

Cultural research may be misleading

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Making assumptions about culture based on existing research that scores countries according to various dimensions may be a flawed process, according to two academics from The University of Queensland Business School.

Dr Sunil Venaik and Dr Paul Brewer have undertaken a comparison of the two most iconic research projects on the varying dimensions of national [culture](#) and their effect on business.

The academics found that the studies contradicted each other significantly in at least one dimension (and perhaps more), which they say could lead to erroneous assumptions and decision-making.

Their findings will be published in a special issue of the prestigious *Journal of International Business Studies* in October.

“The problem is that culture is something people are talking about all the time and at last count these studies have been cited 55,000 times in all sorts of areas of research including IT, finance and even science,” Dr Venaik said.

“Some people reading the findings from such research are likely to be in a position where they are advising companies or [policymakers](#) and their advice may be erroneous.”

Dr Venaik said the two studies referred to included the work of pre-eminent researcher Geert Hofstede and the GLOBE (Global Leadership

and [Organizational Behavior](#) Effectiveness) cross-cultural study.

Both studies provide measures to show how countries vary on several dimensions of national culture and calculate scores on these dimensions for each country.

“These national scores have been enthusiastically welcomed by researchers because they allow them to investigate important relationships between cultural traits and other variables such as income, insurance, corruption or levels of new product adoption,” he said.

“For example, we looked at the two studies' findings on the dimension of ‘uncertainty avoidance’, which attempts to measure to what extent a society would tend to want to avoid uncertainty and therefore, say, not engage in international business transactions.

“One researcher compared Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance scores to an international corruption index and concluded that the most corrupt countries had the highest uncertainty avoidance scores using Hofstede's model.

“Another research project concluded the opposite using the GLOBE findings. This is because country rankings for this dimension are opposite in the two studies.”

Dr Venaik said there was a need to understand and define culture unambiguously before measuring it and examining its impact on human behaviour.

“The moment we put a number on anything, it gives us a false sense of confidence that we are really able to judge that aspect and that is a bit arbitrary. We believe you need to go beyond the numbers to understand the phenomenon.”

The researchers said there were two possibilities arising from their findings: that culture is a complex, descriptive phenomenon that can't be captured in numerical terms; or that researchers needed to narrow and agree on a definition of culture before they could begin to measure it.

Provided by University of Queensland

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