

Chapter 2

Culture

Culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values.

Source: C. Kluckhohn (1951: 86).

... the effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me.

Source: T. E. Lawrence (1926/7, 1997: 14)

1. Introduction

An interesting feature of Kluckhohn's definition of culture above is that it was originally written to define "culture" broadly, i.e., beyond work itself. Despite that wider, societal ambit however, the definition is often cited in narrower, occupational circles (e.g., Aycan & Kanungo, 2001: 390). Evidently, Kluckhohn's definition of culture captures what for many scholars is an essence of culture, whenever it is found and wherever its influences manage to extend. In that sense, it provides us with a working definition of culture with which to begin this chapter.

A further interesting feature of Kluckhohn's definition is that it excludes organizational climate. In this chapter too, culture is differentiated from climate, which consists more of atmospheric factors such as aggression, motivation, or trust (Moran & Volkwein, 1992). Climate factors such as these are discussed in detail later in the book, firstly under motivational gravity (Chapter 3), then as double demotivation (Chapter 4) and broken promises (Chapter 5), and, finally, as inverse resonance (Chapter 6). Underlying each of these climate-related processes, however, is the presence and influence of culture. Culture, therefore, comprises the underlying values and assumptions held, made, and above all lived on a daily basis within any work group (Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson, 2000).

Our definition of culture, as Kluckhohn's definition implies it should, also spans multiple levels. Those levels range from country-level analyses of societal cultures; within-country individual differences in those values (usually in fact either within a single country or across a pair of countries); to organizational cultures. Organizational cultures include various sub-cultures, from departments within the organization to the micro-cultures of workplace teams. Organizational cultures also embody and intersect with cultures of occupations, for example amongst a company's in-house or out-sourced engineers and accountants. Many of us will recognize these various levels of identification. We regularly don them, and inhabit them, each in turn, over the course of a working day. Logically therefore, and as the quotation from Lawrence above presages, a key challenge in studying culture at work

is to develop theories about how different forms of cultural identity transit from one kind of identification to the next.

One of the key lenses for understanding cultural transitions like the above is glocalization. For example, *occupational values* (and norms that are relatively global) may take precedence during disputes about industrial safety; whereas *societal identity* (a more localized form of positioning) will come to the fore when a group of foreign expatriates arrive, “overpaid and over here,” to work on our employer’s latest international project. It is therefore disappointing that much of the literature on culture at work has ignored this kind of fluidity and plurality. Instead, the study of culture at work has been largely a-theoretical (Aycan & Kanungo, 2001). Specifically, the literature has concentrated on building models of measurement only. These models have focused on describing in detail the n-dimensionality of cultural space at one kind of level; and on the content of those (proposed) dimensions, principally in terms of espoused values. It is fitting, therefore, that we begin our journey through work and culture with an overview of the foremost models for measuring cultural values at work.

2. Country-level Studies

The glue that both binds country-level studies together, and, in addition, helps to set them apart, is that they each treat one country (and sometimes region) as one research “participant.” Scores for questionnaire items, normally focused on work-relevant values, are averaged for each country (or region) participating in the survey. In most studies, each country’s participants then effectively become one line of data in an exploratory factor analysis, of the country-level responses on a questionnaire. Although a reasonable descriptive term for this kind of approach generally would be *inter-national*, the approach has actually become known, in the literature, as *ecological*. The context for coining this term *ecological* was the influential study of work culture at IBM worldwide (Hofstede, 1980; for a recent restatement and overview, Hofstede, Triandis, Smith, Bond, Fu & Pasa, 2001; for a more critical point of view, again focused largely on measurement, Spector & Cooper, 2002).

2.1. Hofstede’s IBM study

The original 1980 publication of this study has recently been revised (in Hofstede, 2001) and thereby gone on, reportedly, to become a most cited work in the social sciences (Yoo & Donthu, 2002). Many readers will know the details of Hofstede’s work itself, which was an organizational survey of 40 (and later 50) countries, represented by over 100,000 employees of a single multinational company, IBM. The core result to emerge from this survey was a four-dimensional mapping of ecological culture space, into individualism–collectivism; power distance (belief in hierarchy and keeping social distance between strata); uncertainty–avoidance (desire for the security and certainty of rules); and – most contentiously – “masculinity–femininity.” The latter, according to Hofstede, reflects the degree to which “male” values (supposedly emphasizing “assertiveness” and “acquisitiveness”) tend to prevail in a society over their “softer” and supposedly, also, more “feminine” counterparts (e.g. the stressing of “interpersonal relations”, and “companionship”).