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The Academy of Management Review, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Jul., 1984), 389-398.

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The Cultural Relativity of the Quality of Life Concept¹

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Research data on dominant work-related values patterns in 53 countries and regions are used to suggest how definitions of the quality of life are affected by national culture patterns.

What people see as the meaning of their lives and the kind of living they consider desirable or undesirable are matters of personal choice par excellence. However, personal choices are affected by the cultural environment in which people are brought up. Thus one can expect definitions of the quality of life concept to be culturally dependent as well. For example, in some cultures the quality of life is strongly associated with the degree of satisfaction of material needs. In others, it is associated with the degree to which people succeed in subduing and reducing their material needs.

One facet of a people's quality of life is their quality of work life. The relative contribution of the quality of work life to the quality of life is, in itself, a matter of personal and cultural choice. Charles F. Kettering is quoted as saying:

I often tell my people that I don't want any fellow who has a job working for me. What I want is a fellow whom a job has. I want the job to get the fellow and not the fellow to get the job. And I want that job to get hold of this young man so hard that no matter where he is the job has got him for keeps. I want that job to have him in its clutches when he goes to bed at night, and in the morning I want that same job to be sitting on the foot of his bed telling him it's time to get up and go to work. And when a job gets a fellow that way, he's sure to amount to something. (Whyte, 1969, p. 31).

This statement is attributed to a classical U.S. businessman. It is an extreme of a manifestation of a culture in which the quality of work life is associated with a very central place of work in a people's life

concepts. It is a product of a society stressing job challenge, achievement, and the satisfaction of intrinsic needs. However, there are other societies in which the primary loyalties of individuals are their parents, relatives, or clan. Life fulfillment consists of living up to those loyalties. In such a society, a high quality job is one allowing individuals to fulfill obligations to their families (Kiggundu, 1982).

This paper deals primarily with cultural aspects of the quality of work life. However, work first must be placed in the wider context of total life patterns; that is, the quality of (total) life must be kept in mind. At the level of culture, work and life cannot and should not be separated. "Quality," by definition, is a matter of values. It relates to standards for "good" and "bad." Values depend partly on personal choices, but to a large extent what one considers good or bad is dictated by one's cultural context. In this paper, conclusions about the cultural relativity of the Quality of Life concepts are based on data about the cultural relativity of values.

Value Patterns

A shorthand definition of a value is a broad preference for one state of affairs over others. Culture can be defined as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from those of another. Elsewhere (Hofstede, 1979b, 1980) the present author has reported on research into national differences in work-related value patterns in 40 countries. Later on (Hofstede, 1983), this research was extended to another 10 countries and 3 multicountry regions, so that it now encompasses 50 countries and 3 regions.

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 20th International Congress of Applied Psychology, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1982.

Paper-and-pencil answers on 32 value questions by matched samples of employees of subsidiaries of the same multinational business corporation in all these countries were used to study the relationship between nationality and mean value scores. In a factor analysis of 32 mean scores for each of the 40 countries (an ecological factor analysis), three factors together explained 49 percent of the variance in means (Hofstede, 1980). Afterwards, several reasons led to the splitting of one of these factors into two parts. Thus four dimensions were created. Together they explained about half of the differences in mean value scores among the 40 nations. Each country could be given an index score on each of these four dimensions.

The subsequent phase of the research was devoted to the validation on other populations of the four dimensions. This showed their meaningfulness outside the subsidiaries of this one multinational corporation. About 40 other studies were found that compared conceptually related data for between 5 and 40 of the countries involved. These studies produced qualitative outcomes that correlated significantly with one or more of the four dimensions scores (Hofstede, 1980).

The labels chosen for the four dimensions, and their interpretations, are as follows:

1. *Power distance*, as a characteristic of a culture, defines the extent to which the less powerful person in a society accepts inequality in power and considers it as normal. Inequality exists within any culture, but the degree of it that is tolerated varies between one culture and another. "All societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 136).

2. *Individualism*, as a characteristic of a culture, opposes collectivism (the word is used here in an anthropological, not a political, sense). Individualist cultures assume individuals look primarily after their own interests and the interests of their immediate family (husband, wife, and children). Collectivist cultures assume that individuals—through birth and possibly later events—belong to one or more close "in-groups," from which they cannot detach themselves. The in-group (whether extended family, clan, or organization) protects the interest of its members, but in turn expects their permanent loyalty. A collectivist society is tightly integrated; an individualist society is loosely integrated.

3. *Masculinity*, as a characteristic of a culture, op-

poses femininity. Masculine cultures use the biological existence of two sexes to define very different social roles for men and women. They expect men to be assertive, ambitious, and competitive, to strive for material success, and to respect whatever is big, strong, and fast. They expect women to serve and to care for the nonmaterial quality of life, for children, and for the weak. Feminine cultures, on the other hand, define relatively overlapping social roles for the sexes, in which neither men nor women need to be ambitious or competitive. Both sexes may go for a different quality of life than material success and may respect whatever is small, weak, and slow. In both masculine and feminine cultures, the dominant values within political and work organizations are those of men. In masculine cultures these political/organizational values stress material success and assertiveness. In feminine cultures they stress other types of quality of life, interpersonal relationships, and concern for the weak.

4. *Uncertainty avoidance*, as a characteristic of a culture, defines the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations that they consider to be unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, and the extent to which they try to avoid such situations by adopting strict codes of behavior and a belief in absolute truths. Cultures with a strong uncertainty avoidance are active, aggressive, emotional, security-seeking, and intolerant. Cultures with a weak uncertainty avoidance are contemplative, less aggressive, unemotional, accepting of personal risk, and relatively tolerant.

Country scores on the four dimensions have been plotted in Figures 1 and 2. Exhibit 1 lists the countries and regions and the abbreviations used. Figure 1 plots power distance against individualism/collectivism. There is a statistical association between power distance and the collectivist end of the individualism/collectivism (I/C) dimension ($r = -.67$ across the original 40 countries). This association, however, is caused by the correlation of both power distance and individualism with national wealth. (The countries' per capita GNP correlates $-.65$ with the power distance index and $.82$ with the individualism index.) If one controls for national wealth, the correlation between power distance and collectivism disappears. In the ecological factor analysis of 32 values questions mean scores for 40 countries, power distance plus collectivism showed up on one factor. Their joint relationship with wealth and the disap-

Figure 1
A Power Distance × Individualism/Collectivism Plot for
Fifty Countries and Three Regions^a

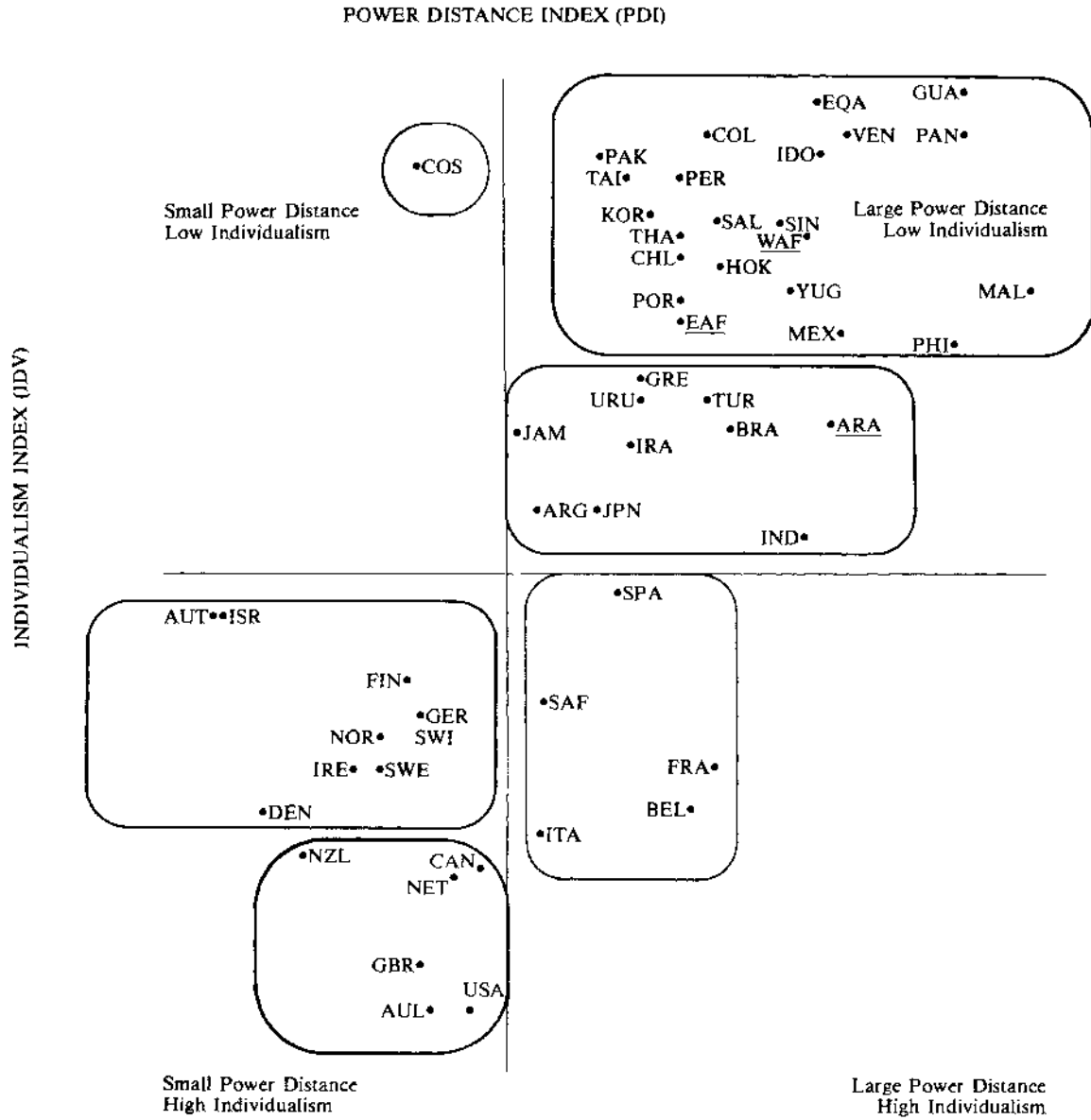


Exhibit 1 Country Abbreviations (For Figures 1 and 2)

ARA	Arab countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Lybia, Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi-Arabia, U.A.E.)	GER	Germany	PAN	Panama
ARG	Argentina	GRE	Greece	PER	Peru
AUL	Australia	GUA	Guatemala	PHI	Philippines
AUT	Austria	HOK	Hong Kong	POR	Portugal
BEL	Belgium	IDO	Indonesia	SAF	South Africa
BRA	Brazil	IND	India	SAL	Salvador
CAN	Canada	IRA	Iran	SIN	Singapore
CHL	Chile	IRE	Ireland	SPA	Spain
COL	Colombia	ISR	Israel	SWE	Sweden
COS	Costa Rica	ITA	Italy	SWI	Switzerland
DEN	Denmark	JAM	Jamaica	TAI	Taiwan
EAF	East Africa (Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia)	JPN	Japan	THA	Thailand
EQA	Ecuador	KOR	South Korea	TUR	Turkey
FIN	Finland	MAL	Malaysia	URU	Uruguay
FRA	France	MEX	Mexico	USA	United States
GBR	Great Britain	NET	Netherlands	VEN	Venezuela
		NOR	Norway	WAF	West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone)
		NZL	New Zealand	YUG	Yugoslavia
		PAK	Pakistan		

pearance of their intercorrelation when the author controlled for wealth is one of the two reasons why he split this factor into two dimensions. The other reason is that power distance (inequality) and collectivism (social integration) are conceptually two different issues.

Figure 2 plots masculinity/femininity against uncertainty avoidance. In this case there is no statistical association between the two dimensions (correlation across the original 40 countries, $r = .12$). These two dimensions are directly based on two separate factors in the ecological factor analysis of 32 values questions mean scores for 40 countries.

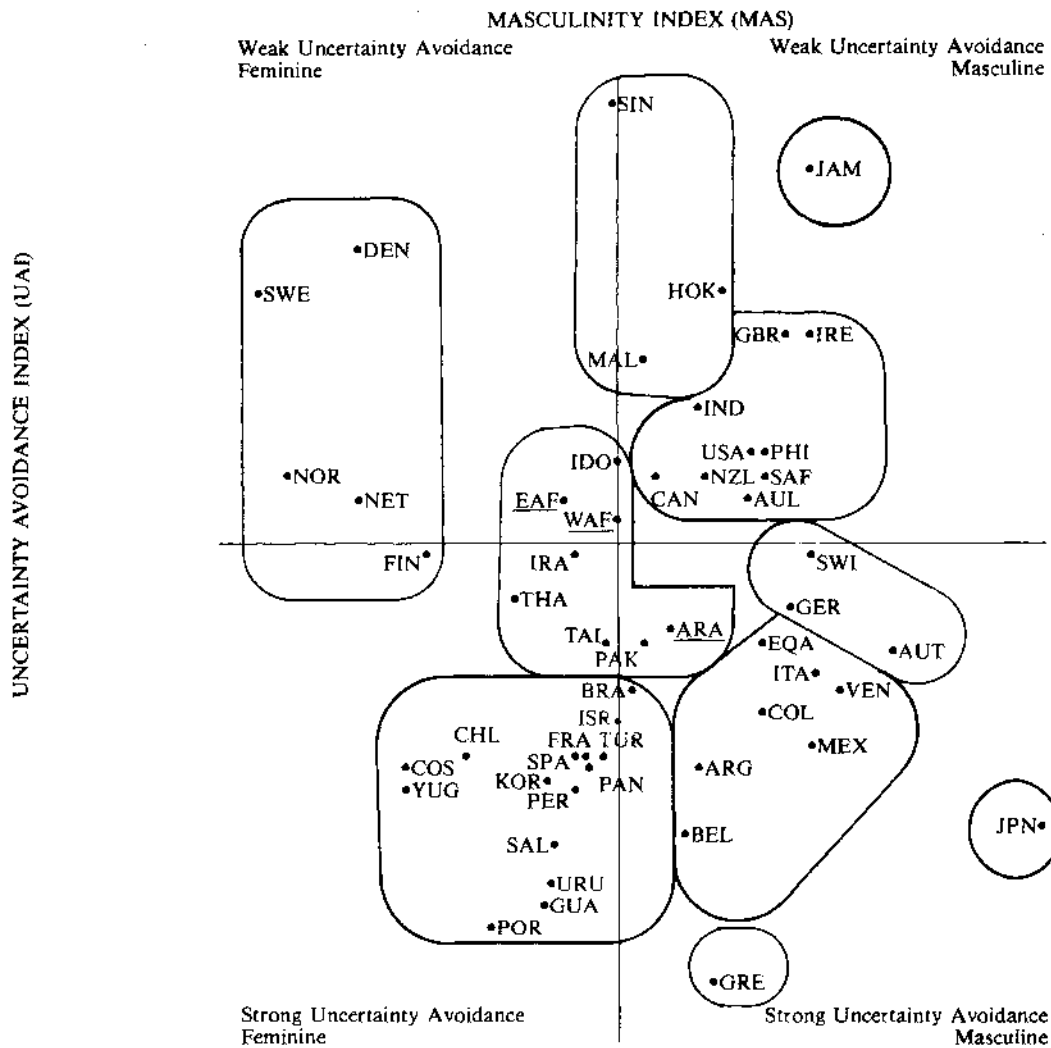
Because of the joint association of power distance and collectivism with national wealth, the Third World countries in Figure 1 tend to be separated from the wealthy countries. The former are in the upper right hand corner and the latter are in the lower part of the diagram. However, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance are both unrelated to national wealth. Thus, in Figure 2 wealthy countries and Third World countries are found in all four quadrants of the diagram.

Work-related values differ by occupation as well as by nationality (Hofstede, 1972, 1979a). There are striking differences in the saliency of work goals if one goes from unskilled workers via clerical workers and technicians to professionals and managers. Professionals, technicians, and managers stress the content of their jobs. Clerks, managers, and technicians stress the social context (interpersonal relationships). Skilled workers and technicians stress security and

earnings; and unskilled stress only benefits and physical conditions (Hofstede, 1972). These occupational differences affect attempts at "humanization of work" (Hofstede, 1979a). The dynamics of the humanization of work movements are such that the "humanizers" tend to be managers and professionals. But the people whose work is to be humanized tend to be clerks and unskilled workers. Thus, there is a real danger of the humanizers trying to increase the quality of work life of these other employees (clerks and unskilled) based on their own (the humanizers') work values of what represents a high quality job; in particular, by trying to make the jobs more interesting. This helps to explain the lack of support for many attempts at improving the quality of work life from the workers and the unions that represent them (for an example from India, see Singh, 1982). In spite of the low priority that workers tend to give to job content factors, however, making the job more interesting *does* increase the workers' satisfaction with it (Hofstede, 1979a). If an increase in job satisfaction is wanted, the humanizers' attempts at making jobs more interesting are justified. Their problem becomes one of what is the best strategy to adopt in order to gain the support of employees and unions, without which support the humanization revolution is unlikely to succeed.

Occupational differences in work values can be seen as superimposed on the national patterns (Hofstede, 1980). In the cross-national research referred to earlier, the occupation effect was eliminated because the comparison was based on matched sam-

Figure 2
A Masculinity/Femininity \times Uncertainty Avoidance Plot
for Fifty Countries and Three Regions^a



^aFor country abbreviations see Exhibit 1.

ples of people in the same occupation from country to country. In any practical quality of work life problem, an account should be taken of both the nationality and the occupational level of the people involved. A useful way of measuring the occupational level is by the number of years of formal education necessary for their occupation (Hofstede, 1980).

In addition to the differences due to nationality and occupation, one is likely to find differences between one organization and another. Organizations have their own subcultures (Hofstede, 1982a, 1982b),

which reflect the values of their founders and the ways in which they were set up. Particular organizations may have particular objectives related to the quality of life that are reflected in the needs of the people who work for them (for an example, see De Bettignies and Hofstede, 1977).

**Power Distance, Individualism,
and the Quality of Life**

Although occupational and organizational differences have to be considered, the focus of this paper

is national differences considers differences on the dimension of power distance and I/C (Figure 1). A society's position on the I/C continuum will have a strong impact on the self-concept of its members and on the way in which they define the quality of their lives (Kanungo, 1982).

In an individualistic society (lower part of Figure 1) a high quality life means individual success, achievement, self-actualization, and self-respect. The capitalist economic system prevalent in and originating from these countries is based on enlightened self-interest. However, in a collective society (upper half of Figure 1), a high quality life is defined much more in family and group terms. Children in collectivistic societies learn to think of themselves as "we" rather than "I." Whoever has success and wealth is supposed to let his/her relatives and friends share in it. The satisfaction of a job well done (by one's own standard) is an individualistic goal. In a collectivistic society, people seek the satisfaction of a job well recognized. Students are less motivated by a need to master their subject and more by a desire to pass their examinations and acquire the status that a degree can provide. Preserving face—that is, preserving the respect from one's reference groups—is the collectivistic alternative to preserving self-respect in the individualistic cultures. Avoiding shame in the collectivistic society takes the place of avoiding guilt in the individualistic one. In Southeast Asian cultures, such as Indonesia (upper right-hand corner of Figure 1), preserving harmony with one's social environment is a powerful motivator. People would probably define a high quality life as one in which harmony is achieved and preserved. In many Third World countries, national unity is an important symbol. A criterion for a high quality job will be the degree to which they can serve their country.

In the individualistic society, job life and private life are sharply set apart, in both time and mind. Not so in the collectivistic society. People accept the job invading their private life. But they also expect the employer to take account of family problems and allow time to fulfill family duties, which may be many. Most importantly, in individualistic work organizations, the task comes before the relationship. In collectivistic work organizations the relationship has precedence over the task. This is because a society in which people think of themselves as "we," not "I," also will teach people to distinguish between

"us" and "them." Others are classified as belonging to "our" in-group, or not belonging, and the way others are treated depends on their group membership. In order to perform a task together, or to do business together, there must be time to develop a relationship with the other person, allowing him/her to be "adopted" into the in-group. Developing such a relationship will take time—anything from two minutes to two years—but it is an essential precondition for achieving the task.

A society's position on the power distance continuum is correlated largely with its position on I/C (Figure 1), although there are exceptions, such as Austria, France, and India. Power distance, among other things, indicates the strength of the need for dependence on more powerful people among the adult members of a society. If this is low (left side of Figure 1), the norm of subjecting oneself to the power of others is undesirable. Everyone should have a say in everything that concerns them. This may be difficult to realize in practice. Small power distance societies, such as Denmark and Sweden, often go through considerable rituals of democratization to satisfy the need for consultation without necessarily contributing much to actual decisions. Status differences are suspect in small power distance societies. Ideal leaders are "democrats" who loyally execute the will of their groups.

In medium power distance societies such as the United States and Canada, consultation is usually appreciated but not necessarily expected. "Participative leadership" is initiated by the participative leader, not by the rebellious subordinate. Ideal leaders are resourceful "democrats"—that is, individuals with some outstanding characteristics people enjoy. Moderate status differences and privileges for leaders are socially acceptable. However, laws and rules are expected to apply to superiors and subordinates alike.

In large power distance societies (right of the vertical line in Figure 1), subordinates have strong dependence needs. They usually aspire to democracy as an impersonal ideal. Subordinates expect superiors to behave autocratically and not to consult them. They may even be uncomfortable if superiors consult them. Ideal superiors in such a culture are benevolent autocrats or paternalists, "good fathers" on whom they like to depend. Everybody expects superiors to enjoy privileges. Moreover, laws and rules differ for superiors and subordinates. In

In addition, status symbols are widely used and contribute to the superiors' authority in the eyes of subordinates.

This set of connotations should make it clear that equality, participation, industrial democracy, and leadership mean different things for the quality of work life in societies at different positions on the power distance scale. North Americans are often appalled and uncomfortable at the legally required co-determination procedures in countries such as Sweden or Germany. They suppose a degree of subordinate initiative and basic equality not in the American book.

On the other hand, North and West Europeans have trouble with the vertical society of nearly all Third World countries. They believe the first thing these Third World countries need is the elimination of their power inequalities. However, after a certain time in those countries they usually adopt "neocolonial" attitudes. This means the North and West Europeans start behaving towards the native lower classes just as does the native ruling class. Third World citizens in Western countries often initially feel lost. This is because of the lack of dependable superiors to take a personal attitude towards them and give clear orders.

Differences in I/C and power distance affect the feasibility of socio-technical interventions. This is because different societies define the "socio" element in the system quite differently, as should be clear from the previous paragraphs. Should the "system" include family relationships? What degree of consultation and visible leadership makes people feel comfortable? These are missing considerations in the classical Anglo-American imported socio-technical approach. Changes in the system are brought about in various ways in different cultures. In small power distance societies people can accept new and less powerful roles and still continue functioning. The larger a society's power distance the more the system is identified with one or more powerful individuals. Thus, change comes about by decree from the center of power or by revolution, changing the center of power.

Kanungo (1982) suggests that differences in the cultural environment also affect the appropriateness of research instruments. Instruments developed by and for the North American mind are too often exported indiscriminately to other cultures. These instruments overemphasize items related to North American (individualist, medium power distance) values and lack

items related to other cultures' values. As an example, Kanungo uses the emphasis on intrinsic need satisfaction of most instruments for measuring the quality of work life. Even the classification of needs as "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" ceases to make sense in cross-national research (Hofstede, 1980). These instruments need to be redesigned and the entire research paradigm merits redefinition (Morrow, 1983).

So far, this paper has presented a static view of the cultural choices of nations. Obviously, cultures do change over time. For the indices plotted in Figures 1 and 2, shifts have been measured over a 4-year period, 1968-1972 (Hofstede, 1980). These show a consistent increase in individualism, which can be proven to follow, rather than precede, the increase in wealth in the countries concerned. These countries show a mixed picture for power distance. On the one hand, greater equality is expected. On the other hand, these are signs that the powerful are not prepared to reduce their power, at least in the large power distance societies. The stress in the large power distance systems increases. There is no sign whatsoever of a convergence among countries. Although cultures change, their differences remain remarkably stable.

Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, and the Quality of Life

Figure 2 shows the masculinity/femininity \times uncertainty avoidance plots. These plots denote the prevalent standards in a country for the quality of work life in different ways than Figure 1. The differences among countries in Figure 2 are unrelated to whether the country is wealthy or poor. Both dimensions relate to human motivation. Masculinity in society relates to the desirability of achievement; femininity relates to interpersonal relationships (not, as in the case of collectivism, with relatives and in-group members, but with people in general). Uncertainty avoidance relates to the acceptability in a society of personal risk-taking (weak uncertainty avoidance) versus an emphasis on personal security (strong uncertainty avoidance).

The consequence of country differences along these two dimensions is that management conceptions about the motivation of employees, common in North America, do not necessarily apply abroad. To illustrate consider the cultural limitations of two North American motivation theories highly popular

among managers: McClelland's achievement motivation theory and Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Both are either implicitly or explicitly considered by many managers as applying universally to the human race.

McClelland (1961) has published scores for the need for achievement (n_{Ach}) in a large number of countries, based on a content analysis of children's readers from around 1925 and around 1950. Across 22 countries, McClelland's n_{Ach} scores (1925 data) show a multiple correlation of $r = .74$ with a low uncertainty avoidance index and a high masculinity index. That is, what McClelland identified as n_{Ach} follows a diagonal in Figure 2 from lower left (low n_{Ach}) to upper right (high n_{Ach}) (Hofstede, 1980). It is remarkable that McClelland's 1925 data, not his 1950 data, show significant correlations. It is likely that the traditional children's readers from 1925 reflected basic national values more purely than do the modernized readers from 1950 (Hofstede, 1980). The countries in which McClelland's n_{Ach} is strong are characterized by weak uncertainty avoidance (personal risk-taking) and strong masculinity. McClelland's n_{Ach} may represent one particular combination of cultural choices. Defining n_{Ach} as a desirable end-state for the world as a whole is McClelland's personal values choice. It is also a highly ethnocentric one. McClelland predicted the fastest economic growth for countries with high n_{Ach} scores. This prediction did not come true in the 1960-1980 period.

With the help of Figure 2, another theory that can be unmasked as ethnocentric is Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of human needs. Empirical evidence of its cultural limitations is found in the classical 14-country study by Haire, Ghiselli, and Porter, (1966). In Haire et al.'s study, managers were asked to rate the importance to them of, and their satisfaction with, the fulfillment of a number of needs. These needs were chosen to represent the five levels of Maslow's hierarchy (from low to high: security—social—esteem—autonomy—self-actualization). Although Haire et al. never drew this conclusion from their data, the only nationality group that ordered their need importance almost, and their need satisfaction exactly, in the Maslow order was the U.S. managers. The other nationalities showed more or less deviant patterns. The present author concluded (Hofstede, 1980) the ordering of needs in Maslow's hierarchy represents a value choice—Maslow's value choice. This choice was based on his mid-twentieth

century U.S. middle class values. First, Maslow's hierarchy reflects individualistic values, putting self-actualization and autonomy on top. Values prevalent in collectivist cultures, such as "harmony" or "family support," do not even appear in the hierarchy. Second, the cultural map of Figure 2 suggests even if just the needs Maslow used in his hierarchy are considered—the needs will have to be ordered differently in different culture areas. Maslow's hierarchical ordering (self-actualization on top) corresponds to the upper right-hand quadrant of Figure 2. In the lower right-hand quadrant (strong uncertainty avoidance and masculinity), a combination of security and assertiveness needs should be placed on top of a need hierarchy. In the upper left hand quadrant (weak uncertainty avoidance and femininity), social (relationship) needs should be placed on top. In the lower left hand quadrant (strong uncertainty avoidance and femininity), security and relationship needs should be placed on top.

For managers operating internationally it is important for them to realize what countries tend to order human needs differently. Moreover these countries are not necessarily inferior technologically, economically, or in the quality of their management. Some countries may even be superior in some or all of these respects. Japan, a country in which security needs rank very high, has been outperforming the world in recent years. Other East Asian countries follow closely. However, the dominant motivation patterns may affect the type of economic and technological activities at which a country is best. Masculine cultures may have an advantage when it comes to mass production. Feminine cultures may have an advantage when it comes to providing services (such as consulting) and to growing things rather than mass producing them (such as high quality agriculture and biochemistry). For example, the leading companies in the world in the field of penicillin and enzymes are in the Netherlands and Denmark. A truly international management should be able to recognize the strengths and the weaknesses in any country's culture pattern, including the home culture.

Improving the quality of work life often has been interpreted as offering to people satisfactions of needs higher on their need hierarchy. Thus, it should be recognized that different cultures have different need hierarchies. In the lower half of Figure 2, improving the quality of work life probably implies offering more security and possibly more task structure on the job. In the left half of Figure 2, improving

the quality of work life implies offering opportunities for creating relationships on the job. In this context a difference is noted between the North American and the North European school of improving the quality of work life (humanization of work, job restructuring). In North America, the dominant objective is to make individual jobs more interesting by providing workers with an increased challenge. This grew out of the earlier "job enlargement" and "job enrichment" movements. In countries such as Sweden and Norway, the dominant objective is to make group work more rewarding by allowing groups to function as self-contained social units (semiautonomous groups) and by fostering cooperation among group members. Humanization of work means "masculinization" in North America, but "feminization" in Sweden (Hofstede, 1980). This shows another aspect of the cultural relativity of the quality of work life.

To the extent the data permitted measurement, the shifts over time on the masculinity-femininity and uncertainty avoidance dimensions were relatively small and inconsistent. There was no sign of convergency among countries, rather there was an indication of increasing divergence (Hofstede, 1980). This means there are not changes permitting one culture's standards for the quality of work life to prevail.

Farewell to Ethnocentrism

Concern for the quality of life is a worthwhile issue in any culture (Alder, 1983). However, researchers approaching the issue in Third World countries have relied too much on definitions of "quality" derived from North American and, to a lesser extent, West European values. Many Third World social scientists

have been educated in North America or Western Europe. It is difficult for them to free themselves from the ethnocentricity of the Western approaches. This ethnocentricity is never explicit but is hidden behind "scientific" verbiage. U.S. social scientific theories and instruments, especially have a high status value. It takes considerable personal courage and independence of thought of a Third World researcher—or of an expatriate Western researcher—to suggest these theories and instruments may be wholly or partly inapplicable and irrelevant to another situation. Scientific approaches are never purely "objective." They always have a quasi-religious, symbolic meaning to the initiated. It is highly flattering to the designers of social science theories in the United States and in Western Europe if their ideas become religion to followers in faraway parts of the world. For the longer term this situation serves neither those followers nor their Third World countries. Even social scientists are children of their culture. The patterns of collectivism (loyalty to the scientific reference group at their U.S. or European university) and large power distance (intellectual dependency on the brilliant professor) are more likely among Third World social scientists than among those from Western countries.

There are counterforces, however. Western ethnocentrism has become too evidently untenable. Countries trying to transfer Western ideas wholesale have been in trouble—Iran, for example. Countries translating them in a way consistent with their own cultural traditions are now outperforming the West—Japan and Singapore, for example. It is time to bid farewell to ethnocentrism in social science theories in general, and in definitions of the quality of life in particular.

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