NATIONAL CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS:

A COMPARISON OF GENDER DIFFERENCES

IN JAPAN AND THE U.S.

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Abstract

Successful businesses today must be able to operate effectively in an international environment. Effective operation requires understanding cultural differences that exist among countries. The increasing presence of women in international business environments raises the question as to whether perceptions of cultural dimensions differ by gender. If cross-cultural gender differences exist, then understanding these differences is important to international business success.

Japan and the United States (U.S.) are two major forces in international trade with considerable economic interaction. Hofstede (1980) found these countries to differ substantially in cultural terms. The economic similarities contrasted with the cultural differences make Japan and the U.S. interesting subjects for comparing gender differences. Given the large amount of trade occurring between the two countries, improving understanding with regard to cross-cultural gender differences may facilitate better business relationships. Our research, therefore, focused on whether the cultural dimensions differ by gender in Japan and the U.S. Significant gender differences appeared for Japanese participants in the power distance and individualism/collectivism dimensions. In the U.S. no significant gender differences were identified. Theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed.

Introduction

Undeniably, businesses today have to be able to operate in an international environment. Firms of any size and in any industry are internationally active and have to be prepared to address the "foreignness" of the business environment in the countries they operate in. Luo and Mezia (2000) in their Call for Papers on the topic of "the liability of foreignness" briefly discuss that this concept has not been clearly defined and systematically studied. However, in recent years much research has focused on cultural differences and their relevance to international management. Differences in culture are certainly an element in the "foreignness picture" and, if not understood and addressed, can result in significant liabilities and losses for an international firm.

A changing element in international business, particularly in industrialized countries, is the increasing presence of women. In most industrialized countries, women's role has changed during the past 25 years. Increasingly women are more educated and are actively participating in the workforce. In many countries, women have made great strides in assuming positions in firms that in the past had not been attainable for them. As businesses interact across cultures, the likelihood of interacting with a female business partner continues to increase. The effectiveness of these interactions depends in part on a mutual awareness and understanding of the cultural differences found in the countries the partners represent.

A further question that arises, given the increasing role played by women in international business, is whether gender differences further complicate cultural differences that exist. If perceptions of cultural dimensions differ by gender, then understanding such differences will increase effectiveness in international business dealings. In fact, successful international business operations may require understanding cross-cultural gender differences.

Japan and the United States (U.S.) are two countries with substantial economic interaction that play major roles in the world economy. In 2000, over 212 billion U.S.$ in trade occurred between Japan and the U.S. (U.S. Government Census 2001). Both countries have undergone substantial change over the past 25 years due to economic and social forces. They are also countries with dramatically different cultures, particularly with regard to gender roles (Hofstede 1980). Because of these similarities and differences, Japan and the U.S. provide an interesting comparison with regard to gender differences that may exist. Understanding such differences may enable improved business relationships and cross-cultural dealings. Our research, therefore, focuses on whether the cultural dimensions differ by gender in these two countries.

Background

Cultural Framework

Hofstede's (1980) study introduced a basic framework for cross-cultural differences that has since become an established typology for research in national cultures. While other typologies exist, e.g., Schwartz (1992), Trompenaars (1993), Smith and Schwartz (1997), we focus on Hofstede because our interest lies in gender differences. Hofstede's study isolated such differences in a single dimension, masculinity/femininity.

Hofstede (1980) collected 116,000 surveys from IBM employees in the late 1960's and early 1970's. His sample initially covered 40 countries and was later expanded to include 53 countries and regions (Hofstede, 1991). In analyzing his data, Hofstede (1980) identified four basic dimensions of national culture: power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity.

Power distance describes the values held in a society with respect to the importance of equal distribution of power, wealth and other factors. This dimension is reflected in the work context by the beliefs regarding the degree of power superiors should hold over subordinates. Those who believe that superiors should have a large degree of power would rank high on power distance while those who believe that superiors should allow more freedom to subordinates would rank lower on power distance.

Individualism/collectivism addresses a focus on individuals and their families versus an ingroup. Members of individualistic cultures prioritize personal interests and goals; members of collectivist cultures give priority to ingroup goals. Members of a collectivist culture give up some personal freedom for security and protection by the group.

Uncertainty avoidance concerns the extent to which members of a society are able to accept ambiguous and uncertain situations. Cultures high in uncertainty avoidance develop detailed systems of rules and procedures. The members of such cultures are expected to strictly adhere to such systems. In cultures low in uncertainty avoidance rule-setting is reduced to the minimum necessary. A higher degree of tolerance exists for deviance or innovation.

The masculinity/femininity dimension captures the emphasis on aggressiveness, achievement, and material success that prevails in a culture. In a masculine culture, these characteristics are strongly emphasized. In a feminine culture, the emphasis is on quality of life and relationships. The masculinity/femininity dimension is of particular interest because this is the only dimension for which Hofstede identified gender differences. While both men and women in a given national culture evidenced a higher degree of masculinity or femininity depending on their culture, Hofstede found that differences between men and women within the culture were greater in more masculine countries.

Since Hofstede introduced his national cultural framework in 1980, his study has become one of the most frequently cited in cross-cultural research efforts. Furthermore, numerous studies have validated his findings, e.g., Bochner 1994, Sondergaard 1994, Thomas and Mueller 2000, Van Oudenhoven 2001. Building upon this existing research, in this study we assume that the gender differences or lack thereof in cultural dimensions noted by Hofstede exist in Japan and the U.S. We seek to explore whether the social and economic changes that have occurred in both countries during the 25 years since Hofstede's study was undertaken have impacted men and women differently.

Japan and the U.S.

Hofstede (1980) found the cultures of Japan and the U.S. a contrast of opposites (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Japan was characterized as a collectivist, high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, masculine country. The U.S. was characterized as an individualist, low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, moderately masculine country. Despite these differences, both countries entered the 70's as economic super powers.

In 1970, the U.S. was ranked number one based on GNP per capita (U.S. $4,760) while Japan was ranked ninth (U.S. $1,920) (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1972). 1970 marked the end of a golden period following World War II during which U.S. companies dominated the world economy (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 2001). During the same post-war period, Japan had undertaken a massive and successful restructuring of its economy with results that were evident in 1970.

The 1980's, however, presented a slightly different story. While both countries retained their positions as world economic leaders, Japan's industrial growth outpaced that of the U.S. so that in 1988, Japan's GNP per capita (U.S. $21,020) exceeded that of the United States (U.S. $19,840) for the first time (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1990). This remarkable state of events became commonplace in the 90's as Japan assumed the position of world economic leader and maintained economic dominance over the U.S. throughout the decade.

The new millennium has wrought further changes. Economic woes in both Japan and the U.S. have slowed growth in both countries. In 2000, the U.S. caught up with Japan (U.S. GNP per capita of U.S. $34,260 to Japan's GNP per capita of U.S. $34,210) bringing the two now aging super powers to economic equivalence (World Bank 2001).

As with other industrialized countries, Japan and the U.S. have exhibited the same trends in the work force, namely the increased presence of more highly educated women. In both countries, women have become more educated and more women have chosen to pursue careers. Since 1975, the percentage of women in the work force has grown continually in Japan and in the U.S. (Ota 1999, U.S. Department of Labor 2000). By 1999, women had grown to 46% of the workforce in the U.S. and 41% in Japan (International Labour Organization 2001). Women also advanced in education terms. By 1999, 23% of women in the U.S. held a bachelor's degree or more (U.S. Department of Commerce 2000). Similarly, by 1997, 24% of women in Japan held a college or graduate degree (Management and Coordination Agency 1998).

As a result of the increased numbers of women combined with higher educational levels, women now comprise 4% of the managers in Japan (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2001) and 45% of the managers in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Labor). They represent 45% of

professional and technical workers in Japan and 54% of professionals in the U.S. (Ota 1999, U.S. Department of Labor 2000).

Hypotheses

Hofstede (1980) found that in general the national cultural characteristics dominated all other factors such as age, gender, level, and profession. As a result, members of the same culture would be expected to have similar values regardless of differences in gender. The only dimension expected to exhibit gender differences was masculinity/femininity. In this dimension, interestingly, the more masculine the country, the greater the differences between men and women. Recent studies on Hofstede dimensions provide mixed results with studies confirming both the presence and the lack of gender differences in these cultural dimensions (e.g., Lee et al. 2000, Thomas and Mueller 2000, Van Oudenhoven 2001). Given these results, we have elected to remain consistent with Hofstede's original findings. As a result, we hypothesize the following:

H1a: Japanese men and women will not differ on the power distance dimension.

H1b: U.S. men and women will not differ on the power distance dimension.

H2a: Japanese men and women will not differ on the individualism/collectivism dimension.

H2b: U.S. men and women will not differ on the individualism/collectivism dimension.

H3a: Japanese men and women will not differ on the uncertainty avoidance dimension.

H3b: U.S. men and women will not differ on the uncertainty avoidance dimension.

Hofstede (1980) found that Japan scored substantially higher on the masculinity dimension than the U.S. (see Table 1) and that men scored higher than women on this dimension in both countries. He also found that in general higher masculinity scores were associated with greater

gender differences in this dimension. Assuming that the U.S. and Japan cultures have shifted synchronously because of the similarity in social and economic development, we propose the following hypothesis.

H4a: Japanese men and women will differ on the masculinity/femininity dimension.

H4b: U.S. men and women will differ on the masculinity/femininity dimension.

H4c: Japanese men and women differ more than U.S. men and women on the masculinity/femininity dimension.

Methodology

Sample: Graduate-level business students engaged in post-baccalaureate studies in Japan or enrolled in MBA programs in the U.S. completed the Values Survey Model 1994 (VSM 94) in Japanese or English. The sample (detailed in Table 2) consisted of 97 Japanese students and 60 U.S. students.

Insert Table 2 approximately here

Males and females comprised 67% and 33% of the Japanese sample and 58% and 42% of the U.S. sample, respectively. The majority were in their 20's and 30's with a wide range of work experience.

Measures: The VSM 94 is the most recent version of the questionnaire originally used by Hofstede (1980). It includes four questions for each of the four dimensions as well as demographic questions regarding gender, age, experience, and nationality. Table 3 provides the formulas used to calculate the Hofstede indices.

Insert Table 3 approximately here

Analysis: Mean comparisons and t-tests were used to evaluate the statistical significance of the differences between men and women in the various cultural dimensions in each country. The differences in the masculinity/femininity dimension between the U.S. and Japan are also compared.

Results

Table 4 presents the Hofstede scores for both countries and for men and women in each country as well as descriptive statistics and the results of the mean comparisons.

Insert Table 4 approximately here

Concerning the power distance dimension, men and women in Japan scored significantly differently. The mean for Japanese women on this dimension was significantly lower than the mean for men. This result does not support hypothesis 1a. The difference in the mean for this dimension for men and women in the U.S. was not significant ($p = .065$), providing support for hypothesis H1b. In Japan, men and women also differed significantly with respect to the individualism/collectivism dimension. This was not the case for men and women in the U.S. As a result, hypothesis H2a is not supported, whereas hypothesis H2b is supported. No significant differences were found for the uncertainty avoidance dimension. Thus, hypotheses H3a and H3b are supported. Concerning the masculinity dimension, neither the difference between men and women in Japan nor the difference between men and women in the U.S. is significant. As a result, H4a and H4b are not supported. The difference between men and women on this dimension was 20 in Japan and 35.2 in the U.S. We had proposed that the difference would be

higher in Japan than in the U.S. because Japan is a more masculine country than the U.S. Hypothesis 4c is not supported.

Discussion

The world that Hofstede originally surveyed differed greatly from the one that exists today. The U.S. experienced several decades during which U.S. companies technologically and economically dominated global business. Japan had made enormous strides since the devastation of the war years and was positioning itself to commercialize U.S. inventions. The economic outlook for the two countries was very positive. Since that time, Japan and the U.S. have experienced both economic growth and decline. Both countries have experienced periods of rapid and rampant economic growth followed by periods of economic stagnation. Similarly, changes in the work force have impacted both countries. Women are better educated and comprise an increasing percentage of the work force. The changes over the past 25 years have brought the two countries to become more similar, economically, socially, and perhaps culturally.

The focus of this study was on gender differences in cultural dimensions. Since Japan and the U.S. have experienced similar economic and social changes, we expected that the cultures of the two countries may have changed synchronously. Based on Hofstede's findings, we also expected that the cultural dimensions would be homogeneous within a country and would not differ significantly for men and women. The results of this study show a significant gender difference for the power distance dimension – particularly for Japan. Women in the U.S. and Japan perceive the power distance to be less than men. In both countries women have made great progress in establishing themselves as "equal to men" in the business world. Our sample consisted of graduate-level business students. Obviously, the women in our sample have great

career ambitions. Power distance concerns perceptions as to the importance of equal distribution of power and wealth in a society. Hofstede (1980) suggested that in less affluent societies power distance is likely to be higher because the poor members of that society need to find a way to associate with more wealthy and more powerful members to succeed. As societies become more wealthy, access to wealth and power becomes more available to all members and the need to associate with the wealthy and powerful is diminished. This logic may be applied to explain our result for power distance. Japan and the U.S. both have become firmly established as extremely wealthy nations. Opportunities for members of both societies abound. Women in particular have seen their role, opportunities, and choices change dramatically over the past 25 years. In their perception their situation has become more equitable to men. They perceive that access to wealth and power is there for everybody, hence a lower score on power distance.

Women in Japan also scored significantly lower on the individualism/collectivism dimension. When comparing the overall score on this dimension to the Hofstede (1980) results, it becomes obvious that Japan has changed from a collectivistic to a somewhat individualistic culture. However, men perceive a significantly higher level of individualism than women. Hofstede (1980) suggested that with increasing economic development and wealth cultures will become more individualistic. In less developed nations access to resources is extremely limited. Survival may depend in part on the support of others – members of the society that represent one's ingroup. As nations develop, access to resources becomes easier. Resources are more available. Hence, the need for belonging to a group decreases. Since particularly in Japan women's success in the business environment is quite recent and since women still fight stereotypes and face discrimination, they may perceive more of a need for belonging to "a group". Additionally, as reflected in the numbers for managerial positions held by women,

Japanese women have not established themselves in business to the extent women in the U.S. have. Hence, we find a gender difference in this dimension for Japan and not for the U.S.

As predicted in both countries no gender differences were found for uncertainty avoidance. In both countries, particularly in Japan, uncertainty avoidance has decreased. As both economies have developed, people are becoming more comfortable with ambiguous situations and uncertainty.

We expected to find a gender difference in the masculinity/femininity score. No difference was found in Japan or the U.S. The overall scores for these dimensions indicate that both countries have become more feminine. This may be due to the more active involvement of women in all facets of society in both countries. The feminine values that emphasize relationships and quality of life are reflected in many aspects of society in both countries such as environmental and social legislation and management practices.

Overall Japan is still slightly more masculine than the U.S. (a score of 34 for Japan and 29 for the U.S.). We had expected more of a gender difference on this dimension in Japan because Japan is overall more masculine. Instead, we found that the difference between men and women on this dimension is much larger in the U.S. than in Japan. Again, women in the U.S. are somewhat ahead of Japanese women in their fight for equality in the business environment. They overcame many obstacles in form of gender bias. As a result, American women may be more aware of differences in masculine and feminine values which is reflected in the difference for the masculinity/femininity score for men and women in the U.S.

In interpreting the results of this study, the following caveats have to be considered. The sample sizes for the two countries in our study were not equal. Furthermore, we utilized students actively engaged in post-baccalaureate studies. As a result, they are a highly motivated and

specialized group and may not be fully representative of the populations in each country. Therefore, our ability to generalize the results of this study may be limited. Finally, Hofstede used IBM employees exclusively in his study. The students in our sample had a wide range of work experience for a large number of different organizations. Differences, therefore, may be due to sample differences.

These caveats notwithstanding, the results of this study have important theoretical and practical implications. In contrast to Hofstede (1980) we found that some cultural dimensions are not homogeneous across gender. From a theoretical perspective this is important. Hofstede's framework may have to be revised to explicitly address gender-based differences in culture. Furthermore, the impact of increases in wealth and economic development on culture may differ depending on various factors such as a country's original cultural characteristics.

From a practical perspective, women in Japan, even though much progress has been made, have not reached the confidence level American women have developed in the business context. In interacting with male as well as female business partners from Japan, Americans must be aware of and consider the differing perceptions with respect to power distance and individualism.

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Table 1: Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede 1980)			
Dimensions of Culture	**Japan**	**U.S.**	**Difference**
Power Distance	54	40	14
Individualism/Collectivism	46	91	(45)
Uncertainty Avoidance	92	46	46
Masculine/Feminine	95	62	33

Table 2: Sample						
	Japan		U.S.		Combined	
	Men	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**
Age						
20's	27	17	22	19	49	36
30's	29	9	7	3	36	12
40's and over	9	5	6	3	15	8
Total	65	31	35	25	100	56
Occupational Level						
None/unskilled	8	4	6	1	14	5
General/vocational	14	6	8	12	22	18
Professional	29	11	7	7	36	18
Managerial	10	2	14	5	24	7
Total	61	23	35	25	96	48
Note: Totals differ as complete information was not always provided.						

Table 3: Index Calculation Formulas and Interpretation
PDI = -35 * (mean score for Question 3) + 35 * (mean score for Question #6) + 25 * (mean score for Question #14) – 20 * (mean score for Question #17) – 20 Normal range: 0 (small power distance) to 100 (large power distance)
IDV = -50 * (mean score for Question #1) + 30 * (mean score for Question #2) + 20 * (mean score for Question #4) – 25 * (mean score for Question #8) + 130 Normal range: 0 (strongly collectivist) to 100 (strongly individualistic)
MAS = 60 * (mean score for Question #5) – 20 * (mean score for Question #7) + 20 * (mean score for Question #15) – 70 * (mean score for Question #20) + 100 Normal range: 0 (strongly feminine) to 100 (strongly masculine)
UAI = 25 * (mean score Question #13) + 20 * (mean score for Question #16) – 50 * (mean score for Question #19) + 120 Normal range: 0 (weak uncertainty avoidance) to 100 (strong uncertainty avoidance)
LTO = 45 * (means score for Question #9) – 30 * (mean score for Question #10) – 35 * (mean score for Question 11) + 15 * (mean score for Question #12) + 67 Normal range: 0(very short-term oriented) to 100 (very long-term oriented)

TABLE 4 – Hofstede Dimensions Scores Descriptive Statistics and T-tests									
Japan		**Men**			**Women**			**T-Test**	
	Overall	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**t-value**	**Signif.***
PDI	38	58	45.7	51.2	24	14.0	47.0	2.61	.011
IDV	86	64	93.5	45.9	32	70.8	48.0	2.25	.027
UAI	50	60	46.7	48.7	26	57.9	54.3	-.95	.346
MAS	34	62	40.8	93.1	26	20.4	90.3	.95	.346
U.S.		**Men**			**Women**			**T-Test**	
		N	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**t-value**	**Signif.***
PDI	33	34	36.3	52.4	25	26.2	46.4	1.88	.065
IDV	96	35	106.4	49.9	25	82.6	46.3	.77	.445
UAI	30	35	22.1	59.6	25	40.0	65.3	-1.10	.276
MAS	29	35	44.0	90.9	25	8.8	74.9	1.59	.118
* = 2-tailed									