

## Cultural dimensions theory

Cultural dimensional models attempt to explain social tendencies in terms of values and norms. But before we delve into the differences in this regard, let's quickly note that as humans we share most of our values with one another. When you ask people what values are important to them, the same themes emerge repeatedly (Schwartz, 2012; Schwartz, 1992). However, there are clear differences in their evaluation and interpretation. For example, many people will agree that cleanliness is important. However, how high we see its importance in the context of other values, and the idea of what cleanliness exactly means, can be quite variable globally.

Cultural dimensional models compare value differences at a national or geographic level. There are many different culture dimensional models. Below we will explain some examples to illustrate this. Below you will find information about other models. Cultural dimensional models are represented using a continuum with two poles, and nationalities or geographical spaces are positioned at specific points on the continuum. These models are criticized, among other things, for their reduction of reality, the equating of culture with nationality or large geographical areas, their overgeneralizations and the Western and economically-oriented research design. However, their advantage is that they make social tendencies visible and the findings can also be transferred to other cultural or social levels. It is important that the characteristics of the dimensions are absolutely value-free; none of the poles are good or bad. Below we want to take a closer look at four cultural dimensions that are relevant to everyday life: low context versus high context and monochronic versus polychronic time from Hall & Hall (1989) as well as individualism versus collectivism and high versus low power distance from Hofstede (2011).

### Cultural dimensions according to Hall & Hall

Our first cultural dimension is called **low context versus high context** (Hall & Hall, 1989). As we can already see in the graphic, German-speaking cultures are extremely low context. Maybe you have already heard of the proverbial German directness. But what does that mean? In low context cultures there is a lot of verbal communication and verbal messages are usually explicit and direct. Things are said accurately and effectively, and the focus of communication is the exchange of information, ideas and views. Disagreements are depersonalized and, like denial, are expressed more verbally and explicitly. In high context cultures, there is a lot of non-verbal communication, and verbal messages tend to be more implicit and indirect. People often talk around the actual topic; the focus of communication is on building and maintaining social relationships. Since differences of opinion are more quickly taken personally, they, like denials, are more likely to be communicated non-verbally and implicitly.

Let's make this clear with an example. Mr. Menzel moves to Malaysia because he became manager of a German logistics company there. One day, out of curiosity, he asks his employee Mr. Lee how a particular delivery is going. After the conversation, Mr. Lee stops exactly this delivery. When Mr. Menzel asks why he did that, Mr. Lee replies: "You asked for it!" What happened here? Mr. Menzel, in his direct German way, simply wanted to know what the status of a particular delivery was. Mr. Lee has heard much more on this issue. If his boss asks him directly about a specific delivery, there must be something wrong with that

delivery! Mr. Menzel's question was a wink to Mr. Lee and he assumed that there was an urgent need for action.

To understand this a little better, you can watch the following two video tips. The first (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQPeUyB09oE>) is about the Japanese concepts of *honne* (i.e. real intention) and *tatemae* (behavior in public that is adapted to social expectations). But be careful, this video is comedy!

And here's another video tip: [https://www.focus.de/finanzen/karriere/themen/informationszeitalter/wann-ist-ein-ja-ein-ja-informationszeitalter\\_id\\_1410815.html](https://www.focus.de/finanzen/karriere/themen/informationszeitalter/wann-ist-ein-ja-ein-ja-informationszeitalter_id_1410815.html). It is explained here that the small words *yes* and *no* can have quite different meanings from an intercultural perspective depending on the context.

Let's look at another cultural dimension. The use of time is also a cultural phenomenon. There are **monochronic and polychronic** cultures (Hall & Hall, 1989). Monochronic cultures have a linear understanding of time. Time is money, schedules are sacred, deadlines are met, interruptions are unpleasant and being late is rude. As we can see from the figure, German-speaking cultures are extremely monochronic. Polychronic cultures, on the other hand, have a flexible understanding of time. People are never too busy to have time for each other, plans can be changed quickly and easily. And it is precisely this flexibility that takes priority. Disturbances are part of life and being "late" is normal or completely okay. And above all: what is too late?

Let's also look at an example of this dimension: "Julia is spending a semester abroad in Lyon. During this time she lives in a student dormitory in which French students as well as students from various other countries live. She made contact with some of her roommates relatively quickly and arranged to meet French and Brazilian students in the foyer of the dormitory at 10 p.m. on one of her first evenings. The Brazilian had already said he wouldn't be on time. Assuming the others would arrive on time, Julia was in the foyer at 10 p.m. - and stood there alone. Disgruntled, she went back up to her room and after a quarter of an hour looked back into the foyer. There was still no one there, so she went back to her room. After another 15 minutes she tried again and decided to wait downstairs. At 10:45 p.m. two fellow students showed up. They said they had learned a little more, the others were tired or didn't feel like it. So the students set off in threes. Nevertheless, Julia was frustrated." ([https://www.dfh-ufa.org/app/uploads/2018/06/DFH\\_Leitfaden\\_deutsch\\_web1.pdf](https://www.dfh-ufa.org/app/uploads/2018/06/DFH_Leitfaden_deutsch_web1.pdf), p. 24). As we can see from this example, different ways of dealing with time can lead to misunderstandings and unpleasant emotions. It is therefore very important to know how differently different people deal with time in order to be able to correctly classify unknown behaviors.

### Cultural dimensions according to Hofstede

Another cultural dimension that is very influential globally is **individualism versus collectivism** (Hofstede, 2011). In individualistic societies, identity is self-centered. The central values are that you can take care of yourself, that you are independent and self-reliant. Group memberships are flexible and selectable, but more unstable. In collectivist societies, identity is formed to a large extent through membership in groups, such as the family, work groups or the neighborhood. Central values are to care for these groups, ensure group harmony and maintain relationships. You are often born into such networks and the membership is very stable, if not lifelong.

The final cultural dimension we want to look at is **power distance**. There are societies with high and low power distance. In societies with low power distance, hierarchies are generally

more undesirable and if they exist, they should be justified and legitimized. In principle, the aim is to have interpersonal encounters at eye level. When power distances exist, they are often based on individual abilities. In such societies, authorities are allowed to be questioned. In education systems, great value is placed on the ability to reflect critically and learning processes are designed as openly as possible. In cultures with a high power distance, the social order is more clearly structured and hierarchies are generally more accepted. Within these hierarchies there are clear rules of conduct. Learning processes in educational institutions are more controlled, more schooled, more clearly instructed, more controlled and more frontal. The relationship with professors and lecturers is usually more distant.

Hofstede also created the cultural dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, short-term versus long-term orientation, enjoyment versus limitation and motivation for achievement and success (2011). In the Hofstede country comparison tool (<https://www.theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool>) certain nationalities can be compared with each other.

### Other culture-dimensional models

These were just four examples of cultural dimensions. As mentioned at the beginning, there are many other approaches. Here is a brief overview of the most important authors and dimensions. Sure (Sure, 2017) gives a short and very clear overview of these approaches in his article “Culture Dimensional Models”.

- Hofstede: Individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, motivation for achievement and success, long-term/short-term orientation (Hofstede, 1983, 1994, 2011)
- Hall & Hall: High context versus low context, monochronous versus polychronic understanding of time, spatial orientation, information speed (Hall, 1959, 1976, 1989; Hall & Hall, 1966, 1989)
- Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck: essence of human nature, human relationship to nature, human relationship to fellow human beings, human activity orientation, human time orientation (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961)
- Trompenaars: Universalism versus particularism, individualism versus communitarianism, affectivity versus neutrality, specificity versus diffuseness, achievement versus origin, relationship to time, relationship to nature (Trompenaars, 1994)
- GLOBE Study: Power distance, uncertainty avoidance and collectivism, gender equality and determination, future, performance and human orientation (House et al., 2004)

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