
The Five Archetypes That Define National Culture



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Dissecting the values that constitute culture reveals unexpected contrasts and commonalities between nations.

Nearly every country has an avatar thrust upon it, a hypothetical individual who, for outsiders, represents the quintessence of its culture. This figure is often an embarrassment to the country whose identity it supposedly distils. Moreover, even modestly experienced world travellers know that no single character can encapsulate a population of tens of millions (or more). Yet caricatures and stereotypes persist when it comes to national culture, because their sociological shorthand more than makes up in utility what it lacks in nuanced truth. Diversity, by contrast, is hard to get one's head around.

Recently, I have been exploring how we might be able to generate simple yet meaningful descriptions of national culture by incorporating statistical snapshots of a country's diversity. (My co-authors for this work-in-progress are Sunil Venaik of University of Queensland Business School and Demetris Christopoulos.) I am not referring to diversity of the demographic, ethnic or racial sort, but rather diversity of values, i.e. the contrasting ethical, moral

and philosophical orientations of the population's sub-groups.

Roughly the same set of values-based orientations (which we call *archetypes*) can be found in most national populations, in varying proportions. This distinctive mixture of universal archetypes, we argue, is what constitutes national culture.

Our values-based approach makes it possible to achieve clarity about national culture without resorting to stereotypes. It has the added advantage of establishing a global continuum of overlapping cultural patterns, revealing unexpected contrasts and commonalities between countries.

Methodology

The most robust raw data on global cultural values come from the World Values Survey (WVS). Introduced in 1981, the WVS uses a common questionnaire to sample the mores of a large number of countries.

The most recent iteration of the survey generated responses from 90,350 individuals in 60 countries, representing nearly 90 percent of the world's population. To create our global values archetypes, we used the questions related to the widely recognised [Schwartz motivational values](#) framework, which are included in the WVS. Then we employed archetypal analysis, a learning algorithm that identified a small number of extreme individuals as prototypical archetypes of the differing values that people may hold.

We found that five such archetypes accounted for 96 percent of the variance in the WVS data. From there, we were easily able to calculate national archetypal mixtures, based on the number of respondents from each of the 60 countries that best fit each archetype. When we tested for external validity, we found strong associations between the archetypal mixtures and the countries' relative rankings on the Global Competitiveness Index, the [Global Innovation Index](#), the [Global Talent Competitiveness Index](#) and the World Happiness Score.

The five archetypes

Once we identified our five archetypes, we proceeded to put human faces on them. Here, again, we drew on the Schwartz values, as well as on prior social sciences literature.

Retreater. Retreaters are oriented more towards themselves than they are towards others. Despite placing great stock in their national identity, they are largely indifferent to pro-social values such as religion, citizenship, work ethic and parental approval. They tend to be older and poorer than the average respondent.

Social conservative. Also older and less well-off than average, social conservatives are in other important ways the opposite of retreaters. They are focused more on society than on themselves, proudly upholding traditional values such as citizenship and the importance of democracy.

Social innovator. Social innovators might be best summed up by the slogan “Think globally, act locally”. National identity resonates much less with them than do local community ties and eclectic international interests. Younger and wealthier than the average, they prize creative, interesting careers more than the obligations of democracy, religion and family.

Social hedonist. Social hedonists put high importance on having a good time, but not at the expense of others. Values that supply a sense of communal identity – religion, democracy, family obligations – are heavy in the social-hedonist mix. They are generally older and less wealthy than the average, and are more likely to work in a menial or blue-collar context.

Maximalist. Maximalists tend to avoid making trade-offs with their values, maintaining local, national and global orientations simultaneously. They are traditional in outlook – holding religion, work and family in high esteem – yet are younger, wealthier and pursue more creative careers than the average respondent.

National mixtures

Our results contradict the homogeneous view of national culture. Most countries in our sample (44 out of 60) exhibit a high degree of values diversity. Only in the remaining 16 did any one archetype represent a majority of the population. We found a great deal of diversity between countries as well. Even the four most diverse countries were diverse in different ways: Maximalists just barely outnumber the other four archetypes in Argentina (the most archetypally well-rounded of the 60 countries), social conservatives are the largest group in New Zealand, and social hedonists lead in Sweden and Germany.

We also uncovered some unlikely cultural correspondences. Japan, for example, is stereotypically considered a place where traditional social conservatives reign. But we found that retreaters are by far Japan's dominant group, with social conservatives coming in second – a quirky dynamic the Asian nation shares with, of all places, the Netherlands.

The countries most ripe for cultural stereotyping – i.e. those that are most monolithic in their values – also tend to be the ones where maximalists predominate. These include many African nations (e.g. Nigeria and Ghana), as well as Russia, Pakistan and Qatar.

Cross-cultural teams

Our research on national culture is still ongoing. So far, though, one obvious theme that arises from our results is the danger of putting too much stock in stereotypes. When doing business in a new country, take care not to assume too much based on what you may have heard or read. The closer you get to a place, the more diversity you'll see.

That could be very good news for HR managers assembling teams across cultural borders. The ubiquity of cultural diversity suggests that the type of employee you're looking for can be found almost anywhere. A foreign culture may yet be more familiar than you think.

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