



The evolution of Hofstede's doctrine

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to provide a mature reflection upon the work of Hofstede by tracking various subtleties in the evolution of his thought and dispelling prevalent misconceptions.

Design/methodology/approach – The goal of the paper is achieved by analyzing Hofstede's output from 1970 to the present day in parallel with contemporary research and criticism.

Findings – The paper arrives at the conclusion that the recent expansion and update of Hofstede's doctrine is indebted to the original groundbreaking work of the 1970s yet a key strength of Hofstede's work has been its ability to adapt and remain progressive.

Originality/value – The paper offers insights into the evolution of Hofstede's doctrines.

Keywords Culture, National cultures, Sociology

Paper type Research paper

Based on his IBM-based research from around 1970, Dutch Social Psychologist and Organizational Anthropologist Geert Hofstede created a new paradigm for the study of cultural differences: a four-dimensional model of national culture, later expanded and updated on the basis of an analysis of a wide range of other cross-cultural data. Subsequently, the model became a cornerstone for cross-cultural research, providing an extremely popular method for the study of cultural differences in a wide range of disciplines, including international management. In this article, we summarize the essence of Hofstede's doctrine, dispel some common misconceptions about it, and trace its evolution from 1970 to the present day. We focus on the recent expansion and update of Hofstede's model and the scientific philosophy that he and his co-authors stand for.

The evolution of Hofstede's doctrine

Commenting on Geert Hofstede's life-long contribution, Michael Bond, one of the world's best-known researchers in cross-cultural psychology, indicated that his colleagues had long been "held in thrall" by Hofstede's intellectual achievement (Bond, 2002, p. 73). International management Professor Mark Peterson has made a similar assessment of the impact of Hofstede's work:

Perhaps, the first edition of *Culture's Consequences* did not create the field of comparative cross-cultural studies but it certainly has shaped the field's basic themes, structure and controversies for over 20 years (Peterson, 2003, p. 128).

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The influence of Hofstede's work is not limited to the cross-cultural domain. A 2008 Wall Street ranking of the most influential business thinkers of the twentieth century ranked Hofstede sixteenth, ahead of Jack Welch and Tom Peters. He is also one of the most-cited authors in social science and the four decades of constant attention and extension of his work evidences the unflagging interest in Hofstede's ideas.

As with any new idea or paradigm shift, Hofstede's doctrine has also generated controversies. It has been both undervalued and overused (Peterson, 2003). It has not only boosted the development of cross-cultural analysis in a number of academic disciplines, such as cross-cultural psychology and international management, but has also unintentionally inspired a significant amount of work based on misunderstandings, misrepresentations and misuse of some of its main elements.

The goal of this article is to outline the evolution of Hofstede's doctrine from its conception around 1970 to the present time. We will summarize some well-known facts and focus on a number of recent developments. As we do that, we will also attempt to clarify some essential theoretical and practical points that continue to generate unwarranted claims and unfounded conclusions.

Hofstede's work became widely known in the academic world after the publication of his first monograph *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Hofstede, 1980). An abridged paperback version appeared in 1984. In 1991, Hofstede published a book for students and a general readership: *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. It interpreted the results of the 1980 study and more recent findings in non-academic language. While *Culture's Consequences* was only rarely and partially translated, the 1991 student book and its subsequent editions have so far appeared in 18 languages with about 400,000 copies sold.

The foundation of Hofstede's multidimensional cultural model originated from his analysis of some 116,000 survey questionnaires administered to employees of the IBM corporation in 72 countries. Hofstede argued that many national differences in work-related values, beliefs, norms, and self-descriptions, as well as many societal variables, could be largely explained in terms of their statistical and conceptual associations with four major dimensions of national culture. To some scholars, including the first author of this article, this came as an astounding revelation. Hofstede's (1980) book obtained enthusiastic reviews by leading psychologists and sociologists, among others by Eysenck (1981), Triandis (1982) and Sorge (1983). However, not all readers were receptive of these new ideas. Some were critical of Hofstede's approach, taking a tone of ridicule or overlooking its implications (Cooper, 1982; Roberts and Boyacigiller, 1984).

In its original form, Hofstede's doctrine had a number of salient characteristics that provided it with a distinct identity and gave it the status of a paradigm shift in cross-cultural research:

- (1) Before Hofstede's work, cross-cultural researchers had often treated culture as a single variable. If a statistical difference was found between two populations from two nations or ethnic groups, and if it could not be accounted for in another way, it was often explained away as a function of "culture". Many researchers intuitively felt that culture is too complex a phenomenon to be treated as a single package, yet the "unpackaging" of culture was a daunting task that many shied away from. Hofstede's work showed how culture can be unpackaged into independent dimensions. Hofstede's unpackaging approach was adopted in some landmark studies, such as the Chinese Culture Connection (1987)

and Schwartz (1994) expansion on the dimensional characteristics of values, Peter Smith's analysis of the Trompenaars data file (Smith *et al.*, 1996), and project GLOBE (House *et al.*, 2004), all of which explicitly admit that they were inspired by Hofstede's work. Nevertheless, the unpackaging of culture seemed to have remained a contentious topic in some academic headquarters. Singelis *et al.* (1999) noted that cross-cultural studies in psychology have often been criticized precisely because culture is treated as a package, containing numerous variables, any of which might account for the observed differences.

- (2) Hofstede's dimensions of national culture were constructed at the national level. They were underpinned by variables that correlated across nations, not across individuals or organizations. In fact, his dimensions are meaningless as descriptors of individuals or as predictors of individual differences because the variables that define them do not correlate meaningfully across individuals. For organizational cultures, entirely different dimensions were found as well. Yet, despite Hofstede's repeated warnings that his dimensions do not make sense at the individual or organizational level, articles that attempt to use them for these purposes appear periodically in various journals, the latest one being a study by Taras *et al.* (2010), called a meta-analytical review of Hofstede's dimensions. In fact, Hofstede (2001) indicated that the idea of constructing dimensions at the national level occurred to him after realizing that, analyzed at the individual level, his IBM data did not make much sense. Hofstede was not the first author to produce national indices on the basis of variables that correlate at the national level and are conceptually linked to cultural phenomena. More than 30 years before him, Cattell (1949) pioneered the use of factor analysis of country data for the same purpose. But prior to Hofstede (1980), such studies tended only to yield a strong economic development dimension and some other factors that were trivial or difficult to interpret.
- (3) Hofstede's dimensions were all constructed in such a way that they addressed basic problems that all societies have to deal with. In Hofstede (1991, pp. 13-14), they were formulated as follows:
 - *Power distance*. Social inequality, including the relationship with authority.
 - *Individualism-collectivism*. The relationship between the individual and the group.
 - *Masculinity-femininity*. The social implications of having been born as a boy or a girl. (Later editions of the book replaced the word "social" by "emotional").
 - *Uncertainty avoidance*. Ways of dealing with uncertainty, relating to the control of aggression and the expression of emotions. (Later editions of the book refer to "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations").

Similar problems had been formulated by Inkeles and Levinson (1969, originally published in 1954). Their work can be considered the theoretical foundation of Hofstede's dimensions. Drawing upon those theories, Hofstede's study was the first empirical confirmation of the utility of a theoretical model of universal problems that all societies have to deal with.

- (4) Hofstede has always believed that his dimensions reflect stable national differences. Concerning criticisms to the effect that his data are old, he has always

defended the opinion that cultures do evolve but they tend to move together in more or less one and the same cultural direction. Therefore, the cultural differences between them are not necessarily lost, and these differences are what the dimensions describe. The clearest confirmation of the correctness of this position was provided by Inglehart (2008). In an analysis of empirical data from Western European countries spanning the period from 1970 to 2006, he showed that while Western cultures did evolve and even tended to show some incomplete convergence, at least on a number of subjectively selected variables, their paths practically never crossed during those 36 years.

- (5) Hofstede's work provided the first large collection of data demonstrating that national culture constrains rationality in organizational behavior and management philosophies and practices, and in society at large. It is likely that suspicions that this was the case existed in some quarters even before the analysis of the IBM project, but large-scale empirical evidence was missing. Nowadays, few managers with international experience will deny the fact that culture matters in international business.

The 11 years following the publication of Hofstede's (1980) monograph can be described as the four-dimension period. In *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, Hofstede (1991) introduced a fifth dimension which resulted from his collaboration with Michael Bond from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. When *Culture's Consequences* appeared, Bond and a number of his colleagues from the Asia-Pacific region had just finished a comparison of the values of female and male psychology students from each of ten national or ethnic groups in their region using an adapted American questionnaire, the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS). When Bond analysed the RVS data in the same way as Hofstede had analysed the IBM data, he also found four meaningful dimensions. Across the six countries that were part of both studies, each RVS dimension was significantly correlated with one of the IBM dimensions (Hofstede and Bond, 1984).

The discovery of similar dimensions in completely different material represented strong support for the basic nature of what was found. Yet both Bond and Hofstede were not just pleased but also puzzled. Both the IBM questionnaire and the RVS were products of Western minds. In both cases, respondents in non-Western countries had answered Western questions. To what extent had this been responsible for the correlation between the results of the two studies? To what extent had irrelevant questions been asked and relevant questions been omitted?

Bond found a creative solution to the Western bias problem. He asked a number of his Chinese colleagues to compose a list of basic values. The new questionnaire was called the Chinese Value Survey (CVS). Translations of it were administered to female and male students in 23 countries around the world. The analysis of the CVS results again yielded four dimensions (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). Across 20 overlapping countries, three dimensions of the CVS replicated dimensions earlier found in the IBM surveys, but the fourth CVS dimension was not correlated with the fourth IBM dimension: uncertainty avoidance had no equivalent in the CVS. The fourth CVS dimension instead combined values opposing an orientation towards the future to an orientation towards the past and present. Hofstede labeled it "long-term versus short-term orientation" (LTO) and adopted it as a fifth universal dimension. The basic societal problem that the new dimension seemed to address was the focus of people's efforts: on the future

or the present and the past. The new dimension was significantly correlated with economic growth over the years preceding the CVS study, and as it turned out later, over the years following it. It provided a cultural explanation of the East Asian economic miracle (Hofstede and Bond, 1988).

Hofstede's books since 1991 also integrate the results of his organizational cultures study (Hofstede *et al.*, 1990). The topic of organizational cultures had become popular in the management literature of the early 1980s, but solid research was still missing. With a team of collaborators, Hofstede in 1985-1986 conducted in-depth interviews and representative surveys in 20 different organizational units in Denmark and The Netherlands, varying from a pharmaceutical plant to two police corps. The study concluded that using the word "culture" for both nations and organizations was misleading: a nation is not an organization, and the two types of culture are of a different nature. National cultures are part of the mental software we acquire during the first ten years of our lives in the family, the living environment and at school, and they contain most of our basic values. Organizational cultures are acquired when we enter a work organization as young or not-so-young adults, by which time our values are firmly in place. According to Hofstede, organizational cultures consist mainly of the organization's practices – they are more superficial. The study found six dimensions of organizational cultures entirely different from the national culture dimensions. They were firmly rooted in organizational sociology and validated by the characteristics of the organizations.

In 2001, Hofstede published a completely revised edition of his first monograph, with a new subtitle: *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations* (Hofstede, 2001). It reviewed over 800 publications written after 1980, including all accessible and meaningful applications of the 1980 dimensions. This was followed in 2005 by the publication of the second edition of the student-level book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* – this time co-authored with his eldest son Gert Jan Hofstede (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). It introduced a substantial amount of new evidence that supported the theoretical foundation of Hofstede's dimensions, now including the fifth dimension, provided vast empirical validation of their predictive powers across a wide range of national differences in many different domains, and dealt with some recurrent criticisms. For instance, Hofstede strongly emphasized the point that uncertainty avoidance is not the same as risk avoidance and masculinity does not stand for oppression of women. Also, long-term orientation was found to correlate with average national achievement in mathematics.

The appearance of project GLOBE's main monograph (House *et al.*, 2004) marked an interesting point in the development of Hofstede's doctrine. Project GLOBE was partly inspired by Hofstede's studies and was intended, among other things, as a corrective of Hofstede's model. While the GLOBE researchers fully accepted Hofstede's paradigm of constructing dimensions of national culture from variables that correlate across nations, they felt that some of his dimensions lacked face validity: they did not measure what was implied by their labels. GLOBE's work, and the enormous controversy that it caused (Smith, 2006; McCrae *et al.*, 2008; Hofstede, 2006, 2010, etc.), not only contributed to a better understanding and appreciation of Hofstede's work but also elucidated some previously murky points in cross-cultural research.

Hofstede (2006) pointed out that unlike GLOBE's authors, he did not view scientific constructs, such as dimensions of national culture, as something that has a real existence. Therefore, it is pointless to argue that one type of measure provides a better

way of capturing a particular construct than another measure. If two approaches to the measurement of uncertainty avoidance produce two different results, they obviously measure different things. Which of them is the real uncertainty avoidance is a meaningless question because uncertainty avoidance is not a material object; it is an abstract construct created by subjective human minds.

GLOBE's work, and its subsequent analyses by Smith (2006) and Minkov and Blagoev (2011), revealed that asking respondents what they consider important to themselves and what they think others should or should not do are two different methods that may yield dramatically different results. The answers to the first type of research are usually called personal values. GLOBE used the term values for the second type of answers as well. To avoid confusion, we prefer the term "norms" to refer to socially desirable behaviors. The two may be diametrically opposed. For example, if I value power as a personal goal, the norm that I am likely to want others to follow is submission, not competition for my power (Smith, 2006).

This difference between personal values and norms for others had not been exposed so clearly before the analyses and criticisms of GLOBE's work. One of the outcomes of this new understanding was the demystification of Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance. Many commentators were perplexed to hear that the construct was, among other things, about rule orientation, and that some of the highest scorers were the Southern and Latin European nations. This could lead a person to ask, "Are they the most rule-abiding peoples on the planet?". In fact, Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance reflects the degree of rule orientation that the members of a particular society wish to see in their fellow countrymen and women. Therefore, it predicts the existence of many rules that people want others to follow but does not give us the average degree of personal rule orientation in a society.

The appearance of a book by the first author of this article (Minkov, 2007) was welcomed by Hofstede as an important contribution to his doctrine. Minkov's findings summarized years of analyses of large international databases, particularly the nationally representative and publicly accessible World Values Survey (WVS) (www.worldvaluessurvey.org), coordinated by American Political Scientist Ronald Inglehart. Minkov was intrigued by the fact that, despite the enormous size of that database, Inglehart's analysis of it had not produced a clear analogue to any of Hofstede's dimensions. Inglehart had identified a dimension called "survival versus self-expression values" (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Minkov (2007) showed that this dimension could be conceptually and statistically split into two components. The first replicated Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension, whereas the second was defined by happiness and its closest correlates: a perception of life control and importance of leisure in the respondent's life. Additionally, Minkov (2009) showed that measures of life control and importance of leisure are the best predictors of happiness across more than 90 nations. These three variables form a strong dimension of national culture, which he labeled "indulgence versus restraint", and which had no equivalent in Hofstede's five-dimensional model. Hofstede invited Minkov to join the author team for the third edition of *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* and added indulgence versus restraint to his model as a sixth dimension, with scores for 93 countries and regions (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

In the early 2000s, Minkov had also become interested in the concepts of "self-enhancement" and "self-stability" in the work of Canadian cross-cultural psychologist Steven Heine (Heine, 2001, 2003). Although these had been used for describing differences between individuals, Minkov recognized their potential as

national-level constructs. WVS measures of pride and religiousness – proxies for an invariant self that adheres to immutable values, beliefs and behaviors – produced a strong dimension close to Inglehart’s dimension “traditional versus secular values”. Yet, it was also strongly and negatively correlated with Hofstede’s long-term orientation (Minkov, 2007, 2008). This new dimension, which Minkov called “monumentalism”, did conceptually resemble short-term orientation. The latter was defined in the CVS analysis by a direct measure of personal stability, as well as by the importance of face, which Hofstede (2001) had interpreted as a concern for personal dignity, which Minkov viewed as similar to importance of pride.

One limitation of the CVS-based long-term orientation dimension in Hofstede’s work was the fact that reliable country scores were only available for 23 countries. Minkov succeeded in extracting a new measure of LTO from WVS data, obtaining scores for 93 countries and regions. The 2010 (third) edition of *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010) provides this new WVS-based measure, describing how it was developed from its CVS-based predecessor. The research that led to the choice of the new long-term orientation measure will be explained in more detail in a forthcoming article in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Minkov and Hofstede, n.d.).

The new version of long-term orientation is not only statistically and conceptually close to that from the Chinese Culture Connection. It also has the same predictive properties. It is associated with national educational achievement and economic growth. The implications of these findings cannot be overstated. The fact that two strongly correlated and conceptually similar measures can be extracted through a Chinese questionnaire and a Western research instrument, such as the WVS, means that “etic” (universal) approaches to the study of culture are justifiable, providing they are carefully and competently designed. Concerns that developing a particular instrument in one cultural environment would make it unsuitable in another environment are sometimes exaggerated. They are always justified when the construct is extracted from an individual-level analysis. Working at the national level does not guarantee that the etic approach will be problem-free either. As we have learned from the GLOBE Project, asking questions at a high level of abstraction about issues that the respondents are not necessarily knowledgeable about (such as the prevalent practices of their fellow countrymen and women or their national character) may result in unfounded national stereotypes that are not supported by much external evidence (McCrae *et al.*, 2008; Minkov and Blagoev, 2011). But appropriate questions about simple self-concepts, such as importance of religion in the respondents’ lives or how proud they wish to make their parents, will be understood all over the world and can be used to construct informative national dimensions of culture.

The third edition of *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* features another important characteristic that enriches Hofstede’s doctrine. It was contributed by Gert Jan Hofstede. Being a biologist by education, Gert Jan Hofstede has a keen interest in evolution. His account of the evolution of cultures has been incorporated into his father’s doctrine, explaining how humans have interacted with their environment since the dawn of mankind and how this interaction has given birth to the different cultures we find today.

The scientific philosophy of the Hofstede doctrine

The scientific philosophy of the Hofstede and Minkov approach to cross-cultural analysis can be described in the following six points:

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- (1) A moderate form of operationalism. This implies that constructs in social science, such as cultural, psychological or organizational dimensions, do not have an independent existence outside human minds. They cannot be properly defined and understood without an analysis of how they are measured and what nomological networks they create. ("Nomological network" is a term for the web of correlations of a construct with other measures). However, a construct is not "nothing more than a set of operations" (thus Bridgman, quoted by House and Hanges (2004, p. 100)). A construct is a complex mental idea that reflects objectively existing phenomena. There are many subjective ways of thinking of and describing an objective reality. Constructs are not the reality itself but imaginary models that scholars build in order to organize their impressions of the observed reality in a way that makes sense to them and, hopefully, to others.
 - (2) There is no one best way of constructing dimensions, be they cultural, psychological, organizational or other. Different approaches to data collection and data analysis will yield different dimensions. Asking which of them are true or right in an absolute sense is a meaningless question. The correct question is how coherent these dimensions are (they should be easily understood by the consumers of social science) and of what use they could be (they should predict and explain interesting and important phenomena). The enormous popularity of Hofstede's model is not due to the fact that it is the absolutely right one or the true one. It stems from the model's coherence and predictive capability.
 - (3) Different models and dimensions will have different merits, depending on what researchers seek to explain. If one is interested in issues related to societal differences in the distribution of power, Hofstede's power distance dimension may be the best alternative. But if a researcher wishes to study and explain national differences concerning sources of guidance for managerial decisions, the best option may be the model developed by Smith *et al.* (2002). This relativist position may cause confusion among some practitioners who prefer simplicity. Yet, scholars should be aware of the fact that there is no single best way of partitioning the cross-cultural spectrum that will provide a one-size-fits all solution. When deciding how exactly to construct a particular dimension, a researcher should consider not only theoretical and statistical guidelines, but also practical ones. Dimensions should have a pragmatic function: they should be associated with a wide range of interesting and important variables, explaining a high percentage of their variance. Which variables are interesting and important is a question to be answered collectively by the consumers of social science. This pragmatic approach may incense scholars who view the goal of scientific inquiry as a search of an absolute truth. We are afraid that "absolute truth" is a very elusive concept, not only in social science, but also beyond.
 - (4) Item face validity (based on the semantics of the words used in a questionnaire item) should not be a strict requirement in a cross-cultural analysis of national cultures. It may be a serious concern in studies at the individual level where it is sometimes hard to interpret and validate some results because additional information about the respondents is missing. But when nations are the unit of analysis, it is relatively easy to interpret and validate a nation-level construct due to the increasingly plentiful availability of statistics about nations.

Thus, what an item or a construct measures is not necessarily defined by its wording, but by its nomological network.

- (5) There is a perennial controversy in the social sciences regarding the relative merits of deductive research that tests the empirical validity of already existing, abstractly built theories, compared to inductive research that starts from empirical data and then explains the results either in terms of an existing theory or by building a new one. Our commitment is to the latter. We believe that social science should be oriented towards practice: its models should lead to valid predictions. A good theory is needed to explain these models as they may defy common sense. Yet, the merit of any model should be judged on the basis of its capability to statistically predict interesting and important phenomena. This is what gives a model its value, not the beauty of the theory behind it.
- (6) There are divergent opinions about the nature of disciplines such as anthropology; some view it as a science whereas others believe that the research methods that are known from the hard sciences are inapplicable when human societies are studied, therefore anthropology is a humanity. In fact, the answer to this dilemma depends on the choice of research methods. Well-designed quantitative methods can add a scientific element to any discipline, including cross-cultural anthropology, cross-cultural psychology or cross-cultural management. Those methods allow researchers to make predictions with mathematical expressions, which makes them susceptible to validation or falsification. A purely qualitative approach does not have this property; descriptions that are not dressed in numbers are hard to prove or disprove. Therefore, a discipline that studies societies is scientific to the extent that it uses quantitative methods. Naturally, those methods are not sufficient for a full appreciation of the social reality. The obtained numbers need to be interpreted. This is where subjective insight comes into the picture. Thus, what is commonly known as social science is best viewed and practiced as a combination of science and humanity or even science and art.

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