

Chapter 5

Cultural Patterns and Communication: Taxonomies

We now focus on specific conceptual taxonomies that are useful for understanding cultural differences. We have chosen four different but related taxonomies to describe variations in cultural patterns. The first was developed by Edward Hall, who noted that cultures differ in the extent to which their primary message patterns are high context or low context. The second describes the ideas of Geert Hofstede, who identified six dimensions along which cultures vary. The third taxonomy explains the ideas of Shalom Schwartz, who reasoned that there are three problems that all cultural groups must solve, which results in seven dimensions of culture. The fourth taxonomy, by a group of researchers collectively known as the GLOBE team, incorporates many of the previously described ideas and identifies nine dimensions of culture. Finally, we provide a synthesis of these four taxonomies and propose seven key features or dimensions that differ across cultures.

As you read the descriptions of the following cultural patterns, we caution you to remember three points:

1. First, there is nothing sacred about these approaches and the internal categories they employ. Each approach takes the whole of cultural patterns (beliefs, values, norms, and social practices) and divides them in different ways.
2. Second, the parts of each of the systems are interrelated. We begin the description of each system at an arbitrarily chosen point, presupposing other parts of the system that have not yet been described. Cultural patterns are best understood as a unique whole rather than as an isolated dimension or characteristic, even if a given attribute is distinctive or predominates within a specific culture.
3. Finally, individual members of a culture may vary greatly from the pattern that is typical of that culture. Therefore, as you study these approaches to cultural patterns, we encourage you to make some judgments about how your own culture fits into the pattern. Then, as you place it within the pattern, also try to discern

how you, as an individual, fit into the patterns described. Similarly, as you learn about other cultural patterns, please remember that a specific person may or may not be a typical representative of that culture. As you study your own cultural patterns and those of other cultures, you improve the knowledge component of intercultural competence.

5.1: Hall's High- and Low-Context Cultural Taxonomy

Edward T. Hall, whose writings about the relationship between culture and communication are well known, organizes cultures by the amount of information implied by the setting or context of the communication itself, regardless of the specific words that are spoken.¹ Hall argues that every human being is faced with so many perceptual stimuli—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and bodily sensations—that it is impossible to pay attention to them all. Therefore, one of the functions of culture is to provide a screen between the person and all of those stimuli to indicate what perceptions to notice and how to interpret them. Hall's approach is compatible with the other approaches discussed in this chapter. Where it differs is in the importance it places on the role of context.

Hall's description of high- and low-context cultures is based on the idea that some cultures have a preponderance of messages that are high context, others have messages that are mostly low context, and yet others have a mixture of both. Hall also describes other characteristics of high- and low-context cultures that reveal the beliefs, values, norms, and social practices of the cultural system. These characteristics include the use of indirect or direct messages, the importance of ingroups and outgroups, and the culture's orientation to time.

High- and Low-Context Culture

According to Hall, cultures differ on a continuum that ranges from high to low context.

Interactive

High-Context Cultures

Low-Context Cultures

Description

Low-context cultures prefer to use low-context messages, in which the majority of the information is vested in the explicit code. Low-context cultures include German, Swedish, European American, and English.

Example

A simple example of low-context communication is now experienced by more and more people as they interact with computers. For computers to “understand” a message, every statement must be precise. Many computers will not accept or respond to instructions that do not have every space, period, letter, and number in precisely the right location. The message must be overt and very explicit.

✓ By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- 5.1.1: Contrast how the preference for indirect and direct messages varies from high- to low-context cultures
- 5.1.2: Explain the importance, in a high-context culture, of determining whether a person is in the ingroup or the outgroup
- 5.1.3: Contrast the view of time in high- and low-context cultures

5.1.1: Use of Indirect and Direct Messages

OBJECTIVE: Contrast how the preference for indirect and direct messages varies from high- to low-context cultures

The way messages are presented differs between high-context and low-context cultures.

WRITING PROMPT

Thinking about Your Past Intercultural Interactions

What have you noticed about your past intercultural interactions? Describe one or two interactions and explain whether the other people displayed high-context or low-context cultural characteristics. Given your experience(s), what are important considerations about high-context and low-context cultures for your future interactions?

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Review: High- and Low-Context Cultures

Complete the activity below to review your understanding of high- and low-context cultures.

Interactive

1. In cultures, the majority of the information is vested in the explicit code.
2. In cultures, the meaning is either implied by the physical setting or is presumed to be part of the individual's internalized beliefs, values, norms, and social practices.
3. Japanese and Latino cultures are two examples of cultures.
4. German and European American cultures are two examples of cultures.

Start Over

Check Answers

5.1.2: Importance of Ingroups and Outgroups

OBJECTIVE: Explain the importance, in a high-context culture, of determining whether a person is in the ingroup or the outgroup

In high-context cultures it is very easy to determine who is a member of the group and who is not. Because so much of the meaning of messages is embedded in the rules and rituals of situations, it is easy to tell who is acting according to those norms. As there are fixed and specific expectations for behaviors, deviations are easy to detect.

Another distinction concerns the emphasis placed on the individual in contrast to the group as a source of self-identity. In a high-context culture, the commitment between people is very strong and deep, and responsibility

to others takes precedence over responsibility to oneself. Loyalties to families and the members of one's social and work groups are long-lasting and unchanging. This degree of loyalty differs from that found in a low-context culture, in which the bonds between people are fragile and the extent of involvement and commitment to long-term relationships is lower.

5.1.3: Orientation to Time

OBJECTIVE: Contrast the view of time in high- and low-context cultures

The final distinguishable characteristic of high- and low-context cultures is their orientation to time. In high-context cultures, time is viewed as more open, less structured, more responsive to the immediate needs of people, and

Use of Messages in High- and Low-Context Cultures

High- and low-context cultures differ in the length, specificity, and focus of their communication messages and interactions, as well as in the source of the meanings in those messages and interactions.

Interactive

Interpretation

Coding

Reactions

- In a high-context culture such as that of Japan, meanings are internalized and there is a large emphasis on nonverbal codes. Hall describes messages in high-context cultures as almost preprogrammed, in which very little of the interpretation of the message is left to chance because people already know that, in the context of the current situation, the communicative behaviors will have a specific and particular message.
- In low-context cultures, people look for the meaning of others' behaviors in the messages that are plainly and explicitly coded. The details of the message are expressed precisely and specifically in the words that people use as they try to communicate with others.

Another way to think about the difference between high- and low-context cultures is to imagine something with which you are very familiar, such as repairing a car, cooking, sewing, or playing a particular sport. When you talk about that activity with someone else who is very familiar with it, you will probably be less explicit and instead use a more succinct set of verbal and nonverbal messages. You will talk in a verbal shorthand that does not require you to be specific and precise about every aspect of the ideas that you are expressing, because the others will know what you mean without the ideas' specific presentation. However, if you talk to someone who does not know very much about the activity, you will have to explain more, be more precise and specific, and provide more background information.

less subject to external goals and constraints. In low-context cultures, time is highly organized, in part because of the additional energy required to understand the messages of others. Low-context cultures are almost forced to pay more attention to time in order to complete the work of living with others.

5.2: Hofstede's Cultural Taxonomy

Geert Hofstede's impressive studies of cultural differences in value orientations offer another approach to understanding the range of cultural differences.² Hofstede's approach is based on the assertion that people carry mental programs, or "software of the mind," that are

developed during childhood and reinforced by their culture. These mental programs contain the ideas of a culture and are expressed through its dominant values. To identify the principal values of different cultures, Hofstede surveyed more than 100,000 IBM employees in 71 countries, and he has subsequently broadened his analysis to include many others.

Through theoretical reasoning and statistical analyses, Hofstede identified five dimensions along which dominant patterns of a culture can be ordered: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and time orientation. Recently, an additional dimension has been added: indulgence versus restraint. Hofstede's work provides an excellent synthesis of the relationships between cultural values and social behaviors.³

5.3: Schwartz's Cultural Taxonomy

Another set of ongoing studies on differences in cultural patterns was conducted by Shalom Schwartz. He also began with Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck's premise that all cultures face common problems for which they must find a solution.⁸

WRITING PROMPT

Schwartz's Cultural Problems/Patterns

Explain which of Schwartz's three cultural problems resonate the most for your cultural group. Which of them seem to dominate your intercultural interactions, and why do you think that is so?

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▼ **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

- 5.3.1:** Explain the three primary cultural dimensions of Schwartz's Cultural Taxonomy

5.3.1: Summarizing Schwartz's Cultural Taxonomy

OBJECTIVE: Explain the three primary cultural dimensions of Schwartz's Cultural Taxonomy

In sum, Schwartz maintains that there are three primary cultural dimensions: autonomy versus embeddedness, egalitarianism versus hierarchy, and harmony versus mastery. Each cultural dimension identifies alternative solutions to a central problem that every culture must resolve. Whereas each dimension represents a continuum of possible cultural responses, a culture's tendency to prefer one pole of a given dimension means that the opposite pole is less emphasized and therefore less important to that culture. Figure 5.1 depicts the relationships among Schwartz's value orientations.

For additional numerical information that locates 80 cultures on Schwartz's dimensions, please see the **Resources**. There you will find information about many cultures, grouped by geographic region. As we suggested about Hofstede's information, Schwartz's data can also be used to understand the tendencies of cultures that are of interest to you. Our earlier caution still applies: No single cultural dimension is sufficient to describe or understand the complexity of cultural differences.

Cultural Problems

Schwartz reasoned that there are three problems or issues that all groups must resolve.⁹

Interactive

First Cultural Problem

Second Cultural Problem

Third Cultural Problem

Schwartz's third cultural problem, which he calls **harmony versus mastery**, deals with people's orientations to social and natural resources.

Harmony cultures encourage acceptance and blending into the natural and social worlds, since humans are seen as an integral part of nature. The view of this cultural orientation, which is held by the dominant cultures in Italy and Mexico, is to accept rather than to change, to fit in rather than to exploit, and to limit rather than to control.

Mastery cultures encourage their members to direct and control the natural and social worlds. One's goals can be achieved most effectively by changing and adapting the social and natural environments. The view of this cultural orientation, which is held by the dominant cultures in China and India, is that one should be self-sufficient, self-assertive, daring, ambitious, and, ultimately, successful.

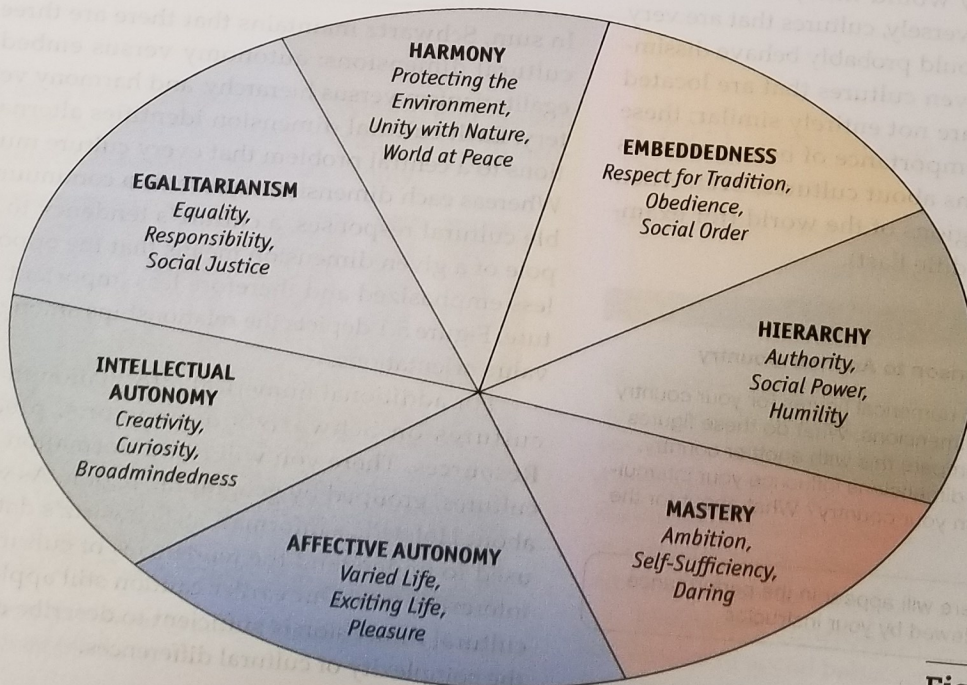


Figure 5.1 Schwartz's cultural value orientations

family and throughout the social institutions of a culture: in the degree to which children are encouraged to have their own desires and motivations, in the solidarity and unity expected in the family, in the role models that are presented, and throughout the range of messages that are conveyed.

Additional numerical information about 61 cultures on the GLOBE dimensions can be found in the **Resources**. The regional groupings organize the cultures in the GLOBE studies by geographic areas. As we suggested previously, the data can be used to understand the tendencies of cultures that are of interest to you.

The GLOBE research expands our understanding of cultural patterns. By providing updated information on a wide range of cultures, and by revising and expanding the cultural dimensions that are relevant, this effort substantially increases our understanding of cultures and intercultural communication. To provide just one example of the usefulness of the expanded GLOBE dimensions, consider the information (in the **Resources**) about the Japanese culture on the dimensions of institutional collectivism and ingroup collectivism. Whereas the Japanese are extremely high in institutional collectivism (+222), they are below the average for ingroup collectivism (-68). This information clarifies why decisions in Japan are most often made, and resources among the Japanese are typically distributed, in a very collectivistic fashion, but the collective group for the Japanese—that is, the group with which people identify most closely—is not necessarily the family but rather the organization, the nation, or some other social unit. New Zealanders, Swedes, and Danes, among others, have patterns on these two dimensions that are similar to the Japanese; Greeks, Guatemalans, Colombians, and others have the opposite pattern.

WRITING PROMPT

The Utility of the GLOBE Taxonomy

Reflect on the information about the dimensions in the GLOBE taxonomy. How useful is it for you in comparison to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions or Schwartz's Cultural Taxonomy? How would you use the knowledge gained from the GLOBE taxonomy in your own intercultural interactions?

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5.5: A Synthesis of Cultural Taxonomies

We have noted that each attempt to identify the fundamental ways that cultures can differ—that is, the core ideas of the taxonomies we have explored—takes the whole of cultural patterns and divides them in different ways. Yet we

are sure you noticed that there are many commonalities in these approaches.

One central idea to each of these approaches, first noted by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, is that all cultures face a common set of problems for which they must find solutions. Based on the ideas presented, we now have a more refined basis for suggesting what those fundamental cultural problems might be, and therefore what aspects of culture would likely make one cultural group similar to or different from another.

We suggest that there are seven universal problems, and therefore seven cultural dimensions, that are fundamental to understanding a culture. Each dimension can be viewed as a continuum of choices that a culture must make. To avoid confusion, we label these dimensions by their commonly used names, when such a name exists. Each label describes one or both of the end points—the extremes—of the continuum.

✓ **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

5.5.1: Analyze the relationship between the authors' seven cultural dimensions and intercultural competence

5.5.1: Seven Cultural Dimensions

OBJECTIVE: Analyze the relationship between the authors' seven cultural dimensions and intercultural competence

All cultures must address problems that inevitably arise in human social groups. Further, cultures must—and do!—invent solutions to these problems that, over time, become the “correct” ways for members of that culture to relate to others. These solutions constitute the dimensions along which cultures differ. This section, therefore, will synthesize the previously provided information on cultural dimensions, which affect how cultures are organized and how they view and act in the world.

WRITING PROMPT

Reflecting on the Utility of the Seven Cultural Dimensions

Identify which of the seven cultural dimensions you find most useful in understanding and interacting with a culturally different person. Why did you select those dimensions over others? To what extent are some dimensions hard to understand and know about a culture?

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ILLUSTRATING THE SEVEN CULTURAL DIMENSIONS Table 5.9 highlights the correspondence between the seven universal problems we have identified, the cultural dimensions that address them, and the cultural taxonomies that we discussed previously.

Seven Cultural Dimensions

It is important to understand these cultural dimensions and to consider them in your intercultural interactions.¹²

Interactive

Individualism–Collectivism

Perhaps the most essential issue that all cultures must confront involves the requirement for a balance between the needs of individuals versus the priorities of the group. The individualism–collectivism dimension highlights this important issue. Scholars such as Harry Triandis have suggested that the individualism–collectivism dimension is, by far, the most important attribute that distinguishes one culture from another; thus it is not surprising that it appears in each of the previously discussed taxonomies.

Power Distance

Gender Expectations

Task Relationship

Uncertainty Avoidance

Harmony–Mastery

Time Orientation

Table 5.9 A Synthesis of Cultural Taxonomies

Synthesis of Taxonomies	Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck	Hall	Hofstede	Schwartz	GLOBE
Individualism–Collectivism	Social Relations Orientation	Context	Individualism–Collectivism	Autonomy vs. Embeddedness	Ingroup Collectivism; Institutional Collectivism
Power Distance	Social Relations Orientation	Context	Power Distance	Egalitarianism vs. Hierarchy	Power Distance
Gender Expectations	Social Relations; Self-Orientation	Context	Masculinity–Femininity	—	Gender Egalitarianism; Assertiveness
Task Relationship	Activity Orientation	—	Indulgence–Restraint	Intellectual Autonomy; Affective Autonomy	Performance Orientation; Humane Orientation
Uncertainty Avoidance	—	Context	Uncertainty Avoidance	—	Uncertainty Avoidance
Harmony–Mastery	World Orientation	—	—	Harmony vs. Mastery	—
Time Orientation	Time Orientation	Context	Time Orientation	—	Future Orientation

Figure 5.2 Cultural orientations

Individualism	_____	Collectivism	
High Power Distance	_____	Low Power Distance	
Gender Expectations			
Men Assertive	_____	Men Nurturing	
Women Assertive	_____	Women Nurturing	
Men, Women Equal	_____	Men, Women Unequal	
Task Focus	_____	Relationship Focus	
Uncertainty Avoidance	_____	Uncertainty Seeking	
Harmony with Environment	_____	Mastery of Environment	
Time Orientation			
Goals:	Short-Term _____	Long-Term _____	
Emphasis:	Past _____	Present _____	Future _____
Use:	One-at-a-Time _____	Many-Things-at-Once _____	
Rhythm:	Open, Flexible _____	Structured, Organized _____	

As you can see, there is substantial commonality across the taxonomies. But they also differ in what they emphasize, in the distinctions they regard as significant, and in the terminology, they use to feature these universal cultural issues.

Figure 5.2 summarizes the range of cultural orientations that can occur on these seven dimensions.

Taken together, these seven dimensions provide a culture-general “map” or framework that can be filled in with culture-specific information. This gives you an accessible way to understand specific cultural patterns.

WRITING PROMPT

Using a Culture-General Map for Your Own Intercultural Interactions

Reflect on how identifying the discussed cultural orientations in a type of “culture-general map” would help you become more interculturally competent. How might you use these orientations in your daily life to become more competent in your intercultural interactions? Provide examples.

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5.6: Cultural Taxonomies and Intercultural Competence

The major lesson in this chapter is that cultures vary systematically in their choices about solutions to basic human problems. The taxonomies offer lenses through which

cultural variations can be understood and appreciated, rather than negatively evaluated and disregarded. The categories in these taxonomies can help you to describe the fundamental aspects of cultures. As frames of reference, they provide mechanisms to understand many intercultural communication events. In any intercultural encounter, people may be communicating from very different perceptions of what is “real,” what is “good,” and what is “correct” behavior. The competent intercultural communicator must recognize that there will be cultural differences in addressing the seven universal cultural issues, and these differences will always be a factor in intercultural communication.

▼ By the end of this module, you will be able to:

5.6.1: Explain why the cultural differences addressed in cultural taxonomies are important in intercultural communication

5.6.1: The Importance of Cultural Taxonomies

OBJECTIVE: Explain why the cultural differences addressed in cultural taxonomies are important in intercultural communication

There are many ways you can use this knowledge about cultural taxonomies to help you increase your intercultural communication competence.