



## IN FOCUS 3.1

### Limitations of Hofstede's framework

Despite the influence of Hofstede's framework, it has attracted a number of criticisms.

- Cultural boundaries are not the same as national boundaries.
- Although Hofstede tried to remove some of his own cultural biases, the 'Dutch software' of his mind, as he acknowledged, 'will remain evident to the careful reader'. Being more familiar with European cultures, Hofstede might inevitably be more familiar with dimensions relevant to distinguishing European cultures. Thus crucial dimensions relevant to Asian or African cultures could be missed.
- Hofstede's research was based on surveys of more than 116 000 IBM employees working at 72 national subsidiaries during 1967–1973. This had both pros and cons. On the positive side, it not only took place in the same industry but also in the same company. Otherwise, it would have been difficult to attribute whether findings were due to differences in national cultures or industrial/organizational cultures. However, because of such a single firm/single industry design, it was possible that Hofstede's findings captured what was unique to that industry or to IBM. In other words, Hofstede's empirical data would reflect the interaction of the IBM organizational culture with local culture, rather than local culture as such. Thus, it was difficult to ascertain whether employees working for IBM were true representatives of their respective national cultures.
- Because the original data are now over 40 years old, critics contend that Hofstede's framework

fails to reflect aspects of cultural change, which have been quite substantive in those countries that have experienced major social or political upheaval, like transition economies. Moreover, the data for some countries are based on small samples or subsequent studies in other organizations, which makes them imprecise estimates at best.

Hofstede has responded to all four criticisms. First, he acknowledged that his focus on national culture was a matter of expediency, with all its trappings. Second, from the 1980s, Hofstede and colleagues relied on a questionnaire derived from cultural dimensions most relevant to the Chinese and then translated it from Chinese to multiple languages. That was how he uncovered the fifth dimension: long-term orientation (originally labelled 'Confucian dynamism'). In response to the third and fourth criticisms, Hofstede pointed out a large number of studies by other scholars using a variety of countries, industries and firms. Many results were supportive of his original findings, while others suggested that cultures indeed change over time. Overall, Hofstede's work is imperfect, but on balance, its values seem to outweigh its drawbacks.

Sources: (1) B. McSweeney, 2002, Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences, *HR*, 55: 89–118; (2) T. Fang, 2003, A critique of Hofstede's fifth national culture dimension, *IJCCR*, 3: 347–368; (3) M. Javidan, R. House, P. Dorfman, P. Hanges & M. Luque, 2006, Conceptualizing and measuring cultures and their consequences, *JIBS*, 37: 897–914; (4) P. Smith, 2006, When elephants fight, the grass gets trampled, *JIBS*, 37: 915–921; (5) G. Hofstede, 2007, Asian management in the 21st century, *APJM*, 24: 411–420; (6) R. Maseland & A. van Hoorn, 2009, Explaining the negative correlation between values and practices: A note on the Hofstede-GLOBE debate, *JIBS*, 40: 527–532; (7) T. Fang, 2010, Asian management research needs more self-confidence: Reflection on Hofstede 2007 and beyond, *APJM*, 27: 155–170.

The first point to remember is that culture is about shared values within a society, and hence helps to explain how people from that culture interact with each other. Thus indices like Hofstede's may help you when you travel abroad and are surrounded by people from a – for you – foreign society. They may also help you when you receive a group of visitors – a tourist group or a business delegation – and observe how they interact with each other. The Hofstede dimensions are much less helpful when it comes to dealing with individual visitors from another culture.