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CROSS-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IMPACTING PERSUASION AND INFLUENCE IN SECURITY CONTEXTS

Culture impacts the ways that individuals communicate. Problems that arise from cross-cultural differences in communication are an increasingly occurring challenge that can have severe consequences. Persuasion and influence strategies rooted in Western culture, often characterised by traits such as individualism, may fail to have the anticipated effect in certain cultural contexts which do not share these characteristics. In our research, we have outlined several prevailing cultural dimensions – integral and enduring aspects of culture – which impact psychological processes and behaviour.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN INFLUENCE

Cultures can vary in how much they value individualism or collectivism. Collectivist cultures are characterised by a focus on the collective relative to the individual. For example, in communications the use of 'we' as a pronoun is favoured over 'I'. Identity is embedded within one's relationships and social context, and individuals are socialised into enduring, cohesive groups. Personal goals are group-oriented, in exchange for the benefits of group membership. Conversely, individualist cultures emphasise the independent, unique, and stable traits of an individual. Individuals are socialised to see themselves as separate and distinct to others and the social context.

These differences are reflected in the role that others play in influence and persuasion processes. Because the self in collectivist cultures is rooted in social roles and context, the salience of in-group members and group identity is an important component of influence. For example, others' opinions exert heightened influence on collectivists relative to individualists, along with appeals to family integrity and harmony with others.

How believable a source is perceived to be also exerts more influence on collectivists. Indeed, collectivists tend to be more compliant to authority, and therefore susceptible to influence and persuasion, as conformity is central to the collectivists' cultural conditions. For individualists, personal attitudes, appeals to self-improvement, and personal goals are more influential.

In this vein, the degree to which context is integral in communication may also shape influence and persuasion. For example, 'low context' communication is direct, linear and is characteristic of Western individualistic cultures found in countries like the UK and US. However, communication in high context, collectivist cultures, as in China, Russia, and former Soviet Socialist Republics such as Uzbekistan, tends to be more indirect and context-oriented. In these 'high-context'

interactions, the relationship, history, and status position of both the communicators and the audience serves as an important framework for what is being communicated.

The goal of low context communication is the sharing of facts, whereas the goal for high context communication is the establishment of relationships. For example, if advertising vitamin supplements, contextualised adverts focusing on the expertise of the Doctor delivering the sales pitch, depicting someone taking the vitamin supplements, or the tradition and history of the product or brand are preferred within collectivist cultures. Conversely, adverts which focus on the product or brand name itself, without a social context, are preferred within individualist cultures.

POWER DISTANCE

Cultures can also vary on dimensions of 'power distance' and 'uncertainty avoidance'. Power distance refers to the degree that power is distributed unequally within society. Cultures high in power distance rely on entrenched hierarchies, with members accepting that power is a 'fact of life'. Individuals who occupy the upper echelons of society have influence over determining what is right and good, and their opinions are given priority.

In these settings, influence and persuasion processes rely on the inherent hierarchy within the interaction and are often uni-directional. For example, status or power markers such as age are more influential for compliance in high power distance cultures. Because there is greater reliance on those who are higher in power, people are reluctant to refuse requests from, or disagree with, authority figures.

Cultures low in power distance tend to be more egalitarian and flat in their relations, and members of these cultures are more likely to question the legitimacy of authority, and less likely to be influenced simply by the position occupied by an authority figure.

UNCERTAINTY

Uncertainty avoidance describes the degree to which members of a culture experience the future as ambiguous and threatening. Members of high uncertainty avoidance cultures search for absolute, ultimate truths to reduce the discomfort of uncertainty.

In terms of influence, there is a greater reliance on nominated experts, which may include community or religious leaders. The perceived credibility of a source is crucial for compliance for individuals from high uncertainty avoidance cultures, echoing the cultural belief that citizens are less competent than authorities.

The expertise of sources is more persuasive for cultures high in uncertainty avoidance and power distance, as opposed to the persuasiveness of argument strength for cultures that are low in both uncertainty avoidance and power distance.

ADAPTING STRATEGIES FOR CULTURE

One final cross-cultural dimension to consider is that of 'honour'; an important concept in some Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African cultures. Honour reflects an individual's honesty, loyalty, and positive social reputation. It is a commodity that can be gained or lost, and thus must be considered carefully in persuasion strategies. Preferences for types of negotiating strategies, such as rational persuasion, coalition-building, and appeals to honour can be linked to culture. For example, rational persuasion – typical in non-honour, Western cultures



AVOIDANCE

– minimises relational concerns and removes the individual from the task at hand, whereas honour models of negotiation focus on the importance of maintaining and gaining honour.

However, rational persuasion may be problematic within cultures which value honour, as the challenging questions which typify rational arguments may undermine source credibility, and therefore public image and perceived honour. Focusing on how honour can be protected or maintained can help shape the effectiveness of persuasion and influence strategies in honour cultures.

In sum, cross-cultural dimensions of the types outlined above impact persuasion and influence processes in a number of ways. For example, in the context of investigative interviews, investigators typically report using two main types of influencing behaviour – rational arguments and being kind. When eliciting information, rational (direct) arguments are more effective when applied to individuals from low context cultures, than for those from high context cultures. With this in mind, influence strategies require culturally informed techniques in order to be effective. These should include flexible communication techniques and training of personnel operating in cultures other than their own.

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