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Learning Culture of Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

With the increasingly multicultural and multi-national demographics of students in the classroom, teachers find themselves having to face the challenges of teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds. While much research has been done on individual differences in learning attitudes, learning strategies and learning styles, there is a severe lack of work done to investigate whether differences in the attitudes and values towards learning could be attributed to group differences. This paper reports the findings of a study on the differences in learning culture between Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian students. A questionnaire that measures learning culture was developed using Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. The questionnaire consists of 24 items covering four dimensions, namely, collectivism/individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. One hundred and fifty Iranian and the same number of Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate students participated in the study. The results showed that there is a significant difference in the collectivism/individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity dimensions between these two groups of students. Implications of the results to the teaching and learning of second/foreign language are discussed.

Keywords: Chinese-Malaysian students, Iranian students, learning culture, language learning, national culture

INTRODUCTION

Culture provides the means, customs, and approaches that can influence human thought and behaviour; consequently, it affects how people learn. Past research has shown that learning is influenced by culture (Bruner, 1996; Brislin, Bochner

& Lonner, 1975; Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2008; Manikutty, Anuradha & Hansen, 2007). Each culture creates its own particular style of thoughts and values and as a result, perceptions of learning vary accordingly amongst people from different cultural backgrounds (Saljo, 1987). Because people's understanding of the world is determined largely by the dominant values and beliefs of the society in which they live, it is expected that students from different cultural groups will have differences in their perception of learning (Purdie, Pillay & Boulton-Lewis, 2000).

Although numerous definitions have been offered by anthropologists and sociologists throughout the years, the concept of culture remains elusive, broad and ambiguous (Ball & Farr, 2003; Lessard-Clouston, 1997). In the study of culture, the trend has been to define the scope of the construct to specific areas. Scollon (1995, cited in Hinkel, 1999, p.1) calls this the "miniaturization of the concept of culture so that the researchers study and write about the culture of the school or even the culture of the classroom". Qualifiers attached to the term 'culture' denote its scope and context; for example "ethnic culture", "local culture", "academic culture" and "disciplinary culture" (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995, cited in Hinkel, 1999, p.1).

Hinkel (1999) posits that culture has to do with "the way a person sees his or her place in society" (p. 1). Further, Rosaldo (1984, in Hinkel, 1999) argues that culture "is far more than a mere catalogue of rituals and beliefs", and that "cultural models

derive from the world in which people live and the reality they construct" (p. 1). She further asserts that these cultural models are understood by people within the same cultural group but not easily so by people outside the group, attesting to the 'collective' nature of culture. Thus, when one speaks of culture, one refers to a collective phenomenon that indicates a group's tendencies as opposed to an individual's personality.

Hofstede (2001) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (p. 9). In his seminal work (1980) mapping the differences in national culture of countries in the world using employees of IBM (a US multi-national corporation with offices all over the world), he derived what were called dimensions of culture, which are collectivism/individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. These dimensions have been applied not only in the study of national cultures, but also of cultures in organizational and educational contexts.

Learning Culture

The present study sought to measure differences in an area of culture focused on learning, which we have named 'learning culture' for ease of reference. Learning culture in this study is defined as students' beliefs and perceptions about how their learning environment should be, and about what they feel is right about teaching and learning practices that include their

expectations about their relationship and interaction with peers and teachers.

Hofstede (1980) identified four[1] dimensions of culture that are collectivism/individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. These four dimensions are said to be general aspects of culture that can be used to study differences between groups with regard to any cultural context:

1. Power distance—"which is related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality"

2. Uncertainty avoidance—"which is related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future"

3. "Individualism versus collectivism, which is related to the integration of individuals into primary groups"

4. "Masculinity versus femininity, which is related to the division of emotional roles between men and women"

(Hofstede, 2001, p. 29)

In 1986, Hofstede expanded his work by applying his cultural dimensions in the educational context, noting that in situations where the teacher and student "were born, raised, and mentally programmed in different cultures prior to their integration in school" (1986, p. 302), cross-cultural difficulties may arise in their interaction with each other. In the next section, cultural differences in learning situations as described by Hofstede

(1986, p. 312) applying his four cultural dimension model are explained.

Collectivism/ Individualism

In a collectivist learning culture, people appreciate values and practices that are "rooted in tradition" more than "whatever is new" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 312). People are expected to learn when they are young, and stop being a student when they reach a certain age (as the expected role of the elderly is to nurture the young). A student is expected to speak only when called upon by the teacher and only in small groups where the group provides him with support. Education is seen as a route to a higher status in society, and thus students focus more on obtaining paper qualifications (accreditation) than acquiring competence. Also, 'face' is important in the collectivist society, therefore making a teacher or student 'lose face' is socially unacceptable. This also implies that maintaining harmony is important and confrontations are avoided. In such a society, status is important, thus giving preferential treatment to a student because of certain affiliations or recommendations is common.

On the other hand, members of an individualistic learning culture embrace innovations and may find traditions stifling. Lifelong learning is encouraged, where older people becoming 'students' is accepted. Students have no qualms speaking up individually and in large groups, nor raising issues and trying to solve conflicts openly. Teachers and students do not 'lose face' easily as they welcome debate

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[1]Although a fifth dimension, long/short term orientation, was added to the list in his later work, the present study used the original four dimensions as these were more relevant to classroom practices

and argument, and education is a route to "economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence" (p. 312). Thus, in such a society, students expend much effort on acquiring skills and competence rather than taking the easy route to a paper qualification.

Power Distance

In a high power distance learning environment, teachers are respected and should never be challenged or criticized in public (Hofstede, 1986). Students expect teachers to be older (i.e. younger teachers are less credible), to initiate communication, structure lessons clearly, and provide answers and guidance. Teaching is teacher-centred, and success of the student is attributed to the teacher, whose wisdom is respected.

In a low power distance learning environment, students feel free to initiate communication in the classroom, may contradict the teacher, and treat teachers as equals outside the classroom (Hofstede, 1986). Student initiative is expected and students are "to find their own paths". As education is seen as the learning of "impersonal truth", which can be "obtained from any competent person" (p. 312), respect for the teacher is given for his or her ability to educate and not due to social status or power afforded by the position he or she holds.

Uncertainty Avoidance

In learning cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, teachers are expected to be

experts who know the answers, and in turn, expect students to demonstrate accuracy in solving problems (Hofstede, 1986). Teachers are allowed to behave emotionally (and so too are students) especially when aggravated by unexpected events. Students want structure in their learning, and expect teachers to provide clear instructions, guidelines, timelines, and so forth. In contrast, in low uncertainty avoidance cultures, teachers are more tolerant of deviations from preset structure, and may ask open-ended questions without clear answers. Teachers and students are both flexible in their approach to learning and welcome innovation.

Masculinity/Femininity

According to Hofstede (1980), the masculinity/femininity dimension refers to the characteristics commonly associated with the roles of men and women in a society rather than physical characteristics. The values of a masculine culture are assertiveness, competition, and toughness, while values of a feminine culture are more orientated toward home, children, people, and tenderness. In a feminine learning environment, teachers and students value solidarity, social adaptation, and intrinsic interest as opposed to extrinsic rewards. Achievement motivation is comparatively low, hence modesty is praiseworthy. Further, physical punishment is unacceptable and mutual respect is highly valued and nurtured. On the other hand, in a masculine learning culture, teachers openly reward high achievers and set high benchmarks for

performance. Students admire teachers for their knowledge rather than their nurturing qualities, and are motivated by extrinsic rewards such as future careers. In such a competition-oriented culture, corporal punishment is considered a necessary tool.

Some Criticisms of Hofstede's Framework

While Hofstede's cultural framework has been used extensively by researchers examining culture-related phenomena, several criticisms have been leveled against it. These criticisms were aimed at Hofstede's first and seminal work on deriving cultural dimensions using countries (nations) as cultural groups, and hence, the term 'national culture' was used.

First is the question of its validity raised by Blodgett, Bakir, and Rose (2008). Among the weaknesses found through their tests of validity of Hofstede's instrument were that "the majority of the items were lacking in face validity, the reliabilities of the four dimensions were low, and the factor analyses did not result in a coherent structure" (p. 343), in addition to claiming that the instrument lacks validity in measuring culture at the micro (individual) level. However, they conceded that these weaknesses did not detract from the legitimacy of the concept of culture, and that their study did not address the instrument's validity for measuring culture as an aggregate score of group tendencies. These weaknesses attributed to Hofstede's framework has not invalidated the framework itself, as Hofstede (1980) himself on the outset had cautioned against using the measure for individual tendencies.

The instrument measures average group tendencies, notwithstanding individual differences within groups.

Second is criticism from McSweeney (2002), Hofstede's strongest critic, who claimed that the assumptions underlying Hofstede's model are flawed. These assumptions attributed to Hofstede's cultural framework by McSweeney are:

1. National, organizational and occupational cultures are discrete levels of culture.

2. National culture is identifiable at the micro-level of IBM samples.

3. National culture creates the questionnaire responses.

4. National culture is identifiable from Hofstede's questionnaire.

5. Hofstede's dimensions are not situation specific.

(in Williamson, 2002, p. 1376)

In reply to the first argument from McSweeney that national, organizational and occupational cultures cannot be assumed to be independent and therefore cannot be measured separately, Williamson (2002) asserted that the limiting of the sample to IBM employees in Hofstede's study was an attempt to control for organizational and occupational cultures. Thus, the underlying assumption in the framework was that these cultures are not discrete, and not otherwise as claimed by McSweeney. To the second argument, Williamson replied that the issue of representativeness of the IBM sample to the countries' population does

not arise, as the dimensions are constructs and hence their measures are not direct/ absolute measures. The question should be whether the differences in measures represent differences in cultural values. The fact that only IBM employees were used in the sample may underestimate rather than overestimate cultural differences between US and non-US countries (due to the American cultural elements found in IBM); hence, differences found between countries are in fact valid. To McSweeney's third argument that culture cannot be assumed to be deterministic, Williamson explained that the framework measures central tendencies based on the assumption that "people's values may be seen as reflecting a wide variety of factors, including non-cultural factors" (Williamson, p. 1383). The sharing of values is seen as a consequence of cultural and non-cultural factors. While the cause-effect relation may not be linear, they nevertheless wield effects that are quantifiable. The main point in argument four is that it is too simplistic to assume that a complex phenomenon such as culture can be measured through a self-report questionnaire. To this Williamson replied that some of Hofstede's dimensions have correlated with other culture surveys, such as the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) and in Smith, Dugan and Trompenaars (1996) (both cited in Williamson, 2002), attesting to their validity.

In defence of his framework, Hofstede (2002) himself declared that surveys are not the only way to measure culture but it is one of the ways; using nations as units for studying culture may not be the best method, but it is often the only type of unit available for comparison; his sample of IBM employees provided differences between cultures that have been validated by other studies that made use of entire populations; his culture dimensions have been found to be stable and have been externally validated over many subsequent studies past and recent; and finally, the set of dimensions proposed are the baseline dimensions, to which other researchers are free to add, as long as the new dimensions have been proven to be conceptually and statistically independent of the existing ones. His final remark to McSweeney was:

> There is no creative accounting in the way I treated my data, I followed common practice and moreover in the 1980 and 2001 books provided all the data by which others can verify my findings. What we social scientists all do is called statistical inference, but McSweeney is obviously unfamiliar with it.
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> (Hofstede, 2002, p. 6)

It is clear that Hofstede's framework has withstood criticisms from its detractors judging from its continued widespread use in the social sciences (i.e. management, behavioural sciences, marketing, education, sociology) (Blodgett, Bakir, & Rose, 2008) and has continued to be validated externally as it is used in different contexts, an attestation to its robustness as a framework for measuring cultural differences.

Purpose of the Study

With the increasingly multicultural and multi-national demographics in the classroom, teachers find themselves having to face the challenges of teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Teaching students from cultures that are different from the teacher's is expected be more difficult than teaching a homogenous group who share a similar cultural background with the teacher. As declared by Hofstede, "interactions between teachers and learners from different cultures are fundamentally problematic and cross-cultural misunderstandings often occur because classroom interaction is an archetypal human phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the culture of a society" (1986, p. 303). While much research has been done on individual differences in learning attitudes, learning strategies, and learning styles, there is a severe lack of work done to investigate whether differences in attitudes and values towards learning could be attributed to group differences, as posited by Hofstede.

This study was part of a bigger research involving the investigation of culture-based differences in perceptions and attitudes towards learning in a tertiary educational setting. The objective was to examine the differences in learning culture in terms of Hofstede's (1986) cultural dimensions between two groups of culturally different tertiary students, Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate students. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the patterns of learning culture of the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian groups of students in terms of the four cultural dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity/ femininity, and collectivism/ individualism?

2. Is there a statistical difference in the measures of each of the four cultural dimensions between the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian groups of students?

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this research arises from the fact that culture is a very pervasive phenomenon and there is no single way to capture all the aspects and dimensions of culture. The second limitation is that the majority of the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian subjects of the study were female students and since one of the dimensions of learning culture measures the level of masculinity vs. femininity, the inequality in the number of the male and female subjects may have contributed to some biasness in the results favouring feminism.

Significance of the Study

The current study is the first research attempt to empirically investigate and compare cross-national learning culture of students, drawing on the conception of culture as proposed by Hofstede (1980,1986). Therefore, the results obtained from this study will provide specific insights into the two groups of learners investigated. Furthermore, as the instrument to measure

learning culture was developed specifically for the study, another contribution of the research was the production of a survey instrument that utilizes a semantic differential scale to measure learning culture. Finally, the results obtained and the conclusions reached through this study will add to the body of research done in the area of cross-national learning culture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The research was a descriptive study employing the survey method and quantitative approach to data analysis. A major part of the study was the development of a paper and pencil questionnaire based on Hofstede's (1986) four cultural dimensions, which we named the Learning Culture Questionnaire (LCQ) to measure the attitudes towards learning and learning practices of two different cultural groups (Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian). The subjects were 150 Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate students in a Malaysian university and 150 Iranian undergraduate students studying in a university in Iran. The physical separation of the two groups of students is a significant strength of the study as it minimizes exposure of the subjects to each other's culture. The cultural patterns of each group of students were then described in terms of the scores obtained from the LCQ, followed by a statistical analysis to determine differences in group means for each of the four cultural dimensions. The following sections describe the subjects and the procedures involved in the questionnaire development, data collection and data analysis.

The Population

The population of the study involved undergraduate Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate students. To conduct a study that examines differences in culture, it is expedient to select populations that are more different than similar in the variable of interest, which is the culture of the societies. In the study, the two populations were selected partly due to convenience, as one of the researchers is Iranian and has access to students in Iran. Meanwhile, the Chinese-Malaysian students were selected as the comparison group as they were observed to be different from Iranians in several aspects:

1. Iranian society is predominantly monocultural and monolingual whereas Chinese-Malaysians live in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. Most Chinese- Malaysians are bilingual, if not trilingual.

2. Almost all Iranians are Muslims, whereas Chinese-Malaysians are varied in their religious affiliations.

3. Hofstede's (1980, 2001) mapping of national cultures of over 40 countries placed Iran and Malaysia at different points on the scale, indicating there are significant differences between the cultures of the two countries.

Further, Chinese-Malaysians, an ethnic group within a society of multi-ethnic groups that make up the population of

Malaysia, were used instead of a mix of different ethnic groups in Malaysian society, as all ethnic groups have their own distinct culture despite their common denomination as 'Malaysians'. Thus, comparing these two groups of learners perceived to be vastly different in culture may reveal interesting results regarding any differences in learning culture that may exist.

Sampling

The Learning Culture Questionnaire (LCQ) was distributed to 150 Iranian undergraduate students in Iran and 150 Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate students in Malaysia. The Iranian students studying in Azad University in Iran and Chinese students in Universiti Putra Malaysia who have lived in their respective countries most of their lives were chosen as the subjects of the study as they were less likely to have been exposed to other cultures. The rational for using undergraduate students rather than postgraduate students was mainly because of the larger number of undergraduate students available. In addition, postgraduate students were more likely than undergraduate students to be more international in their outlook and are therefore more open in terms of the cultural values, a phenomenon that may confound the results of the study.

Cluster sampling method was employed to select the students for the purpose of this study. The respondents from both the universities in Iran and Malaysia were art and management majors and they were selected from freshman to senior levels. For the Iranian subjects, the LCQ was translated into Persian language as many of them were not proficient in English.

Questionnaire Development

Developing a questionnaire that can measure culture is not an easy task, as the concept of culture itself is broad. However, according to Taras, Rowney and Steel (2009), it is a common practice to measure cultural values using self-report questionnaires, in which items corresponding to a cultural framework comprise what has been theorized as cultural dimensions. They also mentioned that cultural values are generally measured along four to eight dimensions or factors in an instrument.

In the present study, a self-report questionnaire (LCQ) was developed using a four-point semantic differential scale to measure the learning culture along Hofstede's (1980, 1986) four dimensions. The students were asked to choose between two options by shading one point on the scale (line) between the two options (A and B) at each end. The distance of the point from each of the options indicates the degree
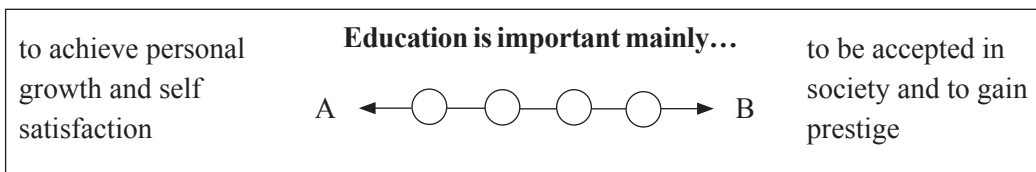

Fig.1: Sample questionnaire item

of agreement with that option. An example of an item to measure the collectivism/individualism dimension in the LCQ is shown in Fig.1.

Development of the LCQ included a face validity check, a focus group discussion, back-translation, and a pilot study to ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument.

Face Validity Check

In order to ensure the face validity of the items in the LCQ, three university students who were proficient in the English language were selected and given a brief definition of the four dimensions of learning culture in oral and written forms. Then, they were provided with the mixed order of the questionnaire items/statements and asked to sort the items into the four dimensions. Where there were obvious inconsistencies in the results from the three raters, the items were changed and edited. Then, the same task was done for the second time with two more students in addition to the previous three students. The purpose of this process was to filter out the items that were not recognized by the five students as measuring the correct dimension. Meanwhile, the items that were ambiguous or had low recognition rates as identified by the five raters were either repaired or removed.

Focus Group Discussion

After the face validity procedure, the need for coming up with new items to be added to the questionnaire became obvious. A focus group discussion was conducted to obtain more insight into what attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about learning and learning practices could characterize Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian students. The focus group consisted of two Chinese-Malaysian and three Iranian postgraduate students in Malaysia. They were asked 15 questions related to their conceptions and ideas about their learning culture (e.g. what was known as appropriate and inappropriate in their culture, what they thought of the opposite group's culture, etc.). Insights obtained from the focus group discussion were drawn on to make changes such as re-phrasing, deleting, and adding further items to the questionnaire so as to reflect the ideas and concerns of the students more accurately.

Translation of the Learning Culture Questionnaire

For the data collection that was done in Iran, the LCQ was translated into Persian to enable the Iranian students to understand it more easily. The questionnaire was translated into Persian and was back-translated into English language and checked for inconsistencies.

Pilot Study and Reliability of the Questionnaire

A pilot study was carried out on 15 Iranian and 15 Chinese-Malaysian postgraduate students in Malaysia. The purpose of the pilot study was to iron out any problem that could arise in the data collection process, and to determine the reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the questionnaire. The initial LCQ used in the pilot study consisted of 26 statements. Table 1 shows the internal

consistency indices of the LCQ obtained from the pilot study and the items that were either repaired or removed. The resulting reliability indices after deleting or repairing problem items are shown in Table 1.

A second field-test was carried out on the translated version of the questionnaire in Persian on 30 Iranian students in Iran. After computing the reliability indices of the data collected from these 30 students in Iran, further minor changes such as repairing the wording/phrasing of items were made. Table 2 presents the reliability indices of the Persian version of the LCQ before and after item repair.

The actual data for the analysis were collected from 150 Iranian students in Azad University in Iran and 150 Chinese-Malaysian students from Universiti Putra Malaysia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At a glance, the overall pattern of learning culture between the Iranian and Chinese Malaysian groups appears more similar than different (see Fig.2). Both the groups are high in terms of their Individualism and Femininity (means > 2.5), but are low in the aspect of Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance (means $\leq$ 2.5).

However, the application of the independent sample t-test to the scores

TABLE 1
Reliability of the Learning Culture Questionnaire based on the pilot study

Dimensions	Reliability	Items to be removed	Items to be repaired	Reliability after removing or repairing
COLL/IDV	0.462		4	0.676
PDI	0.218	7, 12	11,13	0.608
UAI	0.596		14	0.723
MAS/FEM	0.643		22	0.654

Note:
COLL/IDV =collectivism/individualism, PDI=power distance, UAI= uncertainty avoidance,
MAS/FEM = masculinity/femininity
30 respondents (15 Iranians, 15 Chinese-Malaysians)

TABLE 2
Reliability of the Learning Culture Questionnaire for the Persian Version

Dimensions	Reliability	Items to be repaired	Reliability after repairing
COLL/IDV	0.673	_	0.673
PDI	0.529	10, 11	0.599
UAI	0.492	12, 17	0.639
MAS/FEM	0.561	18, 20	0.627

Note:
COLL/IDV =collectivism/individualism, PDI=power distance, UAI= uncertainty avoidance,
MAS/FEM = masculinity/femininity
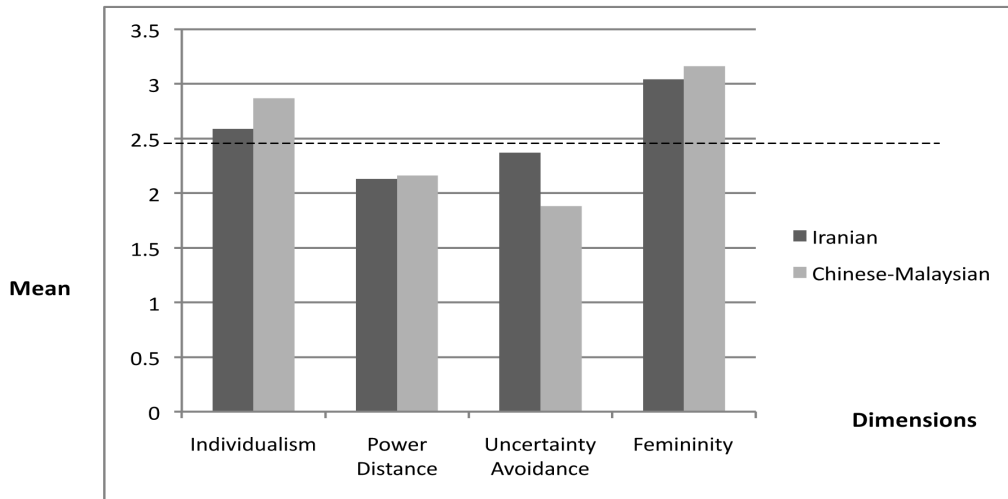30 respondents (15 Iranians, 15 Chinese-Malaysians)

Fig.2: Learning cultures of the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian groups

TABLE 3
Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples t-tests for the four dimensions of the learning culture

Dimensions	group	n	Mean	SD	t	Sig.	Result
Collectivism/ Individualism	I	150	2.59	.618	-4.15	*0.00	C>I
	C	150	2.87	.510			
Power Distance	I	150	2.13	.467	-0.55	0.57	I=C
	C	150	2.16	.486			
Uncertainty Avoidance	I	150	2.37	.704	6.66	*0.00	I>C
	C	150	1.88	.563			
Masculinity/ Femininity	I	150	3.04	.489	-2.12	*0.03	C>I
	C	150	3.16	.439			

Note:
I= Iranians; C= Chinese-Malaysians
* statistically significant at $p < .05$ (Independent samples t-test)

for each dimension showed significant differences between the two groups in the Collectivism/Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity/Femininity dimensions (see Table 3).

The following sections compare the learning culture of both the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian groups of students in terms of the four dimensions of culture.

Collectivism/Individualism

The results indicate that both the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian students have an individualistic learning culture. However, the Chinese-Malaysians are significantly more individualistic compared to the Iranians in their regard for learning. This, going by Hofstede's (1986) model, suggests that the Chinese-Malaysians are more prone to believe that the purpose of education

is essentially for personal growth and self-satisfaction, while the Iranians, in a relative manner when compared to the Chinese-Malaysian group, may look upon education as an important route to being accepted in the society and to gain prestige. Furthermore, the Chinese-Malaysians may expect teachers to develop individual competence more than group competence, whereas the Iranians may prefer more group support in learning. It is important to note that both Iranians and Chinese-Malaysians are individualistic, except that the Chinese-Malaysians are more so when compared to the Iranians. The interpretation of the results provided here reminds us of Hofstede's (1986) caution that his descriptors are of extremes, and that most societies cannot be characterized in such absolute terms but fall along a continuum between the extremes. Hence, although the mean values of both groups locate them as individualistic, the characteristics of collectiveness still exist in both groups.

Power Distance

The results indicate that both the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian students are rather low in power distance, and in this respect, both groups are similar (there is no statistical difference). Hence, it is expected that both Iranians and Chinese-Malaysians believe that students should have a say on what and how they should learn, which is in line with their societies' cultural value that the relationship between students and teachers should be like friends outside the classroom and that students are free to initiate communication with their teachers.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Both the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian students are low in Uncertainty Avoidance, which indicates that they can tolerate uncertainties in their learning environment quite well. However, there is a significant difference between the group means, with the Chinese-Malaysians having significantly lower Uncertainty Avoidance than the Iranians. This further explains that Iranians are less tolerant of loosely structured lessons and unfamiliar methods of teaching. In contrast, the Chinese-Malaysians are more accepting towards innovations in teaching and learning activities and may welcome more freedom in exercising their own creativity and independence.

Masculinity/Femininity

In the masculinity/femininity dimension, the learning culture of both the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian groups are oriented more towards femininity than masculinity. This means that relationship nurturing and intrinsic interest are important to both groups of students. They also do not believe in harsh punishments for poor performance. However, the Chinese-Malaysians were found to be more significantly feminine than the Iranians. This means that in comparison to the Iranians, the Chinese-Malaysians value collaboration and affiliation skills more. Moreover, the Chinese-Malaysians are more likely to make decisions as regards

their academic future based on their interest or passion, whereas the Iranians may place more consideration on their future jobs (extrinsic rewards).

Learning Culture in Context

The researchers work in a context where teaching a class of students coming from diverse cultures is the norm. The Malaysian university to which the researchers are affiliated has a sizeable number of Iranian postgraduate students. The present study was initiated based on the observations by the researchers on the differences in the behaviour and expectations of the Iranian and local Malaysian students. The results of the study showing fundamental differences in the learning cultures of the Iranians and Chinese-Malaysians have shed light on some of the observed behavioural differences.

For example, Iranian learners are more concerned about their final grades and passing examinations rather than about building competence in a skill. Students seeking out teachers to 'negotiate' for a better grade are more prevalent among the Iranians than the Chinese-Malaysian students. On the other hand, the teachers in the Malaysian university, who are partial towards conducting activities aimed at learning and competence development, may find more eager participants from among the Malaysian learners than the Iranian students. This may be because these class activities are not seen to be directly linked to examinations in the eyes of the Iranian students, and hence, regarded as unimportant.

Another area of conflict in expectations is in the extent of flexibility and structure provided. Malaysian students are more tolerant of uncertainties, and therefore, are happy to do assignments that give them a good amount of leeway in interpreting the question and providing innovative answers. Iranian students, on the other hand, want structure, and generally expect fixed arrangements and strict guidelines on what they are expected to do.

Cultural incompatibilities may also arise in student-student interaction. Problems sometimes arise during group activities assigned by the teacher. Iranian students come from a learning environment where individual work is the norm, whereas for Malaysians, group work is common in teaching-learning activities. Therefore, many Iranian students are reluctant to participate in group work and this is probably because they are not familiar with the rules of being part of a group and how to work in a group. In contrast, the Chinese-Malaysian students are comfortable with group activities and are more willing to participate in these activities.

Thus, in a classroom that has obvious cross-cultural elements, knowing the learning culture of students will provide teachers with insights that can guide his or her teaching style, the types of activities planned, or the amount of structure to be provided. Teachers could be more sensitive to the needs and expectations of their students, especially those from a culture

that is different from that of the teacher's. Meanwhile, assumptions about learning and learning practices that are obvious to the teacher may be alien to foreign students who come with a different set of assumptions. As suggested by Hofstede (1986), it is imperative for teachers to learn about their own culture in addition to learning about their students' cultures in order to appreciate what implications these differences in culture can bring to bear on the teaching and learning processes. In sum, teachers need to get "intellectually and emotionally accustomed to the fact that in other societies, people learn in different ways" (Hofstede, 1986, p. 316). Such research on learning culture can equip the teacher with knowledge which can be used to enhance inter-cultural understanding and consequently improve learning in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the differences in the learning cultures of two groups of students, Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate students, using a learning culture questionnaire developed by the researchers based on Hofstede's (1980, 1986) four dimensions of culture. The results show that while the two groups of students are similar in that they are both high in Individualism and Femininity, and low in Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance, the comparison of the group means revealed significant differences in three of the dimensions, namely, Collectivism/Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, and

Masculinity/Femininity. This finding shows that there are fundamental differences in the learning culture of the Iranian and Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate students.

The present research is an important contribution to the study of culture as it has shown that a dimensional model of culture, such as Hofstede's (1980, 1986, 1991), can be applied in an educational context to derive the differences in the learning culture between the groups. Such research is important to teachers and culture researchers alike. Future research could focus on the methodological aspect, particularly instrumentation, to compare whether the semantic differential scale as used in the present study is more or less sensitive and reliable as compared to the Likert-type scale that is often used in culture questionnaires. Future research could also address the interactions between national culture and learning culture, or learning culture which is a group measure with a measure of individual difference, such as learning style and learning strategies.

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