standing or importance, and therefore, informality or lack of rigid social protocol is common. This leads to an informality of speech, dress, and manners that other cultures might find difficult to negotiate because of their own beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors. In Sweden, Norway, and Israel, for example, respect for equality is a warranty of freedom. Subordinates and managers alike often have carte blanche to speak their minds. Other countries found at this end of the spectrum include Austria and Denmark.

To be sure, not all cultures view power in the same ways. Research indicates that the United States tilts toward small power distance but is more in the middle of the scale than Germany and the United Kingdom. The United States has a culture of promoting participation at the office while maintaining control in the hands of the manager. People in this type of culture tend to be relatively laid-back about status and social standing—but there's a firm understanding of who has the power. What's surprising for many people is that countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia actually rank lower on the power distance spectrum than the United States.

Figure 1: A map which shows the relative power distance of nations around the world

Uncertainty Avoidance

The uncertainty avoidance index measures a society’s tolerance for ambiguity, in which people embrace or avert an event of something unexpected, unknown, or away from the status quo. People who have strong uncertainty avoidance generally prefer to steer clear of conflict and competition. They tend to appreciate very clear instructions. They dislike ambiguity. At the office, sharply defined rules and rituals are used to get tasks completed. Stability and what is known are preferred to instability and the unknown. Cultures in the Arab world, for example, have strong uncertainty avoidance; they tend to be resistant to change and reluctant to take risks. Whereas a U.S. business negotiator might enthusiastically agree to try a new procedure, the Egyptian counterpart would likely refuse to get involved until all the details are worked out.

Weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as the U.S. and Britain, show more acceptance of differing thoughts or ideas and are highly tolerant of uncertainty. Such cultures tend to impose fewer regulations, ambiguity is more accustomed to, and the environment is more free-flowing. In educational settings, people from countries with strong uncertainty avoidance expect their teachers to be experts with all of the answers. People from weak uncertainty...
Masculinity vs. Femininity

This index is about how a society views traits that are considered masculine or feminine. Each carries with it a set of cultural expectations and norms for gender behavior and gender roles across life. Traditionally perceived “masculine” values are assertiveness, materialism, and less concern for others. In masculine-oriented cultures, gender roles are usually crisply defined. Men tend to be the bread winners and women take care of domestic duties. Men tend to be more focused on performance, ambition, and material success. They cut tough and independent personas, while women cultivate modesty and quality of life. Cultures in Japan and Latin American are examples of masculine-oriented cultures.

In contrast, feminine cultures are thought to emphasize “feminine” values: concern for all, an emphasis on the quality of life, and an emphasis on relationships. In feminine-oriented cultures, gender roles are more fluid. In such societies it is not uncommon to see women as political and business leaders. There are fewer obstacles for women who enter the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, and less stigma for men who are stay-at-home dads or who enter the helping professions; those occupations typically considered more feminine. Feminine cultures typically offer generous paid maternity and paternity leave, free healthcare and free access to higher education. The Scandinavian cultures rank as feminine cultures, as do cultures in Switzerland and New Zealand. The United States is actually more moderate, and its score is ranked in the middle between masculine and feminine classifications.

Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation

This fifth dimension refers to whether a culture has a long-term or short-term orientation. This dimension was added by Hofstede after the original four you just read about. It resulted in the effort to understand the difference in thinking between the East and the West. Certain values are associated with each orientation. The long-term orientation values persistence, perseverance, and thriftiness. These are evident in traditional Eastern cultures. Long-term orientation is often marked by an order to relationships based on age and status. A sense of shame, both personal and for the family and community, is also observed across generations. What an individual does reflects on the family, and is carried by immediate and extended family members.

The short-term orientation values tradition only to the extent of fulfilling social obligations or providing gifts or favors. While there may be a respect for tradition, there is also an emphasis on personal representation and honor, a reflection of identity and integrity. Personal stability and consistency are also valued in a short-term oriented culture, contributing to an overall sense of predictability and familiarity. These cultures are more likely to be focused on the immediate or short-term impact of an issue. Not surprisingly, the United Kingdom and the United States rank as short-term orientation.

Indulgence vs. Restraint

This dimension refers to the degree of freedom that societal norms give to citizens in fulfilling their human desires. Countries with a high indulgence rating allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun. These cultures tend to place a higher importance on leisure and tend to act and spend money as they please. Countries with a low indulgence rating have strict social norms. Citizens are more likely to feel powerless, as if their experiences are not determined by their own actions, but rather situations happen to them. There
is often a more visible police force, and maintaining national order is a high priority. Countries in Eastern Europe, including Russia, and some Asian countries have low indulgence ratings, indicating a restrained culture. Often, in these countries, there is a pervading idea that indulgence is somewhat wrong. While much of Western Europe falls in the median, most Anglo-Western nations such as The United States have a high indulgence rating.

Value Orientation Theory

The Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Value Orientations theory represents one of the earliest efforts to develop a cross-cultural theory of values. According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), every culture faces the same basic survival needs and must answer the same universal questions. It is out of this need that cultural values arise. The basic questions faced by people everywhere fall into five categories and reflect concerns about: 1) human nature, 2) the relationship between human beings and the natural world, 3) time, 4) human activity, and 5) social relations. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck hypothesized three possible responses or orientations to each of the concerns.

Table \(\PageIndex{1}\): Summary of Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Values Orientation Theory

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<th>Basic Concerns</th>
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What is the inherent nature of human beings?

According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, this is a question that all societies ask, and there are generally three different responses. The people in some societies are inclined to believe that people are inherently evil and that the society must exercise strong measures to keep the evil impulses of people in check. On the other hand, other societies are more likely to see human beings as basically good and possessing an inherent tendency towards goodness. Between these two poles are societies that see human beings as possessing the potential to be either good or evil depending upon the influences that surround them. Societies also differ on whether human nature is immutable (unchangeable) or mutable (changeable).

What is the relationship between human beings and the natural world?

Some societies believe nature is a powerful force in the face of which human beings are essentially helpless. We could describe this as “nature over humans.” Other societies are more likely to believe that through intelligence and the application of technology, humans can control nature. In other words, they embrace a “humans over nature” position. Between these two extremes are the societies who believe humans are wise to strive to live in “harmony with nature.”
What is the best way to think about time?

Some societies are rooted in the past, believing that people should learn from history and strive to preserve the traditions of the past. Other societies place more value on the here and now, believing people should live fully in the present. Then there are societies that place the greatest value on the future, believing people should always delay immediate satisfactions while they plan and work hard to make a better future.

What is the proper mode of human activity?

In some societies, “being” is the most valued orientation. Striving for great things is not necessary or important. In other societies, “becoming” is what is most valued. Life is regarded as a process of continual unfolding. Our purpose on earth, the people might say, is to become fully human. Finally, there are societies that are primarily oriented to “doing.” In such societies, people are likely to think of the inactive life as a wasted life. People are more likely to express the view that we are here to work hard and that human worth is measured by the sum of accomplishments.

As Hill (2002) has observed, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck did not consider the theory to be complete. In fact, they originally proposed a sixth value orientation—Space: here, there, or far away, which they could not quite figure out how to investigate at the time. Today, the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck framework is just one among many attempts to study universal human values.

Critique of Cultural Values Analysis

While such distinctions can be useful in describing general cultural traditions and patterns of behavior, they are problematic when applied to individuals. Individual identities in today's world tend to be complex, constructed from a variety of sources. Individuals may belong to an ethnic group, whose worldview, values, and behavior are quite different from those represented by the mainstream culture. Political boundaries do not define who we are. One might consider in that regard groups which cross political boundaries, such as the Kurds, Romani, or Basques. In fact, in today's world the coherence of nation-states is increasingly porous, given changing demographics, wide-spread immigration, and the growth of social media.

Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\): Representatives of the Yi Minority in China

Contemporary scholars of intercultural communication urge caution in using these categories, as they tend to "present
people's individual behavior as entirely defined and constrained by the culture in which they live so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are" (Holliday, 2010, p. 4). Critics like Holliday describe the use of Hofstede's categories as **essentialism**, that is, assuming that people and things have 'natural' characteristics that are inherent and unchanging. That may translate into defining the essence of individuals in terms of their national origins. If one is from Mexico (a culture designated as large power distance), for example, an essentialist view would be to assume that person will be subservient to the boss, and never question decisions, no matter the context. Inherent in such an assumption is that individuals are unable to adapt to others' norms of behavior. The term **reductionism** is used in similar fashion, referring to the tendency to explain an object by reducing it to a different, usually simpler, level. When dealing with people this means that identities are being reduced to a predetermined set of characteristics, associated with ethnic or cultural stereotypes. Defining individual characteristics through associations with national cultures denies individual free will. It assumes that we don't develop unique individual personalities as we grow. Many people living in "feminine-oriented" cultures are ambitious and focused on material success. Entrepreneurs (and others) in China (a "strong uncertainty avoidance" culture) often take risks to make their businesses successful. No matter what kind of culture we live in, we can probably all point to individuals in our culture who have the characteristics of "individualism" and others who tend towards "collectivism".

Holliday and others have pointed out that most of the cultural categories used in intercultural communication were created from a Western perspective and tend to skew accordingly the values attached to the different labels (Holliday, 1999; Piller, 2017). Individualism, for example, is seen as inherently positive, with attributes attributed to it which are valued in Western cultures, namely initiative, assertiveness, and ambition. Similarly, cultures with a large power distance are seen as undemocratic, hence inferior, and those with high uncertainty avoidance are regarded as adverse to risk-taking and, therefore, inhospitable to creativity and personal initiative. Holliday emphasizes the importance of allowing other cultures to define themselves, advocating a **decentered** perspective. One should be aware of conventional cultural descriptions, but in encountering someone put them aside to the extent possible and focus on the other as an individual, whose identity may be quite complex, derived from a variety of influences. He emphasizes "bracketing" away the cultural stereotypes, removing **a priori** assumptions, in order to be able to judge others individually. Of course, this necessitates on the one hand, being aware of one's own preconceptions. On the other hand, it contradicts the basic human tendency of putting unknowns into familiar categories.

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