

Culture and COVID-19: Impact of Cross-Cultural Dimensions on Behavioral Responses

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The global pandemic of COVID-19 has impacted every sphere of human life across all nations of the world. Countries adapted and responded to the crisis in different ways with varied outcomes and different degrees of success in mitigation efforts. Studies have examined institutional and policy-based responses to the pandemic. However, to gain a holistic understanding of the pandemic response strategy and its effectiveness, it is also important to understand the cultural foundations of a society driving its response behavior. Towards that end, this entry focuses on a few key cultural dimensions of difference across countries and proposes that national culture is related to the protective behavior adopted by societies during COVID-19. The cultural dimensions examined in relation to COVID-19 include the dimensions of individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and femininity, and future orientation. Inferences are drawn from academic research, published data, and discernible indicators of social behavior. The entry provides pointers for each dimension of culture and proposes that cultural awareness be made an important element of policy making while responding to crises such as COVID-19.

Keywords: culture ; COVID-19 ; pandemic ; cultural dimensions ; individualism vs. collectivism ; power distance ; uncertainty avoidance ; masculinity and femininity ; future orientation

For many, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, which began spreading across the globe in January 2020, has been the first and only pandemic people have witnessed in their lifetime ^[1]. The pandemic has been a crisis of unprecedented proportion which brought with it conditions never encountered by the current generations. Governments and people across the world have been left scrambling to contain the spread of the virus and to adopt effective risk mitigation strategies, even after pharmaceutical interventions such as vaccines have come on the horizon ^[2]. The scale of damage that the SARS-CoV-2 virus has unleashed in terms of the lives lost, harmful mental and physical health consequences ^[3], and constraints on public health systems ^[4] has been unprecedented. As of May 2022, more than 520 million cases of COVID-19 and 6.2 million fatalities have been reported worldwide, with the United States, India, Brazil, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Russia having reported the largest number of cases ^[5]. On the other hand, countries such as New Zealand, Egypt, Sri Lanka, and Norway reportedly had fewer than 1.2 million cases ^[6]. Governments have exhibited wide variations in their responses to the pandemic. Some countries experienced nation-wide lockdowns such as India and China, while others adopted softer approaches such as that of Sweden ^{[7][8][9]}. Similarly, the societal response to the pandemic has also varied significantly. It can be argued that to understand a COVID-19 response strategy it is important to understand the interaction of both the formal (institutional mechanisms) and the informal (cultural underpinnings) elements guiding decision making ^[10].

There is increasing recognition today that one cannot understand pandemic responses without adopting a behavioral science approach ^{[11][12][13]}. Consequently, there is a mounting body of work in this direction with several published works focusing on understanding responses to the COVID-19 pandemic through a behavioral lens ^{[13][14]}. Early in the pandemic, when pharmaceutical interventions were limited, some researchers called for recognizing and changing behavior to control the transmission of the virus ^[12]. Several studies have emerged pointing to differences in country-level responses. For example, one such study ^[9] points to differences in cross-country perceptions of risk influencing social distancing amidst the pandemic.

Different cultures react and behave differently to threat perceptions based on shared belief systems ^[15]. Differences in how people behave in a social context are often grounded in varying expectations and learned behavior acquired through socialization ^[16]. National cultures shape people's behaviors ^{[15][17][18]} and have been shown to predict people's wellbeing amidst the pandemic ^[19]. This is particularly relevant in times of crisis such as the pandemic when people tend to adhere more strongly to prevailing social norms ^[20]. Indicative of the powerful effect of culture in shaping behavior amidst the pandemic, in a recent study using econometric data, culture has in fact been shown to act as a substitute for state action in ensuring compliance with COVID-19 policies ^[21]. Thus, if culture has the potency to supplement or replace policy, it

merits attention to understand the cultural dimensions shaping and guiding behavior, which can augment policy-level interventions to manage the ongoing pandemic.

Culture has been widely studied for many decades. Geert Hofstede's cultural diversity model is considered one of the major frameworks for understanding culture ^{[15][16][17]}. Since human behavior is a reflection of the underlying values that people subscribe to ^[22], it is worthwhile to reflect on the values that shape this behavior at the cross-cultural level. One of the earliest ways of understanding cross-cultural values or dimensions of difference was offered by Hofstede based on data from across 64 countries ^[17]. Hofstede conceptualized cultural differences emerging from differences in values categorized along certain dimensions ^{[16][23]}. The original four dimensions of difference across cultures were identified as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity ^{[16][23]}. Other dimensions such as long-term versus short-term were later included in the conceptualization. Individualism versus collectivism captures the dichotomy of independence versus interdependence, or loyalty to oneself compared to that towards the group ^{[24][25]}. It refers to the extent to which people affiliate with loosely or tightly knit social groups ^[25]. Power distance refers to the acceptance of power differentials in a society, while uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent of perceived discomfort with ambiguities or uncertainties in a society ^{[16][18][26]}. Masculinity versus femininity refers to the extent to which cultures prefer equality or egalitarianism between the sexes in a society. It captures the degree to which cultures are prone towards competition and assertiveness, or caring and nurturance ^{[16][26]}. The long-term versus short-term dimension refers to a cultural orientation that is rooted in either the present or the future ^[27].

This entry explores some of the above dimensions of cross-cultural difference as it relates to understanding or shaping behavior amidst the pandemic. In the following sections, the entry examines the relevant cultural dimensions and attempt to synthesize emerging literature linking cultural dimensions to the pandemic. The effect of cultural dimensions on variations in behavior will also be illustrated through some country-level differences, where available. In offering this overview of culture and COVID-19, we aim to understand the relevant cultural variables influencing and guiding human behavior at the collective level amidst a crisis such as the current pandemic.

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