



An Interview with Geert Hofstede

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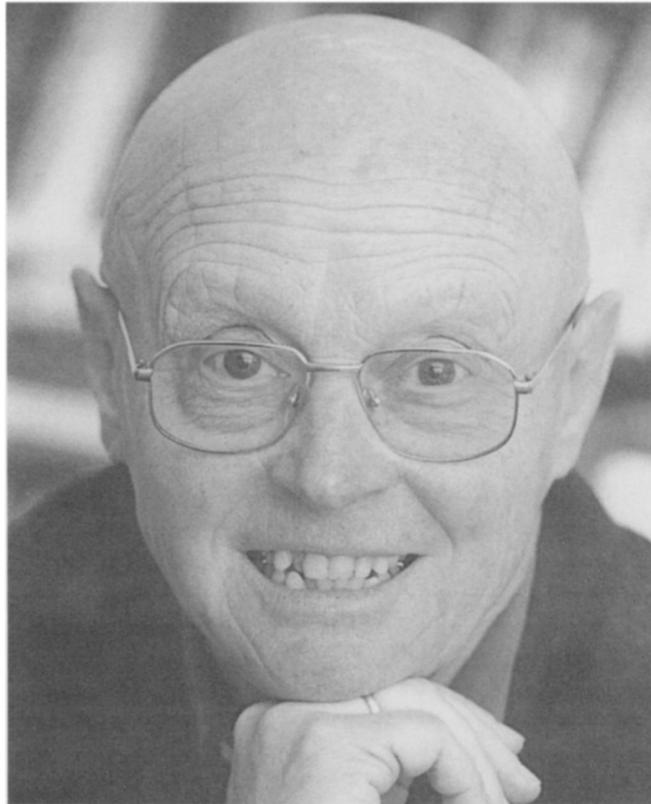
Interview by Michael H. Hoppe

Geert Hofstede received an M.Sc. in mechanical engineering from Delft Technical University in 1953 and earned his Ph.D. in social psychology, cum laude, from Groningen University in 1967. He worked for six years for IBM Europe where he founded and managed the Personnel Research Department. He first entered academics in 1971 when he assumed a visiting lecturer position at IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland. Subsequently Professor Hofstede held faculty positions at the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management in Brussels and at INSEAD in Fontainebleau, France. In 1980 he returned to industry as a director of human resources of Fasson Europe in Leyden, the Netherlands. Just previously, he had published *Culture's Consequences*, the book which is the subject of this Retrospective, and opened wide the door of comparative cultural analysis in business and elsewhere, as a tool for both academics and practitioners. He returned to academics in 1983 to serve as dean of the Semafor Senior Management Program in Arnhem. In 1986 he was appointed professor of organizational anthropology and international management at Maastricht University where he received emeritus status in 1993. During his time at Maastricht, he published a student-level book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (1991) which has been translated into 16 other languages. Since retiring in 1993, Professor Hofstede has served as a fellow at the Institute for Research on Intercultural Cooperation and of the Center for Economic Research, both at Tilburg University, and has held visiting professorships in Hong Kong, Hawaii, and Australia. An entirely re-written second edition of *Culture's Consequences* appeared in 2001, and a re-written *Third Millennium Edition of Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, co-authored by Gert Jan Hofstede, followed in 2004. Professor Hofstede is a fellow of the Academy of Management and an eminent scholar with the Academy of International Business. He has received honorary doctorate degrees from universities in the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Greece, and Sweden. Geert Hofstede has been married to Maaïke van den Hoek since 1955. They have four sons and eight grandchildren. Contact: hofstede@bart.nl.

When I read *Culture's Consequences* in 1980 for the first time, it greatly helped me make sense of my personal and professional cross-cultural experiences up to that point in my life. What personal and professional experiences led you to write the book?

The main motive was intellectual curiosity. I had worked as a psychologist on the international staff of IBM Europe, traveling around and observing the ways IBMers in different countries went about similar tasks. Having been a factory worker, work-study engineer, and line manager myself made me see things other psychologists might have missed.

Then I was a polyglot, a product of the Dutch school system of the 1940s—I could converse with people in Dutch, English, French, German, and Italian, and I picked up bits and pieces of other languages, like Greek and Turkish. Being originally trained as a mechanical engineer had disciplined my mind to order experiences in a systematic and parsimonious way. In IBM and later in IMD, INSEAD, and EIASM, I met many bright people from different countries who were very willing to share their own insights and observations. And living abroad as a Dutch family in Switzerland and Belgium, with four children in the local school sys-



Geert Hofstede

tems, supplied us with first-hand experiences of the transfer of local culture.

Giants in a field of study tend to stand on the intellectual shoulders of other past and present giants of their own and other fields. Less well-known thinkers may contribute at times, too. Who influenced your thinking and work in large measure, then and now?

Adriaan de Groot [1914-], the founder of psychological measurement in Holland. He was trained as a mathematician and later wrote his doctoral thesis based on interviews with chess grand masters. During the chess world championships in Holland in 1937, he asked them to think aloud while they were playing a match. When de Groot had become a professor of psychology, he published a book on social science methodology that became my most inspiring reading during my own doctoral study. De Groot justified my structured approach to human issues. In the USA he influenced Herbert Simon's work on the empirical study of decision-making and the limits to rationality. Another source of inspiration was Karl Popper, whose theory of the progress of science through falsification has remained my philosophy to the present day.

Then I should name Alex Inkeles and Daniel Levinson who from a broad analysis of the anthropological, sociological and psychological literature back in 1954 predicted the dimensions of national culture that I was to find empirically in the 1970s. Finally there is Thomas Kuhn, whose idea of the structure of scientific revolutions helped me understand the initial and later reactions to my own publications on culture.

As you were conducting your research for *Culture's Consequences*, what particular theoretical or methodological issues presented you with the greatest difficulties to overcome?

The level-of-analysis issue! Discovering that you can't compare countries on categories developed for comparing individuals. Countries aren't king-size individuals; they are social systems. It is like the forest and the trees. Forests are not king-size trees; they are eco-systems of different trees, shrubs, animals, and other organisms. National cultures are eco-systems of different individuals, institutions, and resources. For comparing organizations or occupations, one needs again different categories. Even quite respectable authors have gone astray on this issue. The problem is that each level is dealt with by a different social science discipline: countries by anthropology and political science, organizations and occupations by sociology, individuals by psychology. Most authors have been trained in one of these disciplines only. When they move into another discipline's territory, they are unaware of the different laws that apply there, or they think they don't need them. In this era of interdependence, choosing the right level of analysis and what happens when we move across levels should be part of the basic training for all the social sciences, which is rarely the case.

What accounted for the tremendous impact that the book had on those studying and practicing cross-cultural issues in management at the time?

Being there at the right time [1980], when the importance of culture, both national and corporate, began to be recognized. Before me, there were lots of theories, but no one else had done any serious empirical research in the field. And, of course, writing the book in English and having it published by a good publishing house (Sage) provided a broad distribution across social science boundaries.

There was also some resistance to your conclusion that culture matters, in particular among scholars and practitioners in the United States. How did you explain it at the time—and in retrospect?

Yes, in particular to my 1980 article in *Organizational Dynamics*: "Motivation, leadership and organization: Do American theories apply abroad?" Asking a question like that was sacrilegious to some people inside and outside the US. In some circles it still is! It was a paradigm shift à la Thomas Kuhn.

Culture's Consequences greatly shaped the study and methodology of many academic disciplines and spawned numerous dissertations, including mine. What were some of the most promising and less promising directions in which scholars took your work—and what were clearly dead ends?

The dissertations can be divided into replications and applications. Regarding replications, some people tried to compare categories of respondents within countries, not realizing that my comparisons only apply to entire national or regional cultures. Most other replications were on two or three cultures, which didn't contribute much, since for purely statistical reasons a trend found across 40 countries does not need to replicate itself across every subset of two or three. Yours was a shining exception with 18 overlapping cultures and, therefore, very important. But I like the applications best, people relating my dimensions to phenomena in societies, such as differences in language structure, in savings rates, in consumer behavior, in corporate governance, in medical practice, and endless other fields.

This reminds me of your and your associates' book on *Masculinity and Femininity: The Taboo Dimension of National Cultures* [1998], in particular the discussion in Part III on the relationships between culture and sexuality and culture and religion. What reactions and follow-up research did this discussion generate?

Not as much as I would have liked—it's still a taboo. But these things take time. If our book has influenced research by others, it takes years before the results are published. The citations of *Culture's Consequences* only really took off after eight years. The issue can only become more important. I expect more reactions in the coming years.

Since I brought up the masculinity-femininity dimension, which of your five dimensions (I am including the short-term versus long-term dimension that emerged from your work with Michael Bond) has been either the most misunderstood or underutilized, as you look back on the last twenty years of research?

This depends on the area of application. Psychologists, for example, often overlooked Uncertainty Avoidance, while management students overlooked Masculinity and Femininity. Many superficial readers only remember Individualism and Collectivism and try to attribute to it all cultural differences they see.

Overall, what difference, if any, did *Culture's Consequences* and the numerous resulting articles and books on culture and management make for the practitioners who struggled with cross-cultural management issues in the emerging global marketplace at the time?

Providing them with a terminology and a conceptual framework through which the fuzzy and scary area of cultural differences becomes accessible to management strategy. Recognizing that there is such a thing as national cultural differences at all. At least the younger managers have got accustomed to this idea. The older ones who still decide about major international ventures are often still incredibly naïve about culture, and this, I believe, explains the dramatically poor success record of transnational mergers, acquisitions, and alliances. Cultural integration is a top management responsibility, but if top managers don't know what culture is, the disasters are predictable.

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If you could do it over again, what different publication strategies, if any, would you use to enhance the message and impact of your work?

None, I think. Publishing books with good publishing houses was the most effective way of spreading my ideas—this is evident from the Social Science Citation Index: my books [monographs] are by far the most cited sources. Next are articles in good journals, such as *Organizational Dynamics*. Least effective are chapters in readers—hardly anybody cites them.

As you reflect on the impact of your work and the ways in which management theory and practice are discussed today, what pleases you the most?

Having made a difference. Do you remember the musical from the 1970s *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*? My ideas influenced management theory and practice beyond what I tried for. I never planned or expected things to go this way—it is still a surprise.

What displeases you the most?

Visibility has its price. One also attracts the rats, fleas, and paranoids of the academic and business world who try to inflate themselves by disparaging others.

***Culture's Consequences* and the thousands of articles and books that built on it did not only influence the ways in which we think about and practice management. In fact, from the beginning you incorporated findings from many other fields of study into your work. In what other academic fields or areas of our lives do you see your research having had a major influence?**

A major influence can be noticed in psychology, especially through the introduction of the cultural [rather than individual] dimension of Individualism versus Collectivism. Also, since the 1990s in marketing, especially for explaining and predicting differences in consumer behavior, and in organizational theory, especially through the dimensions of Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance. But I have seen applications in the fields of history, medicine, social anthropology, social geography, law, political science, public administration, journalism, international sports, information technology, archives management, accounting, laboratory management, quality control, in ethics, in engineering education, in nuclear power regulation.

Could you give an example from any of these fields that truly intrigues or fascinates you?

What most excited me in the past year was an exchange with Dr. Robert McCrae, the main contemporary authority on personality measurement and one of the champions of the "big five" dimensions of personality. He discovered that national norms for personality scores across more than 30 countries were significantly correlated with four of my culture dimensions [all except Long Term Ori-

entation]. We have just submitted a joint article about this to an anthropology journal.

Two years ago, you published a re-written second edition of *Culture's Consequences* in which you sum up and integrate your and other scholars' findings and thinking over the past twenty years. What are the one or two major ways, if any, in which you think differently today about the theory and practice of management than you did in 1980?

Upon reflection, I don't believe that I have very much changed my mind about management. I have always been skeptical about fads. A present fad is the myth of the magical powers of top executives. The importance of management in general, and of top management in particular, is overrated and top managers are overpaid. In many cases top managers have been brought in who turn out to be parasites on their corporation rather than assets to its real success. The importance of the people who do the work is underrated, although this trend differs between countries and parts of the world.

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Say more about that!

Last year my associates and I published an article in the *Journal of International Business Studies* based upon the views [collected in the late 1990s] of evening MBA students from 15 countries. We asked these people, most of whom had day jobs in companies, to identify the major goals of the top business leaders in their country, the tycoons. There were striking differences between countries. Among U.S. students from five different universities from all over the country, there was a remarkable consensus on the importance of ego goals for these top leaders: personal wealth and power. In comparison, students from Latin countries put "family interests" higher. Asian students more often chose long-term profits and "creating something new." European students perceived their tycoons to pay more attention to their responsibility toward employees and toward society.

What did you learn about yourself through your extensive and intensive involvement with "culture"?

That there is a difference between knowing and practicing.

I admit, this is a pretty personal question, but could you give an example.

After a lecture in Japan, someone asked me a "don't you think that . . .?" question and I bluntly answered "no," as I would have done in Holland. I must have offended the questioner badly; there are less direct ways of answering, such as "That is an interesting question. I would say that . . ." Under stress, one falls back on one's native instincts.

Understanding the big differences in mindsets between people from different countries helps enormously in interpreting what's going on—and where we can and cannot hope for progress.

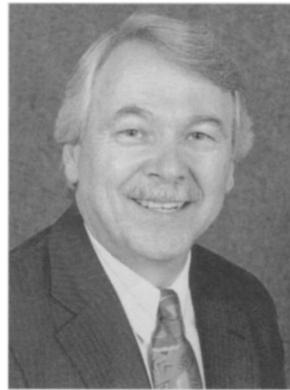
What did you learn about humankind's ongoing struggles with issues of peace, war, sustainability, justice, equity, and so forth?

Those are enough questions for a week's discussion. But if you want a general answer: What I think I learned is that understanding the big differences in mindsets between people from different countries helps enormously in interpreting what's going on—and where we can and cannot hope for progress.

What's next?

Part of my intellectual inheritance is taken over by our eldest son Gert Jan Hofstede who is a researcher and associate professor at Wageningen Agricultural University. Gert Jan in 2002 published a book about training methods, *Exploring Cultures*, with our friend Paul B. Pedersen and me as co-authors. At present, Gert Jan is helping me revise the popular text *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* which originally appeared in 1991. We expect it to be available in 2004. And, since it has appeared in 16 translations, we'll have to manage the updating of these as well. After that my ambition is to write my memoirs, in Dutch and with our grandchildren as a target readership—the way I would have liked to read about my grandfather's lifetime.

Geert, thank you for your time and generosity—with this interview and over the past more than 20 years.



Michael H. Hoppe is a Senior Program & Research Associate at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he conducts leadership development programs and research on cross-cultural leadership effectiveness. He holds degrees in clinical and educational psychology from the University of Munich and SUNY at Albany and earned his Ph.D. in adult and institutional studies from UNC-Chapel Hill. Contact: hoppem@leaders.ccl.org.