Work Perceptions Among Hong Kong and United States I/S Workers: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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Hong Kong and United States information systems (I/S) workers’ perceptions of work are analyzed according to Hofstede’s cultural paradigm. More specifically, the theoretical emphasis of this research is a test of the cultural divergence hypothesis as it relates to the individualism/collectivism dimension of Hofstede’s analysis. Further, smallest space analysis, a multidimensional scaling technique, is used to assess the differences between the two cultures. The hypothesized differences between the two cultures is partially supported; Hong Kong and United States I/S workers differ along the individualism/collectivism dimension of Hofstede’s paradigm, but not in the manner initially thought. Implications of these findings for both I/S professionals and end-users are discussed.

The literature concerning cultural convergence and divergence is inconclusive. Supporters of the convergence hypothesis claim that, due to influences such as technology and global industrialization, cultures have a tendency to become similar; others who support the divergence hypothesis, hold that conformity to global pressures do not necessarily suppress unique cultural values and practices (Hofstede, 1980; Jaeger, 1986; Kelly, Whatley & Worthley, 1987). In an attempt to reconcile these conflicting perspectives, Child (1981) proposed a synthesis stating that cultural convergence was more likely to be found at the macro level of analysis (structure), whereas cultural divergence was more likely to be found at the micro level of analysis (practice). In spite of this explanation (and others), the debate continues and remains unsettled (Ricks, Toyne and Martinez, 1990).

The fact that the cultural similarity/dissimilarity hypothesis is unresolved is not to say that the issue is not important to leaders of multinational and global organizations. If they assume incorrectly that either cultural diversity or cultural similarity exists, the consequences of policies and practices built upon these assumptions can be problematic at best and disastrous at worst in an increasingly competitive global environment. Moreover, these real or perceived understandings of cultural preferences and practices can affect decisions concerning organization and job design (e.g., Beise, Niederman, and Beranek, 1992; Daft and Lengel, 1986; Daft, Lengel, and Trevino, 1987), team composition (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Hofstede, 1980) socialization practices (e.g., Jones, 1986; VanMaanen and Schein, 1979), careers and international assignments of expatriate managers (Mendenhall, Dunbar, and Oddou, 1987; Tung, 1987), and training in general (e.g., Early, 1987). Furthermore, the human resource issues listed above may be partly influenced by the role preferences and perceptions of job incumbents (see Louis, 1980; Nicholson, 1984).

If the work preferences and perceptions among non-Americans do not differ markedly from their counterparts in the United States, then it is reasonable to assume that American human resource theories might be operative abroad; but if role preferences and perceptions do differ, then one would expect that some reformulation or even rejection of these American theories would be indicated (Hofstede, 1980). In
light of this, additional basic research is needed concerning the role preferences and perceptions of managers and business professionals from many cultures in order to extend cross-cultural theory development and to facilitate effective cross-cultural management development for these professionals. In particular, cross-cultural research is needed in the information systems (I/S) field, both for I/S professionals and end users (see Couger and Zawacki, 1980; Ferrett and Short, 1991; Meyers, 1991).

Further, although I/S work may be conceptually similar across cultures, i.e., the macro level of analysis, suggesting cultural convergence, the same technology does not always overcome distinct cultural beliefs and practices at the micro level, i.e., cultural divergence. Systems theory incorporates these potentially conflicting views with the concept of equifinality (Kast and Rosenzweig, 1972; Miller, 1965).

Equifinality is a systems concept which holds that a common goal can be reached through a multiplicity of means. A concern for management, therefore, is knowing the degree of equifinality inherent in a system in order that decisions will be consistent with cultural practices. Unfortunately, denial of system equifinality may result in management assuming that disagreement over means is also disagreement over ends. For this reason, research on cultural differences is necessary.

Micro- and macro-level comparisons of countries in terms of their work values, goals, and attitudes have been the focus of numerous organizational and management studies (Birnbaum, Farh, and Wong, 1986; Hofstede, 1980; Ralston, Gustafson, Elsass, Cheung, and Terpstra, 1992; Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, and Terpstra, 1993). However, missing in this literature are cross-cultural studies which use the I/S field as a focus of attention and which are strongly based in theory (e.g., Mawhinney, Lederer, and du Toit, 1992). Thus a need exists for research to address the convergence/divergence debate described above among individuals working in the I/S field. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe a recently completed research project which assessed the perceptions of work among I/S workers from two countries. Specifically, the research investigated the work perceptions among Hong Kong and United States I/S workers using Hofstede’s (1980) cultural paradigm as the conceptual guide. Although most of the I/S workers included in this study are more like I/S professionals than I/S end users, it is still felt that the research findings reported here should be useful for both domains.

Theoretical Basis of the Research

Hofstede (1980), in one of the largest social science research projects to date, addressed the issue of cultural diversity and its influence on work-related values and attitudes. Of special interest to the I/S field is the sampling basis of his research of IBM employees in over 60 countries. Although other conceptual frameworks exist to assess cultural values, the Hofstede paradigm appears to influence much of the current cross-cultural organizational research. Hofstede, a proponent of the divergence cultural view, defined culture as the “collective mental programming of people in an environment” (p. 42) that can be identified by four factors: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. Subsequent research demonstrated a fifth factor: time orientation (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). However, in Hofstede’s (1980) research, the power distance and individual collectivism factors explained most of the variance he found in cultural differences.

Power Distance

According to Hofstede (1980), the power distance factor is concerned with the distribution of power throughout a society. Societies that concentrate power in an elite class prefer a large social distance between this elite group and others. In such a society, inequality is not thought of as something that should be minimized; rather inequality is accepted as necessary and inherently right for proper individual and social functioning. In contrast, low-power-distance societies seek to minimize power differentials and are tolerant of status differences, not because of an inherent right of the higher-power member, but because the differential is convenient for societal and organizational functioning. Thus, both types of societies may result in similar outcomes, but for very different reasons.

Although Hong Kong is considered to be a high-power-distance culture and the United States, a low-power-distance culture, neither are at the extreme ends of the scale. In fact, both could be considered as having moderate-power-distance cultures, but with different tendencies. However, whereas the United States and Hong Kong do not differ appreciatively on the power-distance dimension, the two cultures do differ significantly on the individualism/collectivism dimension.

Individualism/Collectivism

The second factor that explains most of the variance in cultural differences, individualism/collectivism, concerns the primary emphasis placed on group and individual interests. Cultures which stress collectivism place greater emphasis on in-groups and out-groups; that is, emphasis is placed on the desire to provide and protect (and to be provided for and protected by) a primary-care group (in-group: family, work group) from possible threats from out-groups (e.g., other than primary groups). In exchange for this protection, the individual conforms to the in-group expectations and puts its interest above his or her own. Although collectivist cultures emphasize stability and group membership, secondary social control, and a “we-ness,” there is also a need among individuals to be held in esteem by their group members (Hofstede, 1980; Trice and Beyer, 1993).

Individualistic cultures, on the other hand, do not stress conformity to the degree that an individual would place the interest of others above self-interest. In individualistic cultures, individuals may still conform to a primary group, but this conforming behavior is usually for some personal advantage. But when conforming behavior does not facilitate personal gain, another in-group (e.g., organization,
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