

Universalism, Particularism and cultural self-awareness: a comparison of American and Turkish university students

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Abstract

Universalism implies that correct behavior can be defined and always applies, while particularism suggests that relationships are more important than abstract social codes. The United States is generally considered universalistic, and Turkey particularistic. In the current study, American and Turkish students first reacted to a hypothetical situation in order to determine their location on the universalist-particularist dimension. The students were then asked how their reactions may reflect their cultural values, in order to determine the relative levels of Turkish vs. American cultural self-awareness. The American students scored higher in particularism and the Turkish students higher in universalism, which may reflect the Turkish cultural value of fairness. Turkish students had a greater awareness of the cultural basis for their attitudes. Cultural self-awareness is an important factor in determining business and economic success, and should be encouraged through university education.

Keywords: universalism, particularism, culture, values, self-awareness

Introduction - Universalism-Particularism

Universalism and particularism are value standards that may guide behavior of persons or of whole cultures (Smith, Dugan and Trompenaars, 1996). The distinction has been made since at least the early 1950's (Parsons and Shils, 1951), and has gained visibility with the work of Trompenaars and his associates (Smith, Dugan and Trompenaars, 1996; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). Universalism implies that correct behavior can be defined and always applies, while particularism suggests that relationships come ahead of abstract social codes.

Much of the research on universalism vs. particularism comes from the USA, and is influenced by American cultural preferences. American researchers often associate universalism with modernization and sophisticated business practice, and particularism with less developed rural societies in which everyone knows everyone personally (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1998, p. 33). In addition, the American (and "western") perspective tends to view particularistic decisions as being corrupt and immoral (Lumby, 2006). Although this culturally biased view has been largely corrected by Trompenaars' research, much remains to be done to contrast individuals and cultures on this dimension.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) regard the United States as a "guided missile" culture. Such cultures are egalitarian, impersonal and task oriented, which is consistent with a "universalistic" value system. Turkey, on the other hand, is a "family" culture, in which people are valued before roles, relationships are close, and the leader is regarded as a caring "father." This appears to be more consistent with a particularistic value system.

Cultural Self-Awareness

There is little doubt that cultural awareness is an increasingly important aspect of contemporary business. While there are many viewpoints in this area, psychologists have started to converge around a three component model of cultural competence: (1) awareness, (2) competence, and (3) skills (Fowers and Davidov, 2006). While this model was developed by and for psychologists, it would seem to apply to anyone who interacts with persons from a different cultural background. Competence and skills in such interactions depend largely upon an awareness of one's own cultural values and those of persons from other cultures.

According to Fowers and Davidov (2006), the process of becoming aware of one's own values, biases and limitations involves cultural self-exploration, through which we learn that "our perspectives are limited, partial and relative to our own backgrounds.... [W]e must give up the comforting ethnocentrism, sense of cultural superiority, and unrecognized privilege that is often part of our untutored cultural outlook" (p. 585).

Subjects

Subjects in the current study were 130 American university students enrolled in an Organizational Behavior class and 42 Turkish university students enrolled in an English language class. Both American and Turkish classes had roughly equal numbers

of men and women, and both were predominantly traditional students in their late teens and early twenties.

Method

The students engaged in a class exercise that was based on one of the scenarios used by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), to assess universalism vs. particularism. Each student was presented with the following instructions:

You are a professional journalist who writes a restaurant review column for a major newspaper. A close friend of yours has invested all her savings in her new restaurant. You have dined there and think the restaurant is not much good. Does your friend have some right to expect you to "hedge" your review or does your friend have no right to expect this at all?

1. Provide your individual answer:

___ Yes, she has some right to expect this.

___ No, she has no right to expect this.

2. Form a group of 3-4 persons. Discuss this issue as a group and reach a group consensus on this question.

3. Explain (a) your individual answer, (b) the group's answer. How do these answers reflect the values of yourself, your group, and your culture?

Since this scenario was the basis for a class exercise in which students could discuss their individual answers, reach a group consensus, and reflect on how the results may be a product of their culture, there was the opportunity to probe the universalist/particularist distinction in more depth than in previous research, and to draw some conclusions about the cultural self-awareness of American and Turkish students.

Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

(1) a quantitative assessment of student responses to the scenario (from Part 1 of the exercise) will reveal a significant correlation between nationality (Turkish vs. American) and cultural values (particularistic vs. universalistic).

(2) a qualitative assessment of student interpretations of their responses (from Parts 2 and 3 of the exercise) will reveal a relationship between nationality (Turkish vs. American) and cultural self awareness.

Results

The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Particularistic vs. Universalistic Responses
Of Turkish and American Students

<i>Response</i>	Turkish students	American students	<i>Totals</i>
Particularistic	8 (19%)	85 (65%)	93
Universalistic	34 (81%)	45 (35%)	72
<i>Totals</i>	42	130	172

As seen in the table, 34 of the 42 Turkish students (81%) responded in a universalistic manner (choosing not to “hedge” the restaurant review for a friend), while only 45 of the 130 American students (35%) responded this way. Conversely, 65% of the American students, but only 19% of the Turkish students, responded in a particularistic manner.

The data was then analyzed using the Vassar Statistics Package (<http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/tab2x2.html>). The phi coefficient (for correlation between two dichotomous variables) was .40, indicating a moderately strong and highly significant ($p < .0001$) correlation between nationality (Turkish vs. American) and cultural values (particularistic vs. universalistic). These results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Data Analysis Using the Vassar Statistics Package

Data Entry

		X		Totals	Expected Cell Frequencies per Null Hypothesis	
		0	1			
Y	1	8	85	93	22.71	70.29
	0	34	45	79	19.29	59.71
Totals		42	130	172		

Phi	Chi-Square	
	Yates	Pearson
+0.4	25.61	27.45
P	<.0001	<.0001

The Yates value is corrected for continuity; the Pearson value is not. Both probability estimates are non-directional.

Fisher Exact Probability Test:

P	one-tailed	1.2434646065357668e-7
	two-tailed	1.3635940971945942e-7

Results of the more qualitative, open-ended, part of the study support the conclusion that, while both American and Turkish students have some awareness of their cultural values, there is some tendency to inflate the relationship between their cultural and their personal values, especially among the American students (see Table 3). For example, an American student who chose to “hedge” the review wrote that “...we need to help her out in the end. This shows how our culture is relationship oriented.” Another American student, who chose *not* to hedge, wrote “My values of friendship should not interfere with business, and I think our culture agrees with that too.”

Similarly, a Turkish student who chose to hedge wrote “I think that in our culture looking after your friend is common and almost everybody does it,” and several who chose not to hedge cited truthfulness as an important aspect of Turkish culture. There were also several Turkish students, however, who indicated that they would not hedge even though this kind of behavior was characteristic of the Turkish culture. For example, one student who chose not to hedge wrote “...in my culture you must protect your friend but I don’t think it is true. I have responsibility for my job so I must do my work correctly.”

Table 3
Typical Turkish and American Statements on Personal and Cultural Values

Understanding that personal and cultural values may differ:	Incorrectly assuming correspondence between personal and cultural values:
A Turkish student writes that “...in my culture you must protect your friend but I don’t think it is true. I have responsibility for my job so I must do my work correctly.”	An American student writes that “...we need to help her out in the end. This shows how our culture is relationship oriented.”

These results indicate an interesting paradox. On the one hand, Turkish students were more likely to be self-critical of their culture, and not to confuse their personal and cultural values. On the other hand, the basis for this self-criticism was not supported by this research, since the students overwhelmingly (81%) chose not to hedge on the review. This finding may indicate that the students share a cultural stereotype of Turks as valuing interpersonal relations above objectivity that is not necessarily true. To the extent that this stereotype is negative (and student comments seemed to suggest that they felt it was), these results seem similar to research findings that women and minorities often share the same stereotypes of their own group that are held by the male or majority group.

Conclusions

The results support both hypotheses. There were positive relationships between nationality and both (1) universalism-particularism, and (2) cultural self-awareness. Turkish students were more universalistic than American students and they were more aware of the influence of their culture on their responses.

One reason for the results of this study could be that, though generally viewed as a “particularistic” culture because of its emphasis on interpersonal relationships, there is a strain of universalism in Turkey as well. In a study of English vs. Turkish teachers’ goals, Karakaya (2004) notes a Turkish universalistic emphasis on equality and educational fairness that goes back to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Some Turkish students recognized this aspect of the Turkish culture as well. For example, one student wrote “I think one of the basic elements of Turkish culture is fair. I have taken it as a value to myself.” Perhaps a distinction should be made between when a universalistic decision stems from “fairness” versus when it stems from “objectivity.” In the former case, someone from a person-related society such as Turkey might make the universalistic choice.

Another reason for the results may be related to the specific scenario that was used in this study. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) note that countries may be more or less universalist depending on what the rules are about. French and Italian managers, for example, “believe that when writing on a subject as important as food, you have a universal obligation to truth” (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 36). Turks are very proud of, and serious about, their food as well, so may be expected to react similarly to the French and Italians in this respect.

One implication of this study involves leadership practices. In a study of 6052 middle level managers from 22 European countries, a team of researchers led by Brodbeck and Frese (2000) found that there is a strong correlation between societal cultural diversity and leadership style. In addition, the kind of style found to be effective in one region may not be effective in another. An American manager in Turkey, or any other country, must be aware of the culture before choosing a leadership style.

In general, American managers must understand their own cultural perspective and the cultural differences of others, and be aware that “cultural stereotypes” do not always apply. It may be assumed by an American manager in Turkey, for example, that workers will “lie” to protect their associates. The current study suggests that this may be

actually less true in Turkey than it is in the United States, at least as far as certain issues are concerned.

The current study also suggests that persons in other societies, such as Turkey, may have higher cultural self-awareness than Americans. As a result: (1) they may have a competitive advantage over Americans when dealing with other countries, and (2) their possibly negative stereotypes of Americans as being provincial and ethnocentric may be reinforced.

Although based on limited data from 180 American students in a single university, the results of this study are consistent with other research that suggests that the American educational system should place more stress on cultural differences. Coverage of the work of such investigators as Hofstede (1980; 1991) in most management and organizational behavior texts is a step in this direction. Trying to give American students and faculty foreign exchange opportunities, and attracting more students from abroad to American classrooms, would be other positive steps.

Teaching a diversity course such as one described by Heuberger (1999), and having management classes with exercises and role plays such as the one described in the present study, seem warranted. A modified and abridged version of an exercise developed by Roysircar (2004), which focuses even more directly on cultural self-awareness, is as follows:

1. What is your background? You may refer to your culture, ethnicity, race , or multicultural/multiethnic background.
2. What are the values of the cultural group that have influenced you the most?
3. What are your personal differences from your cultural or primary reference group?
4. What are your feelings about being a member of your cultural or primary reference group?
5. When you're with someone different from you, how do you find common ground to prevent cultural conflict?

Future Studies

More research is needed in this area, especially studies that (1) expand Turkish and American sample sizes, (2) include more measures of universalism/particularism, and (3) quantify the cultural self-awareness dimension. The fact that Turkey is currently a candidate for EU membership makes it especially important to understand the values of the Turkish people, and how they may be similar or different from our own.

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