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Are National Cultures Changing? Evidence from the World Values Survey

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze from a quantitative standpoint the stability of the concept of 'national culture'. In this respect, we analyzed whether significant changes in people's perception have occurred in the past 25 years in different national cultures. A longitudinal study based on data provided by World Values Survey and European Values Survey was conducted. 13 countries were selected. One of the main research findings is that some national cultures are more stable than others. The cultures that are subject to major changes, such as economic ones, change to a greater extent and faster, while others change more slowly. Results and limits of the research are discussed.

1. Introduction

   The importance of national culture and of its study has long been argued in numerous researches pertaining to a large number of fields: management (Liu, Meng & Fellows, 2015; Mao & Shen, 2015), sociology (Ye & Ng, 2015), marketing and market research (Assiouras et. all, 2015), medicine (Bailey & Kind, 2010), education (Kubow & Blasser, 2014) and many more. It seems, culture is more important nowadays than ever. The role and importance of

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national culture derives from the need for a generally accepted unit of analysis that facilitates the intercultural comparison and knowledge transfer. But, in order to use culture as a variable in explaining the human behavior, it is necessary that we identify a means of measuring culture, to understand it in its whole. Many scholars have been preoccupied by the study of culture throughout time. Today, the study of cultural differences remains of topical interest.

Numerous studies from diverse fields handle nations as entities from both a political and cultural standpoint. Considering the fact that nations provide a variety of statistical data about their population, it is easier to obtain data as a nation than it is as a society (Hofstede, 2001). In many cultural studies, nations are used as units for analysis, so that the question arises whether national cultures are homogenous enough to be considered entities. Moreover, because nations are used as units for cultural analysis, it is important to see if the concept of national culture is stable enough to be considered valid.

The manner in which nations create and maintain a national culture is an important aspect to be studied. To what extent do the state, the institutions, the schools, and the national organizations influence the creation and maintenance of national culture? Starting from the definition of 'culture' given by Hofstede – that 'culture' represents the collective mental programming that makes us accept something together with the members of the nation or group to which we belong, but not with other members of other groups or nations (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) – we can say that the source of mental programming is found in the social environment in which the individual is living. The inception is in the family, continuing with school, entourage, work environment, and community (Hofstede, 2001).

The concept of national culture is highly contentious. One of the main objections brought about is the fact that there can be both significant cultural differences in the same country and cultural similarities that cross a nation's boundaries (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012). For example, House and Javidan believe that national border are not the most effective method of delimiting cultural frontiers, due to the fact that there are many countries with significant subcultures (House et. all, 2004). Tung states that intra-cultural variations can be equally important as intercultural variations are (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012).

Peterson and Smith have identified three major critiques against the usage of nations as units for intercultural analysis (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012):
- Studies on individuals show significant variations inside a country;
- Countries have regional, ethnic, or other subcultures;
- Structural theories have been contested.

Nonetheless, when comparing national cultures, it does not matter whether or not the differences between individuals from the same culture are great or small, because they share the same values in essence. But the existence of subcultures can be an important argument against the usage of countries as units of analysis. Minkov and Hofstede have examined the fundamental cultural values (by using the WVS database) from 299 regions belonging to 28 countries worldwide (except for Europe) in order to identify whether regions from a country group themselves within national borders or if they scatter or mix with other regions belonging to other countries. The conclusion of the study stated that when fundamental cultural values are compared, regions from within the country tend to group within the national borders, not scatter or mix with other regions from within the cultural or geographical area (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012).

On the other hand, the existence of cultures which transcend national borders has not been studied enough. An instance of such culture would be the Roma culture manifested in countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, etc. Nonetheless, these countries have a mass culture, shared by the majority of the inhabitants, which can be considered and treated as a national culture (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012).

2. Methodology

The aim of the study is to analyze from a quantitative standpoint the stability of the concept of 'national culture'. In this respect, we have analyzed whether or not significant changes in people's perception regarding the aspects considered important in life have occurred in the past 25 years in different national cultures. The research is quantitative; it is a longitudinal study (trends study) that uses the data provided by World Values Survey

(abbreviated throughout the paper as WVS) and European Values Survey (abbreviated throughout the paper as EVS) between 1990 and 2014. Five waves have been studied: wave 2: 1990-1994, wave 3: 1995-1999, wave 4: 2000-2004, wave 5: 2005-2009, and wave 6: 2010-2014, covering a time period of 25 years. We gathered all the countries for which World Values Survey provided data for all five waves. In total, 13 countries were selected: Argentina, Belarus, Chile, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, South Africa, Spain, and Turkey. For Belarus and Poland, the data pertaining to wave 4 and wave 5 were retrieved from European Values Survey; because WVS did not include these two countries in two of the waves. So, we selected the 13 countries because data for the 25 years time frame was available and also, the 13 countries are spread around the world making our analysis not to be focused on a single geographic area.

For the 13 selected countries, we analyzed the individuals' answers regarding their perception of life, especially on the importance they assign to six aspects of life: family, friends, work, leisure time, religion, and politics. In order to attain our aim, we covered several stages:

We gathered data from WVS and EVS regarding the importance given to the following aspects: family, friends, work, leisure time, religion, and politics.

Charts were made for each wave with the purpose of illustrating if and in which way did the individuals' perception evolved. Only the charts for the first and last wave are presented here.

We calculated the gross difference between wave six and wave two, in order to analyze whether this difference is significant and if there can be identified certain trends for all the countries;

We calculated the Mean and Standard Deviation for each of the considered aspects. Based on these calculations we were able to identify the countries with the largest fluctuations as well as the countries with the smallest fluctuations over the 25 years period considered.

Starting from the countries which registered the most significant fluctuations, we analyzed the factors that could have determined such changes in individuals' perception.

Limitations

Just like in the majority of research based on the analysis of secondary data, one of the limitations of this research concerns the existence of some variations in the studied databases, so that even though WVS supplies data for scores of countries, the study had to be narrowed down to those countries which were studied in all five analyzed periods. Therefore, the study comprises only 13 countries.

On the other hand, this research studies the stability of the concept of 'culture' from a quantitative standpoint. Although regarding the perception of importance of the six studied aspects there have been changes (some were significant), it is possible that the attitude towards these has remained unchanged. In this respect, we admit the necessity of designing qualitative tools of measuring culture that can be applicable alongside the quantitative ones.

Another limitation of the study is that it does not provide an exhaustive list of the influential factors which bring out change in the cultural values of a nation. A more in depth and prolonged research is needed, and we intend to carry out such a research having as starting point the results of this study.

3. Analysis of the results

3.1. A glance at the culture in the 13 countries

Before discussing the results, it seems appropriate to have a look at the 13 countries from a cultural standpoint, and since we have used data provided by WVS in our research, we consider important to have a look on how the 13 countries are classified by Inglehart, and Welzel, the promoters of World Values Survey. The cultural map of the world that includes the 13 countries selected for the research can be found on the WVS official website http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp.

In short, the traditional values highlight religiosity, national pride, respect for authorities, obedience, and marriage. The values of the dimension of secular-rational authority are opposite, and the authority of these societies

is rather established on practical reasons and not on tradition (Inglehart & Welzel, 2015). Values of survival imply the primacy of security over freedom, rejection of homosexuality, abstinence from political actions, mistrust towards people not from their group, and a low perception of happiness. The dimension of the well-being state implies the opposite of these characteristics; these societies value environmental protection, tolerance, and gender equality (Inglehart & Welzel, 2015).

3.2. Results discussion

Based on the data provided by WVS and EVS, analysis were made in order to illustrate if and in which way the individuals' perception has evolved. Further, we calculated the gross difference between the data provided by wave 6 and wave 2 of WVS. The results are summarized in Table 1. As can be seen, the highest absolute values are recorded on the importance given to work, friends, and leisure time. Overall, the importance of work declined nearly as much as the importance attributed to friends and leisure time (treated separately) has increased. The importance attributed to family has also increased, while the importance of politics and religion has slightly declined (see Table 1).

Table 1. Gross difference between data from wave 6 and wave 2.

			Wave 6 – Wave 2. Gross differences			
	Important in life: Work	Important in life: Politics	Important in life: Leisure time	Important in life: Friends	Important in life: Family	Important in life: Religion
Argentina	-17.8	-6.6	-6	2.9	-2.4	-15.6
Belarus	-8.4	-5.6	1.8	6.9	12.7	4.6
Chile	-18.7	-6.4	23.6	16	6.6	-27.3
China	-25.7	-18.3	7.3	25.2	23.7	1.2
India	-42.2	7.7	13.7	-2.6	-12	-5
Japan	13.3	10.5	18.7	11.6	13.5	0.5
South Korea	-7.9	-17.3	5.8	-2	-1.4	0.2
Mexico	20.1	5.7	31.3	14	13	24.6
Nigeria	-16.6	1.2	-15.2	9.8	4.6	5
Poland	-3.9	-6.7	1.3	15.8	1.8	12.4
South Africa	-20	-3.3	7.9	21.8	3.2	-9.6
Spain	-3	0.2	7.5	7.5	9.7	-8.9
Turkey	-4	5	17.9	2.8	8.3	7.6

Source: made by the authors based on WVS data

There is a general tendency to minimize the importance of work, followed by the increase in the importance of leisure time and friends. Nonetheless, work represents the second most important aspect of life in 10 out of 13 analyzed countries. Expressed as a percentage, the importance of work diminished in the past 25 years in 12 out of the 13 analyzed countries. In the case of Mexico, the importance of work has risen significantly in 2000-2004 compared with 1995-1999; the later fluctuations are insignificant. Although the importance of work has diminished globally, this does not mean that so did the way in which people from the analyzed countries work or relate to it (if they prefer teamwork, they refuse to assume individual responsibilities, they prefer being told what to do, etc) has changed. The analysis of the changes regarding the manner in which people from diverse cultures relate to work could constitute the aim of an ample research. On the other hand, the importance of leisure time has increased in the analyzed countries, except for Niger and Argentina.

Next, we calculated the mean and standard deviation for every one of the six aspects for the countries included in the study, with the aim of identifying whether or not significant changes in people's perception were registered, and identifying which are the countries in which the fluctuations spiked most. The two statistical values are presented in

Table 2. Based on the aforementioned results we were able to identify the countries with the most or least fluctuations and changes. The countries with the most significant fluctuations are: Mexico, India, and China, whereas South Korea, Spain, and Belarus had relatively insignificant fluctuations. Thus, it is timely and appropriate to analyze and identify the factors which determined these significant fluctuations in these three countries.

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation for the 13 analyzed countries

Country	Values for Mean and Standard Deviation	Important in life: Family	Important in life: Friends	Important in life: Leisure time	Important in life: Politics	Important in life: Religion	Important in life: Work
Argentina	Mean	89.68	52.52	35	10.12	35.62	69.34
	Std. Dev.	1.996747355	4.326315	5.562374	2.766225	8.220219	6.98985
Belarus	Mean	81.58	33.92	30.28	8.7	14.6	49.48
	Std. Dev.	4.882315025	5.844399	5.632229	3.157531	3.482097	3.820602
Chile	Mean	90.44	26.9	46.22	8.56	40.52	66.54
	Std. Dev.	4.13436815	6.006247	9.417378	3.186377	10.33668	8.180037
China	Mean	72.5	29.5	12.86	18.24	3.08	51.7
	Std. Dev.	10.99022293	10.61673	5.258612	7.664072	1.391761	11.74202
India	Mean	82.88	35.16	21.7	15.26	49.42	71.48
	Std. Dev.	11.83287793	6.472094	7.897151	3.86303	4.170372	16.76356
Japan	Mean	88.1	43.6	37.66	18.96	5.76	47.68
	Std. Dev.	6.068360569	5.851068	7.941851	3.837708	0.650385	5.777283
South Korea	Mean	91.2	47.02	25.28	19.16	23.06	62.24
	Std. Dev.	1.345362405	3.086584	3.193274	6.794336	2.617824	4.074064
Mexico	Mean	89.14	32.56	44.76	16.46	52.32	77.18
	Std. Dev.	10.89486117	6.835422	13.96667	3.142133	13.6388	12.27872
Nigeria	Mean	97.45	58.82	54.73	22.85	90.04	85.56
	Std. Dev.	2.107723891	5.612664	7.116671	3.185906	3.116569	6.25164
Poland	Mean	89.94	30.64	30.68	7.6	40.28	66.06
	Std. Dev.	2.123205124	7.30842	6.569399	2.570992	7.435859	8.17331
South Africa	Mean	93.14	32.56	33.66	21.38	65.72	72.24
	Std. Dev.	2.522498761	8.313122	3.71793	2.194767	5.834124	9.408932
Spain	Mean	85.72	46.84	38.8	6.86	18.44	58.86
	Std. Dev.	4.277499269	4.428092	5.802155	0.986408	5.748304	5.364047
Turkey	Mean	94.82	63.76	38.8	16.08	73.36	61
	Std. Dev.	4.403067113	7.80692	8.730693	5.054899	9.240563	11.31548

Source: calculated by authors using Excel, based on the data provided by WVS and EVS

What do Mexico, India, and China have in common? To find out, we first analyzed the growth chart of GDP per capita in these three countries starting with 1990 to present. For India and China the growth chart of GDP per capita is almost identical; a significant and steady growth since 1990 to present was registered. In the case of Mexico, the GDP per capita has significantly increased, but it also had short periods of decline. By analyzing the growth level of the GDP per capita in the other 10 countries we observed that there is a certain growth in GDP per capita in these countries, so that the ascending level of economic growth alone cannot explain the fluctuations registered in individuals' perception. But the fast-paced economic development (and much more) sets the three countries – Mexico, India, and China – apart from the other countries. All three countries had - at the beginning of the analyzed period of time - underdeveloped economies, but they are currently considered as three of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and are presumed to shortly be amongst the most powerful economies of the world (Dunkley, 2011).

Numerous economists and organizations (Hamilton, 2011) include these three countries in their reports about the fastest-growing economies. China and India belong to 'BRIC' states (Goldman Sachs Global Economics Groups, 2007), term coined by Jim O'Neil from Goldman Sachs, who proposed to include Mexico in it and change the acronym accordingly (Spence, Palmer & Oliver, 2014). All three countries belong to E7, term used to designate a group of seven countries with emerging economies – China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, Indonesia, and Turkey. The term was proposed by PricewaterhouseCoopers in Stern Review report (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2015) published on the 30th of October, 2006. It is assumed that E7 countries will have stronger economies than G7 countries by 2020 (Dunkley, 2011), and Goldman Sachs assumes that the economies of these seven countries will be among the most powerful economies by 2050 (Thornton, 2006). Economists keep in mind several aspects when dealing with economic foresight, such as macroeconomic stability, political maturity, quality of education, labor force, human development index, etc. (Human Development Report, 2014).

The rapid rhythm of economic growth peculiar to these three countries that once used to be underdeveloped brings about changes on all levels, including the social one. Therefore, it seems understandable that it brought mutations in people's perception of life. We consider that the fast rhythm of economic growth with all its implications represents the main factor that explains why Mexico, India, and China registered significant fluctuations concerning people's perception of life.

The importance of national wealth has been reported in the scientific literature before (Panagiotis & Pantelis, 2013; Beugelsdijk, Maseland & van Hoorn, 2015). In an admirable scientific endeavor, Tang and Koveos argue that „changes in economic conditions are the source of cultural dynamics" (Tang & Koveos, 2008). Hofstede, the promoter of the most popular and replicated cultural approach, states in his work that there is a close and "unquestionable" (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) link between national wealth and cultural dimensions. For example, countries that have experienced rapid economic development have moved towards individualism. At the same time, with increasing levels of economic development, power distance decreases.

4. Conclusions

Culture becomes more important every day, and the study of national cultures and of efficient methods to measure them is of great interest. In this paper we aimed to analyze whether the national culture is a concept stable enough to be considered valid. There are opinions both pro and cons on the concept of national culture, many researchers offering reasonable arguments. To achieve our goal we conducted a trends study on data provided by World Values Survey and European Values Survey for 13 countries on 3 continents for the time period 1990-2014. Research limitations were presented.

As seen, there is an effect of substitution between work and leisure time in all countries included in the study. Friends become also more important in many countries. Work becomes less important, while people treasure leisure time and friends more and more. Nonetheless, this fact does not mean that work is not important, actually work represents the second most important aspect of life in 10 out of 13 countries, but the intensity of the importance given to work (expressed as a percentage) has diminished in the past 25 years (except for Mexico, where importance given to work has increased greatly), during which the importance of leisure time has increased in 11 out of 13 analyzed countries.

But, despite the fluctuations in people's perception concerning important aspects in life, the hierarchy of these aspects maintained at a relatively constant level in these 13 countries during the past 25 years, with only sporadic permutations, especially in the inferior part of the hierarchy. This could mean that even though there are changes in people's perception concerning the importance given to certain aspects, the people's reference to these has been unchanged as seen through their personal hierarchy. We must admit that economic and social situations or diverse natural phenomena can influence people's perception of certain aspects in the short run. The hierarchy of aspects considered important in 2014 is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The hierarchy of important aspects in life

country	ranked 1st	ranked 2nd	ranked 3rd	ranked 4th	ranked 5th	ranked 6th
Argentina	Family	Work	Friends	Leisure time	Religion	Politics
Belarus	Family	Work	Friends	Leisure time	Religion	Politics
Chile	Family	Work	Leisure time	Friends	Religion	Politics
China	Family	Friends	Work	Leisure time	Politics	Religion
India	Family	Work	Religion	Leisure time	Friends	Politics
Japan	Family	Work	Friends	Leisure time	Politics	Religion
South Korea	Family	Work	Friends	Leisure time	Religion	Politics
Mexico	Family	Work	Leisure time	Religion	Friends	Politics
Nigeria	Family	Religion	Work	Friends	Leisure time	Politics
Poland	Family	Work	Religion	Friends	Leisure time	Politics
South Africa	Family	Work	Religion	Friends	Leisure time	Politics
Spain	Family	Work	Friends	Leisure time	Religion	Politics
Turkey	Family	Religion	Friends	Work	Leisure time	Politics

Source: made by authors based on the data provided by WVS, wave 6: 2010-2014

Some countries recorded greater fluctuations than others. Mexico, India, and China are the countries which registered the most significant fluctuations in the past 25 years. Possible explanations were discussed. Overall, we consider that the fast rhythm of economic growth represents the main factor that explains why China, India, and Mexico registered significant fluctuations regarding people's perception of life. Certainly, there must be numerous influential factors which bring out change in the cultural values of a nation, but, at this point, we can state that economic development is such a factor. This link between cultural change and economic growth has been reported before, as we previously argued. However there are still many unknowns and more research is needed to fully understand the determinants of cultural change.

Therefore, we can say that some cultures are more stable than others. The cultures that are subject to major changes, such as economic changes – the case of Mexico, India, and China – register certain changed, at least quantitative ones. Surely in-depth research to identify all the factors responsible for the registered fluctuations is needed. The analogy that Brooks Peterson uses in Cultural Intelligence (Peterson, 2004) can effectively illustrate the results of our current research. Peterson believes that culture can be likened to a tree. Every tree is unique in its own way, and just as a tree changes leaves but a part of it remains intact, so do cultures change on the surface, with their essence is left unchanged. By extending Peterson's analogy we can state that since not all trees are the same, cultures also differ; some change to a greater extent and faster, while others to a lesser extent and more slowly. Therefore, bearing in mind that some aspects of cultures change, it is mandatory we continuously adapt the tools used to measure culture, but most of all, it is important to develop qualitative tools of research in order to analyze culture. Intercultural studies are increasingly important as culture seems to change on certain levels.

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