

CONTRADICTING HOFSTEDE: Are Brazilian and American Cultures Really Different?

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study investigates how Hofstede's four cultural dimensions apply, in 2011, to the national cultures of Brazil and the United States by means of a survey administered to a sample of 623 adult MBA students in Brazil and the USA. The instrument selected for data collection was the Value Survey Module 94 (VSM 94).

Findings reveal that changes in Brazilian and U.S. culture, along the four cultural dimensions, have occurred between the two cultures, within the U.S. culture, and within the Brazilian culture, in terms of the general population, gender, age, and educational background since Hofstede conducted his study.

INTRODUCTION

Brazil was colonized by Portugal, a high-context country, and inherited its high context make up from the Portuguese. Likewise, the United States was colonized by Britain, a low-context country, and inherited its low context make up from the British. Both The United States and Brazil were part of the original study by Hofstede some three decades ago. The ratings in all four cultural dimensions confirm the low context status of the American nation. Similarly, Brazil's score in all four cultural dimensions confirm the high-context status of the Brazilian society. Comparing the scores of both countries in the Hofstede study, the evidence shows how far apart they were from each other in all four dimensions at that time.

The Four Cultural Dimensions

In the Hofstede study, the individualism/collectivism dimension, for example, the United States scored 91/100—the highest score of all countries in the study—being consequently classified as the most individualistic country in the world. The second highest score belonged to Australia (90/100), and the third highest score, not surprisingly, belonged to the British. Individualism/collectivism was Brazil's lowest score in all four dimensions (38/100), reflecting the collectivistic make up of the Brazilian society, in contrast with the high individualism of the United States.

In the uncertainty avoidance dimension, which, according to Zagoresek, Jaklic and Stough (2004), “is the extent to which members of a society feel uncomfortable with unstructured

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situations, uncertainty, and ambiguity” (p. 19), the United States scored 46/100, revealing Americans’ high threshold of comfort with ambiguity. The Brazilian society, on the other hand, scored 76/100, which identifies the country’s low level of indulgence with uncertainty.

In the power distance dimension, which reveals how much members of a society “accept inequality in power among institutions, organizations, and people” (Zagoresek *et al.* 2004, p. 19), Brazil scored 40/100, and the United States scored 59/100. The United States score reveals a higher level of interdependence in the relationships between subordinates and managers. The Brazilian score, on the other hand, reveals the higher dependence Brazilian subordinates have on their managers.

Finally, in the masculinity/femininity cultural dimension, which, according to Hofstede (2001), describes the value attributed by a society to assertiveness and personal achievement (those scoring high on masculinity) versus the value attributed to cooperation and concern for each other (those scoring high on femininity), the United States scored 62/100 compared to Brazil’s 50/100. Comparing the score for both countries, evidently the United States is a more masculine society more concerned with material success, whereas Brazil is relatively a more feminine society, being more concerned with “relationships, group decision-making, and quality of life” (Zagoresek *et al.* 2004, p. 19).

How Much Has Really Changed Since Hofstede?

Fernandez *et al.* (1997) conducted a comprehensive study to determine what and how much had changed since Hofstede gathered his original data. Their research work involved nine nations on four continents, and the findings seem to confirm what other researchers have also discovered: There have been numerous shifts in the original four cultural dimensions. Fernandez *et al.* expected to find minor shifts but were somewhat surprised to have also found major ones. They posited, however, that both minor and major cultural changes are a normal consequence of significant environmental modifications in most countries.

Craig and Douglas (2005) posited that every culture is rapidly going through a process of deterritorialization and infiltration by components of other cultures. One of the outcomes of this deterritorialization is that a given culture ceases to be restricted or bound to a traditional geographic location. That location, consequently, loses part of its uniqueness and is no longer as critical as before and may even, occasionally, “be misleading in defining culture and cultural particularity and, as a result, cultural boundaries become more porous, as contact is established between different cultural contexts through the various flows” (p. 331). The authors argued that the nature of culture is inherently dynamic, causing its influences to be continually evolving as the cultural landscape absorbs the impact of inputs from the economy, technology, politics, and the social milieu. The authors also posited that, with changes taking place so fast, researchers and practitioners must understand how global forces are reshaping the makeup of culture; this knowledge is crucial. Craig and Douglas added that trade and economic opportunities are motivating people to relocate to other countries, carrying in their baggage “their interests, values, and distinctive behavior patterns and intermingling with others, thus further clouding the spatial and social boundaries of culture” (p. 323). An ever-present sign of the global culture is revealed in the lives of young people everywhere as they are targeted by commercial advertisement as

well as the film and music industry, “communicating shared values such as individualism, independence and self-reliance. Items of apparel such as jeans, athletic shoes, baseball caps, jewelry, and watches, symbolize their membership in this global culture” (p. 324).

According to Inglehart and Baker (2000), until the beginning of the twentieth century, a largely accepted axiom was that modernization, which goes hand-in-hand with globalization, was a typical Western phenomenon. By the same token, many also believed that non-Western nations had to give up their traditional ways and incorporate the technological and higher Western ways if they also desired to be beneficiaries of the modernization process.

Towards the end of the century, however, the scenario changed drastically, and non-Western nations outperformed their Western counterparts in major areas of modernization. One example is East Asia with China in 2010 becoming the world’s largest exporter and the second largest world economy, behind only the U.S.A. Other East Asian countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia also stand out, having achieved remarkable economic success, and consequently, being able to improve and modernize the standard of living of their citizens. Japan, despite being struck by devastating natural disasters, climbed to the number one position in the world in terms of automobile production and consumer electronics (World Factbook, 2011).

Today, only a handful of people would ascribe any form or shape of supremacy to the West. Western economies, following the same trend, have long ceased being considered the international standard of excellence. Inglehart and Baker posited that record amounts of FDI and the resulting large number of multinational companies operating in both underdeveloped and developing countries has facilitated economic growth and contributed to the betterment of the various layers of society, including not only the haves, but also the have-nots. They also posited that “the central claim of modernization theory is that economic development is linked with coherent and, to some extent, predictable changes in culture and social and political life” (p. 21).

Commenting on the assertion that culture is a dynamic entity, Leung, Bhagat, Erez, and Gibson (2005) posited that contemporary studies in cognitive psychology reveal that “the human mind is fluid and adaptive, engaged in active, dynamic interaction with the environment” (p. 365). These findings represent a breakthrough for multinational companies and open the door to intriguing new options. One of the most promising of these new options, as posited by Leung et al., is that “cultural differences may be easier to overcome than previously assumed, if mental processes associated with national culture are relatively fluid and can be changed and sustained by appropriate situational influences” (p. 366). One major implication of this breakthrough is that MNCs, with proper planning, can transfer, without too much adaptation, a good number of their management norms and best practices to their subsidiaries overseas.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Brazil has been independent from Portugal for almost two centuries; the United States has been independent from Britain for more than two centuries, and Hofstede conducted his cultural research more than 30 years ago. Since that time, many things have changed in both countries, including how people behave in the workplace and, for that matter, in society in general. The Brazilian culture is still high context, the American culture is still low context, and Hofstede’s

four cultural dimensions are also still applicable in both countries, but adaptations and shifts of diverse magnitude have occurred, and both Brazil and the United States now present a different cultural make up compared to the way the circumstances were 30 or more years in the past.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Brazil and the United States, like every country in the world, are part of the global economy and as such cannot escape the consequences of globalization. In the past two decades, globalization has arguably altered the way countries function and changed the way individuals live their lives, regardless of where they reside, work, and socialize. According to Yenyurt and Townsend (2003), “globalization has created a progressively more homogenized world market” (p. 377). Ever-increasing levels and means of communication, combined with rapid exchange of data, goods, and services, have modified the way people interact and have had an impact on relations among nations, individuals, and organizations. The world today is different, in more than one way, from the way it was circa 1970 when Hofstede developed his original four cultural dimensions. McCoy, Galleta, and King (2005) posited that “while Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are still widely used in many disciplines, it is not guaranteed that the measures still hold after over thirty years” (p. 211).

Evidence from both cultures, however, reveals that the Brazilian society experienced more significant changes compared to the changes in the United States. Those changes have caused an approximation of both cultures, mainly when considering the two dimensions in which the two countries were farthest apart in the Hofstede study: (a) individualism/collectivism and (b) power distance, which, according to Heuer, Cummings, and Hutabarat (1999), have the likelihood of being more adaptable than consistent.

Possible Motivations for Change in the Brazilian Culture

One possible strong motivation causing Brazilians to adapt their cultural behavior, especially in the workplace, is the record amount of inward European, American, and East Asian foreign direct investment (FDI) in the past 10 years, totaling US\$18.2 billion in 2005 and in excess of US\$17 billion annually from 2006 to 2010 (Nasmi, 2011). In fact, most American, European, and Asian companies have Brazilian subsidiaries, especially automakers such as Toyota, Honda, General Motors, Ford, Fiat, Volkswagen, Nissan, and others. Pharmaceutical companies such as Eli Lilly, Pfizer, Abbot Laboratories, and Bristol-Myers Squib are also well represented in Brazil. Appliance makers such as Whirlpool, General Electric, Black & Decker plus many others have very active subsidiaries in Brazil. This massive presence of foreign MNCs has contributed to the improvement of higher education, housing, employment, and general quality of life (Adese, 2010).

According to McCowan (2008), globalization is one of the major reasons why higher education is growing so dramatically in Brazil. Panizzi (2003) posited that research shows a correlation between the increase in FDI in Brazil and the expansion of higher education. He affirmed that a noticeable increase happened “from 1994 to 1999 when enrolment rose by 43 percent on undergraduate courses, 23.5 per cent on master’s degrees courses and 58.4 on doctoral courses” (p. 44). He added that during the same period inward FDI increased by an average of 12% a year.

The increased number of Brazilians taking advantage of higher education opportunities benefits not only the national and foreign multinational companies in the sense that they have improved management skills at their disposal, but it also benefits the recipients of higher education themselves in terms of having access to better career choices, better salaries (which in turn can be used to provide better education for their children), more exposure to different ideas and concepts, and an overall improved outlook in life. The Brazilian national culture, as a consequence of globalization and the massive presence of foreign MNCs, has had to adapt and become more homogenized in the past two or three decades. The cultural outlook encountered by Hofstede in Brazil more than 30 years ago, has undergone considerable change.

Possible Reasons for Changes in the American Culture

One possible strong motivation for the U.S. society to adapt its cultural behavior stems from events such as the threat of global and domestic terrorism after September 11; the invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan; the loss of public confidence in the corporate world caused by the recent economic meltdown initiated, not in Latin America or Asia as was so common in the past, but right here in the U.S. Also, one cannot overlook the demographic changes taking place in the United States. Now more than ever the U.S. is a country of immigrants who, to a certain degree, pattern their business and social behavior after their native cultures. Kerin, Hartley & Rudelius (2009) posit that “the trends in the composition of the population suggests that the U.S. market will no longer be dominated by one group and non-Hispanic Caucasians will be a declining majority over the next two decades” (p. 72).

Changes in both the Brazilian and U.S. culture have probably occurred between the two cultures, within the U.S. culture and within the Brazilian culture in terms of the population, in general, gender, age, and educational background. Therefore, the following research questions were used to address (a) power distance, (b) individualism/collectivism, (c) masculinity/femininity, and (d) uncertainty avoidance:

1. Are there significant differences in the power distance scores between Brazilian respondents and their U.S. counterparts, as well as between generations of Brazilian and U.S. respondents, in terms of gender, age, and educational background?
2. Are there significant differences in the individualism/collectivism scores between Brazilian respondents and their U.S. counterparts, as well as between generations of Brazilian and U.S. respondents, in terms of gender, age, and educational background?
3. Are there significant differences in the masculinity/femininity scores between Brazilian respondents and their U.S. counterparts, as well as between generations of Brazilian and U.S. respondents, in terms of gender, age, and educational background?
4. Are there significant differences in the uncertainty avoidance scores between Brazilian respondents and their U.S. counterparts, as well as between generations of Brazilian and U.S. respondents, in terms of gender, age, and educational background?

DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS

One of the objectives of collecting, processing, and analyzing the data obtained in this cross-cultural study was to ascertain how Brazil and the United States compare with each other in terms of the four Hofstede's cultural dimensions: (a) power distance, (b) individualism/collectivism, (c) masculinity/femininity, and (d) uncertainty avoidance. The second objective was to determine whether the distance between the two cultures had diminished and the Brazilian culture had become more similar to the American culture.

For each country-specific analysis (Hypotheses 1–4 addressed the United States analysis, and Hypothesis 5–8 addressed the Brazilian analysis), these four dimension scores were specified as the dependent variables, and gender, age, and educational background were specified as independent variables. For each of these country-specific analyses, the appropriate subset of the sample was used. For Hypotheses 9 to 12, which addressed differences between Brazil and the United States, the four cultural dimensions were specified as the dependent variables, and the country of the participant (Brazil or the United States), gender, age, and educational background were specified as independent variables.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

A total of 623 individuals participated in this study from both Brazil and the United States. As a result of outliers and missing data, the sample was reduced to 440 participants. Of these participants, 386 (54%) were from the U.S., and 286 (46%) were from Brazil. In addition, 386 (62%) were between the ages of 20 and 34, and 237 (38%) were 35 years or older. Three hundred and thirty-six (54%) were females, and 287 (46%) were males.

ANOVA

Factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was chosen to analyze all 12 hypotheses for the study. For Hypotheses 1 to 8 (first four examining the U.S. culture, and the other four examining the Brazilian culture), a 2 (gender) x 2 (age) x 5 (education) ANOVA was conducted for each of the four cultural dimensions. For Hypotheses 9 to 12 (examining the differences between Brazil and the United States), a 2 (country) x 2 (gender) x 2 (age) x 5 (education) ANOVA was conducted for each of the four cultural dimensions.

HYPOTHESES

The four research questions were tested by means of 12 hypotheses. The first four hypotheses (1–4) dealt with significant differences within the U.S. culture. The next group of four hypotheses (5–8) examined the significant differences within the Brazilian culture, and the last four hypotheses (9–12) examined significant cultural differences between Brazil and the United States. All 12 hypotheses were tested in terms of gender, age, and educational background.

Findings

The results for the first four hypotheses revealed that within the United States gender, age, and educational background have no significant impact on the perception of the four cultural

dimensions. Based on Hofstede's (2001) original findings and the review of the literature these results are surprising in that normally gender, age, and educational background have a significant impact on each of the four cultural dimensions. Normally, the expectation would be that U.S. respondents in the 20 to 34 age group would score lower in power distance, higher in individualism (in his original study Hofstede classified the United States as the most individualistic country in the world), higher in masculinity, and lower in uncertainty avoidance.

Accepting these results as a true picture of the United States in 2011, one would wonder why this is happening. Is this dynamic a result of apathy or a lack of interest or hope in the future, even on the part of the new generation? Could it be the result of frustration caused by the U.S. military involvement in so many regions of the world and the uncertainty of the outcome of such conflicts?

Another possibility is that the recent financial meltdown and the consequent high unemployment numbers may have caused the younger generation to lose faith in the corporate world and wonder what the future holds for them. If further research validates these findings, it would represent a significant change in U.S. culture along the four cultural dimensions in terms of gender, age, and educational background. This type of change, especially if caused by one or more of the reasons mentioned above, would have implications for U.S. multinational companies in terms of redesigning their training and motivational programs both for local employees and for potential expatriates.

The results of the four hypotheses dealing with Brazilian culture present some surprises, especially in relation to individualism/collectivism and power distance:

1. Power distance: Younger Brazilian respondents scored higher in power distance compared to their older counterparts. With Brazil being the host country of several U. S., European, and other MNCs, with Brazilian national companies deeply involved in exports, and with Brazilian business schools teaching the American and European management models in their courses, the expectation would be that the younger generation would necessarily score lower than their older counterpart in the power distance dimension. One can only speculate why this dynamic is occurring. Is it because young people are becoming disillusioned and frustrated with the corruption still prevalent in government? Is it because many in the 20 to 34 age group are afraid of losing their jobs and, consequently, look to their managers for job protection (more than 100 questionnaires used for this study had to be thrown out because respondents in that age group either did not have a job or had less than one year in the present and previous jobs). Gender and education had no major effect on the power distance dimension in Brazil.
2. Individualism/collectivism: A more expected result occurred with the individualism dimension in that participants in the 20 to 34 age group scored higher in individualism than their 35 and older counterparts. This result was expected and represents a significant shift from Hofstede's original findings. Possible reasons for this change may be that younger individuals have learned, as a result of job losses, for example, that they have to take care of themselves before taking care of others. Lack of trust in elected officials may also be a reason for younger people to be more individualistic. Both of the above

reasons present compelling explanation for the shift in the individualism dimension. Gender and education have no significant influence in the individualism dimension, and this does not represent any significant change as compared to the original Hofstede's findings.

The last four hypotheses (9–12), which, in reality, would provide the most valuable information as far as U.S. multinational companies operating in Brazil are concerned, examined the cultural differences between Brazil and the United States. Was there a cultural approximation between the two countries?

These results presented some unexpected findings and contradicted previous research in connection with all four dimensions:

1. Power distance (Hypothesis 9): In general, Brazilian and U.S. citizens do not differ in their perceptions of power distance. A very interesting finding relating to power distance, however, is that younger men (20–34 age group) in both countries scored higher in power distance than their older female and male counterparts. Also younger respondents of both genders scored higher than their older counterparts in the power distance dimension. Again one can only speculate why this dynamic is occurring. Could it be that the threat of terrorism, job losses, reduction in salary as a result of outsourcing, and financial scandals are causing younger respondents to be worried about their own financial stability and, consequently, accept and even support hierarchical inequalities in their societies and in their work environment? Maybe the most compelling reason for this unexpected finding is the uncertainty felt by the younger generation as to what the future holds for them. Further study with different samples in different locations in both countries is very important to either confirm the present results or get a truer picture of the situation.
2. Individualism/collectivism (Hypothesis 10): The results reveal no significant difference in perception of individualism between Brazilian and U.S. citizens in terms of gender and education. Younger participants, however, scored higher in the individualism dimension than their older counterparts. This is no surprise in that younger people, in general, tend to be more individualistic. These results are in line with the findings from the first four hypotheses (1–4) dealing with the U.S. culture and the second set of four questions (5–8) addressing the Brazilian culture. Hofstede's original study, however, classified the U.S. as the most individualistic country in the world and the findings of the present study contradict that assumption.
3. Masculinity/femininity (Hypothesis 11): The results indicate no significant difference between Brazilians and Americans on the masculinity/femininity dimension in terms of gender, age, and educational background. This is interesting because U.S. citizens, as members of a low-context society, are perceived to be more business oriented and assertive than Brazilians, whose culture is classified as high context. This also represents a shift from Hofstede's (2001) original findings in which he classified the United States as a more masculine society compared to the Brazilian culture. A very probable reason for this shift is that many Brazilian companies are involved not only in exporting, but also in foreign direct investment with subsidiaries in a number of foreign countries.

This type of activity provides international exposure to Brazilian executives who, to remain competitive, have to learn how to be more business oriented and more assertive.

4. Uncertainty avoidance (Hypothesis 12): The results indicate no significant difference in the uncertainty avoidance dimension between Brazil and the United States. According to Hofstede (2001), Brazilians go the extra mile to avoid ambiguity in society and in the workplace. He posited that many of the laws passed by Brazilian politicians have the objective of minimizing uncertainty and ambiguous situations. Americans, on the other hand, are much more risk takers and can navigate well in the midst of uncertainty and ambiguity (Hofstede, 2001). This is another unexpected result and represents a shift from the original Hofstede's findings. One possible reason for this shift is the uncertainty in the economy of both countries. However, because of small mean differences and very small effect sizes, these results should be interpreted with caution and certainly further study becomes essential.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS

The four hypotheses used to ascertain the cultural differences between Brazil and the United States, in general, seem to indicate an overall cultural approximation between the two countries. This approximation, if confirmed by more detailed studies, will be very good news for U.S. multinational companies doing business in Brazil or considering Brazil as a potential host country. This approximation means that the two cultures have more similarities than differences, thus permitting a more uneventful and seamless transfer of corporate culture, best practices, technology, and so forth from an American home office to Brazilian affiliates. If further research confirms this cultural approximation between Brazil and the United States, U.S. companies would find that conducting similar studies in other Latin American countries as well would be worthwhile since the Latin American culture is basically high context, a trait inherited from its Portuguese and Spanish colonizers.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This research used a convenience sample of 623 Brazilian and U.S. adult students from small universities in Curitiba, Brazil, and Bristol, Tennessee, United States, certainly not areas of major growth in either of the two countries. Consequently, the finding should be considered with caution because they may not be a good representation of either the Brazilian or U.S. population. An important limitation to the present study, as far as comparisons with the original sample are concerned, is that the sample of Brazilian and American adult students does not match the IBM sample originally used by Hofstede. The fact that the data were collected from entry level, supervisors, and low-to-middle-level managers is another potential limitation because the findings may have been different for higher level management positions.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research is necessary and recommended. There are several options for further studies:

1. Survey executive MBA programs in other parts of Brazil. Sao Paulo and Rio have well-regarded adult MBA programs. Follow the same approach in the United States by

surveying executive MBA programs in Chicago, New York, Miami, and other large cities.

2. Survey multinational companies and domestic companies in the Brazilian states of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Minas Gerais. Those are the three states where the major multinational companies and the major Brazilian companies are located. Follow the same approach in the United States by interviewing major American and foreign multinational companies operating in more growth oriented American states.

SUMMARY

The major finding of this research is that there is a cultural approximation between Brazilian and American culture as measured by Hofstede's cultural dimensions in terms of gender, age, and educational background. This means that there are more similarities than differences between the two countries. The results indicate that both cultures have had changes compared to Hofstede's original finding, but the present findings certainly need to be validated by further research. Accepting these results as a true picture of the Brazilian and American culture in 2011, American multinational companies, and other multinational companies for that matter, would be doing themselves a favor by funding further research using the four cultural dimensions.

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