

Teaching in Iran: Culture and Consequences

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine cultural effects on interactions within a Canadian MBA program delivered in Iran. The analysis helps illuminate some of the important cultural differences between the countries and their importance for international education. The study also illustrates how single cause explanations often provide simplistic interpretations of culturally influenced behaviours. Results indicate that underlying cultural differences create issues for teaching and learning, but that their impact is subtle and complex.

Keywords

Cross-cultural education, Iran, cultural dimensions, business education

Introduction

Research into culture on organizational behaviour has grown in parallel with the accelerating rate of international trade (Pinto, Serra and Ferreira 2014). This work has touched on most functional areas in business and embraced numerous industries. One area of activity that has recently attracted more attention has been international education (e.g. Prowse and Goddard 2010; Cronjé 2011; Lemke-Westcott and Johnson 2013; Goodall 2014). For some areas, e.g. China, the literature is extensive (e.g. Getty 2011). For other countries, especially those that are in some way marginal, reliable information continues to be sparse.

Interactions between teachers and students are affected by culture in a number of ways (Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas 2000). Students entering the tertiary level will have already formed a perception of the roles normally held by different parties and are often startled by deviations from this framework (Hofstede 1986; Ding and Lin 2013).

Managing these differential expectations requires adjustments by both teachers and students beginning with the recognition of important issues and their cultural roots (Ryan 2008).

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse interactions between teachers and students in a Canadian MBA program delivered in Iran to illuminate some of the important cultural differences between the two countries and to examine their importance for cross-cultural education. The analysis of the data will also illustrate how single cause explanations of cultural effects often provide overly-simplistic interpretations of behaviours.

The effects of culture

Studying the effects of culture is complicated by the varied definitions that have been proposed for the term. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) listed over 160 distinct usages. Jahoda (2012) observes that culture has been seen as an external force existing independently of individuals and as an internalized guide to behaviour. In business research, a value-based view dominates mainly through the work of Hofstede. For him, culture is “*the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another*” (Hofstede 2001, 9). For the GLOBE project, in contrast, culture is “*shared motives, values, beliefs, identities and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations*” (House 2004, 15). Both definitions emphasize the role of values in the application of the concept. We define culture as a complex social construction in which multiple values interact to influence attitudes and behaviours.

In a teaching context cultural differences are bound to exert an important influence on interactions between students and teachers (van Oord and Corn 2013). A considerable literature has arisen around cross-cultural business education, ranging from policy debates (e.g. Sacco 2014) to classroom activities (e.g. Daly et al. 2012). Much of this work has focused on a few specific cultural attributes, but in reality, any behaviour is an outcome both of predispositions and context. In this paper, we will examine how various

dimensions of culture affect interactions in cross-cultural classrooms, but with the understanding that most behaviours are influenced by multiple dimensions.

Two major studies have derived cultural measurements for Canada and Iran along dimensions that overlap to a certain degree. While his work has been criticized on both conceptual and empirical grounds (McSweeney 2002; Orr and Hauser 2008), Hofstede's study (1980, 1991) has become the most widely cited analysis of culture in the management literature. The GLOBE project (House et al. 2004) has also encountered scepticism from other researchers (Venaik and Brewer 2010) but remains one of the most comprehensive and systematic efforts in measuring culture.

The cultural dimensions derived from the Hofstede and GLOBE models are widely employed in the intercultural education literature (e.g. Signorini, Wiesemes, and Murphy 2009; Prowse and Goddard 2010; Cronjé 2011; Lemke-Westcott and Johnson 2013; Goodall 2014; Dennehy 2015). Prowse and Goddard (2010) used Hofstede's dimensions to examine teaching strategies based on perceptions of cultural differences between Canadian instructors and Qatari students. They concluded that Canadian faculty purposefully changed their classroom strategies based on their own perceived differences with the students' culture. Lemke-Westcott and Johnson (2013) used both sets of dimensions to focus on learning styles in a similar milieu. They found that Qatari students had a different learning style preferences requiring Canadian faculty to be flexible in their pedagogy. Goodall (2014) used Hofstede's collectivism-individualism dimension in studying the cultural differences between British instructors and Kurdish

Iraqi students. She found stark differences in how learning is seen and handled in the two cultures.

The data analysed to produce Hofstede's original values was collected in two waves from IBM employees around the world (Hofstede 2001, 41-42). The questions were designed to elicit responses concerning employee values with an eye towards organizational development. When the data was initially collected, cross-cultural comparisons were not seen as an important outcome (Hofstede 2001, 45). Factor analysis was used to construct the first four basic cultural dimensions (Hofstede 2011, 53-58). The data were collected over 40 years ago, which, in the case of Iran, means that they predate the revolution of 1979. Although Hofstede has argued that cultural values remain stable over time, (1980, 26-27), the Iranian revolution, "...brought an end to 2,000 years of monarchy and transformed the Iranian society in fundamental ways" (Javidan and Dastmalchian 2003, 127).

Table 1 shows the scores for Canada and Iran on four cultural dimensions (Hofstede 2001, 87, 151, 215, 286). The end points for the scales extend roughly from zero to one hundred. For power distance, a measure of how societies regard and deal with inequality, the Canadians scored almost twenty points lower than the Iranians. In an educational setting this would generally mean that the perceived social gap between students and professors would be higher in Iran. This greater distance might result in more willing acceptance of instructions and more deference paid to the professor (Hofstede 1986).

Table 1: Values for Hofstede's Four Cultural Dimensions

Dimension	Canada	Iran
Power Distance	39	58
Individualism (high)-Collectivism (low)	80	41
Masculinity (high)-Femininity (low)	52	43
Uncertainty Avoidance	48	59

National Scores range from 1-120

Source: Hofstede, 2001, 87, 151, 215, 286.

The difference on the individualism-collectivism scale is more pronounced with Canada scoring 80 against Iran's 41 (Hofstede 2001, 215). Students from Canada's highly individualistic culture would be expected to attend more to their own achievements than would students from the more collective Iranian society. Hofstede (1986) argues that in more collectivist cultures the prestige of acquiring diplomas or certification has a strong symbolic component that outweighs the desire for competency.

The differences on masculinity and femininity are small, with Canada being moderately masculine, which means that "(w)hile Canadians strive to attain high standards of performance ..., the overall cultural tone is more subdued with respect to achievement, success and winning" (Hofstede 2017). Iran is slightly more feminine, meaning they should value good relationships, cooperation and employment security over earnings, recognition and challenging work (Hofstede 2001). On the final dimension, uncertainty avoidance, the Canadians are again placed near the overall mean, while Iranians are more likely to seek clear instructions and firm bases for evaluation as reflected in their somewhat higher ranking.

The cultural framework formulated by the GLOBE project posits nine separate dimensions, each of which measured in terms of practice, how things are, and values, how respondents feel they ought to be (Javidan, House and Dorfman 2004). The GLOBE project was designed from the outset to measure values of societal culture, organizational culture and leadership (House and Hanges 2004, 95). Data were gathered through questionnaires administered to middle managers. Only companies from three industries, food processing, financial services and telecommunications were included. The survey began in twenty countries, but was later expanded to a total of 62 (House and Hanges 2004, 96-97).

Table 2 shows the GLOBE values for both Canada and Iran along with the overall means and standard deviations. Our discussion will focus mainly on scores for practice rather than an ideal state since it is on this level that foreigners normally interact. For performance orientation the two societies are quite similar with scores slightly above the mean. They are also relatively close in terms of assertiveness although there is a greater distance between Iranians' actual and value scores (Den Hartog 2004, 409-411). These results indicate that expectations concerning the efforts normally demanded from students and the forcefulness with which they pursue their goals should be similar.

Table 2: Values for Cultural Dimensions from GLOBE study

Dimensions	Practice				Values			
	Canada	Iran	Mean	S.D.	Canada	Iran	Mean	S.D.
Performance Orientation	4.49	4.58	4.10	0.41	6.15	6.08	5.94	0.34
Future Orientation	4.44	3.70	3.85	0.46	5.35	5.84	5.48	0.41
Gender Egalitarianism	3.70	2.99	3.37	0.37	5.11	3.75	4.51	0.48
Assertiveness	4.05	4.04	4.14	0.37	4.15	4.99	3.82	0.63
Societal Collectivism	4.38	3.88	4.25	0.42	4.17	5.54	4.72	0.49
In-Group Collectivism	4.26	6.03	5.13	0.73	5.97	5.86	5.66	0.35
Power Distance	4.82	5.43	5.17	0.41	2.70	2.80	2.75	0.35
Humane Orientation	4.49	4.23	4.09	0.47	5.64	5.61	5.42	0.25
Uncertainty Avoidance	4.58	3.67	4.16	0.60	3.75	5.36	4.62	0.61

Scale 0-7.

Sources:

Performance Orientation - Javidan 2004, 248, 250-251.

Future Orientation - Ashkanasy et al. 2004, 303-306.

Gender Egalitarianism - Emrich et al. 2004, 362, 365-366.

Assertiveness - Den Hartog 2004, 409-411.

Societal Collectivism - Gelfand et al. 2004, 467-468, 470.

In-Group Collectivism - Gelfand et al. 2004, 467, 469, 471.

Power Distance - Carl et al. 2004, 539-540.

Humane Orientation - Kabasakal and Bodur 2004, 573-574.

Uncertainty Avoidance - De Luque and Javidan 2004, 621-623.

For future orientation, the Canadian score (4.41) was over one and a half standard deviations higher than that the Iranians' (3.70) implying that Canadians were likely to take a longer view of their efforts (Ashkanasy et al. 2004, 303-305). In education a lower score would imply more focus on immediate results such as marks on papers and exams and less on the accumulation of systematic knowledge. The differential focus on long and short term goals may have been exacerbated as instructors are generally less concerned with students' marks than the effectiveness of their teaching.

Differences on gender egalitarianism were even more marked with the Canadian score (3.70) almost two standard deviations above that of the Iranian respondents (2.99) (Emrich, Denmark and Den Hartog 2004, 362, 365-366). This provides an interesting contrast to Hofstede's findings, which show only a small difference between the two societies on masculinity-femininity (Hofstede 2001, 286). The discrepancy most likely stems from the content of the items forming the two measures. The GLOBE study focuses on the allocation of roles by gender, while Hofstede's measure added emphasis on certain traits associated with masculinity such as assertiveness and need for achievement. For this study the GLOBE measure, examining how egalitarian the roles of men and women are provides more insight than the Hofstede measure. While the Canadian practice mean is in the top quartile, the value mean is over a point higher. The low Iranian value score shows only a slight increase over practice. The Canadians experience relatively high levels of gender equality, but believe practice should be even better. In Iran gender equality is perceived to be lower in practice than many other countries and is believed to be largely as it should be.

The GLOBE results produced two collectivism dimensions, one each at societal and organizational levels (Gelfand et al. 2004). Looking at the results in Table 2 a stark contrast emerges in the rankings on the two different forms (Gelfand et al. 2004, 467-471). For Canadians the difference between their adherence felt at the societal and organizational level is relatively small with scores rather below the overall mean. The Iranian score for the societal level is a standard deviation below that for Canada. At the organizational level, Iran's collectivism score is almost two standard deviations above that of Canada and the third highest in the sample. This indicates a very strong connection with one's organization in comparison to society as a whole.

Predicting how attitudes toward collectives might affect a classroom setting is less than straightforward. Students from more individualist societies would be inclined to utilize their resources for their own benefit. For those with a strong collectivist orientation behaviour would depend on which organization claimed their allegiance. If that organization was the teaching institution, then compliance with program rules could be expected. If the student group was seen as the focal organization, conflict might arise if the students perceived their interests did not coincide with those of the provider.

The GLOBE results for the power distance dimension are very similar to those found in Hofstede's work. The Canadian mean (4.82) was over one standard deviation lower than that for Iran (5.43) indicating that larger differences among social strata are more acceptable in Iran than Canada (Carl, Gupta and Javidan 2004, 539-540). Greater social

distance might increase the perceived influence of the instructor, which might lead to more formal interactions with someone in a more prestigious position. The greater Iranian power distance would also have an impact on relationships among the students themselves. The deference that Iranians typically pay to leaders (Javidan and Dastmalchian 2003) could come into play in the role expectations of both student leaders and professors.

The results for uncertainty avoidance are more complex with Hofstede (2001, 151) indicating that Iran scores higher (59 versus 48 for Canada) while the GLOBE researchers recorded the Canadian mean (4.58) as more than a standard deviation higher than Iran (3.67) (De Luque and Javidan 2004, 621-623). Venaik and Brewer (2010) noted that studies utilizing the two measures of uncertainty avoidance showed discrepancies attributable to divergent operationalisations of the concept. The GLOBE measure emphasizes a rules orientation. Hofstede's items also include the importance of rules, but they also incorporate stresses encountered in work settings. If this interpretation is correct, the GLOBE results would suggest that the Iranian students would be less concerned with clear rules than their Canadian counterparts.

The Program

In 1999, the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University was approached by an Iranian academic with a proposal to establish an MBA program in Iran. After the 1979 revolution all foreign institutions of higher learning left the country so there were few

guidelines as to how such programs should operate. This uncertainty meant that it took some time to arrive at a mutually agreeable framework.

The content of the Canadian MBA program was fairly standard with courses in all major areas. By agreement the Iranian version included the same content as courses offered in Canada. In many cases courses were taught by the same faculty in both countries although preliminary courses were offered by local academics. The first cohorts spent six weeks in Ottawa during the summer taking courses and experiencing the Canadian context, but this portion of the program was later curtailed as the result of a serious diplomatic breach, which eventually resulted in the suspension of the program.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this paper is qualitative content analysis, which “examines data that is the product of open-ended data collection techniques aimed at detail and depth, rather than measurement” (Forman and Damschroder 2007). It involves examining language intensely in order to group text into categories of similar meaning (Weber 1990). It was also deductive in nature as it “commence(d) with generalisations, and (looked) to see if these generalisations appl(ied) to specific instances” (Hyde 2000, 82).

The segments of the interviews employed in this paper were identified by two researchers, one who had been involved in collecting the data and one who had not. A number of important themes were first identified through an initial examination of the transcripts. These preliminary ideas were then collapsed into four overarching themes.

The interviews were coded by the two researchers to identify examples of these themes. Quotes that supported the themes were independently selected by the researchers with agreement deemed to support the theme. At the same time it should be noted that “because of the pure qualitative nature of thematic analysis, peer checking of intercoder reliability is not always possible since there is scepticism about the value of such testing” (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas 2013, 403). Quotes that were categorized differently were discussed to see if consensus could be reached. For most differences of opinion the quotes could be categorized in more than one of the main themes as they included content for both. There were, however, a few quotes where the two raters were unable to reach agreement. These instances were dropped from the data. The four themes examined are: interactions among students and teachers, academic misconduct, student relationships, and gender equality.

Over the duration of the program, fifteen full-time faculty from Carleton taught in Iran. After the project was suspended, the authors decided to capture the experiences of those who had participated as instructors. The main objective was to examine how pedagogical practices shifted in the face of contextual factors such as a compressed teaching schedule and an unfamiliar cultural setting. All fifteen of the full-time faculty, including two of the authors, agreed to be interviewed for this study although our responses are not included in the quotations. The interviews included a series of questions referring to specific topics with latitude for the respondents to expand their answers. The interviews lasted from 25 to 90 minutes. All but one of the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The faculty interviewed come from a variety of backgrounds in terms of academic area and cultural experiences. Of the fifteen, six were born in Canada, three in India and one each in China, Ghana, Uganda, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States. Since we are examining cross-cultural interactions, it is useful to consider to what extent Canadian culture affected the attitudes of those born outside the country. It is impossible to answer this question in any absolute sense, but all those involved had considerable teaching experience in Canada with several of having taught there for over thirty years. The immigrants may not have become entirely Canadian in their attitudes, but they were certainly habituated to dealing with the expectations and behaviours of Canadian students and to that extent reflected Canadian culture.

Results and Analysis

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we wish to examine the utility of various cultural dimensions for explaining the behaviours of the Iranian students and their instructors from Canada. This should not be interpreted as an attempt to compare the relative power of the Hofstede and GLOBE dimensions. While there are some overlaps between the two approaches, even seemingly similar dimensions may mask important differences (Brewer and Venaik 2010). Rather we wish to use these dimensions in a complementary fashion to understand how behaviours are influenced by the interaction of multiple cultural forces, our second research aim.

Interactions among students and teachers

One of the key components of any cross-cultural interaction lies in the relationships between those involved. In industry, politics, religion, or in this case education, the participants have expectations based on the way these roles are carried out in their home societies. These attitudes may be tempered by earlier interactions with foreigners or by various media portrayals. When discussing perceptions of relationships with those who had taught in Iran, there was an almost universal reference to the high level of respect students exhibited toward the faculty.

'They are probably on average a little bit more in awe of or respectful of the prof, I've found. Where here [in Canada] it's more an earned thing and even then I don't think it's the same. There I felt they just did have some level of respect for you just because you were a prof. Which is kind of interesting.'

'One of the interesting differences is how much students still respect professors. They have tremendous respect for professors. Sometimes too much I think. To the point where they think that when you are a professor you know everything. And that makes it difficult for them to say something contrary to either what you say, what the textbook says.'

The most straightforward interpretation of this attitude lies in the difference in scores for power distance found in both the Hofstede and GLOBE works. The students apparently found it natural to hold the professors in high regard. Their position as experts in charge of the learning process allotted to them certain roles, which the students accepted even

though some of the Iranians held senior positions in their own institutions. Neither of the measures of power distance generated extreme scores, but, the students' attitudes were sufficiently different from those found in Canada as to be remarked by virtually every faculty member interviewed.

In addition to the influence of power distance the heightened position of the faculty might also be affected by a wish to avoid uncertainty. Hofstede (1986) argues that where uncertainty avoidance is higher, professors are expected to be largely infallible even on subjects outside the classroom. Such a belief relieves students from the obligation of examining course materials critically. As can be seen from the second quote the professor, reflecting Canada's more neutral score on uncertainty avoidance, found this attitude surprising, even disquieting. Current efforts to instil critical thinking skills in North America might encounter significant cultural barriers in a country such as Iran.

The respect shown by the Iranian students was somewhat undermined by another behaviour noticed by several professors. Despite their deference, students frequently questioned assignments and course arrangements.

'[I]t was a constant bargaining for everything. Everything was up for grabs. In the moment that you announce something there is always a discussion; if it's necessary, what's the point, why, maybe we can reduce the amount of effort and so on and so on.'

'...one of the things I loved about teaching there is it's a constant negotiation every day about what you're doing and what things are worth and what that's about. So that was kind of neat and I think my first time I probably gave them more slack and they were allowed to create the course probably way more than what I allowed after when I realized that ... you were expected to push back more than I did initially.'

There is a growing literature on cross-cultural negotiation (Bulow and Kumar 2011) with some evidence that negotiation styles used by Iranians have distinctive characteristics (Yeganeh 2011). Negotiation is a common feature of daily life in Iran as many transactions are open to discussion. The Iranian students did not generally seek to alter the content of courses thus posing a challenge to the authority of the instructors. Rather they sought to alter the process by which the material was delivered and the amount of work required. This might be seen as a means of dealing with stress indicated by the higher value on the Hofstede version of uncertainty avoidance since lower workloads reduce pressure on students. Bargaining around workload issues might also be influenced by Iranians' high level of in-group collectivism since lower demands made it possible for those with weaker skills to succeed.

Academic misconduct

Another issue mentioned by many faculty concerned academic misconduct by a number of the students. Academic misconduct appeared primarily as cheating on exams and plagiarism. Initially these two issues were treated similarly. If a student cheated or

plagiarized, they were subjected to university policy which usually resulted in a zero for that part of the grade. The faculty quickly recognized, however, that rules concerning proper citation and appropriating another's work were quite foreign to many students. Although individual faculty would inform their classes about the basics of proper citation problems persisted. Program administrators eventually added an orientation that included one day on appropriate citation practice setting a clear baseline. Cheating on exams took a number of forms meaning that faculty had to be extremely vigilant about the writing, reproducing and administering of exams to limit opportunities for unacceptable behaviour.

Some of the instructors perceived plagiarism and other violations of academic standards in sharp contrast to the high levels of respect they enjoyed. They could not understand how students could exhibit genuine regard for their professors, while at the same time endeavouring to evade basic rules of academic integrity. The professors' perceptions may have been partly due to Canadian values, which emphasize individual responsibility for one's actions downplaying the effects of social pressure.

Despite their distaste for students' tendencies in this area, some instructors recognized there was likely a cultural element underlying their behaviour.

'They didn't take the issue of plagiarism as seriously here because I think the background is that, that it was almost acceptable. If it serves the purpose, why not do it?'

This agrees with Hofstede's (1986) argument that in more collectivist societies educational achievement is so important that taking devious paths to gain credentials is acceptable. The gains that accrue to the individual and other group members justify breaking formal rules of conduct. When this attitude is combined with a high performance orientation focused on near term gains and a low respect for rules, taking advantage of any opportunity becomes a natural way of dealing with uncertainty. (Javidan and Dastmalchian 2003). Most students eventually adapted to Carleton University's expectations regarding plagiarism, however, given cultural pressures, the extension of this behaviour to instances outside the MBA program is problematic. In terms of cheating on exams students remained opportunistic in spite of additional constraints imposed by the instructors.

Collectivism may also play a role in making academic misconduct more acceptable through the burdens it imposes vis-à-vis other group members. One faculty member noticed that some of the attempts to evade rules were made not for the benefit of offending students, but for those who were less proficient.

'They thought it was okay if one of the group members needed answers and they used that as part of their answer. They thought that was okay.'

This type of mutual responsibility is characteristic of collective cultures. The GLOBE study (House et al. 2004), as mentioned above, distinguished between collectivism at the

institutional level where the Iranians scored below the mean and at the organization and family level where their score was among the highest. Such strong feelings of mutual obligation help explain why some of the best students were willing to assist their less talented colleagues in ways that were unethical under the rules of the program. The dictates of foreign authorities carried less weight than the needs of colleagues.

Strong collectivism can also lead to very clear distinctions between in-groups and out-groups, which can serve as a justification for behaviour that would not be acceptable towards fellow collective members. A quite competent student remarked to a faculty member that the students regarded cheating almost as a game; they took pleasure not just in their success, they also enjoyed the process. The professors, even though respected, were not part of the focal group, and thus fair targets for this type of treatment. Success at cheating reinforced the distinction between in and out-group members.

Student Relationships

Discussions of collectivism can convey the impression that relationships within the group are always harmonious and supportive, but this picture may not reflect reality.

‘They had in-groups and outer groups and I think they were accountable within groups and not necessarily across.’

Shortly after the cohorts met for the first time, one or more leaders would emerge with responsibility for mediating between students and instructors. These individuals

normally conducted the negotiations discussed earlier. The process by which these leaders were chosen was not clear although older males predominated. In addition to serving as external spokespersons, they also played a significant role in the internal governance of the group.

'If there were slackers in the groups, I didn't hear about them; or any dysfunctional behaviour in the groups, I didn't hear about it. I doubt there was because things seemed well ordered. You know, the leader in a group wouldn't take that off them.'

This strong leadership role fits with the higher levels of power distance found by both Hofstede and the GLOBE project although it is useful to remember that in both studies the Iranians were somewhat above the mean, but not exceptionally high.

In Iranian public institutions there is a significant centralization of power with leaders normally adopting an authoritarian approach (Ali and Amirshahi 2002). Lower level members of the collective do not expect to have a great deal of influence on the leader's decisions; rather he (seldom she) is expected to communicate a vision that guides group behaviour. This attitude reflects the strong family ties found in Iran and the importance of in-groups as a whole (Javidan and Dastmalchian 2003). In the classroom, such leadership can restrict the interaction between students and faculty. Direct questions to students can create a difficult situation until the leader has indicated his opinion.

'To force the person to talk, it would embarrass that person because they would know the leadership should be speaking, but it would also make the leader feel as if he was being challenged.'

This is not to say there were not spirited discussions, but they were normally framed in relation to the leader's original pronouncement. Attempts to enforce a more Western style of student interaction in which all participated equally would likely encounter difficulties.

Gender equality

The final area of cultural influence to be considered is that of gender relations, a topic that informs many of the stereotypes of Iran. On Hofstede's masculinity-femininity dimension Iran scored 43 or slightly below the mean with Canada slightly above. This reflects the concern for and support of individuals, which is also found in the in-group collectivism score. Individuals in a more feminine society, such as Iran, will negotiate and seek compromises rather than assert their views without considering others. The parallel dimension from the GLOBE study focused more on equality between the genders with Iran reporting a value one standard deviation below the mean.

'To some extent there were challenges across the gender divide and age divide. So older males would tend to dominate or stifle the ideas of, in the worst case, younger females.'

Since virtually all the classes were held in a small city, there was considerable scope for student-instructor interaction outside the classroom. Here too gender inequality, or at least gender separation, played its part.

'There were lots of issues with equality, you know, outside of class. You wanted to organize something and you realized that treatment of men and women was quite different. You can't do this because you're a woman or you can't do that, or you can't do this and that together. But in class, again I had this sense of...that everyone, as they explained, in Iran has two lives. There is a public life and a private life. So in private life they are very tolerant, very equal et cetera, et cetera...but in public life there are always these rules that they had to follow and that's what impacted their behaviour, but again, since we were all in class, I didn't observe it at all.'

While the gender divide was apparent, there were other forces, some of them cultural, that helped bridge the gap. For example, there was, as mentioned above, a feeling of collective responsibility for student success. If a student was seen to be struggling, classmates would assist with readings and assignments in a number of ways. Many of these arrangements involved the more talented, regardless of gender, helping the less gifted. The value placed on collective responsibility did not overcome in any general way gender inequality, but it did create a space in which the value of individual women in certain areas could be acknowledged.

Conclusion

One of the purposes of this paper was to clarify the cultural context for faculty teaching in Iran or encountering students from that country in domestic classes. Adding to the nascent but growing literature focused on cultural differences between instructors and students in international higher education, we found that the dimensions from two cultural surveys were useful as a general guide, but separately are limited in promoting cross-cultural understanding since each dimension can be manifested in a number of ways. The analysis in this paper indicates that while Iran shares some cultural features with other countries in the Middle East, there are aspects of its context that make it unique. According to the faculty members interviewed, specific perspectives on power distance, gender equality and group cohesion give rise to forces that shape students' expectations and behaviour.

A further aim of this work was to illustrate how cultural dimensions taken alone may actually mislead those working across cultural boundaries by putting undue emphasis on a single value. Collectivism is a strong force in Iran, but it does not operate in precisely the same way that it does in other countries. We found high levels of gender inequality have a strong influence on group interactions in Iran but at the same time can be mitigated by the obligations implicit in small group collectivism illustrating how multiple dimensions can affect particular behaviours.

Another finding that calls for further investigation concerns the distinction between the classroom and private life and the way that culture affects each. In the Iranian setting we found that students invoked cultural norms depending on how they defined the situation. Where they considered themselves among friends and colleagues, certain types of behaviour were allowed that they eschewed in more public and formal settings. The degree to which behaviours shift in this way forms an important aspect of culture that may have implications for classroom interactions as well as in other social settings.

Limitations

There are number of limitations to this study largely stemming from its post-hoc nature. Since the study focused on a single institution, the influence of organizational culture may be difficult to distinguish from those of national culture. It is also hard to determine if other cultures might interpret these behaviours similarly. Generalizability would also be limited since all the faculty interviewed work in a business school. Programs in other disciplines may demonstrate different values and norms. Finally, it must be acknowledged that the interviews required respondents to rely on memory with the potential for bias in the reliability and validity of the results.

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