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 communication, the pronoun ‘we’ is more commonly used than ‘I’. This can be seen in their communication style, where there is a greater emphasis on the collective good and the group’s interests rather than the individual's.

In contrast, individualist cultures are characterised by a focus on the individual. Communication is more direct and linear, and personal characteristics are more emphasised. For example, individuals in individualist 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.

POWER DISTANCE

Cultures can also vary in their perceptions of power and authority. In cultures with high power distance, there is a greater emphasis on hierarchy and the authority of those in positions of power. Conversely, in cultures with low power distance, there is a more equal distribution of power and authority.

In these settings, influence and persuasion processes rely on the inherent hierarchy within the interaction and are often unidirectional. 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 less 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, unambiguous 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 cultures that are high in uncertainty avoidance. In cultures that are low in uncertainty avoidance, 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’. Honour is a concept that is prevalent 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 is typically used in non-honour, Western cultures.