

The Nationality of Theories

Geert Hofstede
(hofstede@bart.nl)

Mark F. Peterson
(mpeterso@fau.edu)

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Opening by Geert Hofstede

The suggestion that theories have a nationality will not shock participants in a conference of Cross-Cultural Psychology. To many other social scientists, this suggestion is weird, to some even taboo. They believe there can only be one true theory and this is the one they have learned. Our original title was “the nationality of *psychological* theories”, but in preparing we broadened our subject to “the nationality of theories”, as it became clear to us that discipline borders differ across countries, and theories cross these borders.

Practising what we preach, we introduced our subject in a cross-national dialogue. I was born, raised and educated in Europe, in the Netherlands. Mark Peterson was born, raised and educated in the USA. Both of us afterwards drifted around the world. This article separately summarizes my and his view about the role of nationality in theories, with a joint conclusion. Respecting my seniority, Mark lets me start. I joined the IACCP at the 3rd conference in 1976, 38 years ago.

National theories and national cultures

Academic theories are human artefacts: they were conceived and written by people born, raised and educated in a particular environment. As such, they are products of a culture in the sense of the (1) collective (2) programming of the mind (3) distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another. In the natural sciences, the most relevant cultural category is other scientists having studied the same natural phenomena. In the social sciences, the predominant category is the national society in which the theorists grew up, including its language and historical context. Their theories are being taught by other people, usually sharing part of the theorist’s background.

When joining IACCP, I was a part-time Professor of Organizational Behavior at INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France, at that time the prime European business school. In 1975 we organized a seminar on “European Contributions to Organization Theory”, mobilizing seventeen influential authors from eleven European countries.¹ One objective of the

¹Alain Cotta and Michel Crozier from France, Franco Ferraresi and Giovanni Gasparini from Italy,

seminar was illustrating the originality of organization theories at our side of the Atlantic, including the European roots of many theories taught in US business schools. The discussions during the seminar as well as the chapters in the book published after the seminar (Hofstede and Kassem, Eds., 1976), illustrated the broad variety of theories *among* European nations as well.

To us as an INSEAD faculty, this variety was a daily experience. For example, our teaching languages were both English and French, and as a speaker of both I sometimes taught the same case study in one language in the morning, in the other in the afternoon. Although both classes were internationally mixed, the discussions differed strikingly: intellectually stimulating in the French class, more pragmatic (“so what?”) in the English one. All participants were supposed to prepare themselves by reading the same material, originating from either language, translated one way or the other. Comments on the translated versions were often critical and strikingly similar: too many words, not enough message. The reader’s background made the difference between words and message.

Besides teaching at INSEAD, I was a researcher at the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management in Brussels, Belgium, working for six years on a book. From my previous employer IBM I had inherited a treasure of paper-and-pencil scores on work values, collected from carefully matched samples of employees across 40 nations. Struggling with this data base of more than 100,000 questionnaires, I gradually learned to do multivariate analyses on country means rather than on scores from individuals, shifting my interest unintentionally from personnel psychology into social anthropology, from personal values into national cultures. One by one, the analyses revealed four “ecological” dimensions of national cultures, which later on I discovered to have been predicted in an earlier literature review on “national character” (Inkeles and Levinson, 1954/1967). Choosing labels used in related contexts before, I called them Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism and Masculinity versus Femininity. The next step was validating the country scores on these dimensions by correlating them with country-level data from other sources. All of these also clearly influenced the theories generated and supported in a country; for example, Uncertainty Avoidance stimulated the need for broad concepts, and Masculinity supported aggressive polemics. Thanks to IACCP my approach had drawn the attention of Walt Lonner and John Berry, who at that time were editing a new series on “Cross-Cultural Research and Methodology” for Sage Publications, California, and Sage’s publisher and president Sara Miller McCune dared to publish my book and invented the title “Culture’s Consequences” (Hofstede, 1980a).

Jermen Gvishiani and Gavriil Popov from U.S.S.R., Gunnar Hjelholt from Denmark, Cornelis Lambers and Mauk Mulder from the Netherlands, Niklas Luhmann and Renate Mayntz from Germany, Eric Miller and Derek Pugh from U.K., Tadeusz Pszczolowski from Poland, Eugen Pusic from Yugoslavia, Dick Ramström from Sweden and Einar Thorsrud from Norway.

What about the nationality of my own theory? Having grown up in pre-World War II Netherlands I learned at school to read literature in French, German and English (in this order). Working on the international staff of IBM had exposed me to American organizational behavior literature. Teaching in Fontainebleau and doing research in Brussels, where we lived as a family with our children in French speaking schools, inspired me with a French intellectual tradition in which truths can be relative: I discovered Michel de Montaigne: *Quelle vérité est ce que ces montagnes bornent, mensonge au monde qui se tient au delà?* (What kind of a truth is this that stops at these mountains and is falsehood to the world on the other side? *Essais*, livre II, 1580). It has become better known in a re-formulation by Blaise Pascal *Vérité en-deça des Pyrénées, erreur au-delà* (There are truths on this side of the Pyrénées which are falsehoods on the other side, *Pensées*, 1669). I read Montesquieu in *De l'esprit des lois* (The Spirit of the Laws, 1748) and Frédéric le Play in *Les ouvriers européens* (Field research on the conditions of workers in different European countries, 1855). When at the family dinner table I told about my discovery of a dimension “power distance“, our *lycée* son referred me to one of his school readings: Étienne de la Boétie’s *Discours de la servitude volontaire* (Treatise on Voluntary Subservience), written in 1549 when the author was 18.

In 1980, the editor of the U.S. journal “Organizational Dynamics”, in which I had published before, asked me for a summary article about my forthcoming book. As a title I chose: “Motivation, Leadership and Organization: Do American Theories Apply Abroad?”. While the article was in press, the editor suddenly died from a heart attack. His successor, a prominent US management professor, then refused to publish my article. My question had hit upon a taboo. When I stressed that his predecessor had invited and accepted the manuscript, the new editor reluctantly published it (Hofstede, 1980b), at the condition that it would be followed in the next issue by critical comments from a US and an Australian colleague.

“Culture’s Consequences” took some years to be recognized and read; it attracted both scathing and enthusiastic comments; serious reviews tended to be positive, and in the 1996 International Congress of Psychology in Montreal one session was devoted to “The Consequences of Culture’s Consequences”. My “ecological” dimensions approach had unexpectedly become a leading *paradigm* in the comparison of cultures, in the sense of “a model from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research” (Kuhn, 1962/1970). According to Kuhn, new paradigms initially meet fierce rejection, later become new normal science. Examples of major post-1980 studies of national cultures using the new *paradigm* are Schwartz (1994) and GLOBE (House *et al.*, 2004).

Right after the appearance of the book, at the 5th IACCP conference in Bhubaneswar, India, December 1980, I was asked to be a discussant for a paper presented by Michael Harris Bond comparing answers to the Rokeach Value Survey from students in nine countries. The authors had analysed their data at the individual level, and I suggest-

ed they should do so at the ecological level. When Bond broadmindedly accepted this suggestion, he found four ecological dimensions each significantly correlated with one of mine. Pleased with the similarity in our findings we published a joint article in the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology (Hofstede and Bond, 1984) – but realizing the potential effect of culture, we also wondered to what extent our similar results in fact reflected our similar Western researchers’ minds. In order to test this, Bond, based in Hong Kong, with the help of Chinese colleagues designed a “Chinese Values Survey”, and through local colleagues had it administered to student samples in 23 countries around the world. Ecological analysis of the Chinese Values Survey data produced again four dimensions; three of them correlated with my dimensions of Power Distance, Individualism/Collectivism and Masculinity/Femininity. Correlations with Uncertainty Avoidance were missing, but a new dimension appeared which Bond called “Confucian Work Dynamics”. Bond and his data collecting team published the new results in the JCCP (“The Chinese Culture Connection”, 1987). The most important conclusion from this study was that it clearly showed the effect of the researchers’ culture on the outcome. The Chinese Values Survey did not detect the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance, because the relevant questions were not included. My IBM study did not detect the dimension of Confucian Work Dynamics for the same reason. But in both cases, the hidden dimension was just as important for understanding national culture differences between the countries in the study as the other four.

In validating the new dimension, we found it to correlate significantly with economic growth in the past decade. So far we had only found correlations with national wealth, and as far as we knew, nobody had ever found relationships between culture and growth in wealth. We published about this sensational finding (Hofstede and Bond, 1988); I re-baptized the new dimension “Long Term versus Short Term Orientation”, and added it as a fifth to my model (Hofstede, 1991).

In the 1970s when I did my first research on culture, the IBM world-wide employee values survey data base was the largest of its kind in the world. Since that time, various new sources have become available, covering more countries, more questions, wider ranges of respondents, and periodically repeated. The IBM data set was just a beginning; at present our preferred data base is the ongoing World Values Survey (WVS, current), grown from a six-country European Values Survey in 1981. My colleague Michael Minkov (2008) found a reliable proxy for the Chinese Values Survey-based scores of my fifth dimension in 1995-2004 WVS data, allowing us to extend the number of countries for this dimension to more than 90. The same WVS-source provided us with a sixth dimension “Indulgence versus Restraint”, focusing on the gratification of basic and natural human drives as opposed to their suppression and regulation by means of strict social norms (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010).

I follow on to Geert Hofstede's comments by first recognizing that the idea that culture influences the theory that scholars develop is not only intuitive, but has a long history in economics (Veblen, 1898), anthropology (Calverton, 1931), and sociology Weber (1915/1951). Psychologists are not immune to culture's influence either in the topics that they select (Erez, 1994) or how they go about theorizing (Nisbett, Peng, Choi & Norenzayan, 2001). Although differing in its details from Geert's experience, my home culture also has influenced my work as did my early international career experiences. Comparing the experiences of Cuban immigrants in the United States with foreign immigrants in Japan showed just how dramatically a country's culture and institutions can affect newcomers. Later extended collaborations with scholars in the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Estonia, Brazil, and elsewhere attuned me to differences in the audiences that scholars seek to reach with their theory and how they seek to reach them. Extending Nisbett and colleagues' (2001) insights, psychological theory based on a radically isolated subject rather than a subject consisting of an interpretive system of roles, rules and norms (Smith and Peterson, 1988) shows culturally individualistic theorizing.

Cultural theories and cross cultural research groups

Geert discussed how culture shapes a country's scholarship. Also, cultural diversity influences collaboration in research teams (Peterson, 2001). Polanyi's (1958) explains that the scientific process of articulating what scientists tacitly understand is both personal and social. It requires experiencing contrasts that trigger attention followed by careful, intuitively guided analysis. Intercultural collaboration among researchers can produce contrasting views that trigger such attention to aspects of understanding that would otherwise remain tacit (Berry, 1969; Peterson & Pike, 2002). As the process of theorizing continues, intercultural discussion can continuously contrast the emerging theory with diverse tacit understandings. Hence, collaboration among scholars from multiple cultural backgrounds can prolong and refine the process of developing adequate theory (Duquid, 2005). Success, however, is only realized if the dynamics of a cross cultural research group are well managed, without one person or school dictating the approach (Peterson, 2001).

Culture also affects the politics of science beyond the scope of a cross cultural research group. Kuhn (1962/1970) argues that science is not just about supporting incisive, innovative theory with technically sophisticated evidence, but is also a social and political process of gaining adherents. Science is part of an ecological community consisting of groups of scholars who support different, often competing, yet interrelated paradigms (Sterman and Wittenberg, 1999). The international quality of cross cultural work teams has not been included in the analysis of this ecological process. Nevertheless, culturally separated schools of scholarship allow multiple paradigms supported by separate resources and separate groups of scholars to sustain themselves during the same historical period. Cross cultural research teams, then, can bring these culturally

shaped groups into contact.

Funding agencies have long done their best to engineer collaboration among teams of scholars (Pelz & Andrews, 1962), sometimes specifically teams of scholars from different countries. The special interest in funding teams follows from evidence that the most successful major scientific projects are increasingly conducted by teams rather than by individuals (Wuchty, Jones and Uzzi, 2007). As in business, however, social engineering of diversity carries often underappreciated risks. It is frequently attempted based solely on the potential for sharing creative resources without taking care to carefully manage cultural diversity in order to avoid its process costs (Peterson, 2001).

Our Conclusions

As in all areas of social life, the idea that cultural differences in scientific theories will fade away because of globalization is unwarranted. Cultural change and convergence can occur, but many functional and institutional forces make cultural change slow and path-dependent (Kara and Peterson, 2012). Intercultural contact among researchers certainly helps execute complex research projects and can improve theory. Still, research about the dynamics of intercultural teams (Van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007) suggests that it is challenging for them to achieve the same level of creative closure of a creative individual scientist. Consequently, we anticipate that scientific theories will continue to show the marks of the cultural milieus that shape the dominant communities from which they emerge.

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