



Chapter III

Cultural Differences, Information and Code Systems

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores an alternative way of framing information systems research on the role and impact of national culture. It argues that the widely accepted structural framework of Hofstede reduces interpretation to a simplistic categorical description which in many cases ignores differentiation within cultures. The alternative model suggests, that national culture can be better understood by seeking out the dominant codes that frame the discourse pervasive in a culture and understanding how that discourse affects the obvious social codes of ritual, custom and behavior and the textual codes which express the nature of that culture. This framework is applied to two different case studies — one in New Zealand and one in Thailand — to demonstrate its applicability.

INTRODUCTION

IS researchers have been interested to explain differences in adoption and/or usage of IT/IS by considering the impact of culture — primarily national culture on human behaviour and the way humans use the IT (Myers & Tan, 2002; Straub, Loch, Evaristo, Karahanna, & Srite, 2002; Thanasankit, 2002; Peszynski & Thanasankit, 2002; Hanisch, Thanasankit, & Corbitt, 2002; Thanasankit & Corbitt, 2000; Burn, Saxena, Ma, & Cheung, 1993; Burn, 1995; Burn, Davison, & Jordan, 1997; Davison & Jordan, 1996; Ho, Raman, & Watson, 1989; Korpela, Soriyan, Olufokunbi, & Mursu, 1998; Malling, 1998; Nelson & Clark, 1994). Researchers have examined differences in the adoption and use of information systems, knowledge systems and the business processes that are generated by and support information systems and information technology (IT). The purpose of this paper is to discuss a different view of culture, culture as code systems.

This article adopts a different approach. We examine the construction and meaning of information in its cultural context through the use of code systems and reconceptualise a framework to understand national culture and then apply that framework to two previously published studies, one from Thailand and one from New Zealand. One of the countries studied represents a Western culture and the other an Asian or Oriental culture which Said (1995) suggests are significantly differentiated in the practice of cultural norms. The results of these applications are analyzed and briefly discussed as a means of understanding the complexities involved with the application and understanding of national culture and of progressing the debate leading to a less structured and formalistic framework for dealing with the concept of national culture.

Despite several limitations, the recent phenomenon of a National State has dominated the understanding and measurement of cultural factors in IS literature (Myers & Tan, 2002; Straub, Loch, Evaristo, Karahanna, & Srite, 2002). Although many authors have accepted the existence of a single National Culture for each country (Scarborough, 1998; Burn, Saxena, Ma, & Cheung, 1993; Hofstede, 2000), the adoption of such a rigid definition neglects many of the facts presented throughout history (Myers & Tan, 2002) and oversimplifies the measurement of culture (Straub et al., 2002). Furthermore, many political boundaries defining a National State fail to represent actual cultural boundaries; a single National Culture does not reflect the true cultural beliefs present within many countries (Myers & Tan, 2002). Many agree with Straub and conclude that an "...individual's membership in a cultural group, such as their national culture, defines the nature of values they espouse" (Straub et al., 2002, p. 13).

Due to the complex nature of measuring culture, much research adopts specific (and often predefined) parameters to capture and understand cultural differences (Hofstede, 2000; Scarborough, 1998; Burn & Szeto, 1998; Xing, 1995; Burn et al., 1993). Despite these rigid techniques to measure culture some authors recognise the need to understand the process of how cultures are formed (Myers & Tan, 2002) and employ suitable methodologies to do so (Trauth, 2000). A summary of alternative methodologies found in the literature, including an examination of research employing Hofstede's behaviour principles follows. Cultural dimensions explored though the literature have varied, although Hofstede's principles have dominated. The study of Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance and Masculinity has been closely observed (Burn, Saxena, Ma, & Cheung, 1993; Mcleod, Saunders, Jones, Schreel, & Estrada, 1997; Cummings & Guynes, 1994; Hofstede, 2000; Hunter & Beck, 2000; Mejias, Shepherd, Vogel, & Lazanco, 1997;

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