

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede is a Dutch scholar who investigated cultural differences based on data collected from IBM workers around the world. Based on the data collected, he identified several cultural dimensions that explain the perspectives and behaviour of particular groups of people. Three of the cultural dimensions are provided below:

Power Distance:

This dimension explains how a society expects power to be shared. Asking yourself, 'who is in charge?' is a good start in identifying the power distance in a society. A society with a high power distance tends to be structured along lines of social class with a definitive hierarchy that is not overtly questioned in society. For example, think about peasants and kings in medieval times - they were not equal and the authority of the king over the peasant was never questioned. In a high power distance society, people with status will be treated differently and will enjoy privileges that others do not. On the other hand, a society with a low power distance gives less credence to social class and views people as being relatively equal. In a low power distance society, people will not be treated differently just because of their name or class status. For example, in North America a farmer would be treated the same as the president of a large company when they go to the grocery store.

High Power Distance -----Low Power Distance

Competitive Disposition/ Gender Roles:

This dimension includes two parts. The first part relates to the level of defined gender roles. In a masculine society, gender roles are defined, such that women are expected to do certain tasks, while men are expected to do other tasks. In contrast, in a feminine society gender roles are less defined, such that women and men can do any role they choose. For example, historically in many societies men went to work, while women stayed at home to take care of the family. This predetermined division of labour based on

gender is an example of a masculine society. In contemporary Canadian society, there are less gender-defined roles, making it a more feminine society. The second part of the dimension relates to competitive disposition and degree of acceptance for alternative perspectives. In a masculine society, competition is valued and there is a stronger belief in one correct answer. In such a society, arguments are more likely to occur because people value the importance of being correct. Conversely, in a feminine society the emphasis is more on cooperation and caring for others. Alternative perspectives are more likely to be accepted as legitimate and there is less need to argue a point in order to be 'correct.'

Masculine -----Feminine

Tolerance for Uncertainty:

This dimension relates to how comfortable or uncomfortable members of a group are with uncertainty. A good way to understand how this dimension works is to ask yourself, 'how would members respond to an unpredicted situation?' A society with high uncertainty avoidance has rigid codes and rules to guide actions. For example, if people from a high uncertainty avoidance culture were confronted with a novel situation without any rules to guide actions, they would feel uncomfortable and would immediately try to create rules to address the situation. In contrast, people from a high uncertainty tolerance society would feel comfortable with the ambiguity of the situation and would not feel uncomfortable addressing unique situations. An easy way to remember the difference is to note that uncertainty avoidance will result in the desire for everything to be planned out and predetermined, while uncertainty tolerance will feel more comfortable "going with the flow."

Uncertainty Avoidance -----Uncertainty Tolerance

***Note: one cultural characteristic is not better than the other, they are simply different and each has their own pros and cons.**