

Book: WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT AND SIMILAR – A New Interpretation of the World Values Surveys and Other Cross-Cultural Data

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Michael Minkov teaches Cross-Cultural Differences in Organizational Behavior and other related disciplines on the franchised programs through the International University, Sofia, Bulgaria. He is currently writing a doctoral dissertation at the Department of Scandinavian Studies, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Michael Minkov is since long a disciple of Professor Geert Hofstede.

In his third book on cross-cultural differences, *“WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT AND SIMILAR – A New Interpretation of the World Values Survey and Other Cross-Cultural Data*, Michael Minkov sets out to advance our understanding of cultural differences and similarities. Although there is a vast body of cross-cultural literature, in reality, little is still known about cultural differences and how these should be managed successfully. Often the focus is instead on the results of different cultural values, e.g. leadership, political regimes, and religion, as opposed to what are the causes of these differences, i.e. the values and beliefs. Little of the contemporary literature addresses the fundamental issues of the logic and origins of the cultural differences experienced across nations, and if addressed, the nature and origin of cultural differences is often misunderstood. Minkov, furthermore, points out that we are far from a good, general scientific theory of cross-cultural management with a high degree of validity.

Although, diverging values and beliefs have always existed, in the 21st century they have become increasingly critical due to various globalization and integration processes, which intensify the contact between nations, and which risk growing into significant conflicts. Between the Western and large parts of the non-Western world, there is a clash with respect to values and viewpoints, but even in countries with similar mindsets, interaction, and international endeavors are not problem-free. Consequently, international business activities, such as mergers and joint ventures even between companies in Western cultures often fail. Increasingly people pose the question: *“How can we manage our cultural differences, whether it is related to politics, business, or life in general.”* Minkov believes that the view that cultural values are converging in the developed countries and possibly all over the world is indeed misleading. While there is some cultural transformation, this only occurs because of changes in the environment, and there is no evidence that they are converging substantially with respect to core values. Some cultural differences in values are centuries or even millennia old, which make cultural reconciliation very difficult and what is acceptable, logic, and rational in one culture continues to be considered just the opposite in another. Although cultural adjustments occur, this is not evidence that foreign values are accepted, it is more a question of mutual understanding.

One of the main purposes of the book is therefore, to provide the reader with an overview of some of the major cultural differences, we experience in the modern world. Cultural differences, which Minkov finds important and which, he argues, have not received enough attention in the scientific literature are the focus of his book. He identifies three cultural dimensions based on the latest data from the World Values Survey and validates

them through comparisons with other cross-cultural data. The first dimension, Exclusionism (Collectivism) versus Universalism (Individualism) is close to Hofstede's Individualism versus Collectivism dimension, and the societal in-group collectivism practices of Project GLOBE, but also includes some crucial facets, which have not received sufficient attention. The second dimension, Indulgence versus Restraint does not resemble any cultural dimension in literature to this point in time. The third dimension, Monumentalism versus Flexumility is close to Inglehart's secular versus traditional/religious values, but is interpreted in a different way, i.e. as self-enhancement and self-stability versus lower interest in self-improvement. The first dimension is one of the first attempts to describe what differentiates the West from the rest of the world, i.e. the treatment of people. The three dimensions are able to predict important country differences in real-life phenomena, e.g. foreign development aid, corruption, birth rates, and GDP per person growth. The dimensions, furthermore, are able to explain important differences between regions in the world with respect to savings rates and income inequality.

Minkov's analysis is based on mainstream literature and the author's own international experiences. As a starting point, Minkov offers the reader a critical review of the major large-scale important contributions to the field of cross-cultural research, ranging from Geert Hofstede and the IBM studies around the 1970s to the Pew Research Center (PRC) in 2002. He also touches upon some more controversial studies, and although accepting that genetic differences may result in different cultural traits, he argues that more research is needed before making any such conclusions. Acknowledging that there are rivalry views on what culture is, he argues for a combination of the existing positions and offers the following eclectic summary on culture: *"the environment and already existing culture (and perhaps biology) interact in a complex way, creating a new environment and new culture (and in the very long run, new biology as well."* He also poses the question, if there is one best approach to put together a scientifically valid and practical way to classify cultures and cultural phenomena and reaches the conclusion that because cultural dimensions are human constructs there may be more than one way to explain culture depending on the interpretation.

"WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT AND Similar – A New Interpretation of the World Values Survey and Other Cross-Cultural Data, is a well-written book, presented in a style and language, which allow the reader to gain a good and rich understanding of the most important cross-cultural research to date, incl. its strengths and limitations. Minkov's own background, growing up in mainly non-Western cultures (e.g. the Bulgarian and Arabic), is a strength compared to other work on cultural differences, which is typically written by Westerners and therefore, have a tendency to reflect Western views and attitudes. He manages to present the main findings in a comprehensible manner and the key messages of the book come across clearly. In addition, because his three-dimensional model is complimentary to existing models in the cross-cultural field, his efforts to advance the field and to enrich our understanding of cross-cultural differences across nations are truly successful.