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CULTURE DIFFERENCES AND TRUST

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Abstract

In this paper it is suggested that cultural differences are important to understand how social trust is produced in a different way, considering mainly the dimensions of national culture designated power distance and individualism. It is shown how evidence suggests different types of impact resulting from the association between social trust and these dimensions of national culture and how the production of trust is also associated with social inequalities that are also a characteristic of these same dimensions.

Keywords: Individualism, Inequality, Power Distance, Similarity, Trust

1 – Problem framework: Culture as a context for the production of trust

Trust is always produced in a certain context and cannot be disconnected from people's behaviors. If uncertainty and threats prevail in a given context, people have the feeling that they do not control events at all and feel helpless, mistrust will be the smartest behavior in these situations.

In addition, there are other factors at a macro level that must be understood even if they are not able to be managed by individuals. I refer here to "Culture" in its broad sense and as a collective phenomenon. Therefore, it is important to perceive the macro characteristics of a given context, since this can predispose individuals to be more or less confident. What is culture and how does it affect the production of trust in the citizens of a country?

Culture has at least two key features, namely:

1.º) It is a code that acts as a mental software, composed of information that individuals acquire by learning, imitation, association and other forms of social learning. Once acquired this information is constituted as a 'system of thought and action';

2.º) It is part of the human biology, because the individual himself is an 'evolutionary program' born with a certain 'openness' in his program¹, openness that tools him up to acquire culture and without which it does not develop;

Everything we learn, think, remember and feel is shaped by the "modular" architecture of our mind and by the evolutionary psychological mechanisms (EPM) that support and function unconsciously. They are the operating system and the basis of all constructions and cultural representations. Therefore, there's no nature-nurture conflict because we are programmed to acquire culture!

These aggregate mechanisms, despite the differences, are reflections of the behavior we have carried hundreds of thousands of years ago and we continue to transport them because, overall, they have been effective and helped our survival. Moreover, the so-called "dimensions" of the different cultural models of some authors that I briefly analyse in my 2018 book "Globalization and Cultural Differences" (Portuguese edition, *Op. Cit.*) always end up, despite the emphasis on variations, referring to universal problems of human societies.

¹ Mayr, E. (2001). What evolution is. New York: Basic books.

It is precisely because these problems are universal that become comparable and we can study scientifically the different ways in which each human communities deal with them and seek to solve them (from the emotional acceptance of inequality, to the 'I versus 'we", through competition versus cooperation, to the need for control of uncertainty, time guidance and control of natural impulses).

Accordingly, all cultures have developed norms and rules (whether formal and informal) governing behaviors and their processes of social exchange, and their non-compliance is often treated as a moral transgression. That is why there are institutionalized means of controlling and punishing transgressions in all cultures.

In addition to moral norms, other types of cultural norms may also reflect evolutionary trends in the integration of certain patterns of thought and action. Such case happens with the role of beliefs on the 'in-group' and the 'out-group' (or us versus them, present in all human societies), in the creation and maintenance of cultural identities and in the development of the so-called 'collectivist values' they live, at a deep level in what I have already called "social tribal instinct".

Various evidences and studies suggest that in countries with markedly more "collectivist" values, the behavior is, in principle, warmer in the interaction with members of the group itself, but more suspicious and distant with elements of the out-group.

The 6 dimensions of the Hofstede model are very useful for its scientific validation, repeatedly confirmed, and because they help us to better understand the differences and similarities in everyday life, its consequences for trust, leadership and communication, and above all, how we can make the best of it. After all, whether we like it or not, human beings are the same everywhere, but cultures, no! That's what we'll see next.

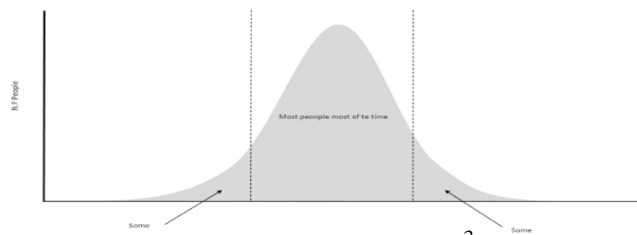
2. Culture as a mental program and the production of trust

The social scientist Geert Hofstede proposes and defines culture from a *national* perspective as being "a *collective mental program of the human mind that characterizes and distinguishes one group or category from another*". In other words, culture is understood as a system of patterns and meanings about how to think, feel and act on common existential problems. These problems are how to deal: 1). with inequality; 2) with the dependence on others; 3) how emotions are associated with gender roles; (4) the need to control uncertainty; 5) The short-versus long-term perspective and 6) the need of control natural drives or impulses.

In its proposal, the national culture, seen as a *software*, is composed of 'layers'. At its core are the values, understood as 'general preferences for one state of affairs in relation to another, to which very strong² emotions and feelings are associated'. The first three layers consist of symbols, heroes and rituals and are the most permeable to change and the most visible. The latter (values) is not visible mainly to a foreigner. The dimensions, which are analytical constructions, reveal the meaning (loud or low) and intensity (strong or weak) in the way societies solve the six existential problems listed above. This is where the variations in values arise in the understanding of G. Hofstede (see next figure).

² In fact, they are so strong that there are people who beat and give their lives for them.

Figure N. ° 1
National Culture as a central tendency

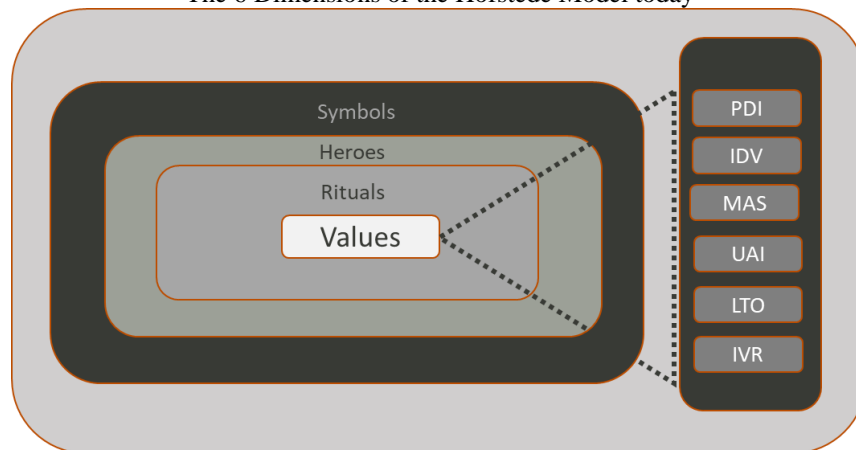


Source: Author adaptation*³

The model based on the seminal study known as the "IBM Study" has since been reinforced by other investigations, using the same dimensions⁴. The underlying idea is that when we compare the distribution of values between populations the rule of large numbers allow us to find a central trend (*where people are mostly most of the time*) that can be opposed to the other.

Fig. N. ° 2

The 6 Dimensions of the Hofstede Model today



Source: Author adaptation from Hofstede, 2010

This model allows to anticipate some behaviors as more likely (because statistically predictable), from the comparison of central trends between national cultures. Let us look further at the two dimensions that promote or hamper the context of the production of trust in interpersonal relationships and not only and how they correlate with each other.

2.1 Trust and power distance

The first dimension of the model is identified internationally by the acronym PDI, meaning, *Power Distance Index*. It translates the problem of acceptance and of the emotional expectation of inequality and assumes that all societies are unequal in the distribution of power, but some are more unequal than others. Thus, it is possible to find on a scale of 0 to 100, the tendency towards a greater or lesser 'distance to power' from which certain typical consequences result for this and other dimensions in the main spheres of social life (family, school and work).

³ Based on Hofstede, 2010. Op. Cit.

⁴ Hofstede, G.; Hofstede G. J. & Minkov, M (2010) Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values, Beverly Hills CA: Sage Publications.

In low PDI societies, hierarchy is perceived like an inequality of roles established primarily for convenience. Here individuals relate to each other as equals, regardless of the titles or professional designations of jobs. Subordinates expect to be consulted in the face of decisions to be made and they can easily address concerns directly to the top management and are not afraid to criticize managers who are generally affordable.

At the opposite end of the index we have societies with high IPD, where hierarchy in organizations reflects existential inequalities. Centralization of decisions is encouraged, individuals relate to each other as different, depending on the titles or professional designations of jobs and do not feel comfortable criticizing managers who are often inaccessible. In this cultural environment, subordinates expect directives on what they should do and tend to do what they know the boss will check.

Characteristics of Trust in Low PDI Cultures

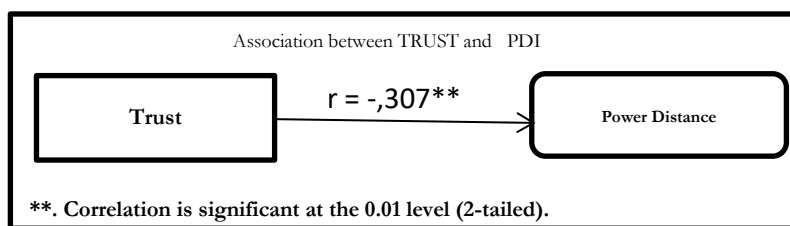
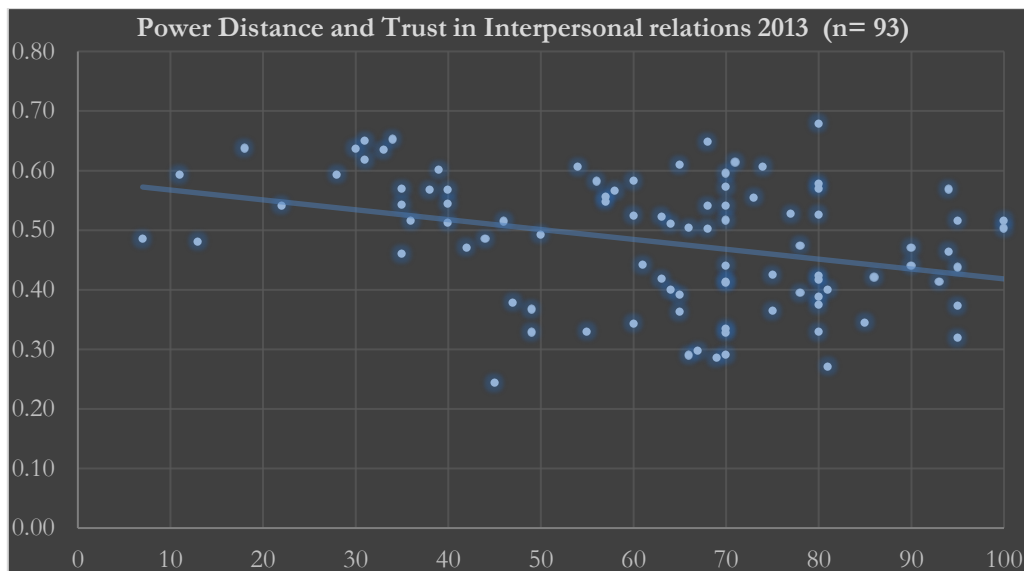
1. In principle, power holders have the same feeling about subordinates as they have about people with power; They're people like you and me and they must treat themselves as equals.
2. As a result, people in these cultures feel less threatened and are more willing to trust people;
3. There is more harmony between people with power and others. Here, the saying "no news is good news" applies more easily because communication between the various echelons in society and organizations flows more easily in every way, including information or critical feedback "upwards".

➤ Characteristics of Trust in High PDI Cultures

1. Generally, power holders tend to regard subordinates as "another type" of people and want to be treated with all respect. They look at other people as a potential threat to their power and social positions;
2. Subordinates consider the superiors to be "another type" of people and with potential mistrust;
3. There tends to be a latent conflict between people with power and others due to lack of basic trust. The popular saying, "no news is good news" is less applicable in a cultural context of high PDI given the underlying mistrust and difficulty in sending "bad news" or providing negative feedback "up";

Research suggests that social or interpersonal trust is also negatively associated with this cultural value (PDI), as it can be seen by the graph of Figure 3. This means that the higher the rate of emotional distance to power, the higher the level of implicit mistrust in social relations and trust in others in general.

Figure 3
➤ **Association between PDI and Social Trust for 93 countries**



Source: Author research(www.academia.edu)

2.2. Trust and individualism versus collectivism

Another common human problem is the dependence on others. This dimension expresses the degree of interdependence of individuals in a society and has a profound impact on the level of relationship and the form of communication between individuals, their greater or lesser orientation to the task or relationship and propensity for a conception of others from a universalist perspective or, on the contrary, an exclusionary.

In individualistic cultures openness, assertiveness and frontality in relationships is considered a virtue and the task is the priority hence the importance of punctuality. The relationship "we/them" is more blurred resulting in weaker categorization. On the contrary, in the most "collectivist" countries there is greater concern for the relationship, harmony in the group, preference in treatment and greater confidence for those who are part of the 'circle of trust' and even a more indirect communication that values the act of "saving the face" of others and of one's own.

These cultures are more "exclusionist" because *they exclude* from the preferential treatment circle all others, which translates into many seemingly "individualistic" behavior in the eyes of common sense and therefore referred to as "selfish".

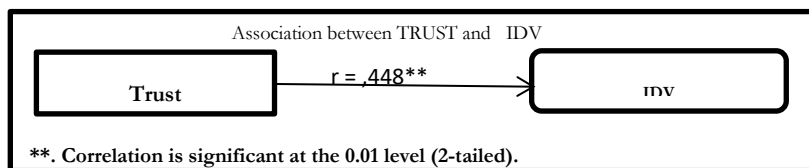
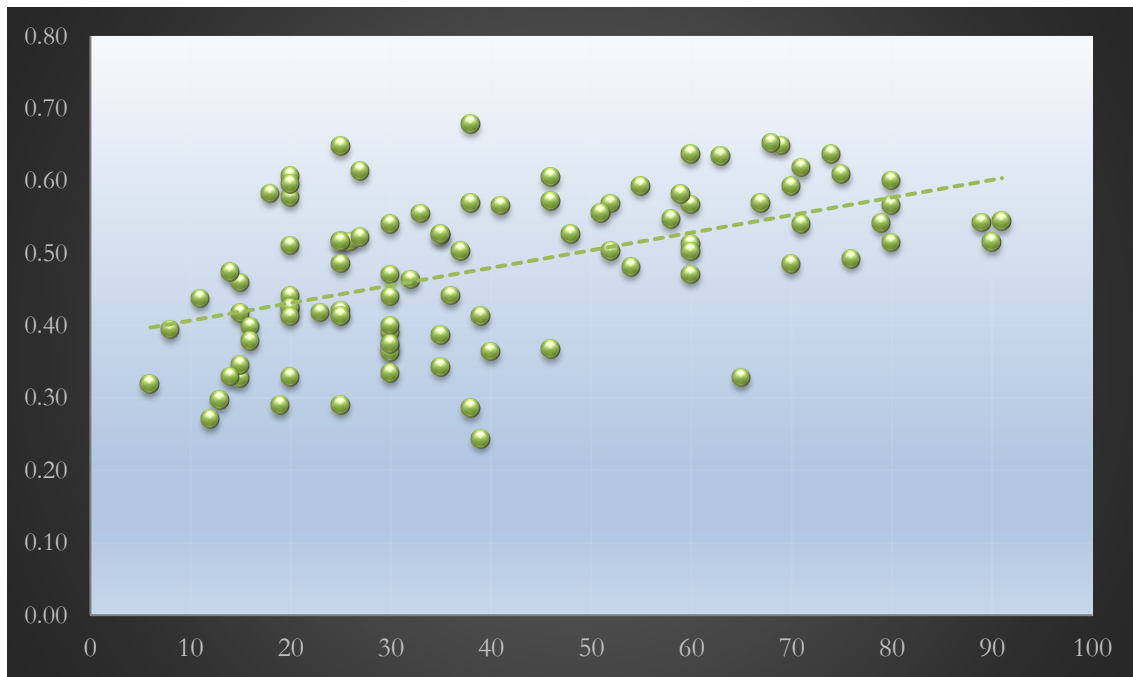
Characteristics of Trust in High IDV cultures

1. In more individualist cultures, people start from the idea that values are applicable to everyone. It's called Universalism.
2. Individuals are, in principle, worthy of trust.

Characteristics of Trust in Low IDV cultures

1. In more collectivistic cultures, the norm is particularism: the core of values is only applicable to group members. Other rules apply to outsiders.
2. Trust in individuals tend to depend on their group of belonging.⁵

Figure 4
Individualism and Trust in Interpersonal Relations – 2013 (n= 94 countries)



Source: Author research based in Hofstede, 2010 & Rotterdam University data (2016)

The culture itself is a construction, therefore, they are collective preferences or values. It makes no sense to ask how many dimensions of culture there are because it will be like asking how many types of cloud there are: it is a matter of definition and practical meaning should be the main criterion.

The dimensions of the Hofstede model do not directly predict any specific phenomenon. To be applied in order to make sense in what happens in the world, one must always consider factors other than culture, namely national wealth, the history of the country,

⁵ To know more about this please check the work Huib Wursten. The 7 Mental Images. Op. Cit.

the personalities of the people with whom one interacts and even simple coincidences and chances. There is no quick solution to comprehend social life after understanding this model.

However, the dimensions and the model when well understood allow to predict a little better what is "more likely" to happen.

On the other hand, they become more useful as they move from specific cases to central trends (where most people are most of the time), averages or expectations. For example, knowing about a specific culture will hardly help predict what type of car someone will acquire, but the trend among compatriots to acquire certain types of cars in the coming years may reasonably be well predicted. Above all this model helps to ascertain our cultural sensitivity as a daily part of our lives.

Conclusion

Culture differences matter when we talk about the context of trust. However, there are also other important issues to consider beyond culture differences.

Other authors have shown that trust is also related to economic and income inequality in societies (Uslaner, 2002, 2006). In countries with large income inequalities, it is more difficult to develop and maintain links between those at the top and those at the bottom of the income scale. In these scenarios, it is difficult to build bridges across social groups because it is unlikely that individuals across different social strata will share a sense of purpose or common goals and, therefore, trust one another. In fact, several researchers have shown the relationship between trust, income and economic inequality, as one of the best "predictors" of the level of interpersonal trust in a society (Knack & Keefer, 1997; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; Wilkinson, 2009). As we know, generally speaking, high IDV cultures and Low PDI cultures tend to be more rich with less social inequalities.

Further research, using various statistical techniques, suggests that it is inequality that affects the level of trust and not vice-versa, that trust impacts the level of inequality (Bartolini, 2003; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; Wilkinson, 2008). This is important because it establishes the direction of causality. Moreover, this indicates that what is responsible for increasing the level of trust in a country is not so much the economic level of well-being *per se*, but rather the level of economic equality perceived among the individuals in that same country.

Therefore, if we want to build societies where people trust more, we also must produce more equal societies.

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