



# Countering Hegemonic Knowledge in Cross- Cultural Research: Hofstede, Epistemic Violence and Imperialism

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural research methodologies are imbued with a legacy of western-centric, colonial epistemology. By clinging on to the neutral orientation of positivism, these studies eschew socially constructed hierarchies of race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. The erasure of alternate realities of subaltern people compared to Western, educated, industrial, rich and democratic – WEIRD populations, in the study of cultures, homogenizes human experiences and explains them from a White heteropatriarchal perspective. In this article, I look at the tradition of cultural determinism in cross-cultural research created by the work of Geert Hofstede and how such discourses impact geopolitical mobility of people from non-West settings. Celebrated as one of the most authoritative body of work in cross-cultural studies, his work inspired a barrage of scientific literatures that produced monumental epistemic violence. Using an assemblage-inflected approach, I look at epistemic injustices constituted by researches that use Hofstede's parameters of national cultures and uphold a racialized power-knowledge materialization. Finally, I present suggestions to amplify inclusivity in social science discourses to counter the Euro-American monopoly in knowledge production.

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The most vivid visualization of the ‘Other’ appears in the concept of The Orient, which besides being a source of human capital, also comprised Europe’s most profitable colonies, sites of protoindustrialization and its greatest cultural contestant (Said 1979). Adjacent to the Occident, The Orient is a non-agentic invention of the West, that serves the West’s purpose of disidentifying from the ‘other’, thereby perpetuating hegemonic traditions (Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova 2018); the disidentification between the West and the non-West has discrete and overlapping implications in terms of geographical, economic, cultural and political power relations. Globalocentric scholars, who view globalization as the one-way flow of resources and scientific wisdom from First World to economically and culturally backward, Third World countries, reify the teleological view of the former from which the latter derive their meaning and sustenance (Kim-Puri, 2005). This framing of the West as the geopolitical center is a repackaging of the imperial project.

Foucault (1990) theorizes that power is wielded by knowledge and power is simultaneously used for production of knowledge. The disciplinary techniques of the West, entrenched in educational institutions, funding bodies and academic journals (Kitayama 2002) produce power-knowledge relations that hierarchize WEIRD voices and subsequently illegitimize the contributions of the former colonies of the West and the geographical south. The monoculture of scientific knowledge (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007) renders indigenous wisdom, epistemologies of knowledge and cultural practices of Global South as a “‘sub-optimal’ expression of ignorance awaiting foreign enlightenment” (Adams, Dobles, Gómez, Kurtiş and Molina 2015: p. 219); this constitutes epistemic violence.

The domination of knowledge production by the North through the otherization and subjugation of cultures of the South, maintains the neocolonial status quo. In that vein, I read Geert Hofstede’s dimensions of global cultures as a way of dehumanizing cultures in non-West settings and an extension of the imperial project. His framework of looking at cultures with a preconceived idea of cultural superiority is identical to ethnocentric monoculturalism, and denigrates collectivistic cultures of Global South.

His canonical work inspired a significant number of scientific literatures that collated collectivism with high tolerance for transgressive academic behavior (Payan, Reardon, Mccorkle 2010), as well as a preference for rote learning without an in-depth understanding (Abeysekera 2008), and individualism with high Global Innovative Index (Khan and Cox 2017) and high Gross National Product (Gouveia and Ross 2000). In this article, I look at the ways by which scholars following suit with this essentialist tradition in cross-cultural research fall in the traps of reductionist fallacy, whereby individual level data are used to draw group attributes. Hence, scholars need to remain wary of knowledge assumed to be “natural, ontologically stable, historically immutable...[as] something that is historically contingent, produced, mutable and thus open to transformation, revision, abandonment and challenge.” (Mendieta 2010, p. 113).

I have limited my discussion on his original four indices derived from the IBM questionnaires: individualism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance and masculinity. The methodological flaws and analysis of his research, which have been taken up by Brendan McSweeney (2002a; 2002b) are not the focus of this paper. I have adopted an assemblage-inflected methodology in this paper to delve into the specific case examples used to further my argument viz the contextualities and the persistent efforts and effects of human actors and materials constituting the labors of producing and maintaining such assemblages (Baker and McGuirk 2017). Assemblages are heterogeneous mixture of elements such as humans, nonhumans, events and technologies that consist and create spatialities characterized by distanced associations and relational proximities (Baker and McGuirk 2017; Prince 2010). They connote ‘wholes characterized by relations of exteriority’ (DeLanda 2006) meaning that constitutive parts of a whole cannot be reduced to their functions and they can aid multiple processes at any given time (Dittmer 2013). The analytical emphasis on laboured-over processuality and dynamicity of assemblage methodological framework is needed to highlight the hierarchical, spatial and relational understanding of geopolitical, sociobiological, technoscientific materializations of Global north-dominating voices.

Hofstede’s theorization of cultural attributes of people of Global South holds ramifications on the geopolitical mobility of people, heretofore constrained by multiple “morally arbitrary facts of birthplace and inherited citizenship and by the exclusionary policies of states” (Brubaker

2005, p. 9). Such a biased worldview turns our attention away from alternate realities that contradict the undisputed scientific ‘truths’ manufactured by WEIRD nations. Thus, to address the multifarious ways ethnocentric cultural norms dictate the perception of Global South and to decolonize these racialized civilizational discourses, I look at Geert Hofstede’s model as a framework that deploys multiple apparently disconnected logics to sustain the complex assemblages of impoverishment of Global South.

## NATIONAL CULTURES AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

The self does not exist in vacuum; it is formed through interactions with the culturally constituted world. Cultural psychology has amassed a colossal amount of literature on the distinction between collectivistic and individualistic societies. Geert Hofstede, a social psychologist and cultural theorist, proposed cultural dimensions based on factor analytic research of over 100,000 responses from a survey database of IBM. Using a priori belief of behavioral differences tied to causal-national-culture, (McSweeney 2002a), Hofstede reifies the ideal of individualism and independence of the self from the collective, a “radical abstraction of self from context, an entrepreneurial understanding of self as an ongoing development project, an imperative for personal growth and fulfillment, and an emphasis on affect management for self-regulation” (Adams, Estrada-Villalta, Sullivan and Markus 2019, p. 2).

The imposed ideal of individualism on the consciousness of individuals as a means to pursue material wealth and happiness is evidenced in the conceptualization of the entrepreneurial self. This is in conjunction with the pathologization of collective identity as a threat to innovation, creativity and accomplishments in organizational settings (e.g. Dollinger, Dollinger and Centeno 2005; Kavanagh, Perkkman and Phillips 2021). In so-called “diverse” academic spaces and organizations, such faulty practices lead to forcible acculturation to the dominant cultural milieu (Ahmed 2012). Hofstede’s cultural taxonomy serves the dual purpose of exclusion disguised as inclusion.

Hofstede’s reading of national cultures on binaries of center-margin, ideal-inept, liberating-confining constructs a normative notion of cultures and forms a system of capital that limits membership to these ‘noble’ groups (Bourdieu 1986). It guarantees an apparent freedom of self-improvement through investment in human capital, a form of governmentality, by which people continuously strive towards growth in adverse conditions (Foucault, 2008).

Cross-cultural studies need to focus on cultural relativism and engage in interdisciplinary dialogue to amend the errors of neutral positivism. I demonstrate this with the example of workers in apparel manufacturing industries in Asia and Pacific (APAC) region, with a labor force of 65 million (Jackson, Judd and Viegelahn 2020) whose aspirations are tied to the precondition of wage labor. These workers working in hazardous conditions with low wages due to lax labor laws and deregulated factories (Saxena 2019) is an inhuman face of striving towards growth in adversity. The workers’ adaptation to toxic (literal sense) working conditions and fitting into the cog of the macro political economy sold as “success stories” is a failure of corporate social responsibility of multinational companies (LeBaron, Edwards, Hunt, Sempéré and Kyritsis 2021).

To understand the garment industry assemblage one needs to look at the power relations, actors, socio-materialities and contingency plans (or lack of) (Baker and McGuirk 2017) of global value chains, subcontracted production levels, price-driven competition and governance deficit that are in flux and their relationships that embolden market actors’ negligence of safety standards in sweatshops and vulnerable infrastructure (Islam, Khattak and Stringer 2017). The exploitation of international cost differentials by multinational corporations for production of goods is an evidence of neocolonialism (Davis, Ein-Dor, King and Torkzadeh 2006).

The failure to utilize a human rights framework in transnational garment industry arises from exporting countries not wanting to lose their advantage of low-cost production, as well as, importing countries subcontracting to avoid governing wages, hours and benefits to the workers. Progressive social change and transnational garment industry workers’ right advocacy thus cannot be solved by merely focusing on the national borders of countries situated in the Global South, but by handholding of political lawyers and policy-makers to create transnational strategies that transcend traditional legal dichotomies of civil and political, social and economic, and domestic and international (Ho, Powell and Volpp, 1996).

I return to Khan and Cox's (2017) study that associates the cultural value of individualism with high Global Innovative Index, as perpetuating the tradition of epistemic violence without considering postcolonial sensitivities and international conditionalities. The privileged positions of businesses, hegemonic Science and dissemination of technology are tied to the economic exploitation of Third World countries. The economic impact of neocolonial rationalities reverberates in microeconomies of APAC countries through violation of labor laws, poor infrastructural planning and neglect of public health. Thus, accounting for marginalized perspectives in cross-cultural studies can aid knowledge production and policy-making and avert human rights abuses, humanitarian crises and environmental degradation.

## ETHNOCENTRISM AND ETHNICIZATION OF POVERTY

One of Hofstede's six indices of value differences among cultures, uncertainty avoidance dimension entails the connotation of psychological tension created due to incompatibilities in perception of reality and a cultural disposition to avoid the same. The cognitive state of uncertainty or ambiguity arises when information available about the details of a particular situation or outcome is inconsistent, unpredictable or absent. Uncertainty avoidant societies are intolerant of ambivalent conditions that have a potential risky outcome and minimize threats to security and safety about the future by rule-abidance; they are high-strung and characterized by "inner nervous energy" (Hofstede 2011, p. 11).

Psychologists have produced a deluge of literatures tying uncertainty avoidance and national cultures to behaviors like decision-making, motivation, threat-perception and self-regulation, which are further correlated with consumer behavior, capital investment, and upward mobility (Bozer and Delegach 2019; Arshad and Ibrahim, 2019). This renders culture as monolithic, characteristic of nation-states (Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016). Such absolutist discourses on economic conditions lead to violent systemic inequalities, that ethnicize poverty based on an ignorant preconceived perception of cultural superiority (Kurczewska 1999).

Hofstede's theory maintains the myth of trickle-down economy, whereby First World countries are posited to be the powerhouse of development and investment while capital flows out of First World countries and towards developing countries. It fosters technocapitalism by ignoring the stark disparities created by international political economy, deregulated global supply chains and extractive imperialism. For instance, the extra land that is used for organic farming in Sweden (low uncertainty avoidance country), purported to reduce carbon footprint, leaves lesser land for carbon sequestration or manufacturing industries (Searchinger, Wirsenius, Beringer and Dumas 2018).

Assemblages claim a territory (Wise 2005) by the continuous process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that formulate and reformulate the relations among humans, nonhumans, events and technologies (Baker and McGuirk 2017). The governance of environment in agri-food systems i.e. agri-environmental governance (AEG) constitute multiple and highly complex assemblages of actors and biotechnologies with multiple interrelations, in that, the human agents are policy planners, private certifiers, farmers' associations and supermarket boards, and the nonhuman agents being soil health, animals, meteorological tools and legal documents (Forney, Rosin and Campbell 2018). With the rapid involvement of private governing entities in certification schemes, AEG is also becoming highly neoliberalized. This has wider and far-reaching consequences on food security, sustainable agriculture, subjectivities of farmers and farming, supply chains and carbon taxes and carbon emissions trading. The introduction of European Union's Emissions Trading Scheme has led to the emergence of an open market for multinational carbon trade; factories that pollute more than their limit of carbon emission, buy it from manufacturing plants that have lesser emissions than their allowance (Oestreich and Tsiakas 2015). Besides labor exploitation through outsourced production, Western conglomerates also outsource environmental degradation to ensure affordability (Saxena 2019).

## CULTURAL DETERMINISM AND HEGEMONIC FEMINISMS

Hofstede's cultural dimension of power distance (acceptance of unequal distribution of power in social institutions) disempowers subaltern women's agency as effected by power. It reifies the construal of multiply marginalized women's agency through a Western androcentric lens.

By using cultural determinism to explain masculinities, he conjures a preconceived idea of the exotic, disempowered and violent “other” (Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova 2018).

Lugones (2007) speaks of a colonial/modern deployment of gender whereby the idea of gender acts as the building ground of belonging or non-belonging to humanity and by which the “civilized” west disavows racism and sexism by externalizing it onto non-West settings (Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova 2018). Hofstede’s work strengthens the tradition in cross-cultural studies to explain gender-inequality and gender-based violence through this gaze of White heteropatriarchy; the affective cultural assemblages maintaining the image of a sexually rapacious, depraved Orient through media representation invisibilizes gender violence in WEIRD nations (Patil and Purkayastha 2018). Construction of gendered experiences as universal, outside of their discursive representation fails to account for transnational perspectives (Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova 2018).

Discourses on cultural differences are dominated by WEIRD scholars, which creates hegemonic knowledge by relegating the intellectual labor borne by subaltern feminist scholars. The exaltation of ‘civilized’ hegemonic feminisms possessing liberatory potential silences subaltern agentic voices in marginalized sites (Kurtiş and Adams 2015). As cultural hegemony sustains itself on the impoverishment and denigration of cultures of ethnic racial minorities (Gramsci 2011), it also targets low-income women of color as populations for unintended pregnancy prevention as unintended pregnancy is framed in terms of economic burden (Grzanka and Schuch 2020) as well as, nonexistent reproductive and bodily agency of women of color, essentially women at the mercy of their barbaric brown male counterparts.

Cultural protectionism and mainstreaming of White nationalism promote the ‘soft’-eugenic policing of disfavored populations through racialized biopolitics of health policies and scientific discourses that target women from marginalized communities for the promotion of intrauterine contraceptives (Winters and McLaughlin 2020). Additionally, reproductive technologies constitute a fluid network of technoscientific surveillance assemblages that are meant to govern the fertility of women from marginalized ethnic, racial backgrounds whose reproduction is seen as a threat to nativist notions of citizenship and national identity (Lowry 2004); this monolithic view of cultures, characteristic of nation-states, bolsters a capitalist conception of subaltern female sexuality by anchoring it to a reproductive function.

The transformation of bodies into commodified information for the purpose of threat reduction to international security (Lowry 2004) stratifies reproductive agency of White middleclass women through initiatives to enhance fertility and maternal health and exposes low income women of color to state violence and coercion to limit their fertility (Grzanka and Schuch 2020). These complex assemblages of reproductive decision-making are fueled by technoscience and conservative migration and reproductive policy governance that sustain sexual and gender essentialisms, anti-immigrant and antiminority sentiments and militarization of domestic and international boundaries (Andaya 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Contrived by analyzing survey data from the subsidiaries of a single multinational corporation, Hofstede has brazenly pursued a reductive notion of national cultures. His polemic responses to his critics (e.g. Hofstede 2002; 2009) such as, Brendan McSweeney and Galit Ailon elucidate that he is convinced of his feat of having discovered the “secrets of entire national cultures” (Hofstede 1980, p. 44). If one were to scratch beneath the surface, the methodological deficits of his research would come unravelling.

Academicians have not only used his flawed cultural indices as a pillar upon which to base their research integrity but have also been persistent about the validity of his research. However, what is most disconcerting is that researchers have endeavored to ossify the malpractice of drawing cultural level inferences from individual level data by using empirical data from attitudinal surveys (e.g. Oyserman, Coon and Kimmelmeier 2002; Arshad and Ibrahim 2019). Thus, scholars must be conscious of ethical issues in cross-cultural studies so that “unnecessary cultural faux pas as a result of [their] own lack of education of a culture outside [their] own” can be averted (Matsumoto and Jones 2009, p. 334).

In an early article published by Columbia Law Review titled “Individualizing justice through multiculturalism: the liberal’s dilemma”, Coleman (1996) wrote about the debate around culturally pluralistic justice system and her disapproval of using cultural defense to exonerate criminal conduct of immigrant defendants. The way in which she pitted foreign customs and cultural practices against Western legal propriety, exemplifies her resentment over multiculturalism having “gone too far” and impeding women’s progress; this imperialist feminist stance preempts debate on multiculturalism and race whereby our Western ‘sisters’ like Coleman argue that goals of multiculturalism and feminism are antithetical (Volpp 1996). This stance adopts a form of cognitive disidentification from the underdeveloped, uncivilized other and yet another way of repackaging hierarchies of knowledge (Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova 2018).

The naturalization and idealization of dominant Western discourses serves to prevail political imbalance between the West and the non-West. Hence, it is imperative for social sciences to focus upon decolonizing the “homogenizing colonial standpoint of mainstream science” for fostering intellectual progress (Adams et al. 2015, p. 232). Cross-cultural research when informed by postcolonial critiques of Western knowledge and critical reflexivity will foster harmony, stability and global sustainability (Ailon 2008). In doing so, the concept of global sisterhood has to be replaced with discussions on feminist solidarity grounded in antiracist, anti-capitalist and decolonial frameworks (Mohanty 2003).

In her famous book *Feminism without Borders*, Chandra Mohanty Talpade (2003) defines political, ethical feminist solidarity in terms of active political struggle countering cross-national and cross-cultural differences through collectivity of workers across race, class, national boundaries. Talpade conceptualizes solidarity as mutuality, accountability and recognition of common goals through incorporation of Third world workforce into the global economy thereby, providing yardstick for cross-cultural comparison and analysis rooted in history and social location, as opposed to ahistorical notion of culture and experience, unlike in Hofstede’s theory.

Matsuda (1989) at a conference in Yale Law School had delineated the importance of multiple consciousnesses as a jurisprudential method, to attune oneself to look at the world from the standpoint of the oppressed. This is necessary because social worlds are characterized by heterogeneous elements in flux, effecting systems of advantage and disadvantage that distribute life chances unequally (Grzanka 2018). Thus, to appreciate the heterogeneity and fluidity of cultures, embracing a multiscale systems approach is important in cross-cultural research (Kitayama 2002).

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The corresponding author was the sole contributor for the conception, drafting and revision of the article.

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