



ARGnote

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Cross cultural theory and how it may help explain differences in symbolic choice in transport

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Overview

People make transport choices not only for practical reasons but also symbolic - how their choices appear to others⁽¹⁾ - and this may differ between people of similar social characteristics across different national cultures. When framing research questions to test this theory Hofstede's cultural values are a useful starting place.

Key Findings

- The work of the cross cultural theorists should help enable the formulation of symbolic transport choice research hypotheses.

Aims & Objectives

To introduce the work of Geert Hofstede and to suggest how his values may help frame research hypotheses relating to symbolic transport choice.

Background

The symbolic aspects of transport choice may differ between similar individuals across different cultures. If sustainable transport policies are to be successfully implemented globally, there is merit in exploring this theory so as to be able to tailor transport solutions to local conditions. Such customisation would be especially fruitful in countries that are balancing rapid economic growth with escalating congestion and pollution.

Discussion

So where to begin? Cross cultural researchers tend to accept Hofstede's definition of culture as *'the collective programming of the mind which*

distinguishes the members of one human group from another' as the industry standard⁽²⁾. Cross cultural study is a respected academic field but it is an evolving, pragmatic and hotly debated⁽³⁾⁽⁴⁾ field populated with theories and paradigms. It's sensible therefore when formulating research questions to choose one set of cultural dimensions and see where that leads us, and Geert Hofstede's work is the logical starting place.

Hofstede⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾ is a pioneer of cross cultural studies. Prior to his work 'culture' was treated as a single hidden variable, the inexplicable 'thing' that drove differences across nations. In the 1970s, however, Hofstede was able, by analysing 116,000 attitudinal questionnaires distributed across the IBM Corporations global offices, to isolate four measures of cultural difference that measure relative cultural differences at a *national* (not individual) level across similar social groups.

The first Hofstede dimension is '**power distance**'. People in societies with a high degree of power distance accept a hierarchy in which everybody has a place which needs no justification. People emphasise their position in the hierarchy, through symbols and behaviour, so that others know how to treat them. China is a high power differential culture. Denmark is a low one. So we may surmise that in high power differential cultures people choose modes of transport which befit the status they need to show others. In low power differential status senior people tend to play *down* their formal status and enhance their informal status, so are probably likely to be more comfortable using public transport than their counterparts in high power societies.

Individualism/ collectivism describes the extent to which individuals are willing to subvert their desires to that of the collective in exchange for loyalty. This dimension correlates with the power dimension (the only Hofstede dimensions which correlate) - collective societies tend to be high power differential. In collective societies decisions are made by the collective for the benefit of the collective, elders are respected without having to earn respect, and the outward family 'face' or dignity is paramount. Indonesia is a collectivist country; Australia, individualistic. It may be hypothesised that in highly collective cultures major purchases, such as a car, are made as a group - with the views of the elder members carrying most weight - for reasons that relate to the family's needs and standing.

Masculine societies stress success and power and have different gender expectations. Feminine societies value caring, and there's little difference between expected gender roles. India is a masculine society; Holland a feminine (note Hofstede found masculine values are present in /low income groups in feminine nations). In masculine nations families who can afford to tend to have a car for both males and females, with the male driving the bigger more powerful model. In feminine societies it's common for both partners to share a single car, and there's less male hostility to driving a small car. It's also possible that in feminine societies the more 'caring', communal modes – e.g. hybrid cars and public transport - are more acceptable to men than in masculine.

Finally **uncertainty avoidance** expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with risk. In a high uncertainty avoidance cultures like Japan people try to manage the future more than those from low uncertainty avoidance cultures such as Ireland, who are more comfortable 'going with the flow'. People in high uncertainty avoidance cultures prefer proven technology, whereas in low uncertainty avoidance cultures status is obtained for being the first to own something innovative, regardless of whether or not it brings risks.

Conclusion

Hofstede's dimensions are not without significant debate, primarily because they generalise at the expense of the individual. Furthermore some have argued Hofstede's work is a little old and likely to have been diluted through globalisation. But despite massive global changes in recent years research indicates that cultures are not

converging to a single point⁽⁷⁾. The *programming of the mind* embedded during childhood seems incredibly resilient as shown by the failures of companies who adopted a 'one size fits all' approach to advertising across cultures⁽⁸⁾.

So, despite debate around Hofstede's dimensions, they remain a logical starting point when framing initial research questions relating to symbolic transport choice across similar individuals in different cultures. Hofstede's dimensions are still the most commonly applied measures, and many would say still the most useful⁽⁹⁾⁽¹⁰⁾. Furthermore whilst other cultural experts such as Schwartz⁽¹¹⁾ and Trompenaars⁽¹²⁾ have built on Hofstede's work, they have never rendered it obsolete but strengthened it in key areas. This is especially true in the areas of collectivism and power distance: regardless of how behaviour is labelled or whether or not it's applied to the individual or collective, most cultural theorists agree that some societies place a greater stress on hierarchy and the importance of the group, than others.

Future Research Areas

The next ARGnote in this series will marry this and ARGnote Vol 2 No. 2 by developing specific research hypotheses related to symbolic transport choice and culture. It will also suggest how they may be tested.

Related ARGnotes

Symbolic and affective choices in transport—aligning the 'head' and the 'heart'. ARGnote Vol2 No. 2. 2015.

Endnotes:

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4. M. Jones. Hofstede – Culturally questionable? 2007.
5. Hofstede G. *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values.* SAGE; 1984. 332 p.
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7. De Mooij M, Hofstede G. Convergence and divergence in consumer behavior: implications for international retailing. *J Retail.* 2002;78(1):61–9.
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12. Mendonsa RM. *Riding the waves of culture: Understanding cultural diversity in business,* by Fons Trompenaars. (1996) London: Nicholas Brealey.