

**THE CONTENT VALIDITY OF HOFSTEDE'S POWER DISTANCE
MEASURE: A CRITIQUE AND PARTIAL RECONSTRUCTION**

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INTRODUCTION

There is a pronounced and growing interest in cross-cultural theories and applications of management. One highly influential work is Hofstede's (1980) study of four dimensions -- power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and collectivism /individualism -- thought to comprise universal vectors along which behavior and attitudes vary in diverse cultures. Power distance has been a particular focus of attention among management scholars (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994; Medinnus, Ford & Tack-Robinson, 1983; Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Merritt & Helmreich, 1996; Sondergaard, 1994; Singh, 1990; Smith & Dugan, 1996).

The concept pertains to how power is differentially socially constructed across cultures. While all cultures (and organizations) necessarily maintain some degree of vertical stratification -- through the division of labor, distribution of authority, etc -- power distance references the extent to which vertical stratification is either magnified, or de-emphasized, on a normative level. Thus for members of a "high" power distance culture "hierarchy signifies existential inequality" (Hofstede, 1980:79). Here power differentials are salient and visibly articulated; members accept that power is distributed unequally, subordinates represent a lower social class, power holders are entitled to special privileges. In contrast, in "low" in power distance cultures factors that increase the psychological salience or open display of hierarchical distinctions are minimized. Here individuals in positions of power are expected to look and act less powerful than they are; "hierarchy means an inequality of roles, established for convenience." To illustrate: a high power distance culture would likely evidence a differentiated dress code for high versus low status members. A low power distance culture would likely stress a common dress code independent of formal rank.

All cultures may be characterized along a unidimensional continuum ranging from high to low in power distance (Hofstede, 1984). It is precisely because power distance varies substantially across cultures that the topic is of enormous interest to management scholars and practitioners. For example, managers from the United States, consistent with their culture's egalitarian heritage, score moderately low on power distance. In other countries, for instance India, power distance scores are comparatively high; members presume that an elaborated status system is normative. Thus, American managers working in a high power distance culture may need to realize that subordinates are treated differently, for instance that giving rather bald directives may be regarded as normative. Similarly, symbolic deference paid to individuals of higher rank may be considered appropriate in such a culture. Taken as a whole, cultural variation in power distance carries important ramifications for managerial practice across a whole range of issues, including leadership, authority relations, superior/subordinate communication, and programs of worker involvement.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT MEASURE OF POWER DISTANCE

Though widely applied and disseminated in management research, Hofstede's concept, particularly with respect to its measurement properties, contains some weaknesses that have been overlooked in prior literature. This paper's goal is to sift through some of the background assumptions implicit in Hofstede's original measure, critiquing these assumptions relative to the instrument's content validity. The purpose is not to overturn the measure of power distance, rather it is to enhance our understanding of the overall construct, and to determine if the measurement properties of the current instrumentation can be enhanced.

Hofstede's book contains over sixty pages of discussion on the theoretical/conceptual underpinnings of power distance. Make no mistake, Hofstede's development of these

underpinnings for power distance is brilliant. His work is well grounded in social scientific and anthropological literature, moreover, the notions put forth resonate quite well with common sense. Further, the construct validity of the instrument is well documented. Hofstede shows the scale to be significantly correlated with a number other scales and variables that are related to power distance on a conceptual level.

The weaknesses, rather, specifically relate to the scale's content validity. Carmines and Zeller (1979) distinguish between construct and content validity. Construct validity is based on the logical relationships presumed to exist among variables. Researchers typically develop hypotheses regarding expected theoretical relationships among a constellation of similar variables/constructs. For instance, on theoretical grounds one would predict a positive correlation to exist between scoring high on power distance and a belief in McGregor's Theory X (which Hofstede found). As such, construct validity is typically measured through findings of positive or negative correlation among instruments thought to be conceptually interrelated. In contrast, content validity (sometimes also referred to as "face validity", Bailey, 1992) references the degree to which a given measure or instrument covers the range of meanings or behaviors included within the original concept, and whether the measurement instrument provides an adequate sample of the intended domain of meaning or behavior. Thus, this paper explores the degree to which the instrument adequately covers the range of meanings represented by the Hofstede's definition of power distance. Put another way, we ask: what is the degree of match, or correspondence, between the specific questions used by Hofstede to operationalize power distance, and the broad meaning or content that Hofstede, and other researchers, have ascribed to this construct?

One typical index of content validity is the degree to which the measure includes an adequate and representative set of items that tap into the concept in question. The more the scale items represent the domain or universe of the concept being measured, the greater the content validity (Sekaran, 1992). Here it is appropriate to observe that the actual scale used to measure power distance is comprised of only three questions. These questions assess: 1) the extent to which employees are afraid to voice disagreement with their superiors, 2) subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their boss tends to make decisions in either an autocratic or persuasive/paternalistic way, 3) subordinates' preference for anything but a consultative style of decision making from their boss, that is, for an autocratic, persuasive/paternalistic, or a democratic style (Hofstede, 1984:75). From a strictly numerical perspective three is generally considered a less than ideal number of items to constitute a insufficient basis for measuring a hypothetical construct (Nunnally, 1994), particularly one so conceptually broad and presumably multi-factorial as power distance. It is surprising that so much research has been founded on a scale containing only three items. Moreover, questions two and three are virtually the same.

A second and perhaps more fundamental issue relative to content validity has to do with the fact that the scale's three questions were not formulated by Hofstede subsequent to his development of the theoretical construct of power distance, as would be ideal. Rather, the scale questions were selected in post hoc analysis. They were drawn from a pre-existing bank of paper and pencil survey results previously administered to the employees of a large multinational corporation for other purposes. Thus, the questions were not tailored to the construct. An indication of the above problem is reflected in the fact that on a logical level there is a gap between the delimited tenor of the three specific questions used and the generalizations drawn out in Hofstede's definition and discussion of power distance. For just one instance, if low

power distance means -- as defined by Hofstede -- "existential equality, with hierarchy merely created for convenience" (1980), why is it that no question on the scale comes even close to corresponding to this thought? Rather, two questions merely query about preferred norms for decision-making, the other question relates to fear of disagreement. Thus, there exists a strong argument for an insufficient mapping, or correspondence, between the scale items and the domain of meaning they are intended to reflect.

ILLUSTRATING SOME LIMITATIONS THROUGH A U.S./JAPAN CONTRAST

This possible insufficient mapping is more thoroughly explored next, illustrated through a US/Japanese contrast of various dimensions that might logically be considered relevant to the enactment of the power distance construct in diverse cultural settings. This more grounded illustration of the differential social construction of power distance will highlight some possible gaps/shortcomings in Hofstede's measure.

Both the U.S. and Japan were included in Hofstede's original survey data on power distance. Managers in the U.S. scored an average of 40 on the scale, managers in Japan 54. In relative terms these two scores are quite close. The scale is normed to range from 0 (low power distance) to 100 (high). Scores of the entire set of 39 countries surveyed range from a low of 11 (Austria) to a high of 94 (Philippines). The U.S. and Japanese scores fall squarely in the mid-range, being separated by only 14 points, with only 3 countries in between (Italy, Argentina, and South Africa). Thus, the scale puts both U.S. and Japanese cultures on a moderately close parity relative to how they construe power distance.

Yet examine these two countries more closely. Due to Japan's competitive position in the global economy management scholarship has in recent years intensively scrutinized Japanese culture and business practices. The emergent picture suggests that in a number of respects

Japanese culture is actually quite hierarchic relative to the U.S. To the extent true, this would seem at odds with Hofstede's findings. Consider specific examples of this two culture contrast below.

Literature on Japanese business practices notes how forms of interpersonal deference pervade daily interaction. Japanese find it difficult to interact with one another in business settings without first ascertaining their status relative to the other (Hall, 1987). Indeed, American businessmen visiting Japan are advised to present business cards prior to initiating social interaction. Because the Japanese use a set of generic job titles they are able at a glance to ascertain the other's relative rank in a corporate hierarchy. This exchange of business cards, then, enables interactants to behave with surety, knowledge of "their place" in a highly differentiated pecking order enables Japanese to know just how deeply to bow when greeting the other, just how polite and circumspect to act, whom should be seated in the preferred "power spot", served first, etc. Such highly regulated forms of interpersonal protocol are notably absent in American corporate culture, where superior/subordinate interaction is often characterized by "breezy informality" (Jackall, 1987:27).

Also consider, for example, how Japanese language contains numerous honorifics -- linguistic forms which embed status. American English contains the honorific title-last-name form, such that superiors are often addressed as "Mr.", "Professor", "Dr.", etc. Yet honorifics are far more frequent and complex within the Japanese language system. Japanese, for example, contains an array of honorific pronouns, as well as multiple verb conjugations, all of which function in daily speech to embed the relative status of interlocutors. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to utter a single sentence in Japanese without embedding relative status (Linowes, 1993)! This contrasts sharply with the egalitarian manners of interpersonal discourse found in

North American culture. In fact, in many U.S. business settings individuals of higher and lower rank are on a mutual first name basis, many CEO's even insist on being addressed by first name by all employees (Morand, 1995).

In her classic work on Japan renowned anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1967:95-6) notes how ingrained status is to Japanese culture. Hierarchy in Japan:

is as characteristic of their judgement on life as trust in equality and free enterprise is of the American way of life. . . The Japanese, therefore, order their world with constant reference to hierarchy. In the family and in personal relations, age, generation, sex, and class dictate proper behavior. In government, religion, the Army, and industry, areas are carefully separated into hierarchies where neither the higher nor the lower may without penalty overstep their prerogatives.

Management scholars similarly comment on Japan:

An elaborate system of status divisions is generally deemed a distinguishing characteristic of Japanese organizations (Lincoln, Olson, & Hanada, 1978:830)

[In Japan] Hierarchy is established on the basis of age (older is superior), sex (male is superior), organizational status (higher rank is superior), and organizational power and size (large, more powerful organizations are superior). Only when all these attributes are identical are the individuals on an equal plane. The concept of hierarchy pervades every aspect of the culture -- even the language. (Marsland & Beer, 1983:49).

How can this vision of such a hierarchically intensive society be reconciled with a power distance score that is on close parity to that of Americans, and with an American culture historically known to cherish equality as an overall value? (Toqueville, 1845/1981; Warner, 1967). Perhaps an answer is illustrated in Table 1. The table's left hand column lists various dimensions along which power may find expression. The other two columns suggest that while some areas of Japanese corporate life and behavior evidence very high power distance practices in comparison to the U.S., for other dimensions Japanese tend toward low power distance practices, the U.S. high. For instance, the dimensions closest to the top of the table flow from the above discussion of language and manners of comportment. In these areas, as indicated in

the table, Japan is properly characterized as a high power distance culture, with the U.S. categorized as low power distance.

Also find seniority and age in the upper half of the table, there characterized as high power distance practices in Japanese culture. Seniority is included because years of service in Japan typically translate into hierarchic position. Thus, seniority in and of itself proves a significant predictor of status. Further, Japanese culture and corporations are highly age-graded; obedience to seniors is considered essential to the maintenance of social order in Japanese corporations (Linowes, 1993). Thus chronological age, independent of positional seniority in a firm, also serves to articulate status distinctions in Japan.

[insert Table 1 about here]

But notably, the lower section of the table reveals a number of dimensions for which the cultural roles appear to be reversed, for which the Japanese approach more rightly assumes a low power distance label, the American tending toward high power distance. Consider as an example the practice of top Japanese executives to accept blame for any corporate failure, either by resigning or more traditionally by committing suicide. In Japanese culture individuals at the top are symbolic figureheads, expected to assume liability for wrong actions or failures of the group. Thus after a major crash involving a Japanese airline the CEO shouldered the blame by immediately resigning, despite no indication of negligence or wrongdoing on his part. But this practice is blatantly contrary to standards in the U.S. corporate world, where the likely recourse would be to locate someone lower in the hierarchy and to assign them blame.

A similar picture is told by Japanese corporations' egalitarian practices regarding use of office space, dress codes, and other symbolic indices of status. Japanese companies employ an "open" office design; managers desks are located in close proximity to low level workers, rather

then occupying the segregated and often palatial "executive suites" as is the norm in the U.S. Moreover, in Japanese factories supervisors and workers tend to wear the same uniform, while differential accoutrement in U.S. settings functions to set apart and to distinguish classes of workers (Ferguson & Ferguson, 1989; Hall, 1987).¹

Regarding the dimension of pay, Japanese pay practices are more egalitarian than in the U.S. For example, the ratio between lowest and highest paid workers is far smaller in Japan. The president of a Japanese company makes seven to ten times less money than his counterpart in America (Hall, 1987; Rehfeld, 1994). Moreover, productivity or profit sharing bonuses are more common in Japan; this represents a more egalitarian practice because all workers share equally in good or bad times.

Decision-making practices in Japanese companies are generally more consensual than in U.S. firms. Japanese tradition emphasizes group consensus, calling for elaborate, often ritualized forms of consultation across ranks. Of course, many American corporations have in recent years practiced substantial delegation of decision-making authority. Nevertheless traditional corporate practices in this country were rather authoritarian, whereas consensual/consultative decision practices are a longstanding element of Japanese culture. Perhaps one exemplar of this point lies in the degree to which quality circles (which entails a form of consultative decision-making among groups of workers), originally an American import to Japan after World War II, took root and disseminated throughout Japan while at the same time failing to do so in the U.S. Similarly, group-mindedness and communality are a core value of Japanese culture. According to some

¹In recent years American corporations have come to emulate these Japanese low power distance practices. Indeed, the trend can be directly traced to Japanese transplants - automobile factories located in the U.S. by the Japanese. Nevertheless the labels in Table 1 do accurately reflect U.S./Japan distinctions extant at the time Hofstede's power distance data were collected. While first published in 1980, Hofstede's survey data were collected

(Benedict, 1967) rooted in the need for collaboration requisite to the cultivation and harvesting of rice crops. This strong sense of group loyalty and "we-ness" encourages not competition and vertical differentiation among individuals, but rather cooperation, devotion, and identification with the group.

Thus, while in aggregate Japanese and U.S. cultures score similarly on Hofstede's three question scale, these scores alone are misleading in that they mask a more complex and sometimes contradictory underlying reality. In sum, literature on power distance has uniformly adopted Hofstede's standard questionnaire to assess power distance. While replication using the same measurement instrument in diverse cultures and in different populations is essential for generating comparative knowledge, there is reason to suspect that the original survey questions fail to fully specify the conceptual dimension. Perhaps the scale should be revised, with more attention paid to its content validity.

TOWARD A REVISED POWER DISTANCE SCALE

Were the power distance scale revised and expanded, potential categories of questions for inclusion would derive from the dimensions displayed in Table 1 -- the role of seniority, assignment of blame, honorifics and language, gesture and interpersonal comportment, pay ratios, etc. For instance, distinct subsets of questions might pertain to interpersonal and linguistic manners of displaying power. Many languages contain formal and informal variants of the pronoun "you". For example, in Spanish "tu" is the informal form, "usted" the formal variant. These forms are systematically related to power such that subordinates are constrained to use the formal variant when speaking "up", while superiors have the conversational right to

in 1968 and 1972 (1984:11), well before the time when Japanese practices described above began to infiltrate American settings.

use the informal form when speaking down. Morand (1995, 1995a, 1996, 1996a) focuses on "forms of address" (use of title-last-name vs. first-name) and on linguistic "politeness" mechanisms tied to power relations in organizations. Research also shows these forms to be sensitive to cross cultural variation (as noted in the case of Japan; also see Brown & Levinson, 1987). Research (Brown & Ford, 1971) has even shown that common greeting phrases such as "Hi" versus "Good Morning" are sensitive to status. Questions could certainly query respondents regarding patterns of pronoun exchange and other linguistic usage. Such an examination of language would provide a behavioral index of how interlocutors construe and socially construct relative status in organizations. Some specific questions for inclusion in a revised survey include: (agree or disagree on a Likert scale) 1) managers and non-managers are usually on a first-name basis, 2) the titles of managers are generally indicated after their names, 3) titles are typically indicated on the doors of managerial offices. 4) employees are usually listed alphabetically on various types of employee lists, 5) I am likely to greet my boss rather informally (e.g. Hi) as opposed to more formally (Good Morning), and so forth.

Alternate questions might query respondents regarding symbolics -- such as office space and clothing. Here sample questions might include: 1) managers can generally be distinguished by the kinds of clothes they wear, 2) at work, managers mostly eat with other managers, 3) managers and non-managers are often close friends, 4) it is usually not necessary to check with a manager's secretary before seeing the manager, 5) separate entrances, (or in alternate versions of this question, segregated dining rooms, segregated office areas, etc.) are utilized in my company for different classes of personnel.

It would seem logical that an additional subset of scale items would query respondents regarding decision-making practices. As illustrated in the Japanese/US contrast above, the

degree of consensuality versus authoritarianism in decision-making may vary from culture to culture. Hasegama (1986) for example, provides some significant detail about decision-making norms in Japanese culture and how they differ from norms and practices prevalent in the U.S. In other cultures this aspect of power distance also likely varies independently from the other dimensions. Here it is of note that 2 of the 3 original power distance scale items queried decision-making norms. This base of questions should be somewhat elaborated and increased in number.

These are some preliminary suggestions. A critique of the content validity is the primary purpose of this paper. This having been provided, future research should provide a revised instrument that enables development of a rich picture of how power relations are socially constructed in diverse cultures. Thus instrument should contain a sufficient diversity of items as to allow for an analysis of the factor structure of a revised scale.

IMPLICATIONS AND PROPOSITION GENERATION

No prior literature has pointed out any of the above weaknesses of the scale. This paper thus represents an important critique of one of the primary measurement tools used in cross cultural management research, and further, offers a framework for a potentially fruitful modification of the power distance scale. A revised, more valid, survey instrument has a number of potential applications in international, comparative research. Most broadly, a revised scale will enable researchers to develop a "thick description" (Geertz, 1986) of the social construction of authority relations in diverse cultures. A revised instrument also enables us to explore several general propositions. Ultimately, one general hope is that a power distance scale with greater content validity can provide insight into the relationship between nomothetic and ideographic approaches to the study of cultural variation (see Morand, 1996a). That is, it will be able to

measure a dimension (power distance) that is universal across all cultures, yet with enough detail such that unique factors which vary independently across disparate cultures can also be captured in some detail. To the extent that the analysis of Japan presented above holds true under more intensive scrutiny, and also for other cultures, such findings would demonstrate that the concept of equifinality set forth by systems theory (namely that there are multiple pathways for attainment of similar ends), operates with respect to power distance. This would also serve as a broad validation for the notion that there exist distinct "cultures of capitalism" (Hamden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993).

A second broad proposition posits that there exist specific factors most likely to perform a counterbalancing function relative to power imbalances in diverse cultural contexts. For example, while there is significant vertical articulation in Japanese organizations, based upon the preceding analysis the emphasis on group harmony, commitment and community in Japanese culture (Hall, 1987) provides an important, and highly functional, counterbalance to the centrifugal forces of vertical differentiation. Using a revised measure of a power distance one might reasonably posit that in other cultures high scores on one subscale might be functionally balanced by low scores on others. For example Mexico -- a high power distance culture -- evidences strong traditions of paternalism: the notion that a boss or company should take care of its workers, having an obligation to look out for workers' welfare as if members of an extended family. Paternalism may prove a functional counterbalance to the potentially divisive forces of high power distance, for despite vertical differentiation certain group obligations are incumbent upon authority figures.

A third general extension of the research deals with the difficulties relative to the implementation of employee involvement and change programs. The high power distance norms

present in many traditional cultures likely create formidable barriers to organizational innovation. In many cultures received norms for power relations are at odds with the more participative, egalitarian, status leveled relations that typify high involvement work settings. Were the measure of power distance broader in scope the resultant detail might enable researchers to glean a better understanding of just how and where organizational practices conflict with more entrenched, culture-based norms. For instance, a revised subscale aimed at uncovering culture specific norms for decision making may enable corporations to learn to effectively mesh their own organizational design efforts with culture specific traditions.

Finally, it is reasonable to posit that scores on the power distance scale will differ significantly across supervisors versus subordinates. Prior literature tends to aggregate the scores, or to test perceptions of managers only. Yet it would be an interesting and important finding if perceptions of power distance were found to vary across levels of formal power in a company. Certainly one interesting finding would be if superior/subordinate perceptions of power distance varied across diverse subcomponents of a power distance measure. Moreover, if there is an overall difference in superior/subordinate scores one prediction would be that perceptions of power distance will be lower for superiors, higher for subordinates, as superiors may be motivated to believe that power differentials are minimal, when in fact they are not.

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Table 1: A U.S./Japan Comparison of Power Distance Dimensions

Dimensions of Power	High vs Low Power Distance	
	Japan	US
Interpersonal gesture & body language	High PD	Low PD
Language and honorifics	High PD	Low PD
Politeness versus bluntness in discourse	High PD	Low PD
Age graded respect system	High PD	Low PD
Respect based on org. seniority/job title	High PD	Low PD
Attribution of responsibility/blame	Low PD	High PD
Accoutrement & other visible status symbols	Low PD	High PD
Open office space	Low PD	High PD
CEO/worker pay ratios	Low PD	High PD
Degree of consultation in decision-making	Low PD	High PD
Communality vs individualism	Low PD	High
PD		