

The Far Side: Contrasting American and South Korean Cultural Contexts

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Abstract

The cultural contexts of South Korea and the United States are vastly different in many ways. The purpose of this study is to examine the origins of these differences, the implications on the present-day societies, and to try to determine any trends for the future. The differing philosophies upon which each society was founded have caused Korea to become an exceptionally high-context society, while the United States represents a significantly lower-context society. While the GLOBE Study results for these countries confirm much of what we would expect of low- and high-context societies, this study concludes that the results indicate that South Koreans seem to be ready to cast off some of their traditional ways and embrace a more egalitarian society, and that the two cultures' acceptance of similar idealized cultural values will lead to a gradual convergence of even such drastically divergent cultures.

Keywords: United States, South Korea, GLOBE study, Cultural context

1. Introduction

Trying to compare and contrast differing cultures is always a complex task, more so when the cultures in question are separated by as great a geographic and cultural divide as are the Republic of Korea and the United States of America. These uneasy allies are drawn together by both an ideological stance against the aggressive communist regime immediately adjacent to South Korea, and by the bi-lateral trade relationship which has been growing steadily for over 20 years and now stands at more than US\$80 billion per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). While both countries stress how important this alliance is, the relationship has frequently been strained and it is likely that the vastly different cultural contexts have played a role. To investigate the differences in these cultures, it will be helpful to look at them from different perspectives. The contrasts are clearly apparent when analyzing these countries through a historical perspective, through Edward T. Hall's concept of high-versus low-context cultures, and finally through the recent GLOBE research findings.

2. Historical Origins of Cultural Contexts

The history of Korea extends back for thousands of years. In fact, with the exception of China, Korea is the oldest continuous civilization in the world (Kohls, 2001). Trying to study Korea's historical origins is therefore problematic in that there are no credible historical records from its formative period but merely legends and myths. However, modern Korean values retain little from the prehistoric era, but rather derive primarily from the period starting in the early 15th century (Cumings, 1997). This was when the rulers of the newly established Chosun dynasty began systematically replacing the former dynasty's policies, which were heavily influenced by Buddhism, with their own policies which were very strictly aligned with Confucianism (Oberdorfer, 1997). The strong influence of Confucianism continues to the present day (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). In fact, Kohls (2001) advises that, "anyone who wants to study Confucianism in daily life today would be well advised to go not to China or Japan, but to South Korea, where Confucianism is still very much alive" (p. 38).

The United States is relatively unique in that its earliest origins are very well documented. Much of what eventually became the American value system came from the Puritan colonies of New England (Nevins & Commager, 1992). The new colonists founded an almost classless society with no aristocracy. The colonies in New England were also fortunate enough to be able to exercise a great deal of autonomy in governance (Tocqueville, 1835). While in other colonies a governor was appointed, or the king granted land to a specific individual or company who then ruled over that territory, the New England townships were given their own

charter and were allowed to govern themselves however they saw fit as long as their laws did not conflict with the laws of England. Therefore, with no interference from the Crown, the colonists established their own governing bodies based on equal representation (Tocqueville).

These preconditions helped lead to the modern American ideal of egalitarianism which establishes the basic value of each person regardless of financial status (Ladd, 1993). The American value of egalitarianism is not based on equality of result in a socialist fashion, but rather on equal opportunity to succeed or fail on your own merits (Ladd). This also allows a great deal more upward mobility than is possible in societies where status is inherited through class structures (Ladd). In contrast, Confucian cultures are marked by their absolute lack of egalitarianism. All relationships are considered unequal and the junior member is expected to yield to the senior member in the same way the grass must bend when the wind blows across it (Confucius, trans. 1893). The status differences are built right into the Korean language which has different levels of formality (Cumings, 1997; Kohls, 2001). For each level of formality, verbs are conjugated differently and even different choices of vocabulary are sometimes required. For example, different words for food (jinji / bap), age (yeonsei / na-i), or house (daek / jip) should be used when speaking to a grandparent rather than the commonly used words. This causes Koreans to be very age conscious, since even a difference of one year in age may require a different level of formality when speaking (Kohls).

3. High- Versus Low-Context Cultures

When Edward T. Hall introduced the concept of high- versus low-context cultures in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976), he frequently used Japan as an example of a definitive high-context culture and contrasted it with the United States as his example of a low-context culture. Although Japan and Korea have their differences, the similarities in their cultures have been noted, particularly by the researchers of the GLOBE study, who classified them together in a group they called the Confucian Asia cluster along with China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, noting that all of these cultures emphasized principles such as diligence, self-sacrifice, and delayed gratification (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Hall's descriptions of different countries as high- or low-context were based solely on his own observations, Kim, Pan, & Park subsequently provided empirical evidence that firmly established Korea as a high-context culture and the United States as low-context (1998). And while Hall spoke generally about the differences between cultures, in their study, Kim, Pan, & Park defined six aspects of a culture that identify it as being either high- or low-context. The first aspect is Social Orientation, indicating how deeply involved people are with those around them. The second is Commitment, meaning how strong the expectation is that one would follow through with what you have said you would do. The next is Responsibility. In high-context systems, the person in charge is considered solely responsible for the actions of their subordinates. The fourth aspect involves Confrontation and how comfortable one is in situations involving direct confrontation. People from high-context societies tend to avoid conflict. They are expected to mask and repress strong feelings rather than express them and risk offending someone. The next aspect is Communication. The structure and social hierarchy of high-context cultures serve to orient the members of that society so that much is understood without having to be openly expressed. Therefore, communication between members is very concise. Low-context cultures require more detailed and explicit communication. The final aspect is dealing with New Situations. Low-context individuals are most creative when dealing with a novel situation, rather than an old, familiar one. In contrast, high-context individuals are most creative in the familiar, but struggle with, what may be perceived to be, out of the ordinary.

An interesting finding of this study was that not only did the Korean subjects' scores indicate that they were much higher context than the American subjects, but they also scored significantly higher than even the Chinese subjects that took part, particularly on the dimensions of Responsibility, Confrontation, and Dealing with New Situations (Kim, Pan, & Park).

4. The GLOBE Study

The GLOBE Study is the most extensive cross-cultural research ever done. This study was conducted by 170 researchers studying the cultural differences between 62 societies (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). One of the primary focuses was how each culture scored on the 9 cultural dimensions identified by the study. These dimensions are performance orientation, uncertainty avoidance, humane orientation, institutional collectivism, in-group collectivism, assertiveness, gender egalitarianism, future orientation, and power distance. The research indicates not only how each culture currently scores on each of these dimensions, but also what each culture considers the ideal level for each dimension. The results for Korea and the United States (see Figure 1) are quite illuminating.

The results show some remarkable similarities on certain dimensions, namely Performance Orientation, Future Orientation, Assertiveness, and Humane Orientation. The other dimensions reveal some interesting differences. Gender Egalitarianism, or the degree to which the society promotes gender equality, is significantly lower in Korea. In fact, Korea scored the lowest among all 62 societies on this dimension. Even the United States did not score particularly high here, placing somewhere in the middle. However, both cultures do believe that this is an area that needs to be increased significantly. Korea ranks significantly higher in both Institutional Collectivism and In-Group Collectivism, which is not particularly surprising since Confucian Asian societies are known to be collectivist in nature (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta), but what is somewhat surprising is that Koreans feel that in Korea, ideally, there should be much less Institutional Collectivism, meaning the degree to which the society encourages the collective distribution of resources, and Americans feel that in the U.S., ideally, there should be much more In-Group Collectivism, meaning the degree of pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in the organization. In fact, both societies seem to feel that the United States has the ideal level of Institutional Collectivism, while Korea has the ideal level of In-Group Collectivism. In the dimension of Power Distance, or the degree to which people agree that power should be concentrated at higher levels of the organization, Koreans scored much higher. This is not surprising for a strongly Confucian culture, since Confucianism is based upon the concept that all relationships are inherently unequal. More surprising is that Koreans believe the ideal level of Power Distance to be far less, less even than the American ideal level.

5. Conclusions

The differences between the cultural context in the United States and South Korea are significant and numerous. They can be traced back to beliefs that were established hundreds of years ago. The United States was founded on a belief in egalitarianism, while Korean values hold that every relationship is inherently unequal based on the teachings of Confucius. It is probable that Confucianism, with all of its rules of etiquette, is responsible for the Confucian Asian countries also topping the list of high-context countries, where people have significant expectations of the behavior of others. Whereas, the United States, with continual immigration of people from all over the world would understandably be low-context due to the great diversity of peoples living there. The GLOBE study results seem to confirm much of what Hall observed of low- and high-context societies, except that it indicates that South Koreans appear to be ready to cast off some of their traditional ways and embrace a more egalitarian society. The fact that South Koreans indicated such a low ideal level of Power Distance, may indicate that the younger generation is growing frustrated with the rigid hierarchy imposed upon them by their culture. This is an area that calls for further research. As South Korea has become a more developed and industrialized nation, it has had more frequent and more extensive contact with other societies, as evidenced by trade figures, and seems to have been influenced by them, as evidenced by the similarities in ideal levels on the GLOBE results. Although there are still significant differences in the current cultures and people from both countries are not entirely satisfied with the way things are, it looks as if both the United States and South Korea hold similar ideas of the way things should be. Leaders who can successfully appeal to these shared ideals may be able to motivate followers from either culture. Future longitudinal studies of value differences between generations might indicate that within another couple of generations, as the barriers to communication decrease and the frequency of cross-cultural contact increases, these cultures may start to converge as the differences slowly start to disappear. Until then, the best strategy for cross-cultural competence between Americans and Koreans would be to begin reaching for the shared ideal values while still being aware of and respecting the long-standing traditions that continue to play a crucial role in each culture. Then the interactions between these two peoples on the far side of the globe from each other can continue more smoothly.

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Table 1. Results for South Korea and the United States on the 9 cultural dimensions of the GLOBE Study

	Performance Orientation	Future Orientation	Gender Egalitarianism	Assertiveness	Institutional Collectivism
Korea (should be)	5.25	5.69	4.22	3.75	3.9
Korea (as-is)	4.55	3.97	2.5	4.4	5.2
U.S. (should be)	6.14	5.31	5.06	4.32	4.17
U.S. (as-is)	4.49	4.15	3.34	4.55	4.2
	In-Group Collectivism	Power Distance	Humane Orientation	Uncertainty Avoidance	
Korea (should-be)	5.41	2.55	5.6	4.67	
Korea (as-is)	5.54	5.61	3.81	3.55	
U.S. (should be)	5.77	2.85	5.53	4	
U.S. (asis)	4.25	4.88	4.17	4.15	

The results are on a Likert scale of 1 - 7.

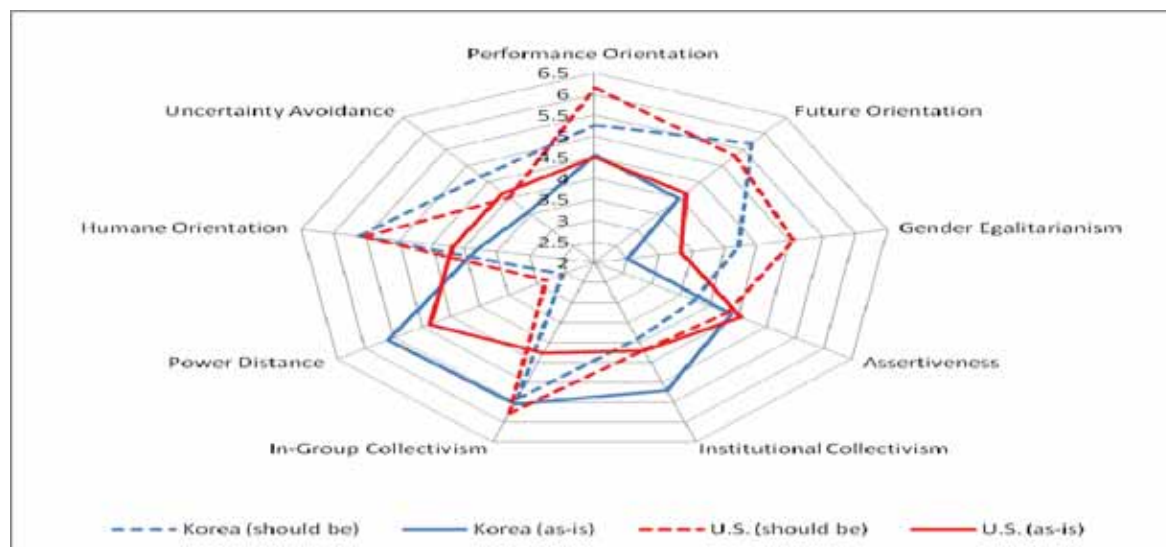


Figure 1. Results for South Korea and the United States on the 9 cultural dimensions of the GLOBE Study

Note: The actual results are on a scale of 1 - 7, but since none of these results were less than 2 or greater than 6.5, I adjusted the chart's axis. To see the actual scores, please see Table 1 in the Appendix.