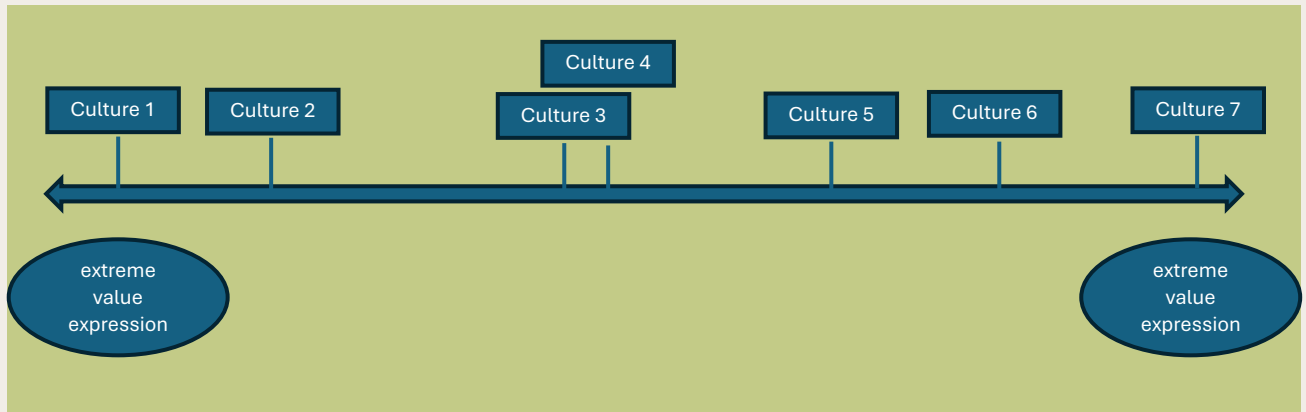# Cultural dimensions theories

Cultural-dimensional models explain societal trends in values and norms. While people share most of their values (Schwartz, 2012; Schwartz, 1992), there are significant differences regarding their importance and situational interpretation. For example, many people will agree that cleanliness is important. However, how highly we value it in the context of other values, and our understanding of what cleanliness actually means, can vary considerably.

Classical cultural-dimensional models compare value differences at the national or geographical level. These models are presented as a continuum with two poles—each symbolizing the extremes of value expression—and nationalities or geographical areas are positioned at specific points on the continuum.

Cultural-dimensional models are criticized for, among other things, their reduction of reality, the equation of culture with nationality or geographical areas, the portrayal of cultures as rigid, inflexible, and homogeneous systems, their overgeneralizations, and their Western and economically oriented research design. Furthermore, cultural-dimensional models should by no means serve as a template for stereotyping. Their advantages lie in their ability to reveal societal trends, and the transferability of these findings to other cultural or social levels is possible. It is important that the dimensions are absolutely value-free; neither pole is inherently good or bad.

There are many different cultural-dimensional models. In the following, we will take a closer look at four fairly everyday-relevant cultural dimensions as examples: low context versus high context and monochronic versus polychronic time by Hall & Hall (1989), as well as individualism versus collectivism and high versus low power distance of Hofstede (2011).

2. Cultural Dimensions according to Hall & Hall

Our first cultural dimension is called low context versus high context (Hall & Hall, 1989). Have you ever heard of the proverbial German directness? Germany is considered a classic low-context culture. In low-context cultures, a great deal of communication is verbal, and verbal messages are usually explicit and direct. Things are expressed precisely and effectively, and the focus of communication is the exchange of information, ideas, and opinions. Disagreements are depersonalized and, like negations, are expressed verbally and explicitly. In high-context cultures, a great deal of communication is nonverbal, 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 disagreements are taken personally more quickly, they, like negations, are communicated nonverbally and implicitly.

High Context – Low Context: A Mini-Example from Everyday Life

Situation: Two colleagues are supposed to prepare a project together.
High-Context Person: Expects that much will be understood "between the lines." She says: "I think we should maybe take another look at it." – and actually means: "The result isn't good enough yet."
Low-Context Person: Takes the statement literally and understands it as an optional idea.
Consequence: Both believe the other is unclear or unreliable – even though both are simply using their culturally influenced communication style.

Let's look at another cultural dimension. Our relationship with time is also a culturally shaped phenomenon. According to Hall and Hall, there are monochronic and polychronic cultures (Hall & Hall, 1989). Monochronic cultures have a linear understanding of time. Time is money, schedules are sacrosanct, deadlines are met, interruptions are unpleasant, and being late is considered rude. Polychronic cultures, on the other hand, have a flexible understanding of time. People are never too busy to make time for each other, and plans can be changed quickly and easily. And this flexibility is precisely what takes precedence. Interruptions are part of life, and being "late" is normal or perfectly acceptable. And above all: what even constitutes being late?

Monochronic vs. Polychronic: A Mini-Example from Everyday Life

Situation: A team is planning its weekly meeting.
Monochronic person: Expects the meeting to start on time, proceed in a structured manner, and end after 30 minutes. Time is linear and fixed.
Polychronic person: Arrives five minutes late, greets everyone at length, and brings up two other topics. Time is flexible; relationships and situational needs take priority.
Consequence: The monochronic person perceives this behavior as unstructured; the polychronic person feels unnecessarily restricted by strict schedules.

3. Cultural Dimensions According to Hofstede

Another globally influential cultural dimension is individualism versus collectivism (Hofstede, 2011). In individualistic societies, identity is self-centered. Central values include being able to take care of oneself, being independent and self-reliant. Group affiliations are flexible and chosen, but therefore more unstable. In collectivist societies, identity is largely formed through membership in groups, such as family, work groups, or the neighborhood. Central values include caring for these groups, ensuring harmony within the group, and maintaining relationships. People are often born into such networks, and membership is very stable, if not lifelong.

Individualism vs. Collectivism: A Mini-Example from Everyday Life

Situation: An employee receives a job offer from another company.
Individualistic Perspective: She decides alone and asks the question: "Is this good for my career?"
Collectivistic Perspective: She involves family or team in the decision: "How will this affect my family or my group?"
Consequence: Colleagues from individualistic cultures are surprised that the decision takes longer; people with a collectivist background find it natural to involve their social circle.

As a final cultural dimension, we want to look at power distance. There are societies with high and low power distance. In societies with low power distance, hierarchies are generally less desirable, and if they exist, they are to be justified and legitimized. Power imbalances are often based on individual abilities. In principle, interpersonal encounters on equal footing are sought. In such societies, authority may be questioned. In education systems, great emphasis is placed on the ability to reflect critically, and learning processes are designed to be as open as possible. In cultures with high power distance, hierarchies are generally more accepted. As a result, the social order is more clearly structured, and within the hierarchies, there are clear understandings of roles and associated rules of conduct. In the education system, learning processes are more controlled, more structured, more clearly instructed, more monitored, and more teacher-centered, and the relationship with teachers and superiors is usually more distant.

Power Distance (High vs. Low): A Mini-Example from Everyday Life

Situation: At the end of a meeting, a manager asks: "Does anyone have any comments?"
Low power distance: Employees openly give feedback, make suggestions, or even disagree.
High power distance: Employees remain silent—out of respect, politeness, or the expectation that decisions come "from above."
Consequence: The manager interprets silence as agreement; the employees as appropriate restraint.

4. Further Culture-Dimensional theories

As mentioned at the beginning, there are many different culture-dimensional models. The examples discussed have shown how culture-dimensional models can make important differences in human behavior visible and understandable. A summary of the best-known authors and their culture-dimensional models is provided by Sure (Sure, 2017) in his article "Culture-Dimensional Models". Here is a brief overview:

• Hofstede: Individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, motivation for achievement and success, long-term/short-term orientation (Hofstede, 1983, 1994, 2011).

Tip: Hofstede's country comparison tool (https://www.theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool) can be used to compare specific nationalities.

aution: Please do not use it as a basis for stereotyping!

•   Hall & Hall: high context versus low context, monochronic versus polychronic concept of time, spatial orientation, information speed (Hall, 1959, 1976, 1989; Hall & Hall, 1966, 1989)
• Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck: essence of human nature, human relationship to nature, human relationship to others, 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-oriented, performance-oriented and human-oriented (House et al., 2004)

5. How we can use culturally dimensional models

Culturally dimensional models show us how variable human behavior can be – and that there is simply no such thing as "normal." They also show us the power of socialization: We often perceive as "normal" what is common in our environments and judge ourselves and others according to these standards. Knowledge about the flexibility of values gives us the freedom to recognize the relativity of our own value system, to take a step back, and not to judge ourselves or others prematurely. Culturally dimensional models thus support our cultural self-awareness. They give us criteria that help us examine how we ourselves, the people around us, and the cultural environments in which we move, operate. By demonstrating the relativity of values and norms, culturally dimensional models protect us from misinterpretations or the danger of using ourselves as the benchmark for evaluating the behavior of others.

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