

# **Impact of Employees Cultural Values and Their Cross-Cultural Work Environment on Organizational Identity**

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*This study investigated an impact of employee's cultural values and their cross-cultural work environment on organizational identity. Data was collected from employees in the U.S. firm embracing different cultural values. The results indicate that proposed hypotheses are supported. Employees are more likely to identify themselves with the organization when they have a congruent cultural fit between employees and their work place. Based on the findings of the study, implications are discussed. (71 Words)*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Individuals can develop multiple identities depending on the context. The work environment is one such context that helps develop the personal identity of individuals. Organizational identity comes from the unique attributes that key stakeholders view as core, long-term and distinctive of an organization. It seeks to answer the question "who are we as an organization" and it is a phenomenon that has been researched (Whetten 2006; Puusa and Tolvanen, 2006). According to McBain (2003) organizational identity represents an important concept for a number of reasons. First of all, people tend to draw their own identity from the organizations they work for. A company's identity sets boundaries on the level to which an organization can change yet remain the same in the eyes of its key constituencies. Adoption of organizational identity helps employees shape their worldview and concerns. The values and views of an organization can therefore transfer to the employees. Common beliefs can lead to higher job satisfaction, better job performance, a healthy work environment and to potentially higher profit margins.

Understanding the concept of organizational identity plays not just an important role for individual satisfaction, but also for job performance and, hence, effectiveness of an organization (Brown, 1969; Hall, et al., 1970). Organizations strive to stay competitive and productive. With the growing number of businesses expanding their operations internationally, the importance of understanding organizational cultures is growing. Farber (1983) and Levinson (1965) argued that with the fading of religious and political faith, the nuclear family and close neighborhoods, organizational identity embraces an important part of an individual's self.

With the growing number of multinational corporations, however, more and more international professionals migrate to other countries and join organizations with different national as well as corporate cultures. This adds another level of complexity to the concept of organizational identity due to differences in cultural dimensions. Culture is a phenomenon that is learned from one's social environment rather than inherited.

The results of the American time use surveys by the Bureau of Labor statistics have shown that an average American worker between the ages 25 – 54 worked 8.6 hours per day (2010). Since Hofstede argues that culture is learned from our social environment and the average person spends a large amount of time at work (36%), organizational culture plays an important role to an individual. This clearly indicates that the work environment plays a significant role in the daily lives and that the working environment can influence individuals.

Individuals that were born and raised in other nations (unlike from the American culture) may face challenges when entering a new job position in different cultures. Concepts such as power distance and level of collectivism in each environment play an important role to understand the employee's heritage as well as the new job environment. This study investigates the relationship between organizational identity and cultures. The authors will analyze the relationship between each individual's cultural dimensions and their level of organizational identity with their current organization. The main purpose of this study is to understand how cultural dimensions influence organizational identity, specifically how congruent or incongruent personal and organizational culture affects the level of organizational identity.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Organizational Identity**

Ashforth and Mael (1989) show that individuals identify with multiple social groups based on their social environments. Organizational identity is connected to the perceived distinctiveness of the organization's principles and practices relative to those of similar groups (Oakes and Turner, 1986). Prestige is the other important precursor which allows individuals to identify themselves with a group to enhance their self-esteem (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). This concept becomes more complicated when cultural aspects are related to organizations and its values and practices. Hofstede (1991) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". Individuals develop cultural traits through generational and traditional impacts. The way people think, talk, listen, act, etc. varies across the globe and for multinational corporations to operate effectively it is essential to understand cultural differences and to adjust practices accordingly.

Organizational identity is a widely researched and important topic that tries to define how people perceive themselves with their organizations. It is the identification of one's belongingness to an organization where the individual defines himself at least partly as a member of the organization. It further tackles the notion of people identifying themselves with the success and failures of their organizations (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Since organizational identity varies from one organization to the other, research with coherent theoretical foundations is scant. Organizational identity, however, has also been identified as a specific form of social identity, in which individuals share the successes, failures and status of the group. According to Hall et al. (1970) organizational identification is "the process by which the goals of the organization and those of the individual become increasingly integrated and congruent" (pp. 176-177). Individuals working within the same organizations do not need to interact with one another, yet they "define themselves in terms of the same social category membership" (Turner, 1984, p.530) or psychological group.

Social identification allows individuals to feel loyal to an organization and its culture. Turner (1982) described social identity as "the cognitive mechanism which makes group behavior possible" (p. 21). Socialization within an organization has the potential to increase the internalization of organizational values and practices. "Through self-stereotyping, individuals take on prototypical characteristics of the group which allows them to feel part of the group and which leads to their identification with the group" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, p.27).

Social identity theory also explains antecedents of organizational identity. The belongingness, distinctiveness of values, and practices of a group describe that individuals differentiate their group from others who provides a unique identity (Oaks and Turner, 1986). For employees, belongingness may be caused due to specific in-group identification within the organization. The organization's successes and failures may be associated with own successes and failures since social identity affects self-esteem.

Perceived organizational prestige was related to organizational identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Within organizations we often see “bandwagon effects” (Ashforth, 1997) when a great idea is supported and spreads throughout the entire organization. If a company shares its successes and profits with its employees, individuals cognitively identify themselves with the winner and as part of the success. Prestige, therefore, represents an important factor that can contribute to organizational identity. Several research studies have found out that the awareness of distinct out-groups increases the homogeneity of the in-group. The more an individual becomes aware of an out-group, the more likely he/she will identify with the in-group. As employees, on the other hand, they are less likely to experience competing demands from department-level or occupational identities (Albert and Whetten, 1985) which allows employees to associate with the group in more traditional ways such as similarities, likings, common history, etc.

These antecedents represent important factors for in-group formation that may affect the identification with the group and the organization. With spreading these factors across the organization, Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that organizational identity is prevalent. Employees tend to choose activities similar to the most important aspects of their personal identities, which they then support for the group and the organization.

### **Cultural Dimensions**

Understanding workplace values in different nations has been a focus for many researchers including Hofstede (1980). Hofstede analyzed five main cultural dimensions, two of which are closely studied in this research study. Two out of the five cultural dimensions defined are researched and tested in this study: high vs. low power distance and individualism vs. collectivism. The concept of power distance describes the degree to which less powerful members of organizations accept and expect unequal distribution of power. Power distance in particular affects the way people think about organizations. It answers the question “Who has the power to decide what?” (Hofstede, 1989). Individualism focuses on the relationship between the individual and the group and the degree to which they are integrated (Hofstede, 1996). Individualism affects one’s thinking about the people in the organizations, rather than about organizations themselves. Hofstede (1980) further suggested that low power distance and individualistic societies are rather loose cultures which foster change and innovation. The other three dimensions include comparisons between masculine and feminine cultures, the level of uncertainty avoidance, and the added dimension of long term orientation.

There are several reasons why the author chose to research power distance and individualism rather than uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and long term orientation. First of all, these two cultural dimensions received a great deal of attention by Hofstede (1980) as well as many other researchers for the past thirty years. Secondly, long term orientation is a dimension that is still fairly new and only twenty-five countries have received an official score (Hofstede, 1991). Furthermore, the United States score on the masculinity index is neither on the higher nor the lower end of the spectrum and cannot be clearly categorized (with a score of 62 on a scale of 5 to 95). The author believes that the concepts of power distance and individualism will have a greater impact for the working environment of this research study for international employees.

With the growing number of multinational corporations and the shifting of human resources all around the world, however, the topic of organizational identity becomes more complicated. In order to stay competitive, organizations send expatriates to different locations and/or invite foreigners to work at their domestic facility. This shift adds an additional constraint to organizational identity: what happens in the context of incongruent cultural fit between employees’ personal culture and the organization’s culture and will foreign born and raised employees be less likely to identify themselves with the organization? This research study will add to Hofstede (1980) theory by testing if employees from different national cultures that differ from those in the work environment will identify themselves with their organization.

Cultures differ in their power distance, the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2001). Employees who live and work in a country that has a high score on the power distance index (PDI) tend to expect and desire inequalities among people. Subordinates expect to be told what to do by their

autocratic boss (Hofstede, 2001). Employees that live and work in a country with a low PDI score believe that inequalities among people should be minimized and that there should be interdependence between less and more powerful people. Subordinates expect to be consulted by their democratic superior.

Countries that score high on the individualism index (IDV) are characterized by respect for privacy, a preference for personal decision making, and low dependence on the organization for fulfilling leisure time, improving skills and receiving benefits. In collectivist cultures, on the other hand, thorough training, satisfactory workplace conditions, and good benefits are preferred. The prime motivator in a collectivist society is the desire for a safe physical and emotional environment (Daniels, et al., 2004).

A case study about the Levi Strauss Company tried to introduce collective team-based production into several individualistic U.S. plants. Overseas managers observed high productivity in a variety of Asian plants; however, employees did not identify themselves with the new system and disliked it. The productivity level sunk and Levi Strauss decided to return to a more appropriate system for their domestic staff (Daniels, et al., 2004). This lack of belonging to the organization caused the productivity to drop.

Therefore, the author expects that organizational identification is weaker when people from a collectivist and high power distance culture are required to work in an individualistic and low power distance environment. Employees with different cultures may face challenges due to their different cultural perceptions and expectations from those at work. Individuals experiencing these cultural differences may not identify themselves with the organizations while individuals experiencing similar cultural values identify themselves with the organization.

## **HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the relationship between organizational identity and cultural dimensions. It is hypothesized that organizational identification is related to the organization's culture relative to those of comparable groups (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). International employees that expatriate to the United States may be challenged by facing opposing cultural values. Hofstede's research has shown that the United States have a low power distance (PDI of 40 out of 104). This cultural dimension demonstrates that within an American work environment subordinates and superiors consider each other as existentially equal with fairly decentralized organization (Hofstede, 1991). On the other side of the spectrum are countries such as Malaysia with a high power distance (highest score of 104). Organizations in countries with high power distance tend to be centralized and inequalities among employers and employees are both expected and desired. When a Malaysian individual expatriates to work in an American organization, he may face cultural differences that may hinder him from identifying with the ingroup, to perceive the group as distinct and to feel prestige for being part of the group because these factors are essential for the identification of an employee with his or her organization (Mael and Ashforth, 1992).

Employees with similar cultural values, however, may face fewer challenges in their working environments. An employee expatriating from the Netherlands (with a PDI of 38) to the United States is able to associate with the less hierarchy in organizations as well as the decentralized environment. The degree of environmental change is smaller for an employee with a similar power distance culture. He or she may be more likely to establish belongingness to the group and identify with the organization. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

*H1: Organizational identification is stronger when people coming from a low power distance culture work in an environment with a low power distance culture than people from a high power distance culture.*

According to the Hofstede, the U.S. is highly individualistic culture (highest IDV score of 91) where employees are expected to act according to their own interest. In highly collectivistic cultures such as Malaysia (with an IDV of 26 out of 91) the relationship between the employee and the employer is perceived in moral terms (similar to a family link). When these two cultures converge, numerous

challenges will be faced. An employee from a high level of collectivistic culture is required to adapt to the cultural changes within an American organization. Since values are deep-seated, this challenge may delay the process of feeling part of a group, which in return may cause the employee to identify himself less with the organization.

Social Identity Theory has shown evidence that people associate each other with individuals of equal cultural background. People growing up in individualistic nations tend to look after themselves and are aware of the notion that tasks are more important than relationships (Hofstede, 1991). These employees from the similar individualistic culture may perceive themselves as part of the distinctive work environment and feel a stronger sense of belongingness to the group than employees with collectivistic values. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

*H2: Organizational identification is stronger when people coming from an individualistic culture work in an individualistic culture than people coming from a collectivistic culture.*

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

The survey was implemented in the U.S. based non-profit organization in the north east region in the US. The American-born and raised employees as well as international employees from various countries working in an organization are the respondents of this study. Seventy-one employees, who currently work at the organization, were asked to fill out a self-administered, paper-and-pencil, one-page survey. Each employee has a mailbox at the headquarter in which the surveys were distributed along with a small incentive (candies). Email reminders were also sent out to the employees to encourage participation and to ensure that the survey is anonymous. The descriptive summary of the respondents is exhibited in Table 1. Of the 71 respondents, 30.3% were international employees. Among all participants, 61.2% were men and the average age was 25 years. The majority has had work experience prior to working for the organization with an average of 4.14 years. For only 26.8% of all respondents, their positions with the current organization represented their first employment experience.

### **Measurement and Reliability**

All scales have been derived from the extant literature. The questions are based on a Likert response scale with a 5-point format from 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For measures of the dependent variable, organizational identity, six items were used based on the scale developed by Ashforth and Mael (1989) and modified for this study; a) When someone criticizes the company, it feels like a personal insult, b) I am very interested in what others think about the company, c) When I talk about the company, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they', d) The company's successes are my successes, e) When someone praises the company, it feels like a personal compliment, f) If a story in the media criticized the company, I would feel embarrassed. This scale has been used in various business studies (i.e., DeConnick, 2011; Rouzies, 2011). The reliability test of this scale shows a high level of internal consistency, achieving a Cronbach alpha of 0.87.

To measure employee's cultural values of power distance and collectivism, two methods were used. First, Hofstede's indices were used for measuring employee's cultural values; power distance and collectivism. Since Hofstede's scale has been used for a variety of studies across various behavioral science disciplines using numerous different countries, it is appropriate to employ this measurement for this research study. The Hofstede's cultural values range from 0 to 1 with 0 representing low power distance and high individualism and 1 representing high power distance and high collectivism.

**TABLE 1**  
**SAMPLE DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Total Sample Size: 71</b>	
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	61.2
Male	44.8
<b>Age</b>	
19 - 24	67.2
25 - 30	31.3
31 - 35	1.5
36 - 40	3.0
<b>Years of Work at an organization</b>	
<1 year	2.8
1 - 2 years	12.7
3 - 5 years	31.0
6 - 10 years	19.7
>10 years	14.1
<b>Prior Work Experience</b>	
Yes	73.2
No	26.8
<b>Cultural Values</b>	
High Power Distance	59.2
Low Power Distance	40.8
Individualism	57.7
Collectivism	42.3

Second, the author used the individual cultural value scale by Paul et al. (2006). Measures developed by Paul et al. (2006) have been used and validated to capture Hofstede's dimensions of culture at the individual level better. Five items of power distance were used based on the scale by Paul et al. (2006) - a) People in higher positions should make most decisions without consulting people in lower positions, b) People in higher positions should not ask the opinions of people in lower positions too frequently, c) People in higher positions should avoid social interaction with people in lower positions, d) People in higher positions should not delegate important tasks to people in lower positions, e) People in lower positions should not disagree with decisions made by people in higher positions. The Cronbach's alphas for this construct of power distance reflected the acceptable level of reliability of the scale ( $\alpha_{pd} = 0.842$ ).

Six items of collectivism were also used based on the scale by Paul et al. (2006); a) Individuals should sacrifice self-interest for the group that they belong to, b) Individuals should stick with the group even through difficulties, c) Group welfare is more important than individual rewards, d) Group success is more important than individual success, e) Individuals should pursue their goals after considering the welfare of the group, f) Group loyalty should be encouraged even if individual goals suffer. The

Cronbach's alphas for the construct of collectivism also reflected the acceptable level of reliability ( $\alpha_{coll} = 0.770$ ).

Culture of work environment is set up as individualistic and low power distance culture for this study based on Hofstede's indices for cultural dimensions of the U.S.

### Analysis and Results

To test hypothesis 1, ANOVA is performed and the result is summarized in Table 3. As predicted, results indicate significant differences to identify themselves with the organization between employees coming from low power distance cultures and high power distance cultures. In other words, employees coming from low power distance cultures are more likely to identify themselves with the organization than employees coming from high power distance culture when they are working in a low power distance environment. The data provides evidence that the employees coming from high power distance have a higher level of organization identity than employees from low power distance (mean: high PD 3.91, low PD 4.34,  $F=4.452$   $p < .05$ ) in support of H1.

To test for hypothesis 2, ANOVA is performed and the result is summarized in Table 4. The author compares employees coming from collectivistic culture with employees coming from individualistic culture to see who are more likely to identify themselves with the organization. As predicted, results indicate significant differences to identify themselves with the organization between employees coming from collectivistic cultures and individualistic cultures. In other words, employees coming from individualistic cultures are more likely to identify themselves with the organization than employees coming from collectivistic culture when they are working in an individualistic environment. The data provides evidence that the employees coming from individualistic cultures have a higher level of organization identity than employees from collectivistic cultures (mean: collectivism 3.89, individualism 4.37,  $F=6.117$ ,  $p= 0.016$ ) in support of H2.

The author also tested hypothesized relationships using individual cultural value scale by Paul et al. (2006) instead of using Hofstede's indices, to measure constructs of power distance and collectivism. However, the results show a different level of organization identity between employees from different cultures of power distance and collectivism, but not at a significant level: for employees from high power distance versus low power distance (mean: high PD 4.06, low PD 4.14,  $p .10$ ), for employees from collectivistic versus individualistic cultures (mean: collectivism 4.04, individualism 4.13,  $p .10$ ). Thus, H1 and H2 are not supported when analyzing hypotheses using individual cultural value scale.

**TABLE 2**  
**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND ANOVA RESULTS ON HYPOTHESIS 1 USING**  
**HOFSTEDÉ'S INDICES (COMPARISON OF EMPLOYEES FROM HIGH PD**  
**VERSUS LOW PD WORKING AT THE U.S. FIRM)**

	High PD		Low PD		F value
	(n=29)		(n=42)		
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Organizational Identity	3.91	0.30	4.34	0.37	$p < 0.5^*$

Note: \* Significant at  $p < 0.05$

**TABLE 3**  
**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND ANOVA RESULTS ON HYPOTHESIS 2 USING**  
**HOFSTEDE'S INDICES (COMPARISON OF EMPLOYEES FROM**  
**COLLECTIVISM VERSUS INDIVIDUALISM**  
**WORKING AT THE U.S. FIRM)**

	Collectivism		Individualism		p-value
	(n=30)		(n=41)		(df = 1)
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Organizational Identity	3.89	0.40	4.37	0.36	p<0.5*

Note: \* Significant at p<0.05

## DISCUSSION

This study investigates the relationship between organizational identity and cultures. Personal characteristics help explain how individuals resolve or adapt to organizations with congruent cultural values. The study found there was a significant relationship between each individual's cultural dimensions and their level of organizational identity when there is a congruent cultural fit with their organization. Employees coming from high power distance cultures are more likely to identify themselves with the organization whose cultural environments are high power distance. Similarly, we can conclude that the more individualistic employees, the more the identification with an organization that has an individualistic culture.

The results have implications for the study of culture and social identity theory. Identity development and integration is a fluid and dynamic process. Contextual factors such as immigration or organizational mergers lead individuals to develop an identity that is similar to a novel group. A new identity is likely to be driven or facilitated by different coping mechanisms or social support. Employees from different cultures are likely to receive social support from other peer groups. The re-categorization of novel in-group could help facilitate the identification with an organization.

With the help of new ways of communication, modern technology, and improved transportation methods, globalization is rapidly growing. More multinational companies bring international employees together that may struggle with the adaptation of national cultures as well as organizational cultures. It is essential to establish a clear comprehension of cultural influences on organizational identity in order to facilitate all employees in their identity building.

Our research has shown that all participants identified themselves with the organization to a certain extent. Those employees from individualistic and low power distance backgrounds, showed a stronger identification in their current work environment, which is individualistic and low power distance in nature. The very diverse working environment may have added to this notion.

"The twenty-first century may become known as the century of the 'global world'" (Paul, et. al). With the growing number of multinational companies all around the world, there is an enormous need for cross-cultural research. International businesspeople can encounter several cross cultural challenges. Finding ways to train personnel and to help understand international co-workers is a knowledge gap that has not yet been filled.

Limitations to this study are several. First, it is limited in terms of the generalizability of findings because of nature of the research design of this study. The findings are specific to a certain population and organization. The same research design may or may not have had similar outcomes when conducted in another country or even another company in different industries in the United States. Another caveat for this study is the relatively small sample size and a question of whether the sample from different cultures



appropriately captures their level of organizational identity from different countries. Even though Hofstede's indices have been widely used all around the world, many researchers argue that his indices are outdated and cultural values may change over time. Furthermore, the proposed empirical research takes into account only two cultural dimensions, power distance and collectivism. Whether or not the proposed relationships will hold across other cultural dimensions cannot be extrapolated from this paper.

Future areas of research include replication of this research with other cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and long-term orientation. Additionally, the study can be replicated in other industries and countries with larger sample size. Particularly, study of organization identity of employees working at the multinational firms in emerging markets provides an interesting avenue for investigations. It would also help determine if the proposed model is universal or culture specific. A final area of future research would be to understand other moderators such as age, years of work experience, and other personal cultural characteristics in this model, and whether they positively moderate the influence of organizational identity.

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