

The Use and Misuse of Questionnaires in Intercultural Training

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Introduction

In this paper, the terms intercultural and cross-cultural are used interchangeably to refer to training which helps participants learn about, adjust to, or develop skills with respect to a culture other than their own.

Cross-Cultural Training programs have many purposes, venues, and audiences. In my experience, they have been used to orient Peace Corps volunteers, government aid workers, health workers, students arriving and departing, the military, and employees in many business contexts. As of late, they are being utilized in some diversity programs in the U.S. and Canada.

Questionnaires can be used in many different ways including assessing the needs of participants before program design; in formative or summative evaluations; as a way of determining the knowledge of participants; and as a way for gathering information about the environment into which, or in which, participants are or may be working. There are also cross-cultural questionnaires which are intended to elicit the preferences of respondents without referring to a research-generated database.

In this paper I will focus on a specific form of questionnaire used in intercultural training programs: Multi-country questionnaires based on quantitative research.

Description of the Questionnaires

There are only two major databases which compare cross-national data over more than 50 countries gathered through questionnaires. These have been developed by Geert Hofstede, the pioneer in the field of quantitative research in comparative management, and Fons Trompenaars, a consultant and author in the same field. Both are from The Netherlands.

The older of the two questionnaire-generated databases was developed by Hofstede. At IBM, he headed a team of six researchers to develop the first internationally standardized questionnaires and a system for administering them; the results of his 53 country and

region surveys were published in *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Hofstede, 1980).

The more recent of the two questionnaires and associated databases has been developed by Fons Trompenaars and published in *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Differences in Business* (Trompenaars, 1993). There were 47 countries represented in this survey at the time of publication of *Riding the Waves of Culture*.

The databases generate mental geographies. They are two different geographies, as if created by explorers who have crafted their own maps of the parts of the same new world each explored.

Hofstede calls culture "the software of the mind," set against the "hard wiring" of genetic development. In fact, he draws out three levels of what he calls "mental programs":

1. *"The universal level of mental programming which is shared by all, or almost all, mankind. This is the biological 'operating system' of the human body, but it includes a range of expressive behaviors such as laughing and weeping and associative and aggressive behaviors which are found in higher animals."*
2. *"The collective level of mental programming is shared with some but not with all other people; it is common to people belonging to a certain group or category. . . . The whole area of subjective human culture. . . belongs to this level."*
3. *"The individual level of human programming is the truly unique part—no two people are programmed exactly alike, even if they are identical twins raised together."*

These three levels of what Hofstede calls "programming" describe the three levels of fountainheads of human behavior: The biological/genetic basis of universal (as well as, I believe, specific) human traits; the environment, chiefly culture; and the combination of the two, which produces our personalities.

Both Hofstede and Trompenaars describe what they are exploring as the map of culture. Hofstede's map is divided into four provinces; Trompenaars' into seven. Only one of the provinces has been named the same (the individualism/collective dimension).

A rather significant complication, perhaps it might be better called a confusion, to both maps is that although the information from these studies are often interpreted as cultural dimensions which describe the differences between cultures, in fact they both analyze the differences between national groups. In the case of many countries, perhaps most, this means measuring multicultural societies and lumping the results as national scores. For the Japanese scores, this may not be a problem; for Canadian, Belgian and Malaysian scores it may well be. However, it makes pedagogical sense to gather, analyze, and disseminate information by country name; to gather the data by separate cultures would mean problems in other directions: For example, would Flemish and Dutch cultures be labeled the same, or different? Perhaps future researchers will gather data by both cultural and national names. Certainly this would make it easier to deal with the creation or disappearance of countries, a development more common now than in the past.

It should be noted that chapter 7 of Culture's Consequences, Hofstede (1980) presents data by language area for Belgium and Switzerland and discusses at length the difference between Flemish and Dutch. Once again, Hofstede has established the standard for future research.

The two questionnaires which developed the databases (in the above analogy, the "map") changed over time as questions were substituted or rewritten to improve reliability. Hofstede used many versions of the questionnaire over the years he researched and analyzed the IBM data. Trompenaars has also utilized different versions.

Hofstede's database is the larger, with 116,000 questionnaires provided to recipients in their own countries and analyzed to provide the basis for his four-dimension map of cultural geographies. The four dimensions were "discovered" from the data; that is to say, they were determined after data were gathered and derived through study of those data. Later, he and Michael Bond added a fifth dimension, valid only for Asian cultures.

Trompenaars' dimensions were generated through a study of the literature and his questionnaire generated from these dimensions. His database is as of now smaller, consisting perhaps of around 50,000 questionnaires. Trompenaars' questionnaire is often provided to participants outside their countries, unlike Hofstede's approach. However, Trompenaars' data cover much of the active business world of today, including areas Hofstede never covered because IBM had not yet penetrated these areas. They include

Eastern Europe, Russia, and China. Trompenaars has also been successful at popularizing the notion of cultures' influence on business, both in Europe and the Americas.

The Four Hofstede Dimensions are as follows (I am using the original terminology, with simplifications in brackets):

Individualism—Collectivism

The individual-collective dimension describes differences in how respondents view the focus of their work—as a fundamentally solitary, individual activity, in which credit or blame, reward or punishment, falls on the individual; or as a collective or team enterprise, in which the group receives credit, blame, reward or punishment.

Example: In Hofstede's study, the U.S. is the most individualistic country. Those coming to work in the U.S. from any other country (here for the moment and in future examples discounting individual differences) should therefore feel themselves relatively unsupported upon their arrival. They may feel a bit as if they were dropped into the U.S. work environment to sink or swim on their own. In my experience (having worked with over 500 arriving employees and their families), this is indeed the case.

High Power Distance—Low Power Distance [Hierarchical—Participative Orientation]

This dimension differentiates hierarchical and participative workplaces. In high-power-distance organizations, the flow of decision-making and responsibility is top-down; in low power-distance organizations, the authority may be expressed in coaching rather than ordering, and responsibility may be devolved.

For example: If a high-power distance subordinate is matched with a lower power-distance supervisor who prefers coaching to providing strong direction, the subordinate may feel a sense of bewilderment or resentment at what is perceived as a lack of direction.

High Uncertainty Avoidance—Low Uncertainty Avoidance [Need for Certainty—Tolerance for Ambiguity]

This dimension discriminates between those who prefer a highly structured work environment and those who prefer not to be encumbered by rules, regulations, and red tape.

For example: A work environment in which every person has his or her own distinct work, and is provided with clear guidelines, and for which there are predictable long-term rewards and benefits, is preferred by those with a high need for certainty. Government and university offices are typically so structured. In other cultures and workplaces (the software industry in the U.S., for example), rules

and regulations are perceived as barriers to creative development or to entrepreneurial advances. This end of the scale is inhabited by those with a low need for certainty.

Masculinity—Femininity [Achievement—Quality of Life Orientation]

This dimension measures the degree to which cultures differentiate between gender roles. How this dimension is interpreted depends on the culture in which your point of view begins. An achievement oriented (masculine) society is one in which social gender roles are clearly distinct; challenge, earnings, recognition and advancement are important. A quality of life oriented (feminine) society is characterized by overlapping gender roles; cooperation, modesty, service and compromise are valued..

An example: In cultures and workplaces which are more achievement oriented, there is an expectation that work often takes precedence over family life. Long hours are expected; there may be lots of travel and weekend work. On the opposite side of the spectrum, quality of life issues are not secondary considerations that are easily sacrificed for the sake of the job. More regular hours are the norm, and family life is taken into account.

Turning to the second research area, the Trompenaars' Dimensions are as follows (again, I am using Trompenaars' original terminology, with interpretations in brackets):

Relationships with People:

Universalism vs. Particularism [rules vs. relationships]

The question at the heart of this dimension revolves around whether rules or relationships regulate workplace behaviors.

Example: If you are a universalist, you will follow societal or work rules in your life and work; a particularist is concerned about whether or not the needs of people, particularly those people closest to him or her, are being met.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

So far as I am able to determine, this area is very similar to Hofstede's; in other words, the two maps overlap at this coordinate.

Neutral vs. Affective [unemotional vs. emotional]

This dimension relates to the display of emotion at work. Those who are from cultures which do not show much emotion at work (for example, who do not talk about their health or lack of health) are "neutral"; those who do are "affective."

Specific vs. Diffuse [brief and numerous vs. long-term relationships]

This dimension distinguishes between people who make many friendships, which are normally brief and superficial, and those who make very few but very deep friendships which last for many years.

In those workplaces in which specific relationships are prevalent, friendships may be instrumental, that is to say, they may enable the participants to accomplish goals. In those organizations and societies in which diffuse relationships are more common, there is a clearer divide between acquaintanceships, which are the norm, and friendships, which are exceptional and significant and take long to develop.

Achievement vs. Ascription [achievement vs. other attributes]

This dimension describes the difference between those who value achievement as the primary dimension of success, and those who value not only achievement, but also the background of the colleague, his or her education, other attainments, and even the reputation of the family or extended family itself.

For example, in parts of Europe, there is still a special cachet for those who are considered to be of aristocratic background. In Islamic cultures, those who have been on the Haj or the pilgrimage are often accorded higher status.

Attitudes toward Time [relative emphasis on the importance of the past, present, or future]

In some societies, for example in France, the importance of the past, as represented in literature, architecture, music, and other streams of culture, are significant; in others, for example the U.S., the future is perceived to be more important than a past away from which many Americans immigrated.

Attitudes toward the Environment [harmony vs. control of the outside world]

A basic concept of Japanese life is Wei, or harmony. This is reflected in such societal expressions as the Tea Ceremony and the architecture of gardens and religious sites. In other countries, controlling nature is much more important than understanding or recreating its harmonies.

These differences are often reflected in the workplace. In Japan, confrontations are not supposed to occur; collaboration, consensus and other techniques have been developed to maintain harmony. In other societies, workplace disagreements and even violence are not unknown.

With this background we will move to the issue of the proper use of questionnaires associated with these databases.

The Use of Research-Based Quantitative Questionnaires in Cross-Cultural Training Programs

Over the past six years, cross-national research-based quantitative questionnaires in cross-cultural training programs have been developed to achieve two purposes:

1. To aid participants in developing an understanding of their own cultural profile and thus to foster an understanding of others' cultural profiles.
2. To help participants compare country culture profiles on the Hofstede or Trompenaars' dimensions, and to understand what bridging might be required for each participant to be more effective in working with people from those cultures.

These techniques were pioneered in the United States at International Training Associates of Princeton (a company which has since 1986 provided training and consulting to global companies and to nonprofit organizations such as the United Nations and the American Management Association), when ITAP was licensed to offer a version of Hofstede's questionnaire in its training programs as a didactic tool. As a research tool, it has only recently been used to gather data to update earlier data or to add new countries.

As such, ITAP began providing its clients with the [Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire™](#) (CW), as it is now called, in 1989. Participants answer a questionnaire made up of questions Hofstede had selected from his series of questionnaires, from which their CW score is computed. The scores for each participant become bar charts representing his or her culture profile on each of the Hofstede dimensions. Because the list of questions has been drawn from the original research questions, the relationship between the participants' scores and the country scores is direct and clear. Reliability and validity are thus related to the original research, as are the participants' scores.

Pedagogical inferences can thereby be drawn between individual scores and country scores. For example, consider participant Bill, an American, who has a high score for individualism and he is being transferred to a job requiring team development in a country with a lower average score for individualism, as determined by the Hofstede database. Bill must determine how best to proceed with his new team, tempered with the knowledge that it is likely that his colleagues on the team will prefer a more collective approach to decision-making, reward provision, task allocation, and so on, than his own preferred personal style. Knowing both his own cultural

style and the national average for the country in which he will be working gives Bill the tools to analyze and project alternative approaches. Should he adopt a more "collective" style, allowing decisions to be made more by the team than he would have done? Should he insist on his style even if that might cause his team to resist that process?

The point here is that such information gives participants the knowledge that different approaches exist. It also provides training designers the opportunity to create skill-building role-plays and other exercises to assist participants in developing competencies to work effectively in different countries.

The Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire™ can also be utilized as a way of compiling individual scores of members of a team. This information can then be used to help team members understand the diversity of approaches within the team and which team members might be predisposed toward certain kinds of team activities. For example, if one member had an especially high need for certainty (i.e., a high score on Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance dimension) compared with other members, that individual might be pressed into service as the team planner.

Variations of the Trompenaars questionnaire have sometimes been used to analyze corporate culture.

The Misuse of Research-Based Quantitative Questionnaires in Cross-Cultural Training Programs

With so much competitiveness in the cross-cultural training and consulting market today, there have been examples of questionnaires cobbled together with little research and no statistical analysis of reliability or validity. In these cases, they are more marketing than instructional tools, and they may in fact be misleading.

There may also be claims made for the use of such questionnaires which exceed the limits of their development.

Such sins are many, and are here enumerated:

Venial (or less serious) Sins

1. The use of questionnaires, whether research-based or not, whether in the field of cross-cultural training or not, is too often accompanied by claims of miraculous and quick cures to very complex problems. In fact, because questionnaires create data which represent models of reality, they must be seen for what they are: A simplification and reduction of reality. In fact they gain their pedagogical power, as for example do simulation games as well, from this process of simplification and

reduction. It is therefore incumbent on practitioners to carefully explain to their participants the limitation of the models they are using.

2. Representing a national database as a cultural database is an easy sin to commit; however it is important to point out that in multicultural societies there may be much cultural variation within a country (e.g., Canada, Belgium, China, the United States).
3. Each database is created within a time frame and has specific limitations. Although the Hofstede database is not contemporary, it is now being updated, and a recent study (Hoppe, 1990) indicates the dimensions are stable over time. A limitation of the Trompenaars database is that it has not always been tightly controlled for demographic aspects of information-gathering; this may have implications for its reliability.
4. It is tempting to claim that the questionnaires and associated databases provide the coordinates for the entire map of culture. We do not yet know the complete map of culture (that is to say, all of the dimensions of cultures that should be compared to have a complete view of those cultures), nor are we likely to in the near future. It is therefore important to point this out, supplementing these databases with other sources of information about cultural aspects of business in different countries.
5. Practitioners can err by leading our participants to assume that cultural differences will account for all the differences in a cross-cultural interaction. However, it is clear that differences in personality and institutional and environmental influences will also play a role in interactions between people no matter whether those interactions take place between people of different cultures or the same culture. Cross-cultural practitioners should take care to take account of these other influences in their seminars.
6. With quantitative databases and associated questionnaires, it is very easy to make the error of directly comparing individual scores to country scores. However, country scores are average scores, and individual scores cannot be directly compared to averages. It is impossible, for example, for someone, even with a very high score on individualism, to be completely individualistic. Human beings do not operate as walking scales. Practitioners should therefore be careful to use the information didactically rather than engage in mathematical comparisons of scores.

1. Assuming that country averages in a database relate to individuals in that country. Country averages are typically (but not always) bell-shaped curves, with individuals at the tails of these curves who may behave in some ways more like members of other cultures than members of their own cultures. I was guilty of such a sin early in my career when I gave the Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire™ to a Japanese employee of an American company and, when his score was very high on individualism, accused him of being insufficiently Japanese. In fact, I surmised later, the employee decided to work for an American company specifically because his own preference, for whatever reason, was higher on individualism than many of his fellow Japanese. Practitioners should help participants in their seminars avoid stereotyping people from other countries and cultures by pointing out that those they meet on their travels may be not "typical" at all, but rather examples of exceptions from cultural norms.
2. Taking for granted that sociologically-based questionnaires and databases developed in one culture are sufficient to explain cultural differences to people from other cultures. This is a serious difficulty in the field, because there are few models which address cultural differences available in the West which have their origin in other cultures. I discovered an example of the kind of problem this causes in a class I taught at the United Nations in Vienna. I had just provided Trompenaars' definition of culture as "a way of solving problems." A man (originally from China) declared: "To me, culture is the water that we swim in: It surrounds and defines us." Clearly, the definition of culture itself is culturally-influenced. Practitioners should be careful to elicit definitions of culture from participants themselves in order to avoid the imposition of one set of ideas over another. Researchers should work to develop models which can serve across cultures.
3. The pressure of competition sometimes causes otherwise sane practitioners to create fictional questionnaires. One, developed by a major training organization some years ago, is still in use today. It claims to be tied to the Hofstede database. However, it is not. Because the Hofstede questionnaire is copyrighted but the database is in the public domain, the practitioner devised his own questions unrelated to the database. But the resulting profile appeared to be related to the database. Why is this a sin? It can yield cultural profiles which do not relate to the dimensions which define them and can seriously mislead participants. Such questionnaires are but smoke and mirrors. Practitioners should maintain standards which prevent such debasing of the field and of research standards.

Mortal (flagrant) Sins

There are three flagrant sins. They are:

Other Conundrums

There are other conundrums in these areas which are less simple than areas of uncertainty. Clifford Clarke, one of the leaders in the field of Japan/U.S. business-focused cross-cultural research, has questioned the validity of sociological (multiple national questionnaires) versus anthropological approaches (single-culture questionnaires and interviews). He believes that the reliability of such questionnaires is questionable given the translation problem and the fact that for Japanese, for example, the context of the question asked is as important as its content.

Conclusions

Questionnaires and their associated databases must be used sensitively and with caution. Sometimes results may be counter-intuitive. It is precisely in these counter-intuitive areas that new understanding of cultural differences may be discovered. If practitioners learn to use questionnaires and their associated databases responsibly, they can provide valuable assistance to people learning to work effectively in other countries.

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