Cultural Differences

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Abstract: *This article aims to look at some cultural differences worldwide. It will be generally shown that what types cultures can be divided into. The kinds of the cultures which will be defined and explored are: Individualistic and Collectivistic, High Context and Low Context and Feminine and Masculine Cultures.*

Keywords: Culture, Differences, Individualistic and Collectivistic, High Context and Low Context, Feminine and Masculine

1. Introduction

Culture is a set of values, beliefs and attitudes which are accepted and shared by a group of people to standardize their behaviors in daily life (Scarborough, 1998). It can be recognized from the definition that there are many various groups of people who think differently because it is not possible to count those groups. Culture is created by human beings (Laroche, 2003); their diverse thoughts and behaviors create the cultural differences. It takes a long time for a culture to develop; many forces act upon people to establish their identity, but the strongest is religion.

Beliefs are the major reasons for cultural differences (Scarborough, 1998). They have different thinking about life style, relation and respect. For example, it would be very difficult for a woman from a female dominant culture to be the wife of a man in a male dominant culture. She would not be able to accept to live under her husband's control. If those cultural features serve a culture, they will be strengths. On the other hand, a culture will be an obstacle if its characteristics do not serve it or not agreed by the members who are the reason of its existence (ibid). It is worth mentioning that the cultural divisions cannot be generalized to all members of cultural groups because they are just indications. This essay will analyse some main cultural differences; they will be compared and their advantages and disadvantages will be discussed.

2. Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

Laroche (2003) argues that the interests of an individual are more important than the interests of the group in an individualistic culture. Individuals introduce themselves with their individual characteristics rather than group characteristics. On the other hand, group interests come first in collectivistic societies. They usually have unique characteristics which they choose as a definition to introduce themselves (ibid). That means an individual lives without relating to any general value in an individualistic culture, but in a collectivistic culture, s/he has to take care of those features which the cultures are based on.
Tamis-LeMonda *et al.*(2008) claim that individualism is valuable because the members of individualistic cultures are more successful than those in collectivistic cultures. Individuals in individualistic cultures set high personal goals because of their strong self-interests (Brett, 2000). According to Brett (2000), the members of an individual

society try to achieve their goals which make them recognizable. All the achievements might praise them without relating to other individuals. However, a group is named for the reason of a success in a collectivistic culture. There might be some members who spend less effort, but everyone shares the same accomplishment. The attainment is for the group rather than a specific individual and this is one of the most important reasons which lead them to spend less effort. Consequently, the success of the members of a specific group reduces.

Sosic and Hung (2002) carried out research on a group of US and Korean students. They identified the former group from an individualistic culture, and the latter from a collectivistic culture. According to the results of their research, individuals from an individualistic culture are more successful than those in a collectivistic one. They say that was the result because when individuals are competing with each other, they try harder to achieve their goals and this makes them more compatible which leads them to be more successful. In contrast, members of collective cultures think they are a group in which there may be some members who work to achieve the goals and some individuals do not try hard which means there is no competition.

It can also be argued that collectivism has its own values. The members of a society should keep harmony among themselves and it is an essential rule to help each other. There is a term which is called vigilante: that means people are gathering to protect themselves or help each other when they need support. The protection can be against risks from natural disasters, human beings or any other dangers those can be a threat on their safety. It is also argued by Geert Hofstede that agrarian countries are collectivistic cultures (Scarborough, 1998). People who are working in agriculture, they should gather because they cannot harvest individually.

It is clear that all members of a culture should admit the characteristics of that culture. If they will not accept the general habits which are accepted by others, they will be seen as people who are not respecting their own culture. According to Harris *et al.* (1999), Arabs breathe on others when they talk; smelling a friend's or other people'sbreathing is desirable.Avoiding this habit is recognized as ashamed for the person who denies the situation. They use to accept this habit and familiarize with this situation since a young age. It is worth mentioning that when it is said people from a culture have some specific

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behaviors, that is a generalization about that culture and it might not be true for all members of that culture. For example, it is said that Japanese people are very indirect because most of them converse indirectly, but there must be some people who communicate directly (Stonti, 1994).

Through my experience, the significance of collectivism is felt when people get old. In their early ages, they are dynamic, active and powerful. During theirold age, they will lose their power and communication will be the most important for them, but they are not able to go outside anymore to make new friends, for example in a pub. In this time they need the members of their family or other members in the culture to live in a collectivistic environment to obtain physical and psychological support.

3. High Context and Low Context Cultures

Anthropologist Edward Hall (in Moran *et al.*2007) makes a dynamic division between high and low-context cultures, and how this substance of context effects communication. A high-context culture uses high-context communications: that means the words are directed very indirectly, it may not be easy for a listener in a low context culture to understand what is meant. Japan, Saudi Arabia, China, and Spain are cultures which engage in high context communications. On the other hand, a low-context culture "employs low-context communications" which means the conversations are very direct and a listener does not need to think about what a speaker tries to say; The United States and Canada involve in low-context communications (Moran *et al.*, 2007).

It can be seen from the definitions how communication is being done among various cultures around the world. This difference is one of the main reasons of confusion and usually it may cause countable troubles. Moran *et al.* (2007) give the following example to show how sometimes this type of cultural differences may cause very serious misunderstandings:

Question: "Do you think Mr. Sim will be able to come to the course next week as I would
like to make hotel reservations for him and the hotel is quite full?"
Answer: "It is possible he may have to attend a meeting in Shanghai."

Follow up question two days later and before the course begins:
Question sent by email: "I am following up my earlier conversation and am wondering if
Mr. Sim will be attending the course."
Answer by email: "As I told you previously he will NOT attend."
 (Moran *et al.*2007: 52)

The above dialogue is between an employee from a low context culture and a Chinese Human Resources Director. The employee asks the director about the return of Mr. Sim who is supposed to attend a training program. He answers the question indirectly that he will not attend, but the employee understands the answer as a possibility of attending rather than an action which have been decided to

not attend. It is shown how it is an undesired situation at the end of the dialogue because the employee has been waiting for a while to make the hotel reservation. According to the dialogue, the director also ignored the employee for seven days at the work place as he was thinking that his answer was not taken seriously.

Hall*et al.*(1990) claimthat members of different cultures should integrate the personal habits or different cultural views. All individuals from a country should know the visitors in their country behave differently. They have to understand each other; otherwise it will be very difficult to communicate because of misunderstanding and miscommunication. Americans are very nearby to understand other cultures and adopt them, but integration with people from different cultures is very difficult for Germans (Hall *et al.*, 1990).

Moran *et al.* (2007) are arguing to declare the reason why people speaking indirectly, while direct speeches take less time and effort. They say human beings learn to listen and talk before learning how to read and write. The average person speaks approximately12,000 sentences every day at about 150 words per minute, while the listener's brain can absorb around 400 words per minute. There is a spare capacity which is left free; that is why members of high context cultures are trying to fill the gap to avoid being bored. They choose to have communication instead of being in silence.

Beune*et al.* (2009) demonstrates that the investigations in police stations by detectives should vary especially in multi-cultural countries. That means people who are investigating should aware of cultural habits especially the cultural background of those who they investigate. They say people from different backgrounds behave differently. Suspects are misunderstood sometimes by detectives who have a different cultural background. The misunderstanding results can be seen through their study which they have done in Netherlands; volunteer students from different countries and cultural backgrounds and detectives from Netherlands participated. They told students to imagine that they committed a crime; then, they are being investigated. It was very clear that student were responding through their cultural experience. There was a very clear miscommunication between the students who were from high and low context cultures and the investigators.

4. Feminine and Masculine Cultures

These two different types of culture were identified after a comprehensive study of core values by Geert Hofstede in 1991 (Scarborough, 1998). Scarborough (1998) defines both types very clearly. He says masculine culture is a tough, exhibiting aggressiveness, decisiveness and competitiveness and it is dominated by males like Japanese culture. In contrast, feminine culture is "a tender, exhibiting modesty, reticence, caring for others and concern for a favorable environment" and it is dominated by females such as Scandinavian culture(Scarborough, 1998).

According to Scarborough (1998), trading and fishing by men are the reasons which lead women to take more

administrative works out home in feminine cultures. In other words, men are working in a very busy environment in which they have no free time to meet the family or home requirements. That is why women are taking the role of men which may not be accepted in a Japanese culture such as doing administrative works outside home which are supposed to be done by males. For the masculine cultures, he sees religion as a main reason. Harris (1999) claims that males have a dominant role in most Arabic cultures which are mainly Muslims, while protecting and respecting females. It can be seen through his claim that there might not be a problem if males are dominant in a culture in case of respecting and seeing women as important members of a society. Scarborough (1998) demonstrates that Arab Countries are different from each other even most of them are identified as Muslim countries. He gives an example; women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia while women can be seen in all aspects of life in Iraq. It is worth mentioning that individuals in a masculine culture are very competitive, because it is men's nature; they always work to achieve higher achievements (Bos*et al.,* 2010). In this case, females become less active than males because they would have fewer responsibilities.

Nelson *et al.* (2006) carried out research to investigate the motivation of members of feminine and masculine cultures to work as volunteers to help other people. Canada and United Stated were chosen as country samples of masculine cultures, whereas Denmark and Norway were identified as the countries for feminine cultures. They found that individuals in a masculine culture think they have the responsibility of helping other people who are suffering from different causes; they try to work voluntarily because they feel such a responsibility. On the other hand, the members of a feminine culture are not taking any responsibility to make an effort and help other people; according to them, it is the duty of government to deal with charity works. It has been shown that even when they are asked for help or donation, individuals appeared to react against the request. Through the result of this study, it can be said a masculine culture might be preferred more than a feminine culture because its members are very motivated towards charity or making an effort for humanitarian issues.

Hofstede in Arrindell*et al.* (2003) argues against this theory. He says members of a feminine culture aspire to the formation of welfare societies. Through his argument, it can be seen feminine cultures are also taking care of humanitarian issues. They are aware of happening events around themselves which shows they are active and making effort to make a change. Individuals in this type of culture are trying to form a society to provide living in peace; but, according to Hofstede, members of a masculine society are trying tocreate a performance society in which he means they are setting high goals to achieve. It may cause very high competition which becomes a reason for conflicts. Those conflicts are mainly serious and disturbance; that is why members of such a society do not live in peace because they try to achieve their goals without caring about each other and that makes complaints and conflicts.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown some main cultural differences; a brief definition and characteristics were the focus.A culture can be seen as an individualist when individuals have individual goals rather than a group aim. In contrast, members of a collectivist culture have a target which they are working to achieve in groups. While a very direct message is directed in a high context culture, the message is more detailed and indirect in low context cultures. Females are taking more administrative responsibilities out home because males are busy with other works like fishing in feminine cultures. On the other hand, males are dominating most aspects of life in masculine cultures. It could be seen through the article these types of culture have their significance, in other words, advantages can be pointed out in those different types of cultures, but there are also disadvantages which can be recognized. The individuals of a specific culture are familiar with the habits in their culture which would be difficult to integrate living in a different culture. That is the reason which leads misunderstanding among people from different cultural backgrounds. Misinterpretation for various cultural performances can make confusions in the process of understanding.

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