

# **Commentary**

## **From Cognitive Dichotomies to Cultural Discourses: Hofstede, Fougère and Moulettes in Conversation**

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Martin Fougère and Agneta Moulettes have taken a largely critical view of Geert Hofstede's research. In the process, they suggest a different approach to the study of culture and cultural difference than that taken by Hofstede. I find value both in their critique, and in the works of Hofstede. In this brief commentary, I want to say a few words about Hofstede's research, about its criticism, then discuss how each sets the stage for a different view of culture and discourse.

Many readers of this journal may already know that Geert Hofstede's study is the most cited work in the *European Social Citation Index* and has become one of the most cited in the *Social Sciences Citation Index* generally. It is a standard reference among many who examine differences between nations, especially those focused on corporations and 'national differences'. I begin here as a way of reminding readers that many practitioners and scholars have found considerable value in what Hofstede has presented in his studies.

The model Hofstede employs presumes a particular definition of culture. As Hofstede (2001: 1) conceptualises it in his book: 'culture is defined as collective programming of the mind', then immediately adds, 'it manifests itself not only in values, but in more superficial ways: in symbols, heroes, and rituals'. His application of the concept is explicit; 'I use the word *culture* to refer to national culture' (p. 1, italics in original).

Hofstede continues by explaining that comparative work across cultures, or national cultures, must somehow examine 'fundamental problems of societies' (p. 1) so one is not caught in a form of ethnocentrism, simply interpreting one society's culture from the vantage of another. In other words, a researcher from American society who examines, 'how the Chinese use the concepts of self and choice', risks skewing the research in the direction of American culture, if relying on peculiar American notions of what 'self' and 'choice' involve. To avoid this problem, Hofstede proposes abstract 'dimensions of culture' which are in some degree, from the view of his model, active across all societies.

There are five such dimensions in Hofstede's model: how the less powerful expect power to be distributed; how integrated individuals are in groups; the distribution of roles between genders; the degree of tolerance of ambiguity; and a society's orientation to the future. Based upon a sample from a national group, one can compute a mean score for each dimension and thereby establish a snapshot of that nation's culture, with that nation's score on each dimension, relative to other nations, being rather stable, Hofstede argues.

Note that Hofstede's model presents the definition and dimensions of culture as *abstractions*, or as he puts it, 'constructs', or 'intangibles' that 'do not "exist" in an absolute sense – we define them into existence' (p. 2). Hofstede's model, then, presents culture as something analysts create for purposes of research, locates culture as in the 'mind' of people, as a mental programme, with the dimensions of culture being 'intangible constructs'. From Hofstede's view, then, culture is a generative mental mechanism; just as there are forces in physics that explain physical reality, so there are mental forces in people that explain social reality. As a result, a nation's ranking on a dimension, relative to another's – the US is 91, China 20 on 'individualism'; China is 118, the US 29 on long term orientation – indicates the way a society's 'mental program' addresses a fundamental problem, in this case how individuals associate in groups, and how they orient to the future, respectively.

Fougère and Moulettes's critique of Hofstede is formed within, what they call, a 'postcolonial tradition' (p. X). They situate Hofstede as exemplifying a discourse, following Foucault, which has 'disciplinary power'. After all, they might say after reading the above, it has been clearly legitimated as such since it assumes a top spot in those citation indexes! As a result, it warrants serious critical analysis. For purposes of this commentary, I will summarise their critique through the following five propositions:

- (1) Hofstede's research is an instance of 'disciplinary power'; as such, it presumes and cultivates a singular way of seeing the world, at the expense of other ways.
- (2) Hofstede's research can be understood as a colonising discourse that reproduces a binary view of societies, thereby dividing the world in two, with one set of nations being valued as 'developed and modern', the other being less valued as 'traditional and backward'. A hierarchical and differential valuing of societies, in this manner, is inappropriately active in this discourse.
- (3) Hofstede's discourse is defended as 'truth' thus narrowing the way worlds can be seen, solidifying divisions between and among societies, and reifying differences as essential qualities in a society's mental programme.
- (4) Locating culture, as Hofstede does, as 'programming of the mind', places cultures, in effect, outside of action, rather than as discursive practices that help shape and evaluate societies.
- (5) Similarly, Hofstede's 'dimensions of culture', as internal motivational mechanisms, not only reproduce one version of disciplinary power, but also cultivate divisions and unwarranted evaluations of societies.

As Fougère and Moulettes develop their argument they give special critical attention to Hofstede's notion of culture as too stable and essentialised, his comparative studies as too evaluative and binary, as well as his arguments being legitimated through a prominent 'Western' model of science which itself, they argue, risks reproducing these very difficulties.

Having summarised at least these parts of their argument, let us take a bit more of a critical look at some of their specific claims.

As Fougère and Moulettes develop their argument, they state: 'Hofstede has never recognized any significant errors or weaknesses in his research' (p. X). Hofstede (2001: 73) does, however, in the text of his book, summarise 'five standard criticisms' of his approach. In this portion of the book, it is clear he is aware of several criticisms of his work, has considered each, and responded to each from his view. He has indeed written about the criticisms of one of his most strident opponents in a journal-length article (Hofstede, 2002). In response to these criticisms, Hofstede replies, in effect, by saying this: studies of these matters should not rely solely on survey research (as he does); nations are not the only social units available for studying cultures (other social units can be so studied); cultural dimensions 'tap' into something beyond the boundaries of a business or company (and thus apply beyond specific organisations); dimensions of cultures may change but are typically quite stable; and there may be more than four or five basic dimensions of cultures. While Hofstede does not jettison his approach, he has engaged his critics about its limitations, thereby opening the door to other versions of cultural and comparative study.

At places in their essay, Fougère and Moulettes write as if Hofstede's northern European culture 'seeps into' his academic discourse, being the implicit criteria used in the verbal interpretation of his findings. If this is the case, Hofstede himself has provided a text in his book that would have been invaluable for such an assessment. His Appendix 8, which is titled 'The Author's Values', makes explicit Hofstede's (2001: 523–524) own rating of various values and 'work goals'. This is an unusual addition to a scholarly report, making explicit one's own values, or ethic. I wonder why this appendix was not consulted in the critical analyses of Hofstede's discourse?

Fougère and Moulettes state further that their criticism is unlike others prior to theirs, which they review. They claim their critique is unique because it examines 'the discourse deployed' by Hofstede in his works, and is, as a result, a kind of 'discourse analysis'. I think it is fair, then, to ask, what discourse of Hofstede's is being analysed here by Fougère and Moulettes? As the book contains over 500 pages of discourse, which segments or snippets or practices were selected for scrutiny? Why were these selections made? This question led me back to Fougère and Moulettes's critique, for a response. I noted of course that some discourse was selected from Hofstede's text. To my count, their corpus of data from Hofstede's text totals 17 full sentences, 19 words and phrases, with 3 of the 19 being repeated. The longest segment of discourse selected from Hofstede's text in their critique is not Hofstede's words, but Hofstede (2001: 211) quoting Triandis. How were these selections made, of these snippets of text? Why were these selected rather than others? Is the critique a fair and just treatment of Hofstede's discourse?

One of the points made by Fougère and Moulettes about Hofstede is that he selects only what 'he finds relevant for his agenda'; 'justifies his claim . . . by giving just one example'; and follows generally a "'one example to justify the whole" rhetoric'. Ironically, it seems the same criticism applies to this critique. It appears as if the texts selected from Hofstede were selected because they fit the argument the critics want to make about Hofstede's discourse. In the process, the critique ignores parts that do not support the points they want to make, as those mentioned above. If we simply replace one selective and totalising judgement, with another, I am unsure what kind of progress has been made. Perhaps Fougère and Moulettes argue there is a disease in colonising discourse, with symptoms in such discourse that must be diagnosed, and treated. I certainly agree with this general point, if not the critical paths traversed in this case.

Note to here that I have been trying to present the views of Hofstede and those of Fougère and Moulettes in a light each may at least partially accept, along with a critical assessment of each. My objective has been to understand something of the point of view each uses, and what is at stake in the exchange between them. I want to conclude by highlighting what I take to be central issues in this discussion, issues that these participants open to our consideration, then sketch briefly how these can transform our views of discourse and cultures.

Reviewing Hofstede's research sets an intellectual stage for at least three things: (1) studies of cultures that rely on methods beyond surveys, (2) social units other than nations and (3) dimensions yes, but those that go beyond internal processes of cognition. Reading Fougère and Moulettes's critique suggests, further that (4) culture is in an important sense discursive, (5) it is inextricably tied to valued resources, (6) it can be understood not just as internal but as a part of practical action and (7) we must honour the variety of ways active in the world rather than abstracting from them into generic, binary categories.

These seven ideas are stronger together, I think, than they are separately. And admittedly, I bring them together as an interested participant who has worked over the years to integrate such ideas into conceptualisations of culture and discourse, culture and conversation (e.g. Carbaugh, 2005). I think this is necessary in the worlds we inhabit today, in order to develop a general theory of cultural discourse which, when applied, creates knowledge about local discursive practices. This local knowledge, in turn, helps build a general theory of cultural discourses. This is of course a view that is different from Hofstede's, yet I think can complement it; it is a view that can also give particular shape and meaning to Fougère' and Moulettes's stance, in a way that extends it.

Let me conclude, then, by sketching elements in a model that bring these ideas together. We need a general approach to discourse and culture that is general theoretically, yet, when used, yields an understanding of local discursive practices. The view must demonstrate an understanding of discourse generally, then use that knowledge in order to see how discourse works particularly and locally, prior to its critical assessment. In other words, the approach must work in one direction toward a generalising theory (to

avoid ethnocentrism), and in the other toward the particularising of practice (to avoid too abstract views of social and cultural lives). Such an approach will enable a general theory of discourse and culture to be built, while keeping our specific understandings of discourses and cultures close to those who use it – in the first instance, before levelling our own evaluations (Katriel, 2004; Philipsen, 1992).

Culture can and indeed now can be productively understood as discursive action (e.g. Hester & Eglin, 1997). Rather than treating culture as a set of abstract dimensions, we can conceptualise culture as a historically transmitted system of discursive practices. From this view, 'symbols' and 'rituals' are not 'superficial' as Hofstede (2001: 1) sees it, but these among similar things are practical devices, the very grounding of culture in socially situated action! These discursive practices typically invoke a rich and ongoing commentary along several dimensions of meanings, thereby saying something about who we are (and should be), how we are (and should be) related, how we can (and should) act, how we feel about what is going on and how we dwell in our places. From this view, then, these are dimensions that are conceptualised as immanent in discursive practice itself, if we relocate culture from cognitive dichotomies into cultural discourses. From this view, culture is a historically based discursive system of symbols, forms of expression, morals and meanings; with the discursive dimensions of meaning varying by degree, not by binary kind! As we track the cultural meanings in discourses from this view, then, we can be attentive to its local social system, informed of its semantic structuring, becoming better aware of the various peoples' wisdom and ways, without abstracting from them for our own analytical purposes.

Onward then, in understanding the cultural variety in discursive ways, through a carefully conceptualised approach, honouring local wisdom, reflecting upon the best each has to offer, from cultures in cognition, to cultures in conversation.

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