

CULTURAL VALUES AND BELIEFS FROM AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE ARAB WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Motivating our learners is the theme of this year's ERGA conference and having a better understanding of what engages them from the perspective of their values and beliefs is the focus of this paper. It reports on the 2008 survey findings of 200 Middle Eastern university dental students and the educational implications of their cultural values and beliefs. The research is preliminary and comparative research will be undertaken at the University of Adelaide later in 2008. However the early findings, which have been compared with that of Hofstede (2001), indicate that various factors have an impact on cultural dimensions and educational implications. These include: the extent of education, discipline/occupation, gender, age and socio-economic status of learners.

Introduction

Motivating our learners is the theme of this year's ERGA conference and having a better understanding of what engages them educationally from the perspective of their values and beliefs is the focus of this paper. It considers the 2008 survey findings of 200 Middle Eastern university dental students in order to identify cultural values and beliefs and the educational implications, specifically for online learning design and facilitation. Comparative research with University of Adelaide dental students will be undertaken later in 2008.

Methodology

A Values Survey Module 1994 (VSM94) developed by Hofstede (2001) for comparing culturally determined values of people from two or more countries or regions was distributed to Year 1, 2 and 3 Bachelor of Dental Surgery students at the University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates in 2008. Twenty content questions allow index scores to be calculated on five dimensions of national value systems as components of national cultures: Power Distance (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), and Long-term Orientation (LTO). In addition to the 20 content questions there are 6 demographic questions.

The researcher further developed a survey instrument using the theoretical Community of Inquiry framework developed by Garrison and Anderson (2003) in order to determine the extent of teaching presence required by the Sharjah students in online learning environments, as well as an online student evaluation of an online roleplay simulation that they undertook. A Learning Styles preference survey (VARK) was also undertaken with the Sharjah students. The findings will be compared with those of the Values Survey Module when further research within the University of Adelaide is completed later in 2008.

This paper concentrates on cultural dimensions and the educational implications for students in the Arab World.

Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede describes the five cultural dimensions as Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), and Long-term Orientation (LTO). The following descriptions are direct excerpts from Hofstede at <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/index.shtml>.

Power Distance Index (PDI) is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality (more versus less), but defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. Power and inequality, of course, are extremely fundamental facts of any society and anybody with some international experience will be aware that 'all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others'.

Individualism (IDV) on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, that is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. The word 'collectivism' in this sense has no political meaning: it refers to the group, not to the state. Again, the issue addressed by this dimension is an extremely fundamental one, regarding all societies in the world.

Masculinity (MAS) versus its opposite, femininity, refers to the distribution of roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found. Studies have revealed that (a) women's values differ less among societies than men's values; (b) men's values from one country to another contain a dimension from very assertive and competitive and maximally different from women's values on the one side, to modest and caring and similar to women's values on the other. The assertive pole has been called 'masculine' and the modest, caring pole 'feminine'. The women in feminine countries have the same modest, caring values as the men; in the masculine countries they are somewhat assertive and competitive, but not as much as the men, so that these countries show a gap between men's values and women's values.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; it ultimately refers to man's search for Truth. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. Unstructured situations are novel, unknown, surprising, different from usual. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situations by strict laws and rules, safety and security measures, and on the philosophical and religious level by a belief in absolute Truth; 'there can only be one Truth and we have it'. People in uncertainty avoiding countries are also more emotional, and motivated by inner nervous energy. The opposite type, uncertainty accepting cultures, are more tolerant of opinions different from what they are used to; they try to have as few rules as possible, and on the philosophical and religious level they are relativist and allow many currents to flow side by side. People within these cultures are more phlegmatic and contemplative, and not expected by their environment to express emotions.

Long-Term Orientation (LTO) versus short-term orientation: this fifth dimension was found in a study among students in 23 countries around the world, using a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars. It can be said to deal with Virtue regardless of Truth. Values associated with Long Term Orientation are thrift and perseverance; values associated with Short Term Orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'. Both the positively and the negatively rated values of this dimension are found in the teachings of Confucius, the most influential Chinese philosopher who lived around 500 B.C.; however, the dimension also applies to countries without a Confucian heritage.

The Arab World

Hofstede has previously undertaken values surveys of over 50 countries, including the Arab World which he defines as including Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (Hofstede http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_arab_world.shtml).

The Arab World findings reflect PDI, IDV, MAS, and UAI but not LTO which is new to VSM94. Hofstede has identified large PDI (80) and UAI (68) for the Arab World where the society is highly rule-oriented, risk adverse and does not readily accept change. According to Hofstede, the high MAS index (52) may be more a result of the Muslim religion than culture (differentiating religion from culture is not discussed further in this paper) and the relatively low IDV (38) indicates a society where loyalty and close long-term commitment to groups such as family is paramount.

Comparison between the Arab World and Australia

Hofstede has compared Cultural Dimensions across 69 countries or regions (http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php) and Table 1 compares the Arab World and Australian findings. This comparison is included for interest purposes only and will not be expanded upon here as the University of Adelaide research has yet to commence.

Country	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO
Arab World	80	38	52	68	
Australia	36	90	61	51	31

Table 1: Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Comparison: The Arab World and Australia

DISCUSSION: UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH FINDINGS

Demographics

Two hundred Year 1, 2 and 3 Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) students within the College of Dentistry, University of Sharjah participated in the VSM94 survey. Eighty-eight percent (n:176) were female. Twenty-two percent (n:44) were aged under 20. Seventy-eight percent (n:156) were aged between 20-24.

Sixty-one percent (n:121) fit Hofstede's category of the Arab World, ie nationality being either Egyptian, Iraqi, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Libyan, Saudia Arabian or Emarati. A further 18.5% (n: 37) can also be categorised as from the Arab World and include Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, Jordan, Oman, Qatar and Yemen. This brings the total Arab World participants to 79.5%.

Sixty-five percent (n:130) have never had a job. Four and a half percent (n:9) have held a management position. Twenty-four percent (n: 48) have held either academically, vocationally or generally trained positions, with a further 6.5% (n:13) having held an unskilled position.

Cultural Dimensions

Table 2 indicates the five cultural dimension findings for the University of Sharjah as compared with Hofstede's findings for the Arab World. The fifth dimension, Long-term Orientation is new to VSM94 and has not been included in Hofstede's published findings.

	PDI	UAI	IDV	MAS	LTO
Sharjah	13.4	58.1	89.7	12.4	54.4*
Hofstede	80	68	38	52	-

Table 2: Comparison Sharjah and Hofstede

* Sharjah findings similar to Thailand and India.

Language

All students who undertook the survey speak English. They are taught in English and all their curriculum is in English. The majority of the students' first language is Arabic as are the lecturers and tutors. The survey was administered to over 100 Year 2 students with both the Australian researcher and Arabic lecturer present. Students required clarification of the meaning of some terms eg 'thriff' and 'subordinate'. The Year 1 and Year 3 surveys were administered by lecturers without the researcher being present and it was reported that some clarification of terminology was also required with both groups. Language issues may have had some impact on the above scores with regard to cultural dimensions.

POWER DISTANCE INDEX (PDI)

The Sharjah findings (with 79.5% having an Arab nationality) indicate a low PDI of 13.4 as compared to Hofstede's Arab Countries index of 80. Even though 88% of the Sharjah sample were female, Hofstede's findings are that differences on PDI between the genders are inconsistent (Hofstede, 2001, pp 79). However PDI scores differ strongly across occupations. He further concludes that education is the most dominant factor and that *higher-education, higher-status occupations tended to produce low-PDI values* (Hofstede, 2001, pp 88). 65% of the Sharjah participants have never worked (but anticipate graduating as qualified Dentists). Only 6.5% have held an unskilled job. They have all received more than 12 years of formal schooling. All participants are undertaking a professional qualification in Dentistry. These factors support Hofstede's conclusion that

Power distance between less educated and nonmanagerial employees and their superiors tended to be larger than between more educated and managerial employees and their superiors (Hofstede, 2001, pp 88).

The following table outlines the key differences between low and high PDI societies from an education perspective. It is adapted from Hofstede's Exhibit 3.8 Key Differences Between Low- and High- PDI Societies 1: Family, School and Work Organization (Hofstede, 2001, pp 107).

Low PDI (as with Sharjah study)	High PDI (as identified for Arab Countries)
Teachers treat students as equals	Students dependent 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
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 top level
More Nobel Prizes in sciences per capita	Fewer Nobel Prizes in sciences per capita
More modest expectations on benefits of technology	High expectations on benefits of technology

Table 3: Education and PDI

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE (UAI)

The only reasonable similarity between the Sharjah study (58.1) and that of Hofstede (68) is Uncertainty Avoidance. Finland, Iran and Switzerland share similar UAI to the Sharjah study. Hofstede states that *the differences between countries on which the index was based are robust. UAI differences are not expected to disappear in the foreseeable future* and further that there is no correlation between PDI and UAI apart from European and Western Countries, nor can the UAI index be applied to occupations or gender differences (Hofstede, 2001, pp 145).

From an educational perspective, when UAI is relatively strong, both students and teachers favour structured learning situations with precise objectives, detailed assignments and strict timetables. Hofstede describes how they *like situations in which there is one correct answer that they can find. They expect to be rewarded for accuracy* (Hofstede, 2001, pp 162).

Conversely when uncertainty avoidance is weaker, both students and teachers *despise structure. They like open-ended learning situations with vague objectives, broad assignments and no timetables at all. The suggestion that there can be only one correct answer is taboo with them. They expect to be rewarded for originality* (Hofstede, 2001, pp 162).

Students from high-UAI countries expect their teachers to be the experts with all the answers whereas students from low-UAI countries accept a teacher who says “I don’t know”. There is more room for unconventional ideas and intellectual disagreement in academic matters in low UAI countries.

INDIVIDUALISM (IDV)

Individualism as opposed to collectivism is the third dimension of national culture. Hofstede warns that the IDV index is not suitable for distinguishing among occupations, the genders, age groups or individuals. IDV is negatively correlated with PDI *but the correlation all but disappears when national wealth is controlled* (Hofstede, 2001, pp 209).

Sharjah’s relative high IDV (89.7) and low PDI supports Hofstede’s findings of a negative correlation between these two indexes (Hofstede, 2001, pp 216). However the Sharjah findings of an IDV of 89.7 are significantly higher than that of Hofstede’s IDV of 38. Hofstede has observed however that in terms of time there is a *clear increase in individualism* and that *for the longer term we can assume that as long as the wealth of nations grows, the individualism of those nations’ citizens will increase* (Hofstede, 2001, pp 254). The United Arab Emirates, within which the University of Sharjah resides and the birthplace of 45% of the Sharjah sample, is a wealthy country and it would therefore follow that the dimension of individualism will continue to increase there and may partly explain the high IDV recently identified. This view is also held by a fellow Arabic researcher and Professor of Dentistry at the University of Sharjah.

Table 4 is an adaptation of Hofstede’s Exhibit 5.5 ‘Key Differences Between Collectivist and Individualist Societies: Family, Personality, Language, and School Issues (Hofstede, 2001, pp 236).

Low IDV (as identified for Arab Countries)	High IDV (as with Sharjah study)
Languages in which the word ‘I’ is not pronounced	Languages in which the word ‘I’ is indispensable for understanding
Students abroad consider their language as not respected	Students abroad consider their language as highly respected
Students’ gender and religion important for their identity	Students’ gender and religion less important for their identity

Self-concept in terms of group	Self-concept idiocentric
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 pre-existing 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

Table 4: Language, Group Identity, At School

An interesting finding of individualism and collectivism with regard to schools and educational systems is that collectivist societies see students from different ethnic or clan backgrounds often forming subgroups in class. In individualistic society, the assignment of joint tasks leads more easily to the formation of new groups than in the collectivist society (Hofstede, 2001, pp 234).

MASCULINITY (MAS)

Masculinity is a fourth dimension of national culture (with femininity as its opposite pole) and is quite a different dimension from Individualism. Hofstede identified that higher-MAS countries indicate differences in the values of men and women in the same jobs whereas there were less differences in lower-MAS countries (Hofstede, 2001, pp 279). As anticipated, the Sharjah study has a low MAS index (12.4), due to the high level of female respondents (88%) and it is considered that this is the main reason for the significant variation from the MAS index (52) for the Arab World.

Hofstede further discusses occupational cultures and MAS variation due to occupational differences. He reports on a study by Fonne and Myhre (1996) which found

Systematic value differences among pilots (highest PDI and MAS), doctors (lowest PDI and MAS) and paramedics (in between) (Hofstede, 2001, pp 414).

The intended occupation of the Sharjah sample is Dentistry (identified by Fonne and Myhre (1996) as a feminine, nurturing and social profession), and this may be a further cause of the low MAS (and low PDI).

Hofstede has further observed that

In the high-MAS countries the values of men and women in the same occupations tended to be more different than in the low-MAS ones (Hofstede, 2001, pp 285).

This may further account for the low MAS value of the Sharjah sample where the majority of the Sharjah sample was female, even though in a high-MAS part of the world.

The majority of the Sharjah sample is from Muslim countries where in most part the formal place of women under the influence of Islam is limited to the family. Hofstede reports on a study by Bank & Vinnicombe (1995) that this does not necessarily mean that they have masculine cultures. *Muslim countries vary considerably regarding the roles of mothers within their homes (Hofstede, 2001, pp 310).*

From an educational perspective key differences between feminine and masculine societies have been adapted from Hofstede's Exhibit 6.12 (Hofstede, 2001, pp 306) as follows:

Low MAS (as with Sharjah study)	High MAS (as identified for Arab Countries)
Friendliness of teachers appreciated	Brilliance in teachers appreciated
Students' social adaptation important	Students' performance important
Failing in school is a minor accident	Failing in school is a disaster
Public praise to encourage weak students	Public praise to reward good students
No special awards	Awards for good students, teachers
Average student is the norm	Best student is the norm
Curriculum choices guided by intrinsic interest	Curriculum choices guided by career expectations
Students take own problems less seriously	Own problems taken very seriously
Teachers give equal attention to girls and boys	Teachers pay more attention to boys
Boys and girls study same subjects	Boys and girls study different subjects
Small gender difference in perceptual abilities	Large differences in perceptual ability: boys analytic, girls contextual

Table 5: Gender

LONG-TERM ORIENTATION (LTO)

This fifth dimension of national cultures is relatively new and was found in a Chinese Value Survey (CVS) in the mid 1980's. Hofstede defines this dimension as follows:

Long Term Orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole, Short Term Orientation, stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of 'face' and fulfilling social obligations (Hofstede, 2001, pp 359).

Twenty-three countries have been surveyed, though not Arab Countries. The Sharjah score of 54.4 is similar to that of Thailand and India. It is relatively high and higher than Australia's score of 32. Long-term orientation has been identified as a main explanation of the fast growth of East Asian economies in recent times and LTO scores are strongly correlated with national economic growth including marginal propensity to save. This could explain the relative high Sharjah scores due to the financial wealth currently being enjoyed from the Muslim countries' oil resources. However Hofstede warns that Muslim countries have *hardly adapted better to the modern world than those that have remained poor* as they have rejected modernization and favoured traditionalism and regard *modern technology and Western ideas as threats rather than as opportunities* (Hofstede, 201, pp 369). The researcher's experience within the United Arab Emirates where the research took place, is that this Muslim country has embraced modernization well. Also, the University of Sharjah has licensed use of the entire Bachelor of Dental Surgery curriculum from the University of Adelaide and is open to innovations in learning and teaching (including technology).

Hofstede reports that 'thrift' (a term that was used in the VSM94 questionnaire that required explanation for the Sharjah students) is a high priority in high LTO families whereas tolerance and respect for other people is more likely in low LTO countries. High LTO families tend to keep to themselves.

Hofstede's Exhibit 7.5 Summary of Connotations of LTO Differences Found in Surveys and Other Comparative Studies of Values (Hofstede, 2001, pp 360) is replicated here:

Low LTO	High LTO (as with Sharjah study)
Quick results expected	Persistence, perseverance
Status not major issue in relationships	Relationships ordered by status and this order observed
Nice people know how to spend	Nice people are thrifty, sparing with resources
Shame is not a common feeling	A sense of shame common
Personal steadiness and stability	Personal adaptability
Protection of one's 'face'	Face considerations common but considered a weakness

Respect for traditions	Adaptation of traditions to new circumstances
Reciprocation of greetings, favours, and gifts	Reciprocation considerations are problematic, risk of overspending
Children should learn tolerance and respect for other people	Children should learn thrift
Leisure time important	Leisure time not so important
Most important events in life occurred in past or occur in present	Most important events in life will occur in future
Students consider 'persistent' not an important personality trait	Students consider 'persistent' an important personality trait
Small share of additional income saved	Large share of additional income saved
Investment in mutual funds	Investment in real estate

Table 6: Long-term vs Short-term Orientation

ONLINE LEARNING

The researcher's primary focus is that of effective online learning design and facilitation and the impact of cultural values and beliefs. Secondary research has been undertaken into the effect of Power Distance Index (PDI) on learners' perceptions of their online learning experiences (Wang 2007). The recent Sharjah research will extend this to incorporate all five dimensions from the perspective of the extent of teaching presence required in online learning environments.

The Sharjah cultural values and beliefs findings indicate that these students are receptive to online learning which is student rather than teacher centred and where they are expected to collaborate as part of the learning process. Rather than fully self-directed online learning environments they do favour structured and guided online learning with a high degree of scaffolding (support) also known as teaching presence. Teaching presence incorporates three dimensions: instructional management, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction (Garrison and Anderson 2003). Separate questionnaires with regard to teaching presence were undertaken by Sharjah dental students (n:101) and overall these students regard as very important all three dimensions of teaching presence which supports the Uncertainty Avoidance findings.

The need to develop a social presence and sense of community in online learning environments involving teacher facilitation and modelling would appear to be important to the Sharjah students (low Masculinity). The Sharjah students' relative long-term orientation indicates that they are adaptable, persistent and futuristic. It would appear to indicate that they are open to innovations in their education which includes online learning and Web 2.0 technologies and this is further supported by feedback from the online evaluation of the

online roleplay simulation where less than 20% of the students (n:81) do not want more of this type of learning.

Further research needs to be undertaken with regard to online group work and the impact of culture. The Sharjah research indicated a high level of Individualism which according to Hofstede lends itself more readily to the formation of new groups than in a Collectivist society. However the nature of the Sharjah group work, which did not allow for self-selection into groups and was anonymous within an online roleplay simulation, may have resulted in the negativity of some students towards taking part in an online group. 'Failure of other group members to collaborate as part of my group' received the highest response (42% of 81 students) to the question 'The ONE least effective feature of the Dental Amalgam eSim was:'.

IN SUMMARY

The Sharjah 2008 sample where the majority of students have an Arab nationality, does not align with three of the five cultural dimensions as described by Hofstede who has undertaken studies of over 50 countries including the Arab World. Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism (IDV) and Masculinity (MAS) all returned markedly different results in the Sharjah study from that of Hofstede. Uncertainty Avoidance (UVI) revealed similar results, and Long-term Orientation is a relatively new dimension which has not been documented by Hofstede for Arab Countries. Possible reasons for the variances within PDI, IDV and MAS are education level, occupation and gender whereby all of the Sharjah sample are student dentists and the majority are also female. Also, all students are relatively young, all under 24 and only a few of them have ever had a job. Comparative research with University of Adelaide dental students is yet to be undertaken. This further research will assist in allowing for the consideration of the impact of cultural dimensions on the design and facilitation of online learning environments within higher education, with a focus on ensuring that we are effectively motivating and engaging our learners.

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