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Cultural Dimensions of Anglos, Australians and Malaysians

Asma Abdullah

This paper seeks to investigate the similarities and differences in the cultural dimensions among Anglos, Australians, and Malaysians, which comprise of Chinese, Indians, and Malays. The main results reveal that the Anglos and the Australians differed significantly from the Malaysians in six dimensions. The most significant differences occur in dimensions related to relationships, collectivism, and religiosity. Among the Malaysian groups, there is only one significant difference. This occurs in the religiosity dimension, whereby the Malays differ from the Chinese and the Indians. The research discusses these differences and considers some suggestions for studying Malaysian managerial behaviors.

Introduction

The study of organisations and managerial behavior in most institutions of learning and training in Malaysia is strongly influenced by an Anglo-American and European based thinking (Jamieson, 1983: 85; Bettignies, 1986; Westwood, 1991). This is NOT surprising as most of the contemporary management literature comes from the Anglo-American traditions (Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991). Against this background, this paper attempts to examine the cultural dimensions of Anglos, Australians, and Malaysians.

The main argument of the paper is that the cultural dimensions of Malaysians differ significantly with those of Anglos and Australians. Subsequently, the paper contends that management theories and practices developed in the Anglo-American context may not be suitable for application in the Malaysian environment barring modifications. It is also the hope of our paper to highlight the need for students of culture and management to be aware of the mental modes of Malaysian managers and to use culturally appropriate terms to describe who and what they are.

The phenomenal growth of global business has brought about pressure on firms to manage their activities across borders. Firms planning to succeed in international business need to have a thorough grasp of cross-cultural management. Along with globalization of businesses, Western based management theories are exported at the same time to other parts of the world.

This has met with growing skepticism by many scholars. Researchers have long debated on the factors that drive managers to successfully manage their international businesses. Some researchers believe that these factors differed across borders and are highly linked to culture. As a result, managers need to adapt to the culture of the locality in which they operate in order to be successful (Pearson, Entrekin, & Girardi, 1997).

The key feature of Western society is its emphasis on instrumental rationality governing how particular organizations are formed and structured as well as how businesses are conducted even across cultures. Rational thinking is based on information that symbolizes reason, and managerial and organisational cultures are accepted as givens with little regard for culture-specific influences (Alvesson, 1993). Since the eighteenth century, the Western ideal of management is understood to be a mechanistic model rooted in the materialisation of values, the standardisation of society through industrialisation, and the mobility to consider anything other than cause and effect relationships as underlying events (Redding, 1980).

In fact, many social science theories have been shaped by the disguised ideology of a focus on individualism. This has sometimes led to the uncritical adoption of the individualistic notions of good life. In this case, the goals in life are thought to be dignity of the person, priority for autonomy or self-direction, the need for privacy and self-development. The value of individualism presumes that the road to freedom requires that persons should be instrumental, rational and expressive of themselves (Pedersen, 1997). As a result, there are some fundamental questions, which have to be answered; one of which is related to the degree of cultural bias in the way organisations are designed.

Hofstede (1987: 16-17) has proposed that the underlying assumptions of Southeast Asian cultures differed with that of American culture. In Southeast Asian cultures, work is perceived as a necessity. People find their rightful place in the community, existing peacefully and harmoniously with the environment. Persons in authoritative positions “represent” God and their objectives are loyally adhered to. Furthermore, people behave as members of a family or a group.

On the other hand, assumptions in the American culture suggest that work is good for people and that people’s potentials should be stretched to its maximum. The organisational objectives exist separately from people who behave as unattached individuals. The American assumptions laid the foundation on which many modern management theories thrived. The motivation theories propounded by Maslow, and Herzberg, and leadership theories developed by McGregor, Likert, and Blake and Mouton are among the better-known American theories. These theories are based on assumptions that are probably absent in countries without an Anglo-American culture.

Research Methodology

This study is part of a larger study conducted by the lead author for her doctoral dissertation. The data used for this paper was collected from managers who attended executive cross-cultural training courses conducted by the lead author. The questionnaire was developed based on eight concepts that are commonly used in cross-cultural management literature. These concepts include relationships, harmony, shame, group orientation, belief in God, respect for elders, polychronic time orientation, and high context form of communication. Six questions were designed to measure each concept, making a total of 48 questions. Respondents were requested to select from the Likert-styled anchor scales: a “7” for statements that they agree most with and a “0” for statements that they agree least with. Table 1 shows the cultural dimensions with their respective descriptions and sample items.

The characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 2. The number of responses for the Anglos, Australians, Chinese, Indians and Malays are 19, 35, 40, 14 and 60 respectively. Most of the respondents are in the thirties, except for the Anglos who are older. A majority of the respondents are males whose careers are less than ten years. The Anglos, however, have a larger proportion with more than 15 years of work experience.

Prior to the main analyses, descriptive analyses were conducted. The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha for the overall sample are shown in Table 3. The standard deviation and variance coefficients do not show any notable anomaly. The cultural factors have moderate to high alpha correlations except for the “Harmony-Control” dimension. This dimension is excluded in subsequent data analyses due to its low reliability.

Results

Analysis of variance is then executed on the data through the SPSS General Linear Model Univariate procedure. Table 4 shows the mean factor scores of each group for all the cultural dimensions, along with the results of the post-hoc pair-wise comparisons. Except for the polychronic-monochronic factor, the F-values are significant for all the remaining factors. This means that the ANOVA tests for the six factors of relationship-task, shame-guilt, we-I, religious-secular, hierarchy-equality, and high context-low context are significant.

The strength of the relationships between the group factors and the six dependent factors, as assessed by Eta², are strong. Respectively, the group factor accounts for 37 percent, 26 percent, 50 percent, 20 percent and 16 percent of the variance of the six dependent factors. The group factor accounts most strongly for the religious-secular factor and weakest for the high context-low context factor.

Table 1: Cultural Dimensions: Their Descriptions and Sample Items

Cultural dimension	Description	Sample item
Relationship-Task	Measures the importance placed on relationships with employees versus task accomplishments.	Before doing business with another person it is important to have good relationships.
Harmony-Control	Gauges the individual's relationship with nature.	It is more important to be in harmony with the environment than to take control of it.
Shame-Guilt	Verifies if shame (which is outer-driven) or guilt (which is inner-driven) is the principle that guides behaviors.	People are driven to do things to maintain the good name of the group (family, team, country).
We-I	Measures the preference for interdependence with other people.	Members regard themselves as part of a group with overlapping and interdependent boundaries.
Religious-Secular	Verifies the degree in which religiosity, as opposed to secularity, is considered in managerial issues.	Religious/spiritual matters should be included when planning material/economic development.
Hierarchy-Equality	Gauges the emphasis placed on rank, status, and other ascribed attributes over equality issues.	Work, duties and responsibilities are distributed according to seniority and age.
Polychronic-Monochronic	Verifies if the principle that guides behavior is "circular" or "sequential".	People do several things at one time, as they believe in multi-skilling.
High Context-Low Context	Measures the extent to which cultures depend on the context (external environment, situation, non-verbal signs) to communicate.	People focus on the implied meaning and nonverbal communication "What you see is not what you get there is more than meets the eye".

Because the overall F test was significant, post-hoc tests were executed on the six dimensions to evaluate pair wise differences among the groups. A decision has to be made whether to use a post-hoc procedure that assumes equal variances or one that does not assume equal variances to control for Type I error

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	Anglo (N = 19)	Aussie (N = 35)	Chinese (N = 40)	Indian (N = 14)	Malay (N = 60)
Age					
Under 30	5.3%	37.1%	17.5%	7.1%	25.0%
30-39 years	26.3%	40.0%	45.0%	50.0%	51.7%
40-60 years	68.4%	22.9%	37.5%	42.9%	23.3%
Sex					
Males	72.2%	75.9%	65.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Females	27.8%	24.1%	35.0%		
Years worked					
Less than 10 years	21.1%	80.6%	62.5%	57.1%	53.3%
10-15 years	21.1%	16.1%	5.0%	21.4%	23.3%
More than 15 years	57.9%	3.2%	32.5%	21.4%	23.3%

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding or missing data.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach's Alpha for Combined Samples

Cultural Factors	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Variance	Alpha
Relationship-Task	168	1.33	6.33	3.774	.913	.833	.662
Harmony-Control	168	1.00	5.67	3.635	.834	.695	.203
Shame-Guilt	168	1.67	6.67	3.978	1.005	1.010	.569
We-I	168	1.00	7.00	3.869	.950	.902	.623
Religious-Secular	168	.00	7.00	3.331	1.417	2.009	.755
Hierarchy-Equality	168	.00	6.33	2.835	1.090	1.187	.560
Polychronic-Monochronic	168	1.00	6.33	3.301	.990	.980	.548
High Context-Low Context	168	1.00	7.00	3.329	1.057	1.118	.579

across the multiple pair wise comparisons. This study chose to use a “middle-of-the-road” test such as the Tukey test for equal variances and the Dunnett's C test for unequal variances over other more conservative tests like the Scheffe test or more liberal tests like the LSD test (Morgan & Griego, 1998: 186). All post-hoc comparisons used the Dunnett's C procedure except relationship-task, which used the Tukey procedure.

The Malays scored the highest on the importance of relationships. The Chinese and Indians scores were close to the overall mean score. Nevertheless, there is no significant difference among these three groups. The lowest score for this factor was by the Australian group, followed by the Anglo group. Both these groups do not differ significantly. The scores of the Anglos and the

Table 4: ANOVA Results of Cultural Factors Across the Five Groups

Cultural Factors	Anglo	Aussie	Chinese	Indian	Malay	F-Value	P-Value
1. Relationship-Task	3.228	2.876	4.025	3.952	4.261	23.62	.000
Anglo							
Aussie		ns					
Chinese		*	*				
Indian		*	*	ns			
Malay		*	*	ns	ns		
2. Shame-Guilt	3.421	3.362	4.183	3.929	4.389	9.185	.000
Anglo							
Aussie		ns					
Chinese		*	*				
Indian		ns	ns	ns			
Malay		*	*	ns	ns		
3. We-I	2.754	3.562	4.192	4.595	4.017	14.609	.000
Anglo							
Aussie		ns					
Chinese		*	*				
Indian		*	*	ns			
Malay		*	*	ns	ns		
4. Religious-Secular	1.684	2.305	3.225	3.548	4.472	40.709	.000
Anglo							
Aussie		ns					
Chinese		*	*				
Indian		*	*	ns			
Malay		*	*	*	*		
5. Hierarchy-Equality	1.860	2.429	2.917	2.833	3.328	9.884	.000
Anglo							
Aussie		ns					
Chinese		*	ns				
Indian		*	ns	ns			
Malay		*	*	ns	ns		
6. Polychronic-Monochronic	3.088	3.576	3.233	3.333	3.244	.996	.411
7. High-Low context	2.579	2.867	3.467	3.286	3.756	7.764	.000
Anglo							
Aussie		ns					
Chinese		ns	ns				
Indian		ns	ns	ns			
Malay		*	*	ns	ns		

Note: Table entries are mean factor scores for the five samples. The degrees of freedom for all factors are (4, 163). Non-significance between pairs of means are denoted by "ns" while "*" denotes significance.

Australians differed significantly from those of the Malaysians. The Anglos and the Australians were clearly classified into one group and the Malaysians in another group by the Homogeneous Sub-set table.

The Malays again scored the highest for the shame dimension, followed by the Chinese. The Indian score was almost identical to the overall mean score. There is no significant difference among the Malaysian groups for this dimension. The Australians and Anglos scored markedly lower than the Malaysians. Both the Malays and the Chinese differed significantly with the Anglos and the Australians. The scores of the Indians however, do not differ from the other groups.

The Indians scored the highest on collectivism, followed by the Chinese and the Malays. There is no significant difference among these three groups. The Anglos turned out to be the most individualist, followed by the Australians. Both these groups showed significant differences with the three Malaysian groups.

The Malays scored the highest for the religious dimension while the Anglos scored the lowest. The Indians scored the second highest while the Chinese score was close to the overall mean score. The Australians are not significantly different from the Anglos. However, both these groups are significantly different from the Malaysian groups. Moreover, while the Indians and the Chinese are not significantly different from each other, both these groups differ significantly from the Malays. The Homogeneous Sub-set table classified the samples into three distinct groups: the Anglos and the Australians in one, the Chinese and the Indians in another, and the Malays in the third group.

The Malays scored the highest for the hierarchy dimension, followed by the Chinese. The Indian score was near the overall mean score. The Anglos scored the lowest for this dimension. The Anglos differed significantly from all three Malaysian groups while the Malays differed significantly from both the Anglos and Australians. There is no significant difference among the Malaysian groups.

The Malays scored the highest means for the dimension of high-context. The Chinese were next highest, followed by the Indians. The lowest score for this dimension was by the Anglos. The only significant difference was between the Malays, and the Anglos and the Australians.

The post-hoc pair-wise comparisons exposed an interesting pattern of differences and similarities. The Malays scored the highest means for five dimensions: relationship, shame, religious, hierarchy, and high-context. On the other extreme, the Anglos scored the lowest means in four dimensions: collectivism, religious, hierarchy, and high-context. The Anglos differed significantly from the Malaysian groups in three of the dimensions while the Australians similarly differed significantly from the Malaysian groups in two dimensions. The Anglos and Australians have no significant difference in all the six dimensions. Meanwhile, the Malaysians have no significant difference

among themselves in five dimensions. They differed significantly only in the religious dimension, with the Malays differing from the Chinese and the Indians.

Finally, the mean factor scores were aggregated to compute the overall dissimilarity matrix. The results are shown in Table 5. The results illustrate the diagonally opposite positions of the Anglos and the Malays. As measured by squared Euclidean distances, the Anglos were furthest away from the Malays. The closest positions were between the Chinese and the Indians. The Chinese and the Indians were relatively closer to the Malays than the Australians were to the Anglos. The Chinese and Indians were not as far from the Australians and Anglos as the Malays were. Gauging from the position of the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians were about “half as far” when compared to the Anglos and the Australians.

Table 5: Overall Distances Among the Groups Based on Cultural Factor Scores

	Anglo	Aussie	Chinese	Indian	Malay
Anglo	.000				
Aussie	2.196	.000			
Chinese	8.741	4.161	.000		
Indian	9.974	4.572	.415	.000	
Malay	15.988	9.750	1.939	1.984	.000

Note: Table entries are squared Euclidean distances calculated on aggregated factor scores.

To briefly summarise the results, the Malays differed most significantly from the Anglos and the Australians. The Chinese and the Indians differed from the Anglos and the Australians too, but to a less marked extent. This is especially clear for the religious dimension, whereby the Malays differed significantly from not only the Anglos and the Australians, but also from the Chinese and the Indians. The Chinese and the Indians have little difference between themselves, just like the Anglos and the Australians do.

Discussions

This study started out to investigate the similarities and differences among five groups of managers with regards to eight cultural dimensions. Generally, there were negligible significant differences among the three Malaysian groups in all the dimensions (except for religiosity). This result appears to support previous research that found little differences among Malaysians in cultural values (Yusof & Amin, 1999). As commented, although Malaysians belong to different ethnic origins, they have “streamlined” their values under a shared wider socio-cultural

environment. There were also no significant differences between the Anglo and Australian samples. This finding is consistent with previous findings. It suggests that while the Anglos and Australians are separated in nationality, they still share some similarity in cultural values.

The findings, however, revealed significant differences between the Malaysian and the non-Malaysian groups. The sole difference among the Malaysian groups occurred in the religiosity dimension (Habrizah, 1997: 41). These differences all occurred in the expected direction. While there were little surprises, a noteworthy point to make out of these differences is the unique position of the Malay managers. The results seem to situate the Malay managers as the “odd man” among the five managerial samples. This is indicated by two findings. First, the Malay sample stands furthest away from both the Anglo and the Australian samples. Second, the Malay sample differs from the Chinese and Indian samples in religiosity. This is accentuated by the presence of little differences between the Chinese and the Indian samples.

A possible implication of this finding is that the Chinese and the Indians have adapted to a more commercial orientation more so than the Malays have. For example, while all Malaysian groups clearly emphasised relationships, the Malays placed far more importance on relationships than the Chinese and the Indians. The challenge for Malays is that, they need to also pay sufficient attention to getting the task done.

Similarly, while all three groups emphasised the notion of shame, the Malays showed the strongest tendency to do so. The Malays see shame or *malu* as an ingredient of social conditioning because it teaches them to be externally driven by what other people have to say *apa orang kata nanti*. Their behaviors are often judged and assessed by their peers and elders who are important in their circle of network. It serves as a tool to deter them from committing acts that are considered as socially unbecoming by the group.

Furthermore, being openly ridiculed and punished brings shame to the person and the family members. The cultural values and norms of face-saving often form the main reasons why Malays are rather uncomfortable with giving appraisal review discussions to their subordinates. Even when they do, managers tend to be indirect and somewhat circuitous *berliku liku* in their face-to-face interactions with their subordinates. It is a difficult task for Malay managers to give honest, and specific performance feedback without first establishing a relationship of trust.

Among the three Malaysians groups, the Malays clearly have more positive attitudes toward religion. Malays believe very strongly in being spiritually fulfilled while the other groups tend to stress more on materialistic achievements. The Malays place a higher degree of importance on fulfilling religious obligations and believe that there is no separation of work matters from the teachings of their religion. Malays strongly feel that they should not sacrifice their religious beliefs for productivity. They believe in upholding their religious values and

practices at the workplace. This notion supports the importance placed by Malay managers that their work ethics have to be strongly anchored in their religious beliefs.

Malaysians are found to be more hierarchical than the Anglos and Australians. The Malays, more so than the Chinese and the Indians, attach more weight to the practice of hierarchy. Malays emphasise the importance of status, and the deference to senior and male elders as articulated in the statement “Make sure you know his titles”. Because of their respect for elders and status, Malays accept that only leaders are entrusted to make the right decisions. Malays demonstrate their respect for elders by using elaborate rituals and standardised forms of courtesy that are calibrated according to rank, ancestry, and wealth of the elder. The senior elder or leader in the group is like the father of a family who is imbued with prestige and authority over the younger members *anak buah*. The latter is expected to respect and obey their leaders and their authority. They are not expected to question or challenge what the elder says.

Malaysians generally practise a high context form of communication where they attach meanings to elements surrounding the explicit message. Their communication patterns are usually indirect because meaningful information either resides in the physical context or are internalised in the person to whom the information is directed. Malaysians also tend to honour their past and value past symbols to perpetuate the experiences of their forefathers. The old and rich traditions and heritage provide examples to guide future actions. Malaysians do not separate the individual from the environment under which they function.

The phrase “the medium is the message” means that the message is often interpreted in relation with the messenger, the recipient, the time and method of transmission, and who else was present during the transmission. The desire to preserve harmonious relationships makes it difficult for Malays especially, to be assertive with Anglo Saxons who prefer a direct and confrontational communication style. Malaysians believe that being too open, frank, forthright and direct comes with a cost of being insensitive to the feelings of others (*timbang rasa dan jaga hati orang lain*). Relationships could suffer, leading to a breakdown in interpersonal communication.

Implications

Much of what we know about organizations today are the products of thinking and research based on the experiences and practices of managers in more industrialized countries where work organisations tend to be more formal and mechanistic than those in less developed countries which are undergoing the process of industrialisation. They are seen as the norm where values of individualism, competition, egalitarianism, rationality, achievement orientation, scientism, secularism, a problem-solving orientation and “ruggedness” are revered.

Based on the results, this paper attempts to highlight the need to review the study of management in organisations in cultures which are less individualistic, religious oriented, high context, relationship-driven with harmony seeking behaviors and respect for elders. Following are some implications for students of management and culture to consider in studying managerial practices in Malaysian organisations and evolve our own cultural capital.

1. There is a need for local academia and management practitioners to decode the Malaysian epistemology in the context of organisational settings. The use of “emic” tools to study how individual managers articulate their roles, make decisions, solve problems and relate with others and locate indigenous constructs which are equally valid and productive have to be initiated. By so doing management curricula in local universities and higher institutions of learning will reflect a more “particularistic” brand of management theories and styles as thinking and theory are often bounded by cultural conditioning.
2. Malaysian managers could benefit from their own interpretation of the culture of social organisations, in light of the advances made in information technology. In striving for greater homogeneity of basic human values, tastes and behaviors, what is much needed is a model of local organisation that has to be reconceptualised and aligned with global values of speed, flexibility, integration, innovation, customer focus and productivity. In fact, there has to be a clarification of the universal aims like efficiency, humanity and integrity, which are valid in all cultural settings but articulated in many different ways.
3. Malaysian managers may find it necessary to do their own “surgery” by locating behaviors that are an extreme interpretation of their values if perceived to be dysfunctional. The over-emphasis on relationship, shame *malu*, practice of not wanting to give and receive feedback for fear of causing disharmony, too much emphasis on hierarchical relationships, and a tendency to wait to be told by superiors, have to be downplayed. Perhaps the challenge for all of us is to harness the values of group preference, shame driven, hierarchical orientation and a religious outlook to enhance high performance team work, effective task completion, a competitive mindset and a highly ethical conduct.

Conclusions

This paper broadly compared the cultural dimensions of Anglos, Australians, and Malaysians. The results revealed that the Malay managers were most different from the other groups. Discussions were made as to the differences and the paper highlighted the importance of incorporating local indigenous constructs to examine Malaysian managerial styles. The findings of this paper

are limited by the sample sizes of the groups. Future studies using both quantitative and qualitative studies with larger samples are needed to confirm the findings from this paper.

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