

Culture and Personality: A Literature Review

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Chapter 3: Stable Factors

BY

David Light

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 explained how this paper intends to address Bernat and Gvozdenko's (2005) call for an examination into the influence of stable psychological factors, such as culture and personality, on learning beliefs. The term 'stable factors' is relatively straightforward; it refers to measurable variables which are resistant to change and difficult to influence, thus typically remaining 'stable' in individuals over time (McGue et al., 1993). Such stability presents two implications relevant to this research. First, it is notable that a statistically significant correlation between a stable factor and something else inherently implies directionality (Schield, 1995); since the stable factor is by definition resistant to influence it is unlikely that the variance in the stable factor is explained by changes in the other factor, or that both factors are responding to same third variable. This implication of directionality should not be mistaken for proof of causality, but it is supporting evidence in that regard which can inform future hypothesis and research. Second, as mentioned in Chapter 1, if a certain factor is stable then attempts to change beliefs related to that factor may be ineffective and even potentially damaging (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005).

Although this paper frames its research in terms of culture, there are both theoretical and methodological problems with doing so. The theoretical problem is that culture is a somewhat controversial construct within the literature, with some academics even arguing that it doesn't exist at all (McSweeney, 2002). At the same time, academic proponents of culture have collectively failed to agree on a consistent set of cultural dimensions (Taras, et al., 2009).

The work of Geert Hofstede (subsequently reviewed using Hofstede et al., 2010), which began with his publication of *Culture's Consequences* (1980), is the most well-known and widely cited theory of culture. By using employees of a large multinational corporation as his research subjects, Hofstede was able to collect data from an incredibly large sample while also controlling for a number of demographic factors such as income, occupation, age, and so on. This enabled differences in response data to be attributed to nationality with higher degree of statistical confidence than had previously been achieved. Hofstede has continually refined his model through ongoing development of the Values Survey Module, or VSM (Hofstede and Minkov, 2013).

The latent factors identified by the VSM have received repeated statistical and theoretical validations through the research of other authors (Taras, et al., 2009). The cultural values described in Hofstede's interpretation of these factors are frequently cited within the literature, but are also commonly recognizable to people outside of academia as well. These values are organized into the following four dimensions of culture:

- **Power Distance;** the acceptance that power within organizations (e.g., companies) and institutions (e.g., the family) is distributed unequally.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance;** the amount of discomfort experienced within unstructured, novel, or surprising situations.
- **Individualism/Collectivism;** the degree to which people are oriented to prioritize their own needs over those of the group or vice versa.
- **Masculinity;** the level to which assertion and competitiveness are valued over modesty and care.

While Hofstede's work has received criticism (e.g. McSweeney, 2002), and competition from other frameworks (Taras, et al., 2009), his theory remains dominant within the literature. Consequently there is a near academic consensus that culture can *only* be observed as a collective, not individual, attribute (Hofstede et al., 2010). This leads to the methodological problem that culture presents to this paper. This research seeks to examine if an individual's beliefs about language learning might be influenced by elements of their cultural environment. To investigate this question, one needs to compare the extent to which variations between individuals' stated learning beliefs correlate with variations in their expressed cultural values. However, under the predominant view in the literature, a given individual *does not possess culture* because culture is not an individual phenomenon (Taras, et al., 2009).

The individual level phenomenon which corresponds to culture is personality. "In studying personality, we compare individuals; in studying culture, we compare societies... Individuals are to societies as trees are to forests" (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004:65).

The dominant theory of personality is the “Five Factor Model”. According to this theory, personality is a set of “enduring dispositions” (ibid:56) rooted in five underlying dimensions called personality ‘traits’. The most widely used tool for measuring traits is the Revised NEO Personality Inventory, or “NEO-PI-R” (Costa and McCrae, 1992) in which the five personality traits/dimensions are: Neuroticism (N), Extroversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). Each trait is

composed of six underlying sub-dimensions, often called ‘facets’ of personality (see Table 3.1). The NEO-PI-R uses a 240-item questionnaire to score respondents on each trait; these scores are consolidated into a final personality measurement for each dimension. McCrae and Costa (2003) demonstrated that the individual differences in personality traits measured by the NEO-PI-R strongly exhibited both stability and heritability.

TABLE 3.1
NEO-PI-R Dimensions and Facets

Dimensions	Neuroticism	Extraversion	Openness	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness
Facets	Anxiety	Warmth	Fantasy	Trust	Competence
	Angry Hostility	Gregariousness	Aesthetics	Straightforwardness	Order
	Depression	Assertiveness	Feelings	Altruism	Dutifulness
	Self-Consciousness	Activity	Actions	Compliance	Achievement Striving
	Impulsiveness	Excitement-Seeking	Ideas	Modesty	Self-Discipline
	Vulnerability	Positive Emotions	Values	Tender-Mindedness	Deliberation

One may wonder at this point why I have chosen in this dissertation to base my research on culture instead of personality. The focus on culture is justified because understanding the role played by culture in the context of second language learning is more valuable, in a practical sense, to TESOL professionals. There are two reasons for this. First, as mentioned in Chapter 1, culture is uniquely important to the experiences of teaching and learning a second language. Second, it is important to recognize that while teachers interact with students on an individual/small-group basis, those individuals/groups are taken from the societal population. There is and always should be an opportunity for teachers to consider how the specific personalities of individual students are affecting their progress. However, the design of lesson plans and development of methodologies must be founded on a more generalized basis that tries to maximize pedagogic efficacy for a hypothetical group of future students whose personalities are not yet known. To return to the tree/forest analogy given above, it is true that the relevant profession’s goal is the care and nurturing of individual ‘trees’, but a strategy of care must be designed for application to the entire ‘forest’. Thus the information sought by this research involves the way that patterns of values which manifest at the societal level can predict and/or inform an understanding of the disposition and tendencies of individuals within that society.

“individual differences in culture” even existing is opposed by Hofstede and general consensus in the literature. However, there is still an argument to be made for the statistical validity of this concept. The argument, in essence, is that evidence supports a model which views both culture and personality as different-level manifestations of a single psycho-social identity-behavior system.

Hofstede and McCrae (2004) demonstrate a strong relationship between personality and culture to the degree that a group’s culture can be effectively generalized as the mean distribution of personality traits within that group. To arrive at this assertion, the authors conduct an in-depth cross-analysis of NEO-PI-R data spanning a decade in order to eliminate alternate explanations for patterns in response variance such as the effects of translation, extreme responding, or self-presentational strategies. They conclude that “All these findings suggest that scalar equivalence can be tentatively assumed” (ibid:67), meaning that the differences in the personality distributions between two samples representing different populations can be reasonably presumed to indicate a similar pattern of differences between the populations themselves. On this basis, correlations between NEO-PI-R factors and Hofstede’s dimensions were calculated across 33 countries. The results (shown in Table 3.2) demonstrate that significant relationships exist between personality traits and cultural values in regards to every measured factor.

While the previous paragraph argues for the conceptual relevance of considering individual differences in culture, the notion of

TABLE 3.2
Zero-Order Correlations Between Mean NEO-PI-R Factors and Cultural Scores (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004:69)

Cultural Dimensions	NEO-PI-R Factors				
	Extraversion	Conscientiousness	Openness	Neuroticism	Agreeableness
Individualism	0.64				
Power Distance	-0.57	0.52	-0.39		
Masculinity			0.40	0.57	-0.36
Uncertainty Avoidance				0.58	-0.55

Within their paper, Hofstede and McCrae (2004:70-78) provide differing interpretations of these findings. Hofstede is more inclined to ascribe the distribution of personality traits within a society as being a product of culture. In this view, as children develop within a particular cultural environment they are socialized by the values of that culture, thus influencing their personality

traits. McCrae disputes this interpretation on the foundation that traits exhibit heritable stability, meaning that they are explained more by genetics than by environmental factors. For this reason, McCrae is more inclined to understand culture as the collective expression of a society’s personality trait distribution.

These two views are not as diametrically opposed as they might seem. Hofstede's questionnaire was constructed to explore participants' values; this emphasizes the desirable – the way one thinks things should be, over the desired – what one personally wants (Hofstede et al., 2010:28-29). This is one of the ways that the distinction between cultural dimensions and personality traits can be clearly articulated. In McCrae's portion of the discussion section (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004:77), he presents a thought experiment outlining the way that a society predominantly composed of individuals high in introversion and conscientiousness would, over time, naturally develop a cultural value for high power distance. Individuals with a trait combination of introversion and conscientiousness typically do not seek to be in positions of power. However, since the trait distribution of any society still displays variation, even a society that has a predominance of these traits will contain individuals whose traits lead them to seek leadership positions. The conscientious majority would be naturally inclined to follow the orders of the ambitious few, potentially creating a stable balance over generations and nurturing a cultural value for high power distance.

What's especially interesting to note in this thought experiment is that both the conscientious and ambitious individuals of the hypothetical society would express the same value for power distance despite playing opposing roles in power exchanges as a result of having different personality traits. This thought experiment suggests an understanding of culture which reconciles McCrae's and Hofstede's differing interpretations of their (2004) findings: Culture is produced by the collective distribution of personality traits within a society, but is more than, albeit analogous to, the sum of those traits. It is the favorable values for the systems of behavior which developed to negotiate the dynamics produced by that trait distribution. This model is my own conceptualization, but I argue that it encompasses and accommodates the facts presented by both authors within their individual conclusions, as well as other areas of the literature reviewed in this chapter.

To summarize the points made thus far: First, it was noted how the literature views culture as a societal-level phenomenon, with individual differences viewed as being a matter of personality. I then argued, however, that there is a practical need to investigate the influence of culture at the individual level. I defend the validity of doing so with reference to the findings of Hofstede and McCrae (2004) which, by demonstrating scalar equivalence and strong correlation between personality and culture, indicate that measurements of the two concepts lack a clear statistical distinction. This implies that, to a large extent, the VSM and the NEO-PI-R are measuring the same social-psychological phenomenon.

This implication is not undermined by the subtle differences in how latent factors have been organized, interpreted, or labeled by the VSM and the NEO-PI-R. Taras et al. (2009:362) point out the impossibility for a single study to evaluate culture according to every possible dimension. They reiterate throughout their paper that the construct of culture lacks a clear definition and is interchangeable with a variety of constructs used throughout the social sciences. A core consideration in the design of any research, they therefore argue, is to decide *which* facets of culture are the most relevant and useful in regard to the interests of the research, since culture cannot be completely or singularly represented by any particular model.

In other words, there seems to be only one distinction between 'personality' and 'culture' that is consistent within the literature: Academics choose the word 'personality' to refer to so-called 'enduring dispositions' when the research occurs at the level of individual differences. Meanwhile, the word 'culture' is chosen when researching those dispositions at the societal level. I was unable to find evidence in the literature of a statistical or theoretical distinction between the two concepts that applied across multiple studies.

From this, there may be an argument to be made that the separate treatment of 'personality' and 'culture' within the literature represents a case of what Healy (2017) describes as excessive "nuance". Nuance is used in this way to describe the tendency in the social sciences to over-specify, and create artificial distinctions within models that are ultimately unhelpful. I believe, however, that even if the distinction between culture and personality is statistically arbitrary, that there remains a practicality in terms of relaying information to the non-academic community. The individual/societal distinction of culture and personality reflects common usage of the terms, and so those terms are useful when communicating the applications of research findings, such as how the findings of this dissertation might relate to the profession of TESOL.

This dissertation therefore takes the stance that an examination of cultural differences at the individual level is both theoretically and statistically appropriate, as well as practically necessary. Nevertheless, the Values Survey Module Manual expresses extreme opposition to the VSM being used in evaluating individual differences (Hofstede and Minkov, 2013:3-4). Furthermore, some ambiguous wording left me uncertain if doing so could even be considered a copyright violation (ibid:10). As a result, the cultural portion of the questionnaire used to conduct the present research is newly constructed. While Hofstede's model was used as a primary theoretical foundation for this construction, none of the questions were coopted or adapted from the VSM directly. The cultural portion of the questionnaire will be discussed with further detail in Chapter 4.