

The strengths and limitations of using essentialist cultural theory to understand international students

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Abstract

This paper, drawn from doctoral research, considers the strengths and limitations of essentialist cultural theory in helping lecturers in higher education understand their international students. The theoretical analysis is undertaken in response to an educational model from Western Europe which utilises Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions to underpin its approach to understanding how diverse cultures in the classroom might manifest themselves and the implications this could have for students' academic work and social interactions between lecturers and students. It concludes that although essentialist cultural theory can be useful in some respects to help lecturers reflect on the idea of culture and help prepare them for working with international students, its limitations make it unwise for them to rely on it as their primary guiding principle in their teaching.

Keywords

Essentialist cultural theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, culture specific knowledge, stereotyping, international students

Introduction

Around the turn of the millennium, an increasing number of students from diverse cultural, language, and teaching and learning backgrounds resulted in an educational model being developed in Western Europe which highlights specific knowledge, skills and attitudes as being beneficial for university lecturers working with international students. The model is called the 'Profile of the Ideal Lecturer for Teaching in the International Classroom' (see Teekens 2000)¹. A distinctive feature of the Profile is the way that it centres the role of 'culture'² as an important feature of contemporary teaching and learning. Indeed, culture is a keystone upon which the Profile rests. One particular skill that the Profile promotes is for lecturers to be able to 'analyse cultural differences on the basis of a theoretical framework' (Teekens 2000, p. 30) and to this end, it utilises Hofstede's (2001) theory of cultural dimensions to show how culture-specific knowledge can be useful for lecturers to help them to better understand their international students. Whilst the matter of whether or not lecturers should be able to analyse cultural differences using a formal theoretical framework is an interesting question in itself, this paper focuses on the substantive issue of the strengths and limitations of using an essentialist cultural theory, such as Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, when teaching in higher education.

Culture through the Hofstedian lens

Geert Hofstede is a psychologist and organisational anthropologist whose work on national cultural values has had wide exposure and is frequently employed in contemporary research in education, especially where intercultural or internationalisation themes are involved. Hofstede's work essentially maps out the fact of descriptive relativism, that is, the observation that social norms differ from one place to another. This is not to say that Hofstede's contribution is simply a modern day confirmation that people do things differently in different places. It is more comprehensive than that. In some respects, it shares a similar theoretical space to Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) thinking on social cognition which posits that a person's culture is a fundamental determinant of their worldview. Søndergaard (nd) reports that the 'Hofstedian argument has become an influential classic.' Chapman (1997) says Hofstede's work has 'become a dominant influence and set a fruitful agenda' (p. 1360). Gannon (2004) comments that of all the major dimensional approaches to cultural theory,

¹ For a comprehensive and critical review of the model, see Sanderson (2006).

² Teekens's (2000) interpretation of culture emphasises the individual's lived and behavioural experience. This way of looking at culture is, according to Pedersen (1988), concerned with "within the person" (p. 3) experiences such as values, habits, customs, and lifestyles. This is exactly the arena of Hofstede's (2001) work, which is promoted by Teekens (2000) and Schröder (2000) as an example of a theoretical framework that can be used by lecturers to help understand their students.

Hofstede's work is 'the most robust and useful' (p. 9). Teekens (2000) summarises the Hofstedian approach in the following way, where

Geert Hofstede has described culture as the collective mental programming which distinguishes members of one group or category of people from members of another culture ... Culture seen as mental programming defines culture in the anthropological sense, covering all spheres of life. It is learned, and it is very hard to unlearn. It defines the way we think, feel and behave. The source of our mental programming is our social environment. It starts at home, continues to develop on the street, in school, at work and in all the social settings a person encounters (Teekens 2000, pp. 28-29)

Hofstede's work is a comprehensive account of particular characteristics of over 72 national cultures (listed as countries) through the way they fit into a model that he produced from two rounds of questionnaires between 1967 and 1973 on attitudes of over 100,000 International Business Machines (IBM) employees. The resultant model originally contained four cultural dimensions. A fifth dimension was added in the 1980s. Hofstede (2001) says these dimensions reflect 'basic problems' (p. xix) that are faced by every society, but for which solutions can differ. See Table 1 for a summary of the five dimensions.

Table 1. Hofstede's five cultural dimensions (Hofstede 2001, p. 29)

Cultural dimension	Description of cultural dimension
Power Distance Index (PDI)	Related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequity
Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)	Related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future
Individualism and Collectivism (IDV)	Related to the integration of individuals into primary groups
Masculinity and Femininity (MAS)	Related to the division of emotional roles between men and women
Long versus Short Term Orientation (LTO)	Related to the choice of focus for peoples' efforts: the future or the present

Hofstede (2001) used the IBM data to generate an index score along a continuum for each cultural dimension for each of the 72 countries. Malaysia, for example, has a high PDI index, a low IDV index, an index in the mid-range for MAS, and a score towards the lower end for the UAI index (see Figure 1). Each continuum, in turn, is associated with certain social dispositions which vary according to whether the index score is low or high. For example, Hofstede (2001) claims that in schooling in a country that scores low for the UAI cultural dimension, it is acceptable for teachers to tell students they do not know the answers to all questions. In a country that has a high UAI score, however, teachers are expected to have all the answers (p. 169). Similarly, in societies with low MAS index scores, the social adaptation of students is important, whilst it is their performance that is considered important in societies with high MAS index scores (Hofstede 2001, p. 306). Through dispositions such as these, a country's index scores can produce an overall appreciation of the *essence* of its national culture. One can talk about it having certain cultural characteristics. The extrapolation of this logic 'implies a belief that an individual's cultural 'identity' (nationality, ethnicity, 'race', class, etc) determines and predicts that individuals (sic) values, communicative preferences and behaviours' (Macfadyen 2005, pp. 20-21). This is how many observers understand Hofstede's (2001) theory of cultural dimensions.

According to Schröder (2000), Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions represents knowledge that can support productive 'cross-cultural communication (which is) the basic medium by which teaching and learning takes place in the international classroom' (p. 48) and can assist lecturers to 'understand behaviour that might otherwise seem deviant' (p. 54). Schröder (2000) makes the assumption that international students are likely to have a mindset which is receptive to a cross-cultural communication setting because they choose to be educated in a foreign country. They are likely to be open-minded, respectful of difference and curious. 'Regrettably,' Schröder (2000) suggests, 'the same cannot be said of the lecturers and staff at host institutions' (p. 48). Whilst it is a big leap to state that international students are likely to be better equipped to operate in the intercultural setting because it is they who have left home, Schröder (2000) is on firmer ground in suggesting that host institutions and lecturers have a responsibility to provide a teaching and learning environment that addresses what Hofstede (1986) calls 'the perplexities of cross-cultural learning situations' (p. 316). To this end, Hofstede's (2001) model of cultural dimensions is promoted by Teekens (2000) as a useful theoretical tool for the practical purpose of, according to Hofstede (2001) himself, engaging in intercultural cooperation to meet 'the crying need for integration of human efforts in a shrinking world' (p. 73).

The potential use of Hofstede's work for lecturers

It is not difficult to see how Hofstede's (2001) model of cultural dimensions might be useful to lecturers. In addition to understanding what each cultural dimension means in general, they could also compare the host country's index scores with those of another country for particular cultural dimensions. The interesting thing for lecturers would be to note any similarities or differences between the respective index scores and to give thought to what these might suggest. For example, an Australian lecturer who had Malaysian students in their class could compare the Power Distance Index (PDI) scores between Australia and Malaysia. Figure 1 shows that Australia's PDI score lies towards the lower end of the PDI pole, whilst Malaysia's score lies towards the higher end.

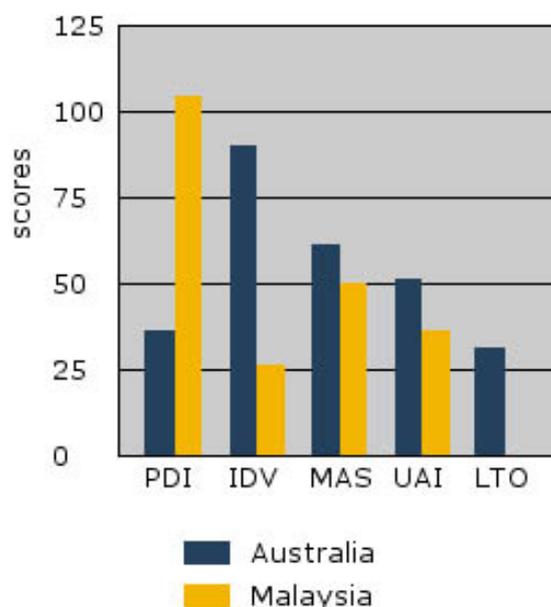


Figure 1. Country index scores for Hofstede's cultural dimensions (ITIM Culture & Management Consultants, 2003)

Taking note of the relatively large difference in the PDI scores between the two countries, the lecturer could then refer to information from Hofstede's (2001) Power Distance dimension which outlines characteristics of low and high PDI societies in relation to schooling (see Table 2) to better understand what this difference could signify.

Table 2. Key differences in schooling between low & high PDI societies (Hofstede 2001, p. 107)

Australia (Low PDI)	Malaysia (High PDI)
Teachers treat students as equals	Students depend on teachers
Students treat teachers as equals	Students treat teachers with respect, even outside class
Student-centred education	Teacher-centred education
Students initiate some communication in class	Teachers initiate all communication in class
Teachers are experts who transfer impersonal truths	Teachers are gurus who transfer personal wisdom
Parents may side with students against teachers	Parents supposed to side with teachers to keep students in order
Quality of learning depends on two-way communication and excellence of students	Quality of learning depends on excellence of teachers
Lower educational levels maintain more authoritarian relations	Authoritarian values independent of education levels
Educational system focuses on middle levels	Educational system focuses on the top level
More Nobel Prizes in sciences per capita	Fewer Nobel Prizes per capita
More modest expectations on benefits of technology	High expectations on benefits of technology

The information presented in Table 2 would be useful for lecturers in terms of painting a general picture of how Malaysian students are likely to initially present in the international classroom. This knowledge can then form the basis for lecturers to develop appropriate skills and attitudes which would enable them to work with, rather than against, cultural difference and differing expectations in class. For example, knowing that teachers initiate all communication in class in high PDI countries, the Australian lecturer could adopt an attitude of openness to the possibility that a quiet Malaysian student might not be bored, disinterested, or shy. Ballard and Clanchy (1997) provide examples of appropriate strategies to encourage communication such as 'give reticent students a chance to prepare themselves by telling them that you will call on them to speak after the next speaker' (p. 41) or 'call on overseas students to add comments based on their own cultural background' (p. 41). Such strategies encourage international students from high PDI backgrounds in a supportive way and are aimed at helping them make the transitions required to meet the academic and social expectations of the Australian classroom.

Similarly, paying heed to the distance between the scores of each country for the Individualism and Collectivism (IDV) dimension (see Figure 1), the lecturer could note the characteristics of schooling that Hofstede (2001) suggests are typical of low and high IDV societies (see Table 3). For example, an Australian lecturer would most likely expect all students to take responsibility for their own learning. The students would be required to show initiative which is consistent with a critical and analytical approach to learning that might include, for example, synthesising information from a wide range of sources in order to write an essay (Ballard & Clanchy 1997, p. 13). Knowing that schooling in low IDV societies is likely to have discouraged students from showing individual initiative in this way, the lecturer might choose to be open to a range of responses and behaviours from Malaysian students and employ specific teaching skills and strategies to address any apparent lack of confidence to tackle tasks that require independent action and seemingly poor initiative shown in pursuit of academic tasks.

Table 3. Key differences in schooling between low & high IDV societies (Hofstede 2001, p. 237)

Malaysia (Low individualistic)	Australia (High individualistic)
Teachers deal with pupils as a group	Teachers deal with individual pupils
Pupils' individual initiatives discouraged	Pupils' individual initiatives encouraged
Schoolchildren report ethnocentric, traditional views	Schoolchildren report "modern" views
Students associate according to preexisting [sic] in-group ties	Students associate according to tasks and current needs
Students expect preferential treatment by teachers from their in-group	In-group membership no reason to expect preferential treatment
Harmony, face and shaming in class	Students' selves to be respected
Students will not speak up in class or large groups	Students expected to speak up in class or large groups
Students' aggressive behaviour bad for academic performance	Students' self-esteem good for academic performance
Purpose of education is learning how to do	Purpose of education is learning how to learn
Diplomas provide entry to higher-status groups	Diplomas increase economic worth and/or self-respect

A cautionary note on the use of essentialist cultural theories

Despite its popularity, Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions is not without criticism. Smith and Schwartz (1997), McSweeney (2002), and Gooderham and Nordhaug (2003) disagree with Hofstede's research methodology and also argue that nations are not ideal units of cultural comparison and that five dimensions of culture are not enough. Such criticisms were recently addressed (and discounted) by Hofstede (2002) (see Appendix 1 for common criticisms of Hofstede's work, plus his response to each criticism). Others, like Hewling (2005) and Macfadyen (2005), are critical of Hofstede (2001) because they do not believe that an individual's national culture or identity can be used to either predict or determine their behaviour or values. The fundamental oversight made by both Hewling (2005) and Macfadyen (2005), however, is that Hofstede (2001), himself, clearly points out that an *individual's* values and behaviour cannot and should not be predicted from national cultural norms (see the following section for more on this). There are good reasons to use caution when using an essentialist or, indeed, any type of cultural theory to better understand the differences and similarities between individuals from various cultures and countries. This is the case whether one uses Hofstede's work or other essentialist cultural theories, such as those put forward by E. Hall (1959, 1966), E. Hall and M. Hall (1990), and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000). A case in point is the following observation made by an Australian academic about students from Malaysia who choose to further their education in Australia, where he suggests that

I'm not convinced that Hofstede's cultural profiles are useful. Even if they are accurate averages for the Malaysian population, Malaysian international students in Australia are not typical Malaysians. Only around one per cent of the tertiary age population in Malaysia studies overseas and compared with the Malaysian norm, they are younger, richer, more Chinese, more urban, more likely to have parents who have studied overseas, etc. Also, these are people who are seeking an education which is different to the Malaysian educational norm, indicating that they may not share the same values as are ascribed to the Malaysian norm (C. Ziguras, personal communication, March 24 2006)

The message in the statement above is similar in sentiment to Hewling's (2005) comment that although the Sudan comprises the 'Arab Muslims in the north ... to Black African Christian or animist in the south', an essentialist view of Sudanese nationality masks the distinctly different cultural norms and practices of the two groups. This, too, is precisely the view of Cope and Kalantzis (1997) who believe that generalisations about national cultures create 'oversimplified images of national sameness' (p. 254). Given the sound reasoning in objections such as these, lecturers who prefer to use essentialist cultural theories to help them understand cultural difference should also remain open to the distinct probability that the values and behaviours of individual students may not conform to what is predicted of their national group (again, see the following section for more on this.)

At this point it is also important to note that the use of Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions as a theoretical approach for the Profile is far from prescriptive. The Profile can accommodate other cultural models (indeed, even a mix of models) that correspond to a lecturer's preferences. For example, it could be supported by Stuart Hall's (1992, 1997a, 1997b) work on cultural representation, Foucault's (1980) deliberations on power and knowledge, or Spivak's (1988, 1999) engagement with postcolonial theory. The difficulty with using theories such as these, however, is that they are usually dense in their discipline-specific terminology and argumentation and, therefore, less likely to be embraced by busy lecturers who might want to understand more about cultural difference, yet may not have the time or interest to study culture-related concepts more thoroughly. For this reason, the essentialist cultural theories are more likely to be utilised by lecturers despite their limitations. For instance, in the case of Hofstede's work, Dahl (nd) notes the following as an explanation of why it might appeal to those seeking to better understand everyday intercultural encounters. He observes that

the work of Hofstede is probably the most popular work in the arena of culture research. Although the work provides a relatively general framework for analysis, the framework can be applied easily to many everyday intercultural encounters. It is particularly useful, as it reduces the complexities of culture and its interactions into five relatively easily understood cultural dimensions (Dahl nd)

The danger of stereotyping

Whilst Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions throws light on differences between cultures by comparing and contrasting their national characteristics, the Profile rightly cautions lecturers to 'try to avoid thinking in stereotypes, and to behave and express opinions without resorting to such generalizations' (Teekens 2000, p. 30). Hofstede (2001) himself says that

what is unfounded in any case is the application of stereotype information about a group to any individual member of that group. The valid part of a stereotype is a statistical statement about a group, not a prediction of the properties of particular individuals. Stereotypes are at best half-truths (Hofstede 2001, p. 14)

The literature related to teaching and learning and culture supports both the Profile and Hofstede (2001) in this regard. Cranton (2001) cautions against generalising from ourselves to others and vice versa (p. 2). She says that it is important to distinguish the individual student with their unique and complex characteristics from the social construct of the typical student (p. 74). Reynolds and Skilbeck (1976) suggest that although cultural stereotypes are useful for interpreting experience, this is a fairly superficial way of understanding difference, and it goes little deeper than simply noting what is typical of one group (p. 2), for example, 'all Chinese look alike; all Dutch are stingy' (Hofstede 2001, p. 424). Of stereotypes, Said (1995) puts the question 'Who are the Arabs?' and then provides a common Western assessment of Arabs as lecherous, bloodthirsty, dishonest, 'oversexed degenerates, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. Slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colourful scoundrel' (pp. 286-287). Indeed, there is also the outsider's stereotype of the typical Australian male as 'the ocker Aussie in a singlet, stubby and thongs, beer can in hand' (Kenyon & Amrapala 1991, p. 3) (see Figure 2). Of course, it is not suggested that the 'ocker Aussie' shown in Figure 2 would in any way be a stereotype of the Australian male lecturer. The image most likely to be held of them by international students, according to Ballard and Clanchy (1997), is that they simply smell of 'beer, beef and cheese' (p. 6) and 'never wants us to get better marks than their own students' (p. 6)!

Conversely, in the case of stereotyping Asian students, a lecturer might subscribe to the view, for example, that they are very quiet and shy, or particularly demanding, or that they do not critique anything (Nichols 2003). Cannon and Newble (2000) describe the stereotypical view of students from Confucian heritage cultures in Eastern and Southeast Asia as 'rote learners' (p. 5). Biggs (2003), too, outlines some stereotypes of international students from Asia. He says they are often perceived as rote learners, do not think critically, are passive and will not communicate in class, do not respond to progressive Western teaching methods, focus excessively on assessment, do not understand what plagiarism is, form ethnic enclaves, do not adjust to Australian academe easily, and consider lecturers to be gods (pp. 125-131). Biggs (2003) suggests that whilst some of these stereotypes are supported by evidence, others are also features of the local students and others, still, 'are simply wrong' (p. 125).



Figure 2. The 'typical' Australian male (Mezger 1992, p. 22)

According to Ballard and Clanchy (1997), stereotyping indicates inflexible thinking. Instead, lecturers (and students) needed to recognise that 'each is an individual within a different cultural setting' (p. 6). Khalidi (1997) says that general descriptions of a culture cannot account for the diversity of individuals within that culture, due to the way that factors such as 'age, education, socio-economic class, religion, gender and personal experiences would influence a person's values and behaviour' (p. i). Kenyon and Amrapala (1991) suggest that international students prefer to be treated as unique individuals in their own right, with their own personalities, interests, and abilities (p. 4). Race (2001) encourages lecturers to avoid making assumptions based on gender, age, ethnic group, and perceived social status (p. 167). Mezger (1992) states that using stereotypes increases the likelihood of going 'back to the square one (sic) of misunderstanding, resentment, frustration, or retreat and further stereotyping' (p. 23). International students, she suggests, have their own personalities, past experiences, needs, and desires. In addition, they also might well be operating outside their own cultural framework (Mezger 1992, p. 23). This last point is particularly important and relates to the caveat clause suggested in the previous section should a lecturer choose to use an essentialist cultural theory to better understand the behaviour of particular international students.

Another danger associated with stereotypical views based on the key differences between countries is that intentionally or not, some Australian lecturers may take the descriptions of educational approaches in high PDI and low Individualistic countries (for example, Malaysia) to suggest that these cultures are coming into Western academe from an educational background that is not only different, but somehow deficient and perhaps even inferior. This 'negative' (p. 53) view, according to Doherty and Singh (2005), is prevalent in higher education in Western countries. As put by Nandy (2000), in general, being non-Western is synonymous with being economically, culturally, and educationally underdeveloped (p. 115). Regarding culture and education,

McInerney and McInerney (2002) say that the commonly-held view in Australia and New Zealand is that students from cultures which are more collectivist or group-oriented are poorly suited to Western-style education (p. 297). Clearly, however, the view of Asian students and education in Asian countries as substandard is unsupported in the teaching and learning literature, particularly through the ground-breaking, Asian-situated work of Biggs (1996) and Watkins (1996, 1998). Their view is best summed up as follows: although the approach is different, the educational outcomes are sound. This 'reverse of the stereotype' also holds true of the Australian setting. Whilst it might be thought that Australian higher education follows the 'student-centred' educational approach that is said to be characteristically found in low PDI and high Individualistic countries, Watkins (1998) and Biggs (2003) note that research has established that, in practice, much of the teaching at university in countries such as Australia and the United States is more about lecturers being knowledgeable about their subject and imparting this knowledge to their students in a teacher-directed fashion. It is ironic that this teacher-centred approach remains a feature of Western education, despite its tendency, according to Kember (1998), 'to depress the use of a deep approach to learning' (p. 18). The commonly-held view is that teaching at Western universities proceeds in an altogether different way, as suggested by the Hofstedian essentialist framework.

The strong message in this section is that whilst cultural theory may be useful for helping lecturers to better understand how culture broadly impacts on the workings of the international classroom, it is perhaps just as (or even more) important for lecturers to adopt an attitude of acceptance of cultural difference and develop the knowledge and skills to respond appropriately to the surprising conundrums that intercultural opportunities frequently provide. This is expressed well by Cope and Kalantzis (1997) who state that

instead of working according to neat formulas or stereotypical visions of the norm, we need to be open to unpredictability. We need to have the skills to read the complexity of the differences we encounter as the product of life history – this person's culture as the accumulated and interrelated experience of a number of particular contexts. Then we will discover that the amount and significance of internal difference within countries will be greater than the average differences between countries. We will also discover that culture is dynamic. It is not a relatively fixed set of country attributes. Culture is a complex set of alternatives. It is a matter of change, creation, hybrid recreation, and responsibility (Cope & Kalantzis 1997, p. 258)

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the strengths and limitations of using essentialist cultural theory to understand international students. The fundamental characteristics of this theoretical approach have been made clear through a presentation of Hofstede's (2001) theory of cultural dimensions. Whilst it has been shown that there are limitations associated with essentialist cultural theory, it is likely that a model such as that developed by Hofstede (2001) will continue to be attractive to lecturers who are interested in knowing something about the role of culture in the classroom and what implications this might have for their teaching. This is due to its accessible conceptual framework and ease of application to day-to-day intercultural encounters. It has been shown how lecturers can use such cultural theory to reflect their past, current and future interactions with international students by contrasting and comparing countries' index scores on the various cultural dimensions and then noting the sorts of social dispositions that are suggested by these scores. Indeed, the process of reflection, as well as exposure to ideas about how other cultures may approach education and educative tasks, is perhaps the key outcome that lecturers should be aiming for through their engagement with essentialist cultural theory. It is vitally important to note that essentialist cultural theory should not be used to try to understand or explain the behaviour of individual students in the classroom. Even Hofstede (2001) stresses this point. Instead, it is critical for teaching staff to be open-minded and perhaps not only know something of the cultures of their students but also, where practicable, *get to know* individual students and move beyond likely stereotypical views. This would seem to be a reasonable expectation of any student-centred teaching and learning environment.

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Appendix 1

Hofstede (2001) outlined five common criticisms of his work and responded to each one (see Table 5).

Table 5. Common criticisms of Hofstede's work (Hofstede 2001, p. 73)

Criticism	Hofstede's response
Surveys are not a suitable way of measuring cultural differences	They should not be the only way
Nations are not the best units for studying cultures	True, but they are usually the only kinds of units available for comparison, and they are better than nothing
A study of the subsidiaries of one company cannot provide information about entire national cultures	What were measured were differences between national cultures. Any set of functionally equivalent samples from national populations can supply information about such differences ... The extensive validation ... show[s] that the country scores obtained correlated highly with all other kinds of data
The IBM data are old and therefore obsolete	The dimensions found are assumed to have centuries-old roots; only data that remained stable across two subsequent surveys were maintained, and they have since been validated against all kinds of external measurements; and recent replications show no loss of validity
Four or five dimensions are not enough	Additional dimensions should be both conceptually and statistically independent from the five dimensions already defined and should be validated by significant correlations with conceptually related external measures; candidates are welcome to apply

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