

# **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE WORK PLACE: A STUDY OF THE WORK ETHICS OF CHINESE AND AMERICANS**

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## **Abstract**

While much has been written regarding the culture of China in a sociological context, only recently has this emphasis expanded to include the exploration of culture in a managerial and business context. This additional emphasis is extremely welcomed as organizations move from a narrow national focus to the Global environment. As more and more organizations move into other countries to conduct business and make products, we need to understand the work ethics of other nationals in order to reduce conflicts and remain competitive. This research studied the work values of Chinese and American workers. After a discussion of various approaches to study the cultural/work values of employees around the world, this paper details the methodology used and the findings. It found that there are significant differences in the orientation of these workers and significant differences in their motivations.

## **Background**

There has been a great deal of research concerning the cultural/work values of nationals around the world, the majority of which has been extremely helpful. The developed frameworks for understanding cultures are averages or norms of the value systems that compose a culture rather than exact descriptions. They represent approximate expected behavior in a culture and the values one takes to the work place. Obviously, not everyone in a particular culture behaves in the same way. In fact, in some cultures, there is often greater variation within single cultures than across cultures. However, the following represent the various frameworks that help us to understand cultural differences.

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck Dimensions - First of all, American anthropologists Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck [6] developed a framework of six dimensions to describe the values orientation of a culture. The values orientation represent how different societies cope with various issues or problems. In the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck framework, a culture may favor one or more of the variations or approaches associated with a particular values orientation.

Hofstede's Dimensions of Cultural Values - A major study of culture focuses specifically on work-related values. In a large-scale research program of 40 countries, Geert Hofstede [5], a Dutch researcher, collected data from IBM employees on work-related values and attitudes. In analyzing the data from more than 116,000 employees, Hofstede extracted four dimensions of values to explain the differences among cultures: individualism-collectivism, power

distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. Using the average scores for each country, Hofstede developed national profiles that explain differences in work behaviors.

**The Chinese Value Survey** - Because Hofstede's study presents a Western view of values some researchers thought that his European values influenced his findings and theory. To prevent Western values from influencing another study, Chinese social scientists developed the Chinese Value Survey (CVS) in Chinese, then translated it into other languages and administered it to students in 23 different countries on five continents. Twenty of the countries were also in Hofstede's study. Four dimensions of culture emerged from the study, three similar to Hofstede's dimensions of power distance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity/femininity. The fourth dimension, however, represents Chinese values related to Confucianism. Originally called Confucian work dynamism, it was eventually labeled long-term/short-term orientation by Hofstede.

**Trompenaars' Seven dimensions of Culture** - Fons Trompenaars [8], a Dutch economist and consultant, also developed a framework to examine cultural differences. Using Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's theory described previously, Hampton-Turner's dilemma theory, and Parsons' pattern variables, Trompenaars describes national cultural differences using seven dimensions. Five dimensions are about how people relate to others. The sixth dimension is time orientation: past, present, or future and sequential or synchronous. The final dimension is relationship to nature: internal- or external-oriented. Just as with the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck work, Trompenaars' dimensions represent how societies develop approaches to handling problems and difficult situations.

**High and Low Context Societies** - Edward T. Hall [3], an American anthropologist, uses the concept of context to explain differences in communication styles among cultures. "Context is the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event" [3, p. 64]. Cultures can be categorized on a scale from high-to low-context. "A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" [3, p. 79].

**Cultural Metaphors** - A different approach to understanding culture is the use of metaphors. Martin Gannon and his associates [2] identify an important phenomenon or activity of a culture as a metaphor to describe it. Gannon

discusses the history and culture of 17 countries and how the metaphor leads to greater understanding of cultures. In explaining each metaphor, typical behaviors in the culture are related to the metaphor.

Each of the preceding cultural frameworks attempt to explain cultural differences. Some are built on and elaborate the work of others, resulting in some overlap. None of the frameworks in its totality is more correct, or better, than the others, yet each contributes to our understanding of why people from different cultures behave differently.

### **Current Research**

For the purpose of this paper, we relied upon a conceptual framework outlined by Harrison [4] to discuss organizational culture. Harrison offered four organizational ideologies: (1) Power Orientation, (2) Role Orientation, (3) Task Orientation, and (4) Self, or Person, Orientation.

The Power-Oriented organization wants to dominate its industry, is extremely competitive and desires to have employees loyal and supportive, while it will be the benevolent authority for all. In this type organization, the employees do what he/she is told what to do and the employees feel comfortable in an environment such as that.

The Role-Oriented organization aspires to be rational and orderly in all of its dealings. There is a preoccupation with legality, legitimacy, and responsibility. Employees are expected to follow the detailed policies and procedures of the organization, and in most cases, employees with this orientation prefer to work in that type of environment.

The Task-Oriented organization strives to achieve its goals. The important and determining factor is that the organization's structure, functions, and activities are all evaluated in terms of their contribution to achieving the desired goal. Nothing is permitted to get in the way of accomplishing the task. The employee oriented in this manner basically wants to be left alone to do his/her job.

Finally, the Person-Oriented organization exists primarily to serve the needs of its members. The organization attempts to provide growth to its members by recognizing that a more experienced, trained individual will contribute more to the organization. The employee with this orientation looks to the organization to provide personal growth opportunity and the practice of considering the feelings of the individual.

The strength of Harrison's framework is twofold. One, he has developed a valid and reliable instrument that can be used to classify the four cultures, and has been used to predict success in joint venture organizations in

information technology [1], and compare different cultures from a strategic standpoint [7]. Two, he has provided the basis for the potential benefits for both the organization and the individual operating under the four cultures.

### **Methodology and Data**

Survey variables as developed by Harrison were administered to employees in American and Chinese corporations. Demographic data included marital status, gender, length of employment, public or private sector, educational level, organizational position, etc. A total of 183 American and 440 Chinese responses were collected, representing Chinese workers from the PRC, Hong Kong (prior to its unification with the PRC), and the Republic of China. The questions measured fifteen cultural/work orientations. These included items that asked such questions as:

1. The type of boss they preferred;
2. What is a good subordinate;
3. Where priorities lie in the job;
4. Which people do well in an organization;
5. How the organization should treat individuals;
6. How people are controlled and influenced in an organization;
7. When it is legitimate to control others' activities;
8. What is the basis of job assignments;
9. Why work is performed in an organization;
10. The reason for people work together;
11. What the purpose of competition is;
12. How a conflict in an organization is handled;
13. Who should make decisions;
14. How appropriate are control and communication flow in an organization; and
15. How the external environment is perceived.

In addition, the following seventeen motivation variables were solicited from the respondents as to their indications on what would make for an ideal job:

1. Time for personal and family life;

2. Challenging tasks to do;
3. Lack of stress on the job;
4. Good physical working conditions;
5. Good working relationship with direct supervisor;
6. Security of employment;
7. Freedom to adopt one's own approach to the job;
8. Working with people who are cooperative;
9. Being consulted by a superior;
10. Making a contribution to the company;
11. Having the opportunity for higher earnings;
12. Serving one's country;
13. Working in a well defined job situation where requirements are clear;
14. Having the opportunity for advancement to higher job levels;
15. Having an element of variety and adventure in the job;
16. Working in a prestigious organization; and
17. Having an opportunity to help others.

## **Findings**

It was hypothesized that there would be significant differences in both the orientations of the respondents and significant differences in the motivational values of the respondents. Overall, Task Orientation is prevalent in all four societies, with Americans choosing 12 out of the 15 as task, followed by the Taiwanese, with 11 of the 15 for task, the Mainland Chinese with 6 of the 15 and the Chinese from Hong Kong with 5 out of the 15. The Chinese from the Mainland and Hong Kong had highest orientations vis-a-vis the Role Orientation, with 7 and 8 respectively out of the 15 choices. In addition, only the Chinese from all three nations orientated toward Power in at least one category, which was the type of boss desired. Of the possible 45 combinations between Americans and the three countries, there were 22 significant differences ( $p=.05$ ) in the areas of boss, subordinate, treatment of employees, control and influence, legitimacy, job basis, purpose of work, why people work together, the purpose of competition, resolving conflict, who makes decisions, control and communications, and the view of the external environment.

Of the possible 51 combinations between Americans and the three countries, there were 32 significant differences ( $p=.05$ ) in the motivational values of the respondents. Differences were discovered in: time for family, challenging tasks, little stress and tension, working relationships, security of employment, freedom to adopt, cooperative workers, be consulted, make contributions, opportunity for more money, serve your country, work with clear directions, advancement opportunities, job variety, successful corporation, and help others.

## **Conclusions**

Obviously, American managers operating in one of the three Chinese societies will certainly be confronted with many problems unless he/she understands the differences between the cultures. For example, all three Chinese nationals desire a boss who is “strong, decisive, firm, fair, protective, generous, and indulgent to loyal subordinates”. This is not the case with Americans who feel a boss should be egalitarian in his/her approach, “he uses his authority to obtain the resources needed to compete the job.” One orientation is power and the other is task - a definite conflict of orientations. Another example is who should make decisions in an organization. For Americans, the decisions should be made by the “person with the most knowledge and expertise of the problem”, while the Chinese orientation is with the “person whose job description carries the responsibility,” in this case the boss.

When asked to prioritize those values one looks for in an ideal job, the differences in motivational values are striking. For example, working conditions were ranked 11 out of 17 for the Americans, while they were ranked 1 by the Mainland Chinese, and 2 by the Chinese from Hong Kong and Taiwan. For having time for your family and friends in an ideal job, Americans ranked this as number 1, while the Chinese ranked this 5 (Taiwan and Hong Kong) and 9 for the Mainland Chinese.

While these findings are based on a small sample of working employees in four nations, they adequately point out in a general sense that there are significant differences, in many areas of work values - and at the same time, that there are some areas of agreement. A more detailed breakdown of each orientation will show even greater similarities and differences.

For multinational corporations, merely accepting the fact that there are differences is a start. Learning from studies such as this as to what are their work values would assist in the manner in which they manage nationals from other societies. This knowledge can be helpful in reducing internal conflict between employees and between management and employees. At that same time, by treating another based upon his cultural orientation could

contribute to higher productivity for the firm. The more the manager (or employee) understands the other, the better one can build an organizational culture that can support the strategy of the company.

This paper presents the methodology used in assessing employee cultural values and reports on its finding in four different nations. It details the variables that were used in the study and what they mean for an organization. It offers suggestions on what management can do to understand and coordinate the differing values it would find in a multi-cultural organizations. The findings are promising and further analysis will provide a more detailed breakdown of the findings and results of the study.

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