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Power Distance in Finnish Higher Education Institutions from the North American Perspective

Introduction

Hofstede (1980: 13) argues that culture is 'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another'. Thus, national cultures share basic values, assumptions, behaviours and practices, symbols, rituals, and artefacts that can be easily observed (Kim & McLean 2014). Hofstede (1980: 26) further claims that 'there must be mechanisms in societies, which permit the maintenance of stability in culture patterns across many generations'. He notes that institutions such as families, education systems, politics and legislation may be changed, but the change does not necessarily affect social norms. Change can only come from violent outside forces, such as through changes in climate, trade, conquest, colonization, or scientific discovery (Hofstede 1980: 26–27).

Hofstede (1980) views culture as stagnant supposing that cultures are pure and they transfer through our genes from generation to generation. This kind of discourse produces 'culture clash' theories commonly used by mainstream media. Many scholars, however, view culture as not static, but constantly being reconstructed and re-imagined in relation to and in combination with other cultural sensibilities, narratives, and practices (Handa 2003). The idea of culture is enmeshed with notions of belonging and nation and also tied to ideas of art and music. National identity, which is a construction project of the nation-state, can override other identifications in the name of the nation relying on stereotypical constructions of 'us' against 'them' (Pickering 2001). When using binaries identities become polarized because they are perceived as contrasting and oppositional categories in culture conflict discourses (Handa 2003). Hofstede's dimensions follow more of this tradition.

Hofstede (1980) distinguishes four dimensions of national culture that can be measured: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, and masculinity/femininity. These categories were extended later on to also include time orientation, indulgence, and monumentalism. These dimensions have been created to facilitate intercultural communication, especially for business managers to move easier from one place to another. There are numerous studies validating and even expanding these dimensions (see e.g. Juustila 1997; Minkov 2010; Kim & McLean 2014).

I have chosen to examine power distance in the workplace, which is one of Hofstede's four original dimensions. Power distance is defined as 'the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede Centre 2015). Using Hofstede's power distance dimension chart, I have chosen Finland and the United States because

they are very closely positioned together. Finland scored 33 and the United States 40 in the scale between 0 and 100 (see Table 1). It is hypothesized that because the difference is minimal, North American employees in Finland should find their work environments very similar in terms of power distance. Can this be verified with qualitative interviews?

Table 1. Similarities and differences in power distance between Finland and the United States.

Finland	**The United States**
Power distance score: 33	**Power distance score: 40**
Power is decentralized.	
Independence important, individualism score of 63.	Independence important, scores highest in individualism (91).
Hierarchy for convenience only.	Hierarchy is established for convenience.
Equal rights.	An explicit emphasis on equal rights in all aspects of American society and government.
Superiors accessible and act as coaching leaders.	Superiors are accessible.
Control is disliked.	
Management facilitates and empowers.	
Managers count on the experience of their team members.	Managers rely on individual employees and teams for their expertise.
Employees expect to be consulted.	Both managers and employees expect to be consulted and information is shared frequently.
Communication is direct and participative.	Communication is informal, direct, and participative to a degree.
Attitudes towards managers are informal and on a first name basis.	
	The society is loosely knit in which the expectation is that people look after themselves and their immediate families only and should

	not rely (too much) on authorities for support.
	Hiring, promotion, and decisions are based on merit or evidence of what one has done or can do.

(The Hofstede Centre 2015)

The Research Design

Five persons from North America working in higher education institutions in Finland were interviewed about working in Finland and in the United States. They were young professionals approximately between the ages of 25 and 40. Four participants were females and one was male. Four of them had lived in Finland for three to five years and one for nine years. Participants were asked to compare the differences and similarities about the power distance chart. Hofstede's dimensions on Finland were shown to everyone beforehand in emails and the chart was also available during the interview. The interviews lasted from 17 minutes to one hour. Three interviews were done individually but during one interview there were two participants at the same time. Names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Self-Reflections and Power

Hofstede (1980: 94) discusses inequality in society in a chapter on power distance. According to him inequality can occur in regard to (1) physical and mental characteristics; (2) social status and prestige; (3) wealth; (4) power; and (5) laws, rights, and rules such as 'privileges' that are private rules. Hofstede also brings up the issue of migrant workers and racial minorities calling them 'pariahs' according to Bohannan (1969). Pariahs are kept outside recognized major institutions of the social structure.

Carissa begins with: '*I am just looking at this definition of the power difference, this is interesting: "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations" – so that would be us because we are foreigners, we have less power what a Finn does. We don't have that job history or contacts.'* Carissa recognizes that her migrant background in Finland positions her in an unequal position in comparison to Finns in the job market or even renting an apartment. Adrianna also discusses how she has had to prove herself to be a good and dedicated worker to be able to get similar length work contracts compared to other Finns in similar positions[1]. She reflects her status in comparison to other migrants in Finland and notes that it has been easier for her compared to many others:

Also when we were talking about this and my position here, of course, it is important to remember that I came to Finland as a white lady from the United States with already a Bachelor's degree, got a Master's degree from Finland. So my working

experience, I totally believe, are, have been so much easier than other people and still I find those kinds of things I mentioned earlier like exclusion from power severe. Leinonen (2012: 213) also found in her research that many Americans living in Finland considered themselves to be privileged compared to many other groups of migrants. Reflecting on their migrant status, labels such as 'immigrant' (*maahanmuuttaja* in Finnish) were resisted while they saw themselves more as 'expatriates' or simply 'Americans living in Finland'.

Class, Occupation, and Gender Differences Producing and Lowering Power Distance

One reason for recognizing smaller power distance to Finns than many other migrant groups could be that North Americans in Finland are usually highly educated people with middle-class backgrounds. Hofstede (1980: 96) notes that 'societies differ in the implications of rank inequalities for social functioning'. By this Hofstede refers to classes, castes, and estates. In the case of Finland, there are class differences based on economic activity and/or educational background. Hofstede (1980) defines class from the realist perspective as the collective consciousness of members of the same class, which unites and brings a sense of belonging.

A Finnish higher education institution employs highly skilled persons who have similar educational and class backgrounds. Education is a dominant factor. Hofstede (1980: 105) found that higher education, higher status occupations tend to produce low power distance values and lower education, lower-status occupations tend to produce high power distance values. Adrianna and Jasmine discussed how their jobs in the United States were different than in Finland and therefore, they were not seen as comparable. They worked in small non-governmental organizations, in the food industry, and in retail before moving to Finland.

Another factor that Hofstede does not discuss in regard to power distance is gender. Jasmine talks about how her supervisors in the United States were men in high positions leading million dollar projects. In Finland all of her supervisors have been women. She ponders that,

Women I am working here, they all have families, they all have children and some of them have grandchildren at this point. So they kind of understand my situation like immediately. They also respect that. For me, they see me more holistically. … Whereas when I think of people who are above me in the US, the paradigm they are working and the way they are acting in the world, isn't something that I am aspired to. So that creates something like an ideological distance. Because they are like in the hegemonic culture, they are operating in the male hegemonic culture, which I as a woman can only participate in a certain ways that don't really appeal to me. I think so many things are here so natural, the way things should be.

Also Valerie points out that: '*And I was so very happy that I had a child and I was still able to do as much a career here which I wouldn't have had the same opportunity in the US'*.

Power Distance Between Supervisors and Employees

Hofstede (1980) articulates that an unequal distribution of power over members is the essence of an organization, which is formalized in a hierarchy. A boss-subordinate relationship bears resemblance to that of a teacher and a student. People are expected to carry over values and norms they have learned at school and at home. Hofstede (1980) argues that we can expect to find the traces of differences in the exercise of power in hierarchies and thus, power distance can be used as a criterion for characterizing cultures. Kevin described formal events at Finnish higher education institutions as very hierarchical.

I remember going to some of the events, the opening gala of the university. And I was struck who was talking to whom and who was in which group. And it was interesting because I went with 'my Finnish colleague' (the name has been dropped) who is like 'this is the first time when I went to one of these in fifteen years. In 15 years I have never been to one of these.' I am like that's interesting itself. And then we started to looking at it. It was like that all the deans were basically sitting and talking to themselves. People in units were talking to with each other, but the supervisors were not part of these groups. They were with other supervisors in the same kind of setting. It was the same kind of power dynamic there, the kind of social order. So we had a very interesting time sitting and looking at it and watching that.

Participants viewed hierarchy in Finnish workplaces from different perspectives. Valerie thought that power distance in Finland was lower than in the United States. She described the situation in Finland as: "*Now when I go to lunch I can sit in the table with the undergrad and Masters students and with the professor. And we can joke about science. You would not find that in the US."* Kevin, however, saw the situation in Finland more formal than in the United States. "*Like with my boss, I find him approachable, but I have to go to him. I find him accessible, I don't ever go to have coffee, go to lunch or see him outside the office. And in the US, there is a lot of that too, but only if you don't connect or get along with your boss."*

Carissa describes her supervisor as a very international person who spends two months of the year abroad. Her supervisor had invited her and her husband to have dinner at his house, but Carissa is not sure if he has ever invited any Finnish employees to his home. Then she discussed how it is often not cultural but due to individual differences how power distance is produced between an employee and a supervisor.

One of the issues all participants brought up was using first names of their supervisors in Finland. Hofstede's claim about the power dimension in Finland argues that 'attitude towards managers are informal and on a first name basis' (Hofstede Centre

2015). Adrianna notes that, "*When I am writing to the people superior to me I always use the first name, it doesn't even occur to me to use their last names.*" Furthermore, Carissa and Jasmine discuss how funny it would sound if they called their supervisors as doctor this and using their last names. Hofstede (1980: 121) speculates that in low power distance countries, 'power is something of which power holders are almost ashamed and which they will try to underplay'. Perhaps using first names is one of these strategies to lower the distance.

Jasmine expressed an interesting point reflecting more on what Kevin had said earlier about the formal relationship with superiors in Finland.

I don't like this word 'informal'. Because I feel like Sarah (the name has been changed) and I have a very formal relationship and we are on the first name basis. She is officially my advisor. She is someone who is responsible for me and my research officially. And also we are on the first name basis. It is nice that it is not only one way or other. In the States if you are on the first name basis it means informality. There is a nice balance that you are on the first name basis and you can also have a nice working relationship and be very respectful.*

Hence, even if first names are used in Finland between supervisors and employees, it does not necessarily mean that their relationship is informal. According to Hofstede communication patterns should be similar between the United States and Finland, but every participant complained that it was actually one of the biggest issues producing power distance. This is due to the language issue: many participants not knowing enough Finnish and Finns not including enough English in their meetings.

Communication and Power Distance

Although communication is more direct in Finland than in the United States as Jasmine puts it, there is a lot less of it in Finland and decision-making occurs mainly in Finnish. Adrianna thinks that she is excluded from the decision-making process. She explains that,

There are challenges with being able to get to the power structure, to decide things. There are these working groups, I would like to get in and I am interested in, but I don't get invited to these groups at all. … All these invitations come in Finnish and discussions about them are happening in Finnish. You can imagine that it takes a long time for me to read these emails. When I am super busy I am not going to take all that time to read those emails. … And it would not be the same in the US because there would not be this language issue. Department meetings, for example, they are in Finnish. I think that better things would be done here if international staff would be more integrated into the decision making spheres, where we are excluded very much.

Adrianna, Jasmine, and Valerie all discuss how higher education institutions send emails first in Finnish and then in English. They all realize that there is a lot more text

in the Finnish version. Adrianna claims that if something in an email is in English, she thinks it must be important.

Not only being excluded from the decision-making sphere, but also the language issue may extend to some social meetings at the workplace. Carissa explains with laughter:

I think being a foreigner here and not being fluent in the language, you automatically lose power in the workplace…. because I am an employee here but it lessens my opportunities to get involved and just even, you know, coffee time like I just felt like I was crashing like a coffee crasher. Because you know then everyone would need to speak in English and you can tell who are not comfortable doing that here.

Kevin told a story how he ended up going to the workplace one day that happened to be an official holiday, which he did not know because there were no academic calendars in English available at that time and no one had told him about this yet. He thinks that it is a problem that knowledge is not shared: *'But these days we laugh about these things. Whereas I think that in the US you would get a huge manual, academic calendar, if something is missing, documentation is so in depth. It is much more accessible, much more communicative that way.'* All participants agree that communication in the United States is more open and abundant. Kevin continues that: '*Here the expectation is that if you don't know something, you ask. But there are a lot of things in the work culture that you are expected to know, and if you don't know that, you don't know what you need to ask.'*

Carissa, for example, did not know that she was supposed to join the union because union membership was not a part of everyday American culture as it is in Finland. Carissa, Kevin, and Jasmine all talk about the differences between the United States and Finland in terms of liberal/corporatist way of doing things. In Finland there is always a group that represents a bigger group of people in decision-making. These are the groups Adrianna said that she would like to get involved in. Jasmine said that she trusts that these groups are making good decisions and including her. But Kevin and Carissa were not that trusting. They laughed and jokingly explained that the starting point is that in the United States no one trusts the government or any group.

Trust was also an issue that was brought up many times and connected to supervisors who expected that employees knew what they were doing independently. "*So I think that Finland is much more trusting and you don't need to prove yourself worthy to other person. That was the most shocking for me when I came here. No one is asking me if I am doing the things I am supposed to do"*, Jasmine cheered. Four participants thought that there was a lot of trust between supervisors and their employees. Valerie anticipated that her experience was different from others because she had had more freedom and independence while working in the United States.

The coaching leader statement was a bit confusing to many participants and it was often related to working independently and getting assistance when an employee initiated it. When this statement was combined with the expectation of getting regular

feedback, things got more complicated. Kevin noticed that there was a certain cultural difference between Finland and the United States and explained:

It is embedded that you are going to move on at some point. You are not going to stay in your position. You are going to move on. Whereas here, it is like you have a permanent contract. 'Why do you wanna move on? Why do you want to move into something else?' So discussions are not even brought up, not even about your daily work. So when I think of being coached, it is not just there.

Concluding Reflections

Participants reflected on the power distance chart by commenting that some things were clearly due to cultural differences while other things occurred because of personal or organizational differences. An open and abundant communication style was seen more as an American cultural characteristic, and trust and independence more as a Finnish way of life in the workplace. While Valerie and Jasmine trusted that the decision-making groups were making good and transparent decisions for them, Kevin, Carissa, and Adrianna felt more excluded from the decision-making sphere at their workplaces.

When we were reflecting on Hofstede's power dimension chart, Jasmine said that it reflects the world of men. Hofstede administered questionnaires to IBM employees at the end of 1960 in over 70 countries. At that point in time most IBM employees were middle-class men. Qualitative studies also show individual differences more clearly. If the national culture of states can be compared on meso-level, one should be careful comparing individuals. Even Hofstede (1980) warns about it, although his biological conception of culture is problematic. Anthias (2012: 104-105) explains this well,

This is mirrored in the idea that migrants belong to ethnic groups and they bring with them given predispositions (which involve them in making particular choices in terms of labour market niches or familial and social organisation and mobilisation). Although this idea can certainly not be completely dismissed out of hand, it predisposes us to put people in these little boxes of cultural predispositions that are self-fulfilling. We then cannot recognise the crosscutting influence of other dimensions of their location, such as how ethnic categorisations, which produce the idea of ethnic groups cross cut with gender, generation, class, political values, experience, opportunities and very importantly agency. It also under-emphasises the constraints of structural processes and contextual parameters such as those of opportunity structures.

Anthias (2012) claims that the best way of looking at migrants is through the intersectional lens in which a person is seen more holistically and individually. Also, this approach could be applied to any Finn in Finland because their backgrounds also differ quite a lot producing different kinds of power distance in the workplace. Hofstede's chart is useful for business and marketing people briefly visiting different

countries, but applying it to people who have lived a long time in Finland and/or are part of global cosmopolitan culture is troublesome.

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[1] Adrianna has acquired a Finnish citizenship.

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